‘I now feel that I know people within the MoJ HQ I can speak to, and I hope they feel similar’: An innovative staff network putting the frontline at the centre of policy making

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The disconnect between central government policy-making and operational delivery has been widely recognised. A recent Commission on the Centre of Government noted that although frontline services often have a direct understanding of the problems that need to be addressed, their voices are ‘too frequently lacking in the discussion at the centre’.[1] Similarly, John Slater, former Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education, wrote that there is often a separation between ‘policy’ and ‘delivery’ which keeps policy makers removed from the reality on the ground and results in policy making which is ‘fundamentally inadequate to address the challenges we face’.[2]

The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is one of the biggest operational delivery departments in Whitehall. The MoJ umbrella includes central MoJ, which is exclusively a headquarters (HQ) function and is responsible for setting policy. However, the MoJ also includes Executive Agencies, such as His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and His Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) which are responsible for the operational delivery of frontline services. Although HMPPS and HMCTS are predominantly operational, they both have HQ functions of their own. This set-up lends itself to opportunities for greater collaboration between policy and delivery teams than elsewhere in government where delivery functions are independent, but it does not mean that the separation described by Slater is not felt.[3]

In 2023, a team in MoJ interviewed frontline and HQ staff to understand the ‘gap’ between operations and policy. They identified a number of organisational barriers — including physical, cultural, and knowledge-based barriers — that limit communication and engagement between the frontline and HQ. Having worked in both frontline and HQ roles, these barriers were something we had experienced first-hand. While working in our frontline roles — as prison officers, probation officers and court staff — the world of HQ in the MoJ felt very distant; we knew it was where the policies were developed that influenced the work we did every day, but did not know how these policies were made or who was making them. When we transitioned into HQ roles, we found that this feeling ran the other way too — many of our new colleagues had not seen how the policies they developed were working in practice nor met the people implementing them. We found that there was little support for those transitioning from frontline to HQ roles, limited opportunity for those working in HQ roles to learn from frontline experience, and a gap between the two ‘sides’ of the organisation.

The Frontline Staff Network

In 2020, a small group of ex-frontline staff in MoJ HQ decided to address the aforementioned problems

1. Institute For Government. (2024). *Power with Purpose: Final report of the Commission on the Centre of Government.* https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/Centre-Commission-final-report.pdf
2. Slater, J. (2022). *Fixing Whitehall’s broken policy machine.* The Policy Institute. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/fixing-whitehalls-broken-policy-machine.pdf
3. See footnote 2: Slater, J. (2022).

and created the Frontline Staff Network. The network was founded on the premise that staff working in HQ can only be as effective as their understanding of what happens on the frontline, and staff working on the frontline can be better supported, empowered and enabled by stronger links to colleagues in HQ.

The network has three aims:

1. To create a safe space and support system for people who have moved from a frontline role to a HQ role in the MoJ, or one of its agencies or Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs).
2. To create a network of people with frontline experience who can act as a resource for colleagues across the department who might not have that experience, but who would benefit from being able to test their thinking with people who've lived it themselves.
3. To bridge the gap between HQ and the frontline, fostering learning for staff on both sides to better deliver the MoJ priorities.

The network is open to anyone working in MoJ, its ALBs, and wider criminal justice organisations like the Crown Prosecution Service, regardless of whether they have frontline experience or not. While some members join to access the support we offer for ex-frontline staff, others join because they have no experience of working on the frontline and are interested in learning more about others' experiences. There is great demand for the support we offer and opportunities we enable; our membership has grown from 130 members at the end of December 2021 (the first full year of the network) to over 1,500 members at the end of December 2024 — almost certainly the fastest growing network in the MoJ. We were recognised in the 2024 MoJ Awards, winning the award for the 'Justice Together' category, and have also been shortlisted for the 'Development' award in the 2025 cross-government Operational Delivery Profession awards.

