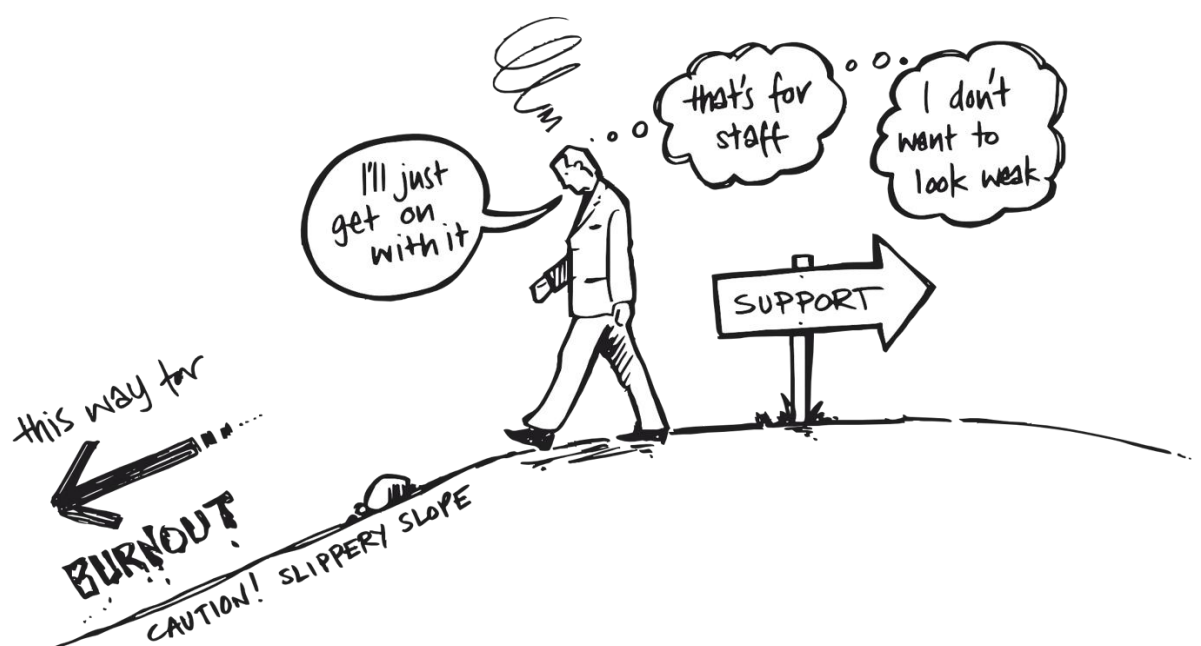


“Just get on with it”

*A qualitative exploration of the health and wellbeing of
prison operational managers and Governor grades*



Overview of findings

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The project



There's this attitude of just get on with it: be a bit macho, be a bit roughy thoughty, 'oh it was only a bit of self-harm', 'it's only a bit of claret' or 'he's only a bit blue'.

The team of University of Lincoln researchers was commissioned in 2021 by the Prison Governor's Association (PGA) – the professional body for prison operational managers and governor grades in the UK – to help them build a better understanding of the health and wellbeing of their members. This is particularly important because the Prison Service is **not an ordinary workplace**, with staff exposed to different and substantial daily pressures. Using qualitative interviews, the multidisciplinary team – bringing together expertise in psychology, health, law, and criminology – spoke to 63 PGA members to explore how participants described their health and wellbeing at work, what mechanisms of support were available, and how they felt about their current role. This short report captures an overview of the findings, based on analysis of the qualitative research. Further detail can be found in the full project report, available by contacting the authors using the details at the end of this report.

