

Nacro's response to the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee call for evidence: Prison culture: governance, leadership and staffing

About Nacro

1. At Nacro we see people's future whatever the past. That's why our housing, education, justice, and health and wellbeing services work alongside people to give them the support and skills they need to succeed. It's also why we fight for their voices to be heard and campaign together to create lasting change.
2. We deliver services across England and Wales and across the different stages of the criminal justice system (CJS), from liaison and diversion in police custody and court, through to support for people on a community order or on release from prison, including advice with accommodation, personal wellbeing and finance, benefits and debt. We deliver the Community Accommodation Service (CAS-2) on behalf of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), housing prison leavers on Home Detention Curfew and those bailed from court in need of an address, as well as a range of supported housing projects for people leaving prison. We run a national criminal records helpline supporting 12,000 individuals and employers annually.
3. We recognise the impact crime has on individuals and communities and we work with people who have committed offences and who are victims of crime. To reduce reoffending, we believe that rehabilitation must be at the heart of an effective CJS.

About Nacro's Justice ExChange

4. The Nacro Justice ExChange is a network of people who have been in contact with the criminal justice system and received support from Nacro with their resettlement journey, including people who are currently in prison or have previously served a prison sentence.
5. Our response to this call for evidence is based on the views and experiences of the members of Nacro's Justice ExChange and the wider people we support. Additionally, we interviewed nine members of the Justice ExChange (six men and three women) who have served custodial sentences ranging from a few weeks to 14 years. Between them, they have spent in excess of 50 years in over 30 prisons (both public and private), in a range of establishments including the youth estate, all categories of men's prisons and both open and closed prisons in the women's estate.

6. Please contact Andrea Coady, Head of Policy and Service User Involvement, for more information on our response: andrea.coady@nacro.org.uk.

Our response

7. We have limited our response to the section entitled ‘the perspectives of prisoners’.

The perspective of prisoners

Question 1: How do prisoners understand the role of the Governor? How often do they see the Governor and what impact does Governor visibility have?

8. The people we interviewed understand the role of the Governor as being in charge of an establishment, keeping order and holding responsibility for the vision and plans for their prison. Governors are responsible for communicating their vision and plans effectively with staff, people in prison and their families on the outside. One person said that part of the Governor’s role is to encourage rehabilitation.
9. With one exception, everyone we interviewed said they rarely, or never, saw the Governor, and that any visibility within the prison was generally seen to be limited to dealing with negative things, such as volatile or violent incidents or dealing with adjudications.¹ Everyone we interviewed said there is very little positive affirmation from Governors or senior staff.
10. They believe that there are too many levels of management within prisons and bureaucracy has increased which makes it difficult or impossible for people in prison to express their views directly to Governors and can lead to a lack of consistency.
11. The people we interviewed would like to see more visibility of Governors and senior leaders as they believe that openness and accessibility creates trust and a more human and caring environment within prisons and encourages positive attitudes and behaviours.
12. The following comments are representative of the views of the people we interviewed:

13. The role of the Governor

“The role of a Governor is to keep order in the prison for staff and prisoners. To keep everyone safe and to communicate with staff, prisoners and families so everyone is on the

¹ The prison adjudication system deals with breaches of prison in a court-type hearing. Most cases are heard by a Governor, and independent adjudicator hears the more serious cases. If a person is found guilty of misconduct, they can be awarded a punishment (or punishments), which can include cellular confinement, forfeiture of privileges, stoppage of wages. Only and independent adjudicator can order that someone has extra days added to their sentence.

same page. The final part of their role is to encourage rehabilitation. When I arrived in prison I was not told anything about the Governor or his staff or what they do.” JEX Male 2, released July 2024

“I could only really guess at what the Governor’s role is as I never saw him, but I think the deputies do most of the day-to-day work. I think the main Governor is only there for negative stuff when things turn violent on the wings for example and people are punished.” JEX Male 4, released March 2023

“There are too many levels of manager in prisons now so you can’t get to anyone who is making decisions. There is too much paperwork involved, they have muddled the water and in doing so they have pushed the inmates further away from access to the people in prison who have power to make decisions and that has created a clear divide which leaves you as a prisoner feeling unconnected.” JEX Male 3, released 2022

14. Governor visibility and its impact

“It’s important to have a visible Governor, someone who is willing to talk and is reachable, have understanding of what’s going on and interested in the inmates in the prison, but also having a plan and policy that is shared with inmates.” JEX Male 3, released 2022

“Most prisoners day to day will never see the Governor. Unless they are on adjudication or something negative has been done then you aren’t seen, and Governors do not get involved. If there was more visibility there would be a positive impact. It would show an increased positive attitude towards prisoners. As it is, prisoners are quite far removed from Governors and senior staff and there is a lack of communication from Governors about their direction for the prison.” JEX Male 1, released October 2023

“I occasionally saw a Governor but not very often. It was more a case of seeing them in a negative situation when something violent or volatile had gone off in the prison.” JEX Female 7, released 2015

“There were two Governors during my time in prison. I only knew the name of the first one but I never saw him. The second Governor was impressive. He wanted prisoners to be engaged. He did a daily video that came out on the prisoner’s TV in their cells and that told them what he was doing each day and what his plans were. It was very useful and interesting. He would have someone different with him each day and it was meaningful to what was going on in the prison. If there were any issues, he was visible and present and would speak face to face with prisoners. This was a real contrast to the first Governor, who didn’t do anything hands on and this gave the impression that he didn’t care.” JEX Male 2, released July 2024

Question 2: What makes a “good” prison officer from the perspective of prisoners? How do relations between prisoners and staff affect the experience of those in the prison system (staff and prisoners)?

