



# CORRECTIONS CAREERS

## CCJ4C: CAREER COUNSELLING GUIDELINES FOR STAFF WORKING IN CRIMINAL CORRECTIONAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

<b>Date:</b>	<b>Monday 08 March 2021</b>
<b>Place:</b>	<b>Conducted virtually</b>
<b>Project partner:</b>	<b>York Associates International, UK</b>
<b>Number of participants:</b>	<b>09</b>

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

York Associates encountered reluctance among participants to permit their identifying details to be published in this report. The focus group moderator and administrator have retained detailed identifying information about the participants, including their full names and job roles, but at the request of the participants, the descriptions provided in this report will not include any identifying information.

**Moderator:** Tom Flaherty (TF)

**Administrator:** Linda Simi (LS)

**JP** – Prison officer in a maximum-security facility, with 12 months service

**RG** – Prison officer in a maximum-security facility, with 3.5 years' service

**SG** – Partner of prison officer (RG), recently employed within the Probation Service

**DJ** – Head of Learning & Skills for HM Prison Service

**KW** – Youth Offending Officer in Restorative Justice team, with 6.5 years' service

**PW** – Member of the UK Independent Prisons Monitoring Board

**RW** – Director of an organisation working on creative learning programmes inside prisons

**CR** – Lecturer of Criminology

**EB** – University Deputy Dean of School of Education and Social Sciences, formerly Principal Lecturer of Criminology

### FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

TF began the focus group by welcoming the participants, and introducing himself and LS, the focus group administrator. TF asked each focus group member to briefly introduce themselves and explain their role within the criminal justice system.

TF proceeded to explain the purpose of the CCJ4C project is to develop, test and set in place a working methodology for improving the career guidance process in Criminal Correctional





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Justice (CCJ) focusing on the competencies needed by an individual to manage their own career.

TF further explained that following completion of the quantitative analysis, the purpose of the focus group would be to discuss and expand upon these findings by obtaining qualitative evidence and analysis from the focus group participants.

TF asked if there were any questions about the project or the format of the focus group. Once TF had established the group were happy to continue, TF began the discussion and debate element of the focus group.

## DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

### ***What do you think are the attitudes to the career of prison officer, among prison officers, their prison service colleagues, families, and also among the wider public?***

RG began by stating that they generally avoid telling people what their job is, because they believe there are many stereotypes about what the role involves. RG said they believe that the general public often consider prison officers to generally be aggressive, controlling and perhaps violent in their personality, and that the role of prison officer is very brutal. CR agreed there is a perception among prison officers themselves that the job is a 'masculine' role and only suitable for individuals who can control their emotions, not show weaknesses, and who have physical strength.

RW stated that their experience has been that many people do not fully understand what the role of the prison officer really involves and whether it is an enforcement role or a rehabilitation role, or both. JP stated they felt that it is both enforcement and rehabilitation but that the public have very strong opinions on how the criminal correctional justice system should be used. DJ feels that prison officers are not viewed with the same respect as other emergency service workers, such as hospital staff and the police. EB expressed concern here that in some prison environments, prison officers are from the same or similar socio-economic group as many inmates and although this is a generalisation, entry requirements for employment in the prison service are not particularly strict, and they wondered whether the most suitable type of people are attracted to roles in the prison sector.

### ***What do you think drives this reaction?***

TF asked the group why they thought there may be a negative public perception of the prison officer role. DJ said that they feel the role is much less high profile in the media





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compared to the police, for example. DJ also said that although there have been multiple UK government campaigns to encourage people to join the prison service in the last few years, high staff attrition rates mean that some people leave their prison service careers feeling unhappy and disillusioned with the criminal correctional justice system. PW spoke here about their experience that a decade ago, prison officers would often be from ex-military backgrounds, and perhaps therefore the public perception may be of the masculine, aggressive element of the role. However, PW did feel that more recent recruitment campaigns have focussed more on communication and support skills and fewer ex-military individuals now join the prison service.