What we found

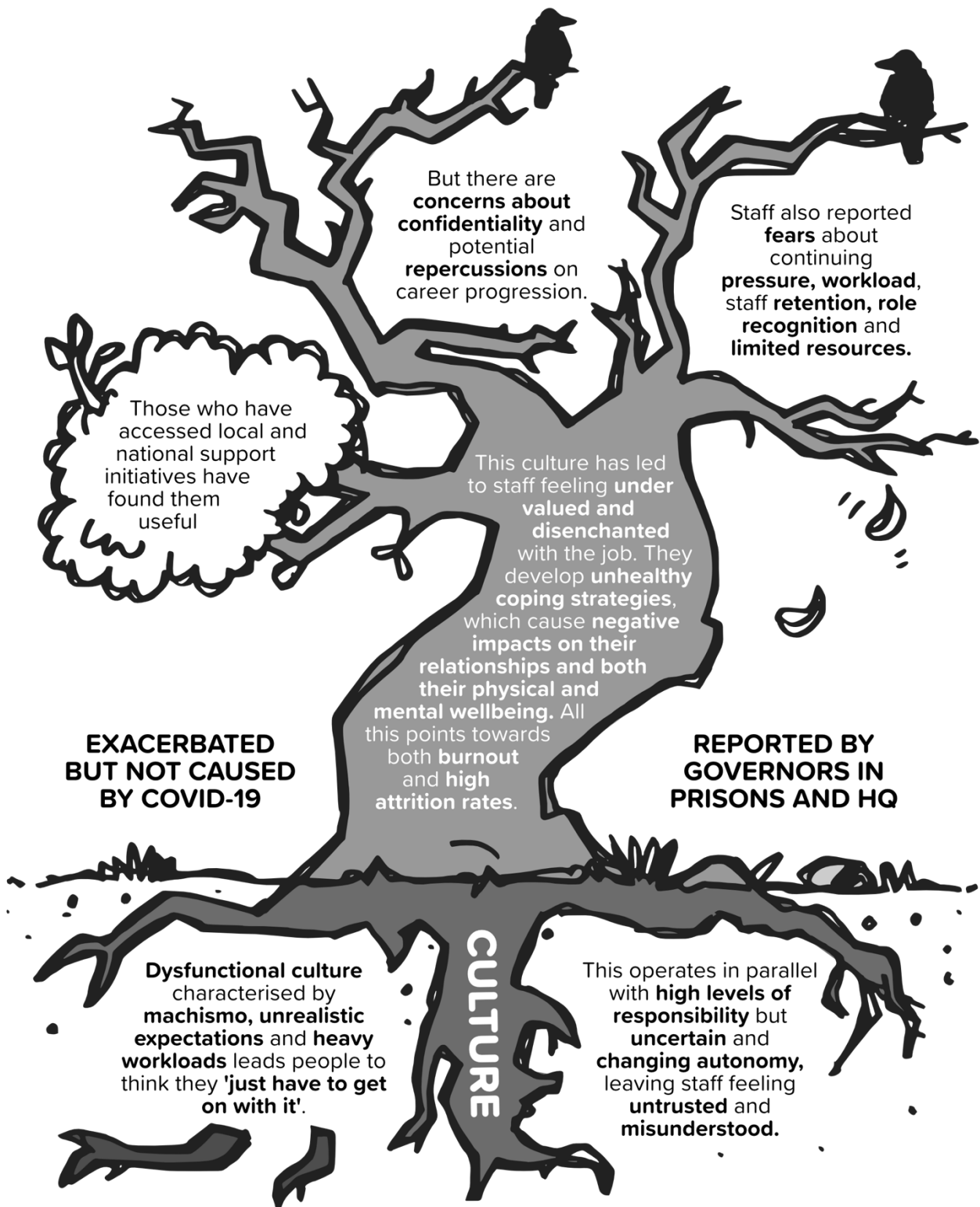
The overwhelming feedback we received was that **more needs to be done to support the wellbeing** of prison operational managers and governor grade staff, whether they work directly in prisons or in HM Prison and Probation Service headquarters.



I've not asked for help, because I don't want to be seen as a failure.

What starts with a dysfunctional culture results in staff feeling unvalued, disenchanted and disengaged. Together, this has significant negative impacts on the home life of staff as well as both their physical and mental wellbeing. And while these contributing factors had at times been exacerbated by Covid-19, interviewees reported that they were by no means caused by the pandemic. We explore these issues in more detail below.

