

Safe Inside
Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance
Position Statement
2025

Position Statement

The Joint Unions in Prison Alliance (JUPA) are committed to working together and engaging with other key stakeholders to lobby for improvements in the working conditions for our members.

Whilst we acknowledge the proposals made by the Ministry of Justice to make prisons places of safety and reform (MoJ and NOMS 2016), we are frustrated by the lack of urgency and the continuing impact this is having on our respective members. Retention of a skilled and experienced prison workforce is key to making these improvements in safety; however, the current environment is not conducive to sustainable careers in the prison service or associated support services. The MoJ Annual Prison Performance Ratings 2023/24 (MoJ 2023) outline that only 13 (10.9%) of prisons were given an outstanding rating, the same number as in 2022/23, which is the lowest number of prisons to receive this rating since 2016/17. In addition there was an increase in the proportion of prisons rates as serious concern compared to 2022/23, with 15 (12.6%) of prisons given this rating. An increase of 6 prisons from 2022/23.

The following are our jointly agreed calls for action on the government, regulators and employers to address the situation:

- Take proactive steps to achieve safe staffing levels for all staff working in prisons
- Improve measures to tackle violence and aggression against all staff in prisons, including targeting of violence against women workers
- Prevent sexual harassment and assault in the workplace
- Prevent work related stress – 70% of band 3-5 staff say they are stressed a few times a week or more at work and 61% do not feel their mental health is taken seriously at work (Justice Committee 2023).
- Preventing exposure of all staff to Spice/psychoactive substances
- Provide all staff working in prisons with access and information on health and safety systems
- Provision of regular health and safety information, instruction and training for all staff
- Investment to improve the working environment and conditions for workers in prisons – including the provision of suitable welfare facilities in good condition (including rest areas, toilets, lockers and facilities for showering and changing)
- Tackle workplace culture and actively respond to reports of bullying, harassment (including sexual), physical abuse and verbal abuse from colleagues
- Effective consultation with trade union safety representatives on matters which affect the health, safety and wellbeing of members

Background

The Joint Unions in Prisons Alliance was set up in response to the ongoing concerns about the safety of staff working in prison environments to seek improvements to working conditions in prisons so that staff can feel 'Safe Inside'.

The Alliance brings together the following trade unions and professional organisations, all of whom have members working to provide services in prisons:

- British Medical Association (BMA)
- GMB

- Napo (The Trade Union, Professional Association and campaigning organisation for Probation and Family Court staff)
- Public and Commercial Services union (PCS)
- POA (Prison Officers Association)
- Royal College of Nursing (RCN)
- Royal College of Podiatrists
- UCU (University and College Union)
- UNISON
- Unite the Union

We represent staff employed by HMPPS, private prison providers, and staff working for third party contractors providing cleaning, maintenance, health care and education services.

Key Concerns for prison workers

The annual report from HMP Inspectorate of Prisons (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2024) found many prisons severely overcrowded and understaffed. 'Inspectors found men and women continued to spend far too long locked in their cells with nothing to do thanks to the woeful provision of education, training or work'. Inspectors also found a 'surge in illicit drug use, self-harm and violence'. The report also notes that 'lots of prisons were dirty and needed repairs' and 'prisoners were not able to see doctors and nurses quickly or get mental health care when they needed it'.

Unsafe staffing

Understaffing and a dramatic loss of experience impacts not only on the safety and welfare of prisoners but all staff working in a prison setting including those providing vital services such as maintenance, education and health care. For example, nursing staff holding cell keys in order to access prisoners, or prisoners not able to be escorted to the toilet during an education session and subsequently having no choice but to urinate in the corner of the classroom.

Work-related violence

Prison workers continue to suffer from physical assaults by prisoners and verbal abuse and threatening behaviour is an everyday occurrence which some workers see as 'part of the job'. Continued verbal abuse and the threat of violence has a negative impact on workers and can lead to increased sickness, poor morale and make the recruitment and retention of staff extremely difficult. Over 70% of band 2 staff and over 80% of band 3-5 staff say that staff morale is not good in the prison they work in. In addition, half of band 3-5 staff do not feel safe at the prison they work in (Justice Committee 2023).