The network is run by us, a small committee made up of MoJ colleagues, mostly with frontline experience, who are passionate about bringing the voice of the frontline into the heart of policy-making. The work we do as part of the network committee is voluntary and additional to our day-to-day roles. We have used our experience to develop innovative ways to overcome barriers and create opportunities for colleagues across the organisation to work better together. This article explores how we have done that — from navigating the unfamiliar environment and feeling like an outsider, to establishing connections between different parts of the organisation and using our operational expertise (and empowering others to use theirs) to make an impact across the department. We hope that by providing an evidence base and highlighting the effective practice of the network, we will inspire other government departments to consider how they too can address the disconnect to make more effective policy.

Staff working in HQ can only be as effective as their understanding of what happens on the frontline

From 'outsiders' to 'insiders'

When transitioning from a frontline role to a HQ role,[4] we recognised several changes in our working lives that contributed to us feeling a reverse culture shock and like 'outsiders' in HQ.

Time at work

The first of these was how time at work was managed completely differently — many frontline operational staff work in shift patterns (including weekends) to accommodate the 24-hour nature of the criminal justice system. Moving to a regular 'nine to five' with every weekend off felt very different and also uncomfortable as it suddenly means that you have weekends off when your friends who still work in frontline roles do not. In addition to this, particularly for many ex-prison officers, the contrast of a strict prison regime, where activity and actions are pre-determined down to the minute of every day, was very different from to the looser office timings where it was decided by individuals when to have breaks or lunch. A frequent reflection from network members is how strange it is to not have to ask permission to finish the working day (unlike in prisons, for example, when all people in the prison must be counted before operational staff may leave the building).

4. We define frontline staff in the Ministry of Justice broadly as individuals who directly contribute to the delivery of justice through either direct engagement with the public, victims, offenders, or through essential support roles positioned in frontline sites that enable these interactions. This includes operational staff such as probation officers, prison officers, and court personnel, as well as those staff based in frontline sites (e.g. prisons and courts) such as administrative support, case coordinators, intelligence analysts, and logistics personnel who ensure the effective functioning of frontline services.

Pace, tasks and workload

The change in pace, type of tasks, and workload were other marked differences experienced by staff who made this transition from a task-based role in which duties must be completed daily, to a role with longer-term deadlines and greater autonomy on how to manage the working day. In contrast to frontline delivery, for many ex-prison officers, the direct impact of their work was less likely to be immediately felt, which often made them question the value they add to the departmental objectives. A notable piece of feedback we received from a newer member of the network captured these changes as 'Previously you got paid to react to lots of tasks, now you get paid to think!', highlighting the more long-term, strategic nature of most HQ and policy roles compared with the more immediate decision-making required in many frontline roles.

Level of responsibility and management

A fundamental difference noted by prison officers who made the transition to HQ was that, when working on wings, they would often be responsible for large numbers of people, and make decisions that feel like 'life-or-death'. When transitioning from such an intense role, where at times it can be crucial to make quick decisions and 'think on your feet', to a HQ role decision-making may feel less 'high stakes'. There is also more frequent contact with line managers and those higher up the 'chain of command' when making important decisions. There can also be a level of reassurance being able to talk through decisions in slower time with colleagues, as this can remove the element of pressure that is felt so resolutely by officers.

All these challenges faced by early network committee members led to them establishing the first aim of the network: to create a safe space and support system for people who have moved from a frontline role to a HQ role. Their own experiences led them to understand that there were few resources to support staff who made the move to HQ as well as little wider understanding from HQ colleagues (who may not have direct experience of the frontline working environment) on how to support these colleagues through this transition. Since then, the network has worked with its members from across the MoJ frontline to produce several helpful resources to raise awareness of the challenges staff can face in transitioning to HQ, as well as a line manager guide on how best to support their staff (including how to take a trauma-informed approach to support). The network also runs a buddy scheme in which newly joined members are paired up with HQ staff who have had the same experience of transitioning between parts of the organisation, as a way of reducing the feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome and facilitating a safe space in which to ask questions. To date, over 80 buddy pairs have been set up, with many examples of those who moved to HQ and requested a buddy, now becoming buddies themselves.