What interviewees told us about their wellbeing



The current culture and its impacts point toward the need for more - and different - wellbeing support for staff, as well as creative and sustainable ways to address staff fears for the future

Note: The term 'Governors' in this image relates to prison operational managers and Governor grades.

The cycle of macho culture

'Macho culture' refers to an environment where toughness and stamina are emphasised, and weakness should not be shown. From our interviews, we heard that participants perceived **opening up as a sign of weakness or failure** and feared the repercussions if they did share what they were feeling. There is a culture of presenteeism, with staff carrying unmanageable workloads. Instead of talking about the challenges they face, participants referred to the need to adopt an 'impenetrable' persona and cope on their own, even when serious incidents occurred.

Participants also felt the **weight of expectations**, from themselves (either explicitly or subconsciously), from the working environment and from other people, including prisoners, staff, peers, managers, headquarters, and ministers, as well as the public and the media. It became apparent in conversations that internal and external expectations fuelled the other, creating a vicious circle that feeds the perceived need for long working hours and the ability to be able **to just get on with it** no matter what happens.



I'm a manager I should be able to manage it, and if I'm not managing it, then I'm failing.

Responsibility but lack of autonomy

Participants reported mixed perceptions about autonomy and responsibility depending on where they were working but there was an overriding sense that those in prisons were **expected to take responsibility for the welfare of their staff and prisoners but that they were not given appropriate autonomy to do so**. This was bound up with the perception that these staff were **neither trusted nor supported** to make the decisions needed to do their job. This had led both to a stifling of innovation and maverick decision making which, in turn, has increased stress and fear of negative repercussions. At the same time, staff working in headquarters felt that their roles and contribution were not understood or valued. This has created a clear '**them and us**' divide for both groups of staff.



We don't necessarily understand the pressures on non-operational people at headquarters, but equally they don't understand the pressures on us. And there needs to be a better appreciation of that, there needs to be a recognition that they are not necessarily roles that either can step into.

Accessing support

A key feature of the research was to explore when and how prison operational managers and governor grade staff accessed support, and through the interviews we asked how participants felt about the local and national wellbeing initiatives on offer. Where services like PAM Assist, the Employee Assistance Programme, and Trauma Risk Management had been accessed, interviewees were generally positive about their experiences. However, most felt that all these **services were more geared towards their staff than themselves**, and some reported **significant concerns about confidentiality and the potential repercussions of using such a service**, particularly in relation to career progression. Sustainability of initiatives was also highlighted as an issue. And this perceived lack of appropriate support means that people don't feel valued at all.



They don't care who I am. They don't care about me. They don't care if I'm in this role or if it's someone else. They don't have any kind of belief in me . . . they're not rooting for me . . . You're here at the current time, you are all disposable. Someone else will come along . . . you're as disposable as the food containers from last night's food.

The path to disenchantment

Taken together, these three features – macho culture, lack of autonomy and lack of support – made interviewees feel **disenchanted and disengaged**. Staff told us about feeling exhausted, in some cases bullied, traumatised, and, in some cases, unable to go on. Several told us about using unhealthy coping strategies to deal with the relentless and intense pressure they face every day. Many also reported being **unable to maintain a healthy work-life balance, damaged relationships, and physical and mental health exhaustion**. People talked about being too tired to go on, feeling constantly worried, and at risk of burnout.



*For the first time in my working life, I had genuinely thought, and excuse my language, of going, f*** it, I can't do this anymore. I'm not coming in.*



For most, these pressures have been exacerbated by Covid-19 but some saw the past two years as having a positive effect, bringing people together, creating a sense of camaraderie and reminding them about their pride in their job.

The future

So, what does this mean for the future? When we asked what prison operational managers and governor grade staff felt about the coming years, we heard two key concerns. First, they felt **fearful about how the service would look**, whether anything would be learned from the last two years and whether there would be any end to the constant workload pressure. This links closely to the second concern, which was about **staff retention and attrition across all grades**. One interviewee described the current situation as the 'the perfect storm', with 'inexperienced staff, poor leaders that are hiding away and a regime that's opening up'. Many told us that they were considering leaving their job, either contemplating early retirement or finding employment outside of the service.