A risk management audit by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ 2024) on how prisons assessed and managed the risks of violence and self harm concluded that 36 out of 77 prisons were rated 1 and 2 (ratings are 1-4, with 1 being the lowest).

Safety in Custody statistics (MoJ 2024b) showed the number of serious assaults on staff increased by 18% in the 12 months up to March 2024. The latest statistics (MoJ 2025) the rate of serious assaults increased by 13% and 11% of all assaults on staff are serious.

Data extracted from the prisons data on safety and order (MoJ 2024) states that in the 12 months to September 2024 there were 120 assaults on staff per 1,000 prisoners, up from 114 in the period April 2023 to March 2024.

While the figures are of serious concern, the alliance is not assured that all incidents of violence and aggression are formally reported by prison workers (including third party providers). This is further exacerbated by the current situation whereby the only category that can be reported against on the HMPPS incident reporting system is 'assault'. This means that other incidents including verbal abuse, threats and non-physical violence against staff cannot be formally reported or recorded through the HMPPS incident reporting system.

The Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 requires the criminal justice system to take attacks against prison staff more seriously. One prisoner, who had assaulted a prison officer at HMP Berwyn, had an increased tariff added to his sentence, with the judge specifically citing the 2018 Act. However, the Alliance believe there should be a greater focus on preventative action to avoid violence and aggression against all prison staff. This should include the capture of non-physical/non-assault incidents, action to review trends and patterns to identify further preventative action and support for affected staff.

Impact of Exposures to Psychoactive Substances

In addition to the well-documented role psychoactive substances have played in the rise of violence in prisons, members of the Alliance have serious concerns about short and long-term secondary exposure to psychoactive substances, especially in situations where members working in prisons have to enter cells to provide first aid to prisoners who have become unconscious following exposures.

Members working in prisons report a variety of symptoms from second-hand exposures, including nausea, dizziness and anxiety. The Alliance are aware of cases where their members have been rendered unconscious due to exposures; have experienced breathing problems and instances of staff being taken to hospital, including a member of prison healthcare staff being cardioverted (an emergency procedure to regularise their heart) in the back of an ambulance.

Members also highlight concerns over driving home from a shift following secondary exposures to psychoactive substances. The Alliance is aware of a case of a prison officer crashing his car on the way home from work after exposure.

Working conditions and overcrowding

The UK Parliament's Health and Social Care Committee found that too many prisoners remain in unsanitary conditions that fall far short of the standards we should expect. The committee recommended that the Government should set out what its plan is to ensure that all prisons are clean and sanitary all of the time and by when, and how, they expect to stop overcrowding. The Health Committee also recognised workforce issues and highlighted that "Workforce is fundamental to addressing the problems in prisons", going on to recommend that "the National Prison Health

Board should develop a workforce plan to underpin a whole prison approach. The plan should set out how it will ensure there are sufficient and stable staffing levels and how it will fill key gaps in the skills and skill-mix of the prison workforce” (Health and Social Care Committee 2018).

Overcrowding and poor conditions were also raised by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. As identified by Professor McGuire (MoJ 2018) in a rapid evidence assessment for HMPPS, poor physical conditions for prisoners can heighten tensions and lead to a rise in conflict and abuse. In addition, less than a quarter of band 2-5 prison staff agree that physical working conditions at their prison are adequate (Justice Committee 2023).

Despite the issue of overcrowding being raised consistently and staff verbalising their concerns about their working conditions, the same issue was reported in HM Inspectorate of Prisons annual report 2023-24 (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2024) which found many prisons severely overcrowded, dirty and in need of repairs.

HMP Dartmoor has recently decided to temporarily close and move all prisoners to other locations due to an ongoing issue with radon levels, which are reported to be over ten times higher than the workplace limit. The exposure of prisoners and prison staff to levels of significant levels of radon is a serious concern due to the risk of developing lung cancer.

Consultation on health and safety issues

The Alliance recognise the value of trade union safety representatives in improving working conditions and want to work with respective employing organisations to recruit more safety reps.

There is evidence of under-reporting of issues, members working for contractors in prisons do not report all concerns and even some reports made via the HMPPS reporting system are not acknowledged, actioned and do not feature in overarching reports.