Through these early initiatives, anecdotal feedback suggests that the network has been able to support many colleagues who have newly transitioned into HQ roles to feel a lot less like 'outsiders' who do not belong, and to become confident 'insiders' who are able to assuredly navigate the HQ working environment and leverage their frontline experience within their new HQ roles.

> We have used our experience to develop innovative ways to overcome barriers and create opportunities for colleagues across the organisation to work better together.

Inside knowledge

Despite facing the numerous challenges highlighted earlier, individuals with frontline experience have a unique attribute to offer — their insight and deep understanding into the realities of frontline delivery. As a network, we help these individuals realise the benefit of this and empower them to make positive impact across the department.

We quickly realised that individuals with frontline experience within the criminal justice system can leverage their expertise to support their colleagues in HQ, who may not have had the same operational background (or perhaps not as recently), in ensuring their work reflects the realities of current frontline delivery. We established a system where colleagues across the Department can find someone with relevant frontline experience who could provide insight into the area they are working on. Whether that is the Safety team wanting to test early ideas on a new peer support scheme, or the Data Science team wanting to develop a new digital tool for prison officers, their target audience (with the exact experience, grade and area of expertise required) can now be found with just one simple e-mail to the network.

While this is not a substitute for formal engagement with the frontline, the Insight

Commissions strand of the network offers an opportunity to easily tap into a wealth of frontline experience to test initial ideas, run workshops or collect feedback. This approach allows for early-stage ideas to be sense-checked ahead of formal engagement with the frontline, which has recently been under significant operational pressure.

One notable piece of work shaped by the Insight Commissions strand was the HMPPS 'Extraordinary Jobs' campaign. This campaign aimed to improve the recruitment and retention of prison and probation staff and marked the Department's first ever major national TV and radio advertisement effort to recruit for the HMPPS frontline workforce.[5] The MoJ Recruitment Marketing team approached us, recognising the experience that our members have working in prisons and probation and their connections with frontline stakeholders, which allowed them to get their 'foot through the door' into frontline engagement. The team was also able to rely on the operational experience of the network's members to ensure the campaign accurately depicted the day-to-day reality of life as prison and probation officers. With the help of the network, the recruitment campaign was launched in September 2023 and led to an increase in applications for prison and probation officer roles across England and Wales.

In a separate undertaking, when the User Research team worked on a project aimed at exploring the complex nature of behaviour management in prisons, they needed to recruit participants with operational experience of prisons to run a series of workshops. As a network, we were able to tap into our resource pool to put them in touch with the right people in a matter of days — a process which can sometimes take many weeks through other channels. Initial engagement with the network's members allowed the team to test the effectiveness of their approach and helped them tailor it to their target user group. This initial consultation highlighted a number of challenges, including navigating sensitive topics as well as understanding prison jargon, which the team was then able to better prepare for. This not only allowed the team to feel more confident in their approach, but also ensured the time they had with frontline staff was effectively used to produce valuable insights.

Engagement with frontline stakeholders is crucial to ensuring policies are grounded and reflect operational realities. However, it is equally important to recognise the significant pressures frontline staff face, ranging from prison capacity issues to insufficient staffing numbers. Any engagement should be carefully thought out to avoid adding further strain to their workloads while still making the most of their input. As a network, through the first-hand experience of our founders and members, we recognised this and set up a system that innovatively addresses this issue.

