

# Prison Officer Training in Scotland And Norway: Is It Fit For Purpose?

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**The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) has long recognised that they need to do more in order to positively impact the lives of prisoners and help them to desist from crime.<sup>1</sup> In 2013 and 2016,<sup>2,3</sup> they published two reports which identified that the training delivered to staff was not sufficient to enable them to transform the lives of prisoners, nor were they equipped to work to their full potential due to the culture which existed, namely where control and command type behaviours were rewarded. As a result, the initial training delivered to residential prison officers changed in 2020 from completing the seven-week Officer Foundation training programme, with either none or one-week transitional training, to a twelve-week programme with more focus on rehabilitation. Modules are also completed over a two-year period.<sup>4</sup>**

Although they are socially and culturally different, the SPS often looks to countries such as Norway when planning or implementing change.<sup>5</sup> The Norwegian prison system is considered to be forward thinking, with some of the most humane prisons in the world and a professionalised work force of prison officers due to one of the best training programmes in Europe. The Norwegian Correctional Service (NCS) have had a two-year prison officer training programme since the 1980s. This was a result of White Paper no.27 which recognised change was required to deal with the problems which existed at the time, such as rioting in prisons, and high levels of re-offending after release.<sup>6</sup> As a result, both the initial training and the role of the prison officer changed from being solely a guard, to be considered one of a guard and a social worker. Since

2012, prison officers in Norway obtain a Diploma in Correctional Studies as part of their two-year initial training, and since 2019 they have been able to undertake a Bachelor's Degree in Correctional Studies.<sup>7</sup> It is acknowledged that problems can arise from replicating prison systems that are socially and culturally different. Norway doesn't face the same challenges as Scotland in terms of prison overcrowding and understaffing. However, improving the length of the training in Scotland, and gaining relevant qualifications while doing so, would hopefully move the SPS towards having a significantly more professionalised workforce of prison officers.

The last three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the aftermath of this, has impacted prison officers' abilities to positively impact prisoners even more. Staff shortages in Scotland meant that prisons have become 'places of containment rather than rehabilitation'.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is clear that a transformation of the role of the prison officer is still necessary to help meet the SPS' aim of 'maximising its contribution to reducing re-offending'.<sup>9</sup> As well as this, changing the negative societal perceptions of prison officers and improving their salaries would likely attract more of the right individuals to the role which could also help to improve staffing levels.

## Professionalising the role of the prison officer

The need, and want, to professionalise the role of the prison officer in Scotland is not new. For two decades, the SPS have discussed correctional excellence and they have envisioned that the prison officer should carry the same public status as that of a nurse, teacher,

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1. Scottish Prison Service (2012). SPS Corporate Plan 2012-2015. Available at: <https://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Corporate6.aspx>;
  2. Scottish Prison Service (2013) *Organisational Review - Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives*. Available at: <https://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Corporate9.aspx>
  3. Scottish Prison Service (2016). *Value Proposition*. Available at: <https://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Publication-4733.aspx>
  4. F. Slokan, personal communication, 7 February 2020.
  5. Scottish Government (2015). *International Review of Custodial Models for Women: Key Messages for Scotland*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/international-review-custodial-models-women-key-messages-scotland/pages/6/>
  6. Høidal, A. (2018). Normality behind the Walls: Examples from Halden Prison. *Federal Sentencing Reporter*, 31(1), 58-66.
  7. KRUS (2021). Studies at KRUS. Available at: <https://www.krus.no/studies.511950.no.html>
  8. HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (2021). *HM Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2021-2022* (p.3).
  9. Scottish Prison Service (2012). SPS Corporate Plan 2012-2015 (p.9). Available at: <https://www.sps.gov.uk/Corporate/Publications/Corporate6.aspx>

or social worker.<sup>10</sup> Yet, prison officers do not have professional certification. The SPS developed a Prison Officer Professionalisation Programme (POPP) which intended to professionalise their role. Among other things, POPP intended to enable prison officers to obtain a Diploma as part of their training. In October 2018, despite the Prison Officers Association (POA) advising its members to accept the proposal, it was overwhelmingly rejected.<sup>11</sup>

In order for the SPS to meet their goals, it is imperative that the training delivered to prison officers improves so that staff feel equipped to do the difficult job expected of them. Improving their training will likely help prisons to retain staff who usually leave due to lack of training and development opportunities.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, research has found that prison officers who are given appropriate training and have experience in the role are more likely to believe that rehabilitation is possible.<sup>13</sup> This article intends to identify key training areas for prison officers in Scotland and investigate prison officer attitudes towards training and development.