15. Many of the people interviewed for this response spoke of good relationships with some officers, but they felt that this was generally not the norm.
16. The common themes which emerged from our interviews and are consistently raised in the forums that we run in the community and in prisons are that a good prison officer is/has: Consistent and well-informed; respect and honesty; people skills and life experience; empathy and a caring attitude; approachable and willingness to listen. Below is further detail on these themes.
17. **Consistent and well-informed** – having a consistent approach from day to day is key so that prisoners know where they stand. To be consistent it is important that officers are well-informed so that they deal with issues properly. The importance of officers following through on things they say they’ll do is repeatedly emphasised.

“There was a lack of consistency between officers, and they don’t pass information on to staff who take over from them. This means that the simplest things, like getting toilet roll, have the potential to escalate into violence or have an impact on mental health.” JEX Male2, released July 2024

18. **Respect and honesty** – The people we interviewed spoke of the importance of respect, as this creates good relationships which build trust and support the functioning of the prison. This relates closely to honesty – people want to know where they stand and have honest dialogues with officers.

“I had a good experience with officers which I put down to me being polite and respectful while I was there. One officer would occasionally have a cup of tea with me and this meant a lot to me, it gave me a real boost. Officers need to have the human touch and treat people with respect which isn’t always there. You need more continuity of staff and not such a high turnover.” JEX Male 4, released March 2023

19. **People skills and life experience** – The people we interviewed thought that the best officers were those that had good people skills and life experience as these often mean they can relate to people in prison on a deeper level.

“Most of the staff at [women’s closed resettlement prison] were the same during my time there. Smaller prisons are better and means you can build a rapport with staff and are not just simply a number. The staff were less officious and more friendly because they had the time to communicate and use their common sense.” JEX Female 7, released 2015

20. **Empathy and a caring attitude** – Having an understanding of the issues of people in prison and demonstrating that they care is vital to promoting good relations.

“Care. Nurturing. Growth. Change. All words you hear but rarely are put into practice by prisons. Some officers do care but are not given the platform to care by the failing system.”
JEX Male 1, released October 2023

“I’d just like officers to have humanity and show a human touch. They should show empathy and a willingness to listen. I had no family or friends so if an officer listened to me that went a long way. Being locked up is a punishment and so they don’t need to continue to punish you. I think a lot of officers have a power trip.” JEX Male2, released July 2024

21. **Approachable and willingness to listen** – The people we interviewed spoke about the importance of all staff – from the Governor down – being willing to take the time to talk to, and listen, to what people in prison have to say.

“Officers must speak with prisoners rather than just at prisoners. Younger officers are often more willing to listen to prisoners but they ... need to then absorb it and act off the back of it.” JEX Female 8, released 2022

“Staff have to be approachable with good people skills and need empathy. They have to be willing to take time to listen and they have to care. If they are just there for the pay cheque then it is obvious to a prisoner, it’s easy to see that they couldn’t care less. If there was a good officer, I’d wait for them to be working so I can ask them things, but they are few and far between. There is a lack of experience in the staff - life experience as well experience as an officer.” JEX Male 2, released July 2024

Question 3: What factors contribute to the “culture” of a prison? How are prisoners affected when a prison is badly run?

22. It is clear from our interviews that people see the culture of a prison being influenced by a range of actors, including the people who are imprisoned, staff on the wings who have daily interactions and all levels of management. Staff shortages are seen to significantly impact on prison culture and the people we interviewed believe it is important for senior staff to have the autonomy to make bold decisions. Good communication and listening to and working with people in prison positively contributes to the culture. A focus on rehabilitation also helps to create a good culture as it is focused on people’s futures.

23. The following comments are representative of the views of the people we interviewed:

“Culture comes from prison staff. There is a lack of respect from staff currently in prison. If there is a negative attitude from staff then there will be a negative culture on the wings. Prisons are understaffed and therefore staff are not able to care through their own stress levels. We need more continuity of both staff and care which is now missing from prisons.”
JEX Male 1, released October 2023

“A lot of this [the culture of a prison] is down to prisoners. If they are given a privilege that can be taken away then prisoners will not want to lose it ... [A trusted job] gives positive

reinforcement but this needs to be rolled out to more prisoners not just a few.” JEX Male 4, released March 2023

“Prisons need to set a culture and environment for prisoners to thrive. Individuals high up in prisons need to be empowered and brave to put forward programmes that engage and help prisoners to succeed.” JEX Male 4, released March 2023

“If a prison is run badly it has a knock on effect to the mood of the whole prison. What might appear to be a small thing can then escalate into a huge issue. I believe in having mentors on the wings and this needs to be rolled out in a bigger way and should be peer mentor led.” JEX Female 7, released 2015

“The culture of a prison will quite often be set by prisoners themselves however this comes from being given the platform by staff to set a positive culture.” JEX Male 6, released 2023

“One change I would make about prison culture is a shift towards prisoners being given ownership and responsibility to lead on things. This would make them feel valued and lead to a more positive living/working environment. By creating leaders amongst the prisoners this may help take the pressure off officers and prisons that are overstretched.” JEX Male 6, released 2023

24. We are grateful to the Justice ExChange members for their generosity in sharing with us their experiences during their time in prison for this response.