Innovation to foster connections

As discussed previously, working both in the frontline and HQ (whether it be policy, analysis, or other roles) gives an insight into the 'gap' between the two. Helping colleagues in both worlds understand each other better, and therefore collaborate more frequently, becomes an imperative for those with these experiences. Many people who have made the transition will have found themselves eagerly trying to explain the nuances of operational realities to HQ colleagues and to articulate the difference between the two worlds. Likewise, they may have difficulty explaining the work they do in headquarters to colleagues still in operations. As a network, we have formalised these types of conversations through a variety of innovative schemes which encourage mutual exchange and understanding, including events, a 'Bridging the Gap' scheme, Frontline Familiarisation Visits, and shadowing opportunities.

Engagement with frontline stakeholders is crucial to ensuring policies are grounded and reflect operational realities.

The network was born out of innovative talks by an empowered HQ staff member, who bravely and openly started sharing her experiences as a prison officer with colleagues, including at an event with the private office of the Prisons Minister. This event was incredibly well received and, from then on, the network continued to receive an increasing number of requests to organise talks on different topics. In the early days, these events focused on 'a day in the life' of staff working in diverse frontline roles, but soon evolved to include panel talks involving people with experience and expertise on 'hot topics' in the field.

Through the years we have established reoccurring traditions; for example, an event series called 'Getting

5. An extraordinary job. Done by someone like you | Prison Jobs

to know...' and an annual Festival, which is the culmination of the network's yearly calendar of events. The 'Getting to know' series invites fascinating people from diverse backgrounds across the organisation and wider justice sector to share insights into their experiences on a variety of topics of interest that connect with our network members. Some stand-out guests include a judge, who spoke candidly on their career and how the challenges faced by the sector have changed through time, and people with lived experience of the justice system which captured the imaginations of the network's membership, influencing and inspiring their work. As the repertoire and range of events offered previously has accumulated into an extensive catalogue, the events and their topics now rely less on requests from colleagues and more on us knowing what our members want to hear about.

The highlight of the year for the network is the annual Frontline Staff Network Festival, a two-week schedule of online sessions including panel discussions, skills sharing workshops and interviews with a few visits to the frontline offered during this time. The 2024 festival focused on 'Expanding Horizons' and the 1,300 attendees heard from collaborators across the justice sector such as the Zahid Mubarek Trust, people with lived experience, and representatives from diverse departments across the MoJ widening the perspective and understanding that staff have of the wider justice system.

From 130 members at the end of December 2021 (the first full year of the network) to over 1,500 members at the end of December 2024.

In addition to ensuring that operational realities remain front and centre in the minds of HQ staff through online events, we also offer schemes which foster connections between individuals, giving each participant a very tangible experience of the 'other side' of delivering justice. The 'Bridging the Gap Scheme', rolled out in early 2024, offered the opportunity to bring together frontline and HQ staff. The aim was to support staff in feeling more connected to each other and foster working relationships across the organisation, as well as facilitating knowledge sharing. The Scheme required paired staff to arrange three meetings (of up to 1 hour during working hours) over the course of three months, and included supporting materials to structure conversations during each meeting. The materials encouraged participants to share insights relating to their career journeys, roles and responsibilities, workplace practices and cultures, and views and experiences of different areas of work in the organisation. Where possible, participants were paired based on mutual work interests; for example, a frontline staff member interested in security was paired with a HQ staff member working in that policy area. In total, 75 frontline prison staff from 18 prisons and 92 HQ and policy staff signed up to take part in the Scheme. Of those that applied, 75 frontline and HQ and policy staff members were matched and participated in the Scheme.

We conducted an informal evaluation using questionnaires which captured participants' thoughts both before and after they took part in the Scheme. Analysis showed that prior to undertaking the Scheme, there was a lack of understanding between frontline and HQ participants about what each other's roles entailed. The Scheme appears to have been successful in improving the understanding of HQ work by frontline staff: of the frontline staff who signed up for the scheme, only 28 per cent stated they understood the work HQ does before participating, while 67 per cent of those who completed the Scheme stated that they did afterwards. Qualitative feedback from those who completed the Scheme indicated that it had the desired effect of 'bridging the gap' between HQ and frontline, with participants citing an improved sense of connection between HQ and the frontline, and a developed understanding of each other's roles. As one frontline participant responded, it helped them to understand 'that people in HQ and MoJ are actually here to help and aren't just faceless people who don't know the best interest of what it is like operationally.'