## Method

This was a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews and focus groups utilised to collect data. Nine interviews were carried out, seven with first-line managers from two prisons in Scotland, and two with ex-governors in Norway. Four focus groups were carried out. One contained three prison officers from a single prison in Norway, the other three focus groups contained four, two and two residential prison officers respectively from two prisons in Scotland. One impromptu meeting was also held with a governor from one of the Scottish prisons.

All participants, with the exception of the ex-governors, were selected by the prison governors or volunteered to be part of the study when asked by the governors. The two ex-governors in Norway still worked in corrections in some capacity. One of the officers in Norway supervises the trainee prison officers

going through their two-year training with the Kriminalomsorgens høgskole og utdanningscenter (KRUS), the University College of Norwegian Correctional Service. There was a mixture of male and female participants, with years in service ranging from one to twenty years. Several participants had experience of helping develop prison officer training in several different countries.

Thirteen questions were prepared ahead of the interviews and focus groups. The questions were created based on the literature that was available and gaps in the literature that the researcher wished to explore. Questions were centred around relations between staff and prisoners, the role of the prison officer, the importance of the initial training, the extent to which the training equips them to impact the lives of prisoners, what further training they felt necessary, and their thoughts on the training delivered in the opposing country. Follow up questions were asked where necessary.

Full ethical approval was given for this study from the University of Abertay and from SPS Research and Ethics Committee. Each participant was informed about the aims of the study via an information sheet and was given a consent form. As a result of COVID-19 all interviews and focus groups were conducted and recorded online via Microsoft Teams. These were later transcribed by the researcher. The collected data was analysed using NVIVO 12 and fifteen key themes were identified and coded through the use of inductive analysis.

## Findings

There was a strong consensus among the officers in Scotland that first and foremost the role of the residential officer is the maintenance of safety and security. While this is paramount in any prison, the SPS states that the primary role of the residential officer is to support prisoners each day through effective case management and to build relationships with them.<sup>14</sup>

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10. Scottish Prison Service (2001). *Delivering the SPS Vision: The Work of the Vision Teams*.
11. Scott-Moncrieff (2019). *Scottish Prison Service: 2018/19 Annual Audit Report to the Accountable Officer and the Auditor General for Scotland*. Available at: [https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2019/aar\\_1819\\_scottish\\_prison\\_service.pdf](https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2019/aar_1819_scottish_prison_service.pdf)
12. Penal Reform International (2022). *A global perspective on prison officer training and why it matters*. Available at: <https://www.penalreform.org/blog/a-global-perspective-on-prison-officer-training/>
13. Kelly, D. (2013). Punish or Reform? Predicting Prison Staff Punitiveness. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 53, 49-68.
14. Scottish Prison Service (2019). *Role of a Prison Officer - Residential Officer*. Available at: <http://www.sps.gov.uk/Careers/OportunitiesintheSPS/RoleofaResidentialOfficer.aspx>

While not suggesting that residential officers should disregard safety and security as an important part of their role, it is interesting to note that no individual, when asked about the role of the residential officer, mentioned assisting prisoners before talking about safety and security aspects. However, participants in Norway mentioned that the role of the prison officer is to be a mentor, a social worker, and a parent, responsible for building positive relationships. One participant stated, 'it's not hard to run a prison where people don't escape, they need to spend time in a system where they have changed and learned to govern their own lives'. Participants in Scotland recognised that the role is to help rehabilitate prisoners, but a number of them felt that wasn't something they actually did.

There was a distinct difference between why participants applied to the role in Scotland and Norway. In Scotland, some participants applied because they felt underqualified for anything else in the same pay range, and many applied out of economic pragmatism. However, in Norway, a number of the participants applied because they had a desire to work in a rehabilitative role. This is important because Nilsen and Bagreeva<sup>15</sup> argue that the quality of a prison officer depends on their motivation for becoming one and their attitude towards prisoners. They believe that these qualities are just as important as the skills they acquire through training.