Overall, participants called for a recognition of the issues raised in this research and greater acknowledgement of their experiences, a review of roles and workload, increased appreciation of the different roles in prisons and headquarters and more appropriate and better resourced support services.



I don't think they've ever done this before, and it's a really useful temperature check of the prison service in 2021. And I think we need to make this achieve something. It needs to have an impact, doesn't it?

This raises several questions, outlined in full in the main report and summarised here:

- ⇒ **What can be done to support and evaluate the culture of talking about mental health and wellbeing, including work related stress and trauma?**
- ⇒ **What can be done to increase the understanding and appreciation of different roles and contributions within the prison service?**
- ⇒ **How can Governors be supported to be more innovative in their roles?**
- ⇒ **What Governor-specific support should be implemented, how and by whom?**
- ⇒ **What can be implemented to support the working hours of Governors and encourage them to take their full leave entitlement?**
- ⇒ **What further professional development needs and solutions can be identified and implemented for current and future Governors?**
- ⇒ **What are the next steps in responding to the suggestions made by Governors? What resources are required to implement these suggestions? How can the impact of this change be measured?**

Note: The term 'Governor(s)' in these questions relates to prison operational managers and Governor grades.

Who are the findings for?

We hope that this research is useful to a variety of individuals and organisations:

- ⇒ The **Prison Governors Association**, as an evidence base to help them understand the health and wellbeing of their members and to shape services.
- ⇒ **Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service**, to provide insight into the health and wellbeing of prison operational managers and governor grade staff – both within prisons and at headquarters – and to inform the development of future initiatives to improve wellbeing. The research could also form the basis of a longitudinal study of prison operational managers and governor grade staff and be used to help evaluate the impact of wellbeing initiatives.
- ⇒ The **Ministry of Justice**, as a measure of the state of the prison service and its ability to ensure the safety and security of prisons, and to inform policy decisions that impact on the health and wellbeing of prison operational managers and governor grade staff.
- ⇒ **Prison operational managers and governor grade staff**, to show them that they are not alone in what they are facing and that somebody is listening.

Why this research and why now?

Prison Governors and Managers have multiple demands and stressors placed upon them in the delivery of their duties as senior staff within their services. Prisons in the UK have experienced multiple challenges including increased violence, suicide, and self-harm; overcrowding; increasingly complex prisoner needs; decreased funding; and staff attrition. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused additional challenges, posing significant risks for both staff and prisoners and leading to lockdowns across prison populations that far outlasted those in the general UK population. In 2021, the Prison Governors Association carried out quantitative (questionnaire) research with its membership, which revealed high workloads and high levels of stress, impacting on wellbeing. Our research sought to explore these findings in more detail by providing a platform for people to tell us about their experiences. This has enabled us to build a deeper understanding about current working conditions, the impact of Covid-19, and the underlying reasons for wellbeing and stress within the workplace.

Our approach

We invited people who had completed the 2021 Prison Governors Association health and wellbeing questionnaire to take part in more detailed discussions. We interviewed 63 participants – 43 male and 20 female – across a range of ages and with different lengths of service, to reflect the overall Prison Governors Association membership.

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of individuals about their wellbeing. We asked six main questions:

- How would you describe your health and wellbeing at work over the past year?
- What strategies and support do you have to manage your own health and wellbeing at work?
- What strategies and support do you use to help your staff members' health and wellbeing at work?
- Have these strategies changed since Covid-19?
- How would you describe how your work impacts your home life?
- Have your feelings towards your role changed and, if so, how?

We also used a series of prompts for each question to explore answers in more detail and participants were encouraged to talk freely and openly. We recorded and transcribed the interviews and then analysed and discussed the findings, drawing on the multi-disciplinary expertise of the researchers.

Find out more

As a research team, we are committed to sharing our findings widely and working collaboratively with partners to co-create solutions. If you would like to find out more, please contact the team via Dr Lauren Smith, School of Psychology, University of Lincoln, laurensmith@lincoln.ac.uk.

To watch a video overview of this project, please visit <https://youtu.be/lfrX3iMAtPM>