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‘Hammering on the pressure’: Prison governor well-being and the need for a more humanised approach

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Abstract

The challenges of prison work and the impact on the well-being of prison officers is widely publicised. However, less is known about the well-being of prison governors, and what may impact this: the focus of this research. Semi-structured interviews (n = 63) with prison governors across England, Scotland and Wales, analysed using thematic analysis, indicated core themes around poor well-being, limited work-life balance and feelings of disenchantment. The well-being climate was underpinned by challenges within the occupational culture including the relentless workloads, a so-called ‘macho culture’, competing expectations, a dissonance between responsibility and autonomy, and a lack of role understanding between staff within prisons and those working from HM Prison and Probation Service headquarters. The challenges were exacerbated, but not caused, by Covid-19 and a lack of perceived value among staff, but mitigated to a degree by individual coping and some access to governor-specific support. Implications and future directions are discussed.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Prisons have been described as ‘the quintessential government institution, with almost complete control over the lives of people compelled to spend time in them’ (Bierie & Mann, 2017, p.478). Depending on how they are run, and what opportunities they provide, prisons have huge potential to change the life course of large numbers of people, for better or for worse (p.478). However, prisons rely on large numbers of staff to ensure the safe, and effective running and management of prisons. While much is known about the health and well-being of prison officers, comparatively little is known about the well-being of those responsible for managing prisons. Furthermore, there is a paucity of information about factors which influence the well-being of prison governors.

1.1 | The prison workplace

Prison establishments are not typical workplaces. Staff working within them are required to support those who would be considered some of the most vulnerable people in society due to high prevalences of mental ill-health (Fazel & Danesh, 2002), drug and alcohol use (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011), physical health issues (Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011), and experiences of exploitation, neglect, abuse and trauma in their histories (Bierie & Mann, 2017