### Initial training in Scotland and Norway

The direct entry residential officer role is a direct result of the rejection of POPP in October 2018. Each of the participants in Scotland felt that POPP would have been beneficial to them by increasing the status of their role, providing them with a qualification and more in-depth training to make a bigger difference in prisoners' lives. One participant stated:

*'I was frustrated [POPP] didn't go through. I believe we should be trained and with a recognised qualification...we have no professional service in the SPS and it should*

*be. It's one of the most highly skilled, I'm more highly skilled as a prison officer than I was as a [other public service profession].'*

The participants felt that POPP was rejected due to the lack of communication given by governors and senior staff, so prison officers weren't clear on what it would entail or how it would benefit them. This is disheartening, as POPP appeared to be a big step towards achieving the SPS' vision and mission which was set out in the organisational review.<sup>16</sup> While the direct entry to the role of residential officer is a direct result of the rejection of POPP, it does not deliver the same benefits. For example, residential officers will not work towards a degree. Several officers have commented that, without a degree, they feel their skills gained in the role are not transferrable.

The majority of the interviewees in Scotland felt that the initial training delivered to residential officers was not fit for purpose, was not orientated towards rehabilitation and did not prepare them to transform the lives of prisoners. One participant had been through the new residential training in 2020. They felt the training covered operational duties mostly, and its purpose was to teach the basic knowledge of the job and included nothing about

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rehabilitation. This participant knew nothing about the modules that they were supposed to complete over the first two years in the role, despite having been in the role for around nine months by this point. Most of the staff felt that informal training at the establishment, where the new recruits shadow more experienced staff, was the best training for learning the job. However, they felt that due to short-staffing or lack of motivation, many experienced staff either didn't have the time to teach them the role or weren't interested in doing so. New recruits should be mentored by experienced officers who are engaged and want to make a difference to ensure the culture that the SPS is trying to achieve is established.

Seven years on from the Values Proposition report highlighting the failings in the initial training, the training has been re-developed.<sup>17</sup> However, a new recruit who experienced this training felt it focused on

15. Nilsen, A., A Bagreeva, E. (2020). How to transform a static security prison into a dynamic organism for change and growth, in Focquaert, F., Shaw, E., and Waller, B.N. (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Science of Punishment*. Routledge.  
16. Scottish Prison Service (2013). See footnote 2.  
17. Scottish Prison Service (2016). See footnote 4.

the operations role instead of the residential, that the trainers were not prepared for this intake of new recruits and the officer didn't know anything about the modules they were to undertake. Furthermore, due to staffing levels, the residential officer training has been stripped back even further to focus merely on the basic security requirements of the role and doesn't cover all the rehabilitative work that it was created to do. It will be difficult for residential officers to unlock the potential and transform the lives of prisoners when they do not appear to receive appropriate training to do so.

All participants from Norway felt their training was fit for purpose but felt it could be longer. Some participants felt the two-year training only 'scratched the surface' of what they needed to know in their role. When asked what they thought of the training delivered in Scotland, one participant stated, *'what you put in, you get out. If you give people seven weeks training and expect them to do wonders it will fail, no doubt'*. While another offered,

*'Holding one of the most important and influential positions in Scotland...People who have been locked up and then we put people in charge of these kinds of institutions without any proper training. It's disgusting, it's terrible...'*

Most of the participants in Scotland felt positively towards the training delivered in Norway and felt they would hugely benefit from similar training. One stated, *'I think it would be great to professionalise what we do'*. However, a few acknowledged that, while they should be doing the rehabilitative work with prisoners, they were unable to do so due to overcrowding which caused them to do the *'basic security-type stuff'*. They felt that this, coupled with under-staffing, meant it wouldn't be justifiable to have a similar training system until these aforementioned issues were dealt with.

### Required training needs

While the SPS have attempted to transform prison officer training, all participants in Scotland felt their initial training was inadequate. It appears that POPP would have been a positive step forward for prison officer training in Scotland, however it was communicated poorly. It offered a degree — something that all participants said they would have wanted —

professional recognition and improved pay. It also intended to enable all prison officers to become Personal Officers, rather than solely residential prison officers. This would have enabled operations officers to carry out case management with prisoners, combating the problem of residential officers feeling like they don't always get time to do this type of work due to short-staffing. It is concerning that the SPS appeared to have made a breakthrough in moving their staff towards being 'justice professionals', yet it was rejected by officers because they felt POPP, and everything it would bring, wasn't effectively communicated to them by governors and senior management.