Innovation for the network has often been centred around ensuring those at different ends of the department no longer appear as 'faceless' to one another by promoting genuine opportunities for learning and information exchange. Our 'Frontline Familiarisation Visits' scheme is a key example of this. The visits scheme, which began in September 2022, is aimed at HQ staff with little experience of operational working and provides them with the opportunity to visit frontline sites such as prisons and courts. One of the aims of the scheme was to help civil servants working on policy, communications, analysis or other projects to develop their knowledge of how their work affected the frontline in practice and thereby reflect this both in how they engaged with the frontline, and within their HQ work.

Between September 2022 and December 2024, we facilitated 137 visits in total and enabled over 1,000 members of staff from headquarters to better understand the pressures faced by the frontline. In 2024 alone, the network delivered 77 visits throughout the year — 52 to prisons, 17 to courts, five to prison training centres (such as Newbold Revel), two 'Activity Days' bringing together HQ staff with people in prison and prison staff, and one to a Courts and Tribunal Service Centre. The impact of the visits is best expressed in comments given by scheme participants:

> 'For me personally, I wanted to understand the impact of a specific policy change on this prison, and I was able to see some of it and also talk to the Governor about it. That was really valuable. I also found it helpful to generally see different parts of the site and hear from our guide about some of the security and safety challenges at the prison.' (Policy Advisor, MoJ)

> 'I think this would be a useful exercise for all HQ colleagues, to understand the lived pressures of frontline staff'. (Analyst, MoJ)

> 'As someone who is office based within HQ it really was very insightful to be able to visit the prisons and get a better understanding of how they operate.' (Policy Manager, MoJ)

Ninety-nine per cent of the 481 visitors who have responded to our post-visit survey have stated they would recommend the visits scheme to another colleague. Prior to our establishment of the visits scheme, there was no centralised opportunity for staff in the department to visit prisons. This is just one of the ways that our insight has helped to build relationships across the department and bridge the gap between HQ and frontline.

Another innovative way we have facilitated HQ colleagues to spend time on the frontline is through developing our partnerships with third sector organisations and amplifying volunteering activity that is happening across the MoJ. In doing this, we have offered and supported multiple opportunities for MoJ staff to volunteer in frontline criminal justice settings. These provide colleagues with more exposure to frontline services and also support charities to increase their impact. For example, we recently partnered with registered charity Give a Book who provide books to children of people in prison.[6] MoJ volunteers spent time at family days in prisons, encouraging families to choose a book and read together. Our support not only gave MoJ colleagues the opportunity to spend a day in a prison supporting people in prison and their families but also expanded the support the charity is able to offer.

> 'The volunteers were incredibly kind, warm and passionate about the cause and the family day. It was such a treat to have their support.' (Family Day organiser)

We have facilitated HQ staff visiting the frontline, we have also arranged for frontline staff to understand more about HQ.

Just as we have facilitated HQ staff visiting the frontline, we have also arranged for frontline staff to understand more about HQ. This was initially offered through a series of 'Spend the Day in HQ' events, where colleagues working on the frontline were offered the opportunity to spend a day in one of the Department's central offices. As previously discussed, the world of HQ is often described by those on the frontline as an 'ivory tower', a mysterious and faceless place where policies are developed and decisions are made. By inviting frontline colleagues into this space to learn about the work that's done there and meet the people doing it, we hoped HQ would become a tangible reality that colleagues could feel connected to.