### ***What specific barriers are there to staying in the role, and staying active in learning within the role?***

TF asked the focus group to consider what the barriers may be to staying in the role, and to continue to learn and develop within the prison environment. RG stated that they feel that the biggest barrier to continued learning in their role as a prison officer, is lack of financial resources, understaffing and overcrowding. They said they do not feel that there is a willingness at the very top of the prison service to fund correctional justice to the level required for prison staff to have the time to undertake additional training. JP agreed, saying that although they personally felt motivated in their roles and actively looked for training opportunities, they did not feel that this was the case for most prison officers. DJ concurred, speaking about the attrition rate among prison officers, and stating that they felt the prison environment was a shock to newly recruited officers when they first entered the profession. Furthermore, DJ felt that there is a disconnect between the lived experience of prison officers and the picture painted during the recruitment and induction process. Here, EB also highlighted a recent survey by the Association of Prison Officers (POA), which found that over half of respondents (58%) rated opportunities for advancement in the prison service to be 'poor' or 'very poor'. PW stated that their experience was that career paths for prison officers are not made clear so they could see that prison officers may feel that advancement opportunities were limited, although their experience was that this was not necessarily the case, and opportunities were available to those who proactively sought them out.

### ***What do you think would be good about improved support for prison officers to keep learning and training within their role?***

TF asked the group to move on to the question of the benefits of improving learning and development support for prison officers. CR pointed out here that research in 2018 indicated that one third of prison officers leaving the service had been in their role for less than 12 months. CR felt that improved training and developing support, and career





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guidance would be one of the ways in which prison officers may feel more empowered to remain in their roles, thereby reducing the attrition rate. PW mentioned that a decade ago, training programmes were often offered in prisons on specific subjects, such as supporting vulnerable prisoners at risk of self harm or substance abuse. They stated that many of these programmes had reduced due to funding concerns and it was their view that these programmes were well received by officers and encourage prison officers to feel that they were playing a role in improving the experience of inmates. PW felt it was disappointing that such programmes were now longer prioritised and that improved support for prisoner officers via programmes such as this, would lead to improvements in prisoner experience and improve the rehabilitation aspect of prison life for inmates.

***What are your thoughts on the format? What would improved support look like? (leaflets, external training, guidance, better training for line managers etc)***

DJ pointed out here that there is already a very good UK government website providing information and guidance on the roles available within the prison service (this can be found at: [www.prisonandprobationjobs.co.uk](http://www.prisonandprobationjobs.co.uk)) so perhaps better publicising this information would encourage recruitment into the role. JP agreed here that the information about joining the prison service that they had found online when considering the role was comprehensive and clear, however they stated they felt that it did not necessarily paint a true picture of the reality of the role. They do recognise that when trying to recruit new officers, there is a balance, and the job does need to sound appealing. RG agreed with all JPs comments but said it had been a particular shock to them on joining the prison service to see how much more was involved in the role and some of the challenges that had not been discussed in advanced, for example understaffing and inmate substance abuse. PW felt that it would be very beneficial to newly recruited prison officers to take a short, supervised visit to a prison before beginning their training, so that they get some idea of the reality inside the facility prior to committing to the induction training programme. EB commented that their view was that if salary for prison officers was increased, and entry requirements were also tightened, people applying for the role may be more interested in the role as a career choice and not only a job.

TF asked the group to consider then, as well as information prior to joining the prison services, what might the group consider would be useful to prison officers in terms of ongoing support?

RW spoke first here, stating their concern that prison culture and the working environment can make prison staff reluctant to ask for or accept training and development opportunities





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so that they do not appear weak or unskilled next to their colleagues. It was their view, therefore, that ongoing career development and learning must be made mandatory for prison officers. They were clear that each officer's development journey should be tailored but that a specific amount of development time should be allocated to every officer. The group broadly agreed, with all participants with direct experience stating that although training opportunities are often available it is usually up to the individual to be proactive and ask - ongoing training is rarely offered, except standard refresher training.

***What are your thoughts on the content? What exactly do you think prison officers need to know? (e.g male / female, HR / line managers etc, public?)***

TF asked the group to consider what messages needed to be delivered to prison officers through this guidance and development initiative? He prompted the group to consider, for example whether messages should be different for male and female officers.

CR stated here that their concern would be the variety of different prison environments that a prison officer may be working in. It is their view that a single approach would not work in all prisons, due to the differences between state and privately run prisons, categories or prison (from high security through to open prisons) and differences between prison standards in different regions of the country. All focus group members echoed CR's opinion on this, and felt it was very important that any guidance system would have to be very flexible to accommodate multiple different prison environments.