There needs to be more establishment-specific training, as many participants felt the training at the Scottish Prison Service College (SPSC) was aimed at staff working within the closed, male estate. Staff in the female, young offenders or open estates were told to direct all questions to their establishment when they arrived. When they arrived at their establishment, most participants were told to 'forget everything they learned at the College'. This hinders the effectiveness of the initial training, so it is imperative that there is better integration between the SPSC and the establishments. Perhaps a welcome pack could be distributed at the SPSC, giving new recruits information about the establishment they'll be

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working in. In Norway, prison officers spend six months at KRUS, a year in a prison, then a further six months at KRUS. Many participants liked that Norway's training had this blended approach. They felt that implementing this in Scotland would enable their training to be tailored to their establishment and help the training at SPSC be better integrated within their prison establishments.

Participants felt it would be beneficial to have better training in substance misuse, how to effectively manage prisoners with mental health difficulties, report writing, and interviewing skills. In relation to substance misuse, one participant stated that training in this area was *'lacking massively'* as so many prisoners come to rely on drugs in prison, even if they'd never previously had a drug addiction. Interestingly, there is a low level of drug taking in Norwegian prisons, yet their staff are taught about substance misuse during the core 'reintegration' module. Substance misuse remains a prominent challenge in Scottish prisons, yet substance misuse training did not form part of the core training

for officers.<sup>18</sup> Participants wish for further training in interviewing skills so they can better deal with the difficult conversations that arise regarding prisoners' trauma, mental health, and their offending. Some participants received no training on report writing, yet this can have a significant impact on how a prisoner progresses through their time in prison.

The SPS should incorporate their vision and mission into the initial training so that the culture they are trying to promote is embedded in new recruits. When new recruits enter the prison on masse, they could then hopefully promote rehabilitation and a growth-orientated environment, rather than conforming to the current 'command and control' culture.

### Conclusion

The overall purpose of this article is to address a gap which exists in relation to the initial training delivered to prison officers, particularly in Scotland, on which there has been limited research. The research drew on Scandinavian models as a comparator, therefore the initial training delivered to residential officers in Scotland and prison officers in Norway was examined. The research concluded that the training delivered to residential officers in Scotland is not fit for purpose. POPP appeared to be a positive step forward for the SPS and offered the key components that the SPS want their staff to have in order to professionalise them and enhance their effectiveness. However, this was rejected, seemingly due to poor communication from governors and senior staff. In training, prison officers were not taught about rehabilitation, despite the SPS wishing for prison officers to unlock the potential within prisoners and transform their lives. Many of the participants felt that training in this area was lacking, with one interviewee stating that they were not sure rehabilitation was something they even did. While the direct entry residential officer training was only introduced in March 2020, one participant had undertaken this. They felt the training was operations focussed and did not prepare them for the

rehabilitative aspect of their role. Since this, the training has been stripped back further due to the impact that COVID-19 has had on staffing levels.

There was a strong consensus that the training delivered at the SPSC was to teach the basics of the role and that the 'real learning' began when working in an establishment. It is clear that there is a lack of continuity between what is taught at SPSC and within establishments. Integrated learning between the SPSC and establishments would better assist prison officers to do their job, as they would be putting theory into practice. The participants in Scotland felt this would be the best way for them to learn. The Norwegian participants learn this way and they each felt this was crucial for effective learning and subsequent implementation. Providing welcome packs at SPSC about the establishment each recruit would be working in may be useful so the training can be more individually tailored.

Using a training model similar to Norway would be beneficial in Scotland. In particular, more integration between the SPSC and each prison establishment, working towards a qualification and being mentored by engaged staff who want to make a difference. Most of the officers in the Scottish sample joined the SPS out of economic pragmatism, whereas in Norway it was more because they wanted to make a difference or work in rehabilitation. Staff who want to make a difference may be more inclined to apply for, and remain in, the role because they feel better equipped to do the job, are part of a rehabilitation-orientated culture, and are working towards a qualification. The SPS were vocal about their aim to professionalise prison officers and reduce re-offending in Scotland prior to this study. However, the last three years of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the struggles they have had with this. Scottish prisons are facing even more problems with short-staffing, poor relations between staff and prisoners, and difficulty doing the rehabilitative work expected of them. Improving training for prison officers in Scotland is needed now more than ever.

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18. Scottish Government (2022). *Prison population: substance use and wider support needs*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/understanding-substance-use-wider-support-needs-scotlands-prison-population/pages/1/>