JUPA Position

There are continued health, safety and wellbeing risks for all workers, partner agencies and third party providers working in prisons. The alliance is committed to working with HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) and employers to improve working conditions and ensure that all prison workers feel ‘Safe Inside’.

The alliance is calling on the UK Government, the Health and Safety Executive and other relevant enforcement authorities, HMPPS and third party providers to take further preventative action.

UK Government

JUPA calls for the UK Government to:

- Provide immediate ringfenced funding to tackle maintenance backlogs and improve H&S infrastructure e.g. fire protection and detection systems in HMPPS buildings, which may be leading to the deterioration of working environments and damage or disturbance of asbestos.
- Mandate the phased removal of all asbestos in HMPPS buildings

- Fully resource the Health and Safety Executive enable them to proactively inspect and, where appropriate, take relevant enforcement action

Regulators

HSE

The RCN calls for the national regulators of health and safety in the workplace to:

- Implement a programme of proactive themed inspections on violence and aggression, work related stress, psychoactive substances, asbestos and working conditions

Employers/ HMPPS

- Ensure that all workers, including third party providers are aware of and have access to key H&S information and systems
- Through thorough risk assessment identify safe staffing levels for all staff working in prisons and commit to ensuring safe staffing is in place for all workers in prisons
- To reinvigorate and reinforce the zero tolerance to violence, harassment and abuse of prison workers. This must include taking appropriate legal action against perpetrators.
- Make a clear commitment to prevent the sexual harassment and assault of workers through the implementation of stronger controls and action.
- Broaden the zero tolerance to violence, harassment and abuse definition to include sexual harassment and assault are included and there is a clear commitment to prevent sexual harassment and assault. Review the incident management and investigation processes to ensure data is captured for investigation, preventative action and further analysis.
- Develop and implement a national violence reduction standard
- Conduct a review of the incident management system to facilitate reporting of all incident types, to include:
 - non-physical/ non-assault violence, harassment and abuse
 - sexual assault
- Fully implement a single incident reporting system for all prison workers which includes acknowledgment of all incidents, a clear structure, process and timescales for investigation and commits to preventative action.
- Regular promotion of the importance of reporting incidents and how to use the incident reporting system to all workers and third party providers
- The review of the use of body worn cameras policies and protocols to ensure there is clear governance in place. This must take into account of who should wear them, when and how they should be worn, how footage will be stored, who has access to recorded footage and for what purpose and dignity for prisoners if they are receiving medical treatment. Carry out further consultation and agreement on the expectation for third party providers to wear HMPPS owned body worn cameras
- Carry out thorough risk assessments to identify substances hazardous to health and implement effective preventative measures to prevent the exposure of workers and third party contractors e.g. reduce access to and use of by prisoners leading to secondary exposure of prison workers

- Fully implement the HSE Management Standards and commit to the prevention of work related stress. Ensure workers are provided with swift access to support services which includes the option of self-referral.
- Carry out necessary reviews and upgrades of fire protection and detection systems e.g. upgrading fire detection systems to meet statutory requirements
- Ensure compliance with the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 and provide suitable and sufficient information on asbestos risks, including why there are asbestos warning signs and how to escalate any concerns as part of mandatory health and safety training, for all workers.
- Support, monitor and supervise third party contractors who are undertaking their duties and activities within the prison setting. Third party contractors, delivering services for prisoners should not be responsible for supervising and managing prisoners on their own.
- Make necessary improvements to working conditions for workers and ensure that all workers including third party contractors and private providers have access to suitable clean and hygienic rest facilities including areas to store, prepare and consume hot food and drink, access to fresh drinking water, the provision of toilet facilities in close proximity to the working area and facilities to store and change clothing, especially if there is a risk of contamination
- Drive forward improvements in workplace safety culture and ensure effective and timely action is taken to prevent and deal with reports of bullying, harassment (including sexual), physical abuse and verbal abuse from colleagues
- Ensure cooperation and coordination with third party providers is maintained, procedures, protocols and risks are shared to enable third party providers to carry out robust risk assessments and communicate significant risks to workers
- Consultation with staff side trade union representatives as required under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations 1977

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