EB spoke about their research work and stated that they believe that gender plays a key role. EB's experience within the prison environment has been that female prison officers may feel that there is a need for gender specific training that is not currently available, for example in how to de-escalate violent situations. RW agreed here that gender specific training in some elements may be beneficial and stated that their experience within prisons has been that generally speaking, female staff have been more open to training exploring communication and emotional management. CR felt strongly that any training or development activity deliver to prison officers must be seen to be credible, any outside trainer coming into the prison environment must demonstrate that they understand the prison experience, and gain the trust of the prison officer team in order for the development sessions to be successful.

***When would improvements have the most impact? Before joining, early in career etc?***

TF asked the group to consider when, in a prison officers career journey, development initiatives would have the biggest impact. JP stated that they would have liked more ongoing





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training and development opportunities; they had been pleased with the initial training but felt somewhat unsupported once they began full time working in the role. Early in their career, after initial training and a short period of time working with prisoners would have been an excellent time to discuss a career development journey with their line manager, but this was not offered. RG agreed completely with JP on this subject and there was a general consensus from the group that early discussions about career development plans would be beneficial for all prison staff.

DJ also raised here that the prison service does not currently carry out exit interviews when staff are leaving their employment. DJ commented that they feel that exit interviews would be a very beneficial exercise in enabling senior prison management and justice department teams to understand some of the reasons for the prison services' high attrition rates. Although this would not necessarily help the individual who had decided to leave the service, it would hopefully inform decision makers on future initiatives to support prison officer retention.

### ***Would these improvements have effect on prison officers' motivations and conditions in the working environment?***

TF asked the group whether they felt that these interventions on training and development would improve prison officer motivation in their role. The opinion from the group was generally mixed. PW mentioned their experience that there are multiple motivations for joining the prison service and there is no 'one size fits all' approach to managing prison officers, as not all staff are especially career oriented or open to continuing professional development. CR disagreed with PW here, feeling that in their experience, the majority of prison officer did want some support with contouring their development but often did not know where to look to find the opportunity available. DJ spoke here about their view that although anything intended to improve the conditions for prison officers would be beneficial, they believed that much bigger issues around recruitment and retention of staff, and improvements to salary and working hours would ultimately improve conditions for both staff and inmates more effectively. CR agreed and highlighted a recent report from the UK's Institute for Government that prison spending has been reduced by 14% in real terms since 2009/10. It was generally agreed by the group that funding was an ongoing concern within the prison sector. The conclusion of the group was that any career development opportunities made available would be welcomed overall by the majority of prison officers, but that real concerns about pay, conditions, understaffing and overcrowding were possible bigger considerations within the prison service currently.





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### ***Would it improve how family and friends view the prison officer job?***

After a short break to allow the group members to refresh and gather their thoughts, TF asked the group to consider whether outside contacts of the prison officer would view the role more positively if guidance and development opportunities were available? SG definitely felt that, as the partner of a prison officer, they would feel more positively about the role if they felt there were more training and career development opportunities. They stated again that they had felt the quality of the initial training had been very good overall, but that ongoing development and support was limited, and that their partner had very much needed to seek out opportunities themselves proactively, rather than having any guidance from colleagues or senior staff. KW agreed and stated that in their role within youth restorative justice, development opportunities are more clearly defined, but that in the adult prison sector this does not seem to be the case, and they would definitely view the prison officer role more positive if career development opportunities were more obvious. EB stated here that their research indicated that some prison officers and their families were aware of training opportunities for prisoners themselves, that were often not available to the prison officers, and that there was a sense of unfairness regarding this. JP and RG concurred on this point. The final consensus was that personal contacts of prison officer would view the job more positively if more visible career development opportunities were available.