We created varied and interesting agendas for these days to expose frontline colleagues to the work of different teams, such as private office, or policy, learning and development, and communications teams. Feedback demonstrated that colleagues were surprised by the diversity of work and the passion of those involved in delivering outcomes that improve what happens on the ground:

> 'It really is an excellent initiative, and will recommend to all my colleagues, the networking opportunities and exchange of ideas is brilliant' (Frontline participant)

> 'Really found it useful to fill in the missing gaps and reinforce all the hard work that goes on.' (Frontline participant)

6. https://giveabook.org.uk/

There was overwhelming demand for the Spend a Day in HQ events; the most recent had over 20 applicants per space. In order to create more opportunities for frontline colleagues to gain exposure to HQ, we set up a shadowing scheme. This aimed to facilitate opportunities for frontline staff to shadow someone in HQ. Like the Bridging the Gap scheme, we matched frontline applicants with a colleague in HQ, with matches based on mutual work interests where possible. We provided HQ staff with guidance and resources about how to host a good shadowing placement, but gave pairs the freedom to decide how they would like to conduct their shadowing depending on interest, workload and availability.

We matched 72 colleagues from frontline prison and probation roles with HQ colleagues working across 40 teams in MoJ and HMPPS, including four senior civil servants. Feedback has indicated that this has been an incredibly valuable experience; of the 66 colleagues who responded to the survey, 98 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they found shadowing (or hosting a shadowing experience) an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. 95 per cent of frontline participants that responded felt they had a better understanding of HQ as a result of shadowing, and 84 per cent of participants that responded planned to stay in touch, continuing the connections they had built through shadowing.

> 'In 13 years of service, this is the most productive thing I think I have ever done.' (Frontline participant)

> 'I really valued the discussion around my policy areas and getting the fresh frontline experience from her to give me food for thought in how I progress my policies.' (HQ participant)

> 'I now feel that I know people within the MoJ HQ I can speak to, and I hope they feel similar.' (Frontline participant)

The disconnect between HQ staff and the people working on the frontline in courts, prisons and probation was one of the catalysts to the network's foundation — and connection has been the aim and the undeniable result of the efforts of the volunteers forming the network. The gap is shrinking one event, attendee, visitor and shadowing participant at a time. Beyond the vast number of interpersonal and professional connections fostered through the various initiatives, the network also enables its members with frontline experience to reflect on themselves and how they understand their identity as a headquarters colleague, with their invaluable frontline experience.

Conclusion

Despite our grassroot beginnings, the Frontline Staff Network is now playing its part in building a vital bridge between the operational and HQ worlds at the MoJ. By fostering collaboration and encouraging understanding between staff working in HQ and those on the ground in prisons, probation and courts, we have created meaningful opportunities for knowledge exchange and innovation.

Through our initiatives like the Insights Commissions, Bridging the Gap Scheme, and Frontline Familiarisation Visits, we have empowered those with operational backgrounds to share their experiences, allowing those in HQ roles to better design services and policies that reflect the true nature of operational realities. Our efforts not only appear to be transformative in fostering relationships and improving engagement between HQ and the frontline, but also to have led to positive tangible outcomes, such as helping to shape the first ever prison workforce recruitment campaign depicting the operational realities of working in a prison.

While the tremendous collective efforts from its volunteers have helped to embed the Frontline Staff Network in the Department, its rapid growth and increasing demand for its initiatives only highlight how much more work there is to be done. Despite this, the work of the network underscores a very important truth: the gap between the frontline and HQ is not a fixed divide, but something that can be bridged with the intentional and collective efforts of staff, and commitment to collaboration.

The positive feedback we have received so far, both from frontline and HQ staff, reflects the value of our network — it appears to be helping frontline voices not only be heard, but integrated into the decision making happening in HQ, hopefully making the MoJ better equipped to serve the needs of its staff and the very people they support.

The Frontline Staff Network is a volunteer-run Ministry of Justice initiative. If you are interested in learning more about what we do or how you can replicate some of our initiatives in your organisation, please contact us at.
frontlinestaffnetwork@justice.gov.uk.

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