### ***Would it improve outcomes for prisoners?***

After a short rest break to allow the group to gather their thoughts, TF resumed the focus group by asking the group to consider whether developing career guidance and development programmes for prison officers would improve the outcome for prisoners themselves. RW felt that this would certainly be the case, stating that if motivation among prison officers could be increased, and attrition rates reduced, prisoners experience would be improved. CR spoke about a recent initiative they had seen within a prison entitled 'every contact counts', where prison officers were encouraged to consider the impact of every interaction with a prisoner, even the small, day to day conversations they may have. Their research into the programme indicated that prisoners felt better supported and more respected by prison officers who had been involved in the 'every contact counts' training programmes. CR also mentioned credibility again here, arguing that outcomes would only be improved for prisoners if flexible and targeted programmes were developed for prison officers, and prison officers themselves felt the guidance to be relevant and delivered by credible trainers. JP and RG both agreed with CR on this and stated that it would be important to them to feel that the guidance was provided by an individual or organisation with an understanding and empathy for the prison officer role.





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RW stated that the felt it was important that training was encourage and delivered from the top down. It is their opinion that prison officers would need to feel that their line managers and other senior prison staff were also open minded to undertaking training themselves, and supportive of prison officers continuing development. This would enable a culture of guidance and development to develop within the prison that would lead to better motivated staff and therefore better outcomes for prisoners.

***What else would make it easier for prison officers to learn more about the training that is available, and what training would be useful for prison officers to support prisoner rehabilitation?***

TF asked the group to consider what training would be useful and what would make it easier for prisoners to learn more about available training. JP reiterated a previous point here that it would be easier for prison officers to accept training opportunities if there was some form of mandatory requirement to undertake development programmes, with flexibility about the specific nature of the programme selected. RG suggested, for example, a suite of online training programmes on different subjects, where it is mandatory for all officers to select a specific number of courses and complete them each month or year. RG felt that this would enable prison officers some flexibility to choose learning that appealed to them or they felt would help them, but that because programmes were mandatory, there would be no stigma attached to spending time on professional development. DJ spoke here again about funding and stated that if the funding were available, they believe each prison or at least prison region, should have a guidance officer for prison staff, and that it should be a requirement to meet with this person regularly to discuss career development and opportunities. The group widely agreed here that reduced prison service funding would again be a potential roadblock to increasing learning opportunities for prison officers and that this remains an area of significant concern.

On the subject of types of training, RG stated that they would like the opportunity to undertake training on leadership skills, to improve their opportunities for promotion within the prison service. SG felt that more training on managing stressful situations would be beneficial to all prison officers, and KW mentioned that training in the youth justice sector on empathy, emotional management would be useful for staff in adult prison environments. RW spoke about resilience training and agreed with KW on emotional management. CR spoke about the importance of ensuring any training initiatives are challenging to the prison officer in new and innovative ways, to encourage interest and interaction with the subject. RG and JP both strongly agreed with this comment. EB commented on the need to provide







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specific training tailored to prison officer gender and ethnicity to ensure that training feels relevant. RW agreed, and felt that more training focussed on the self, rather than others would be beneficial to the prison officer community.

## CONCLUSIONS

The focus group consisted of 9 attendees, along with one moderator and one administrator. The attendees were chosen from multiple backgrounds relating to criminal justice and education, including prison officers, lecturers, other prison workers including staff from NGO's, and criminologists.

Using their own experiences, the group were able to discuss questions relating to career guidance, learning opportunities and development for staff working within the criminal correction justice sector, specifically prison officers. The group agreed that overall there is a negative public perception of the prison officer role. The also agreed that on the whole, personal contacts of prison officers such as family members and friends, do not have a positive opinion of the role. Prison officers themselves feel that their job is not well respected outside the criminal justice system.

The focus group concluded that the biggest barrier to encouraging career development within the prison service is a lack of funding from central government, along with understaffing and in some case, overcrowding. It is the conclusion of the group that funding for additional prison officer development programmes is unlikely to be readily available. Whether career development opportunities would increase prison officer morale overall was contested within the focus group with some voices stating that improvements to salary and working conditions would cause the biggest impact to officer morale. Overall the group felt that that personal contacts of prison officers would view the job more positively if more visible career development opportunities were available. The group also concluded that in the long term, it is likely that improved opportunities for prison officers would likely lead to better outcomes for prisoners. In general, the groups opinion was the most important aspects of any career guidance and development programmes would be that it must be tailored to the type of prison involved and possibly the gender and ethnicity of the prison officer. The group also strongly felt that some forms of training should be mandatory, or at least that all officers should completed a designated number of hours of training in each month, quarter, or year. Similarly, the group concluded that any individual or group delivering training or careers guidance must be seen to be credible to the prison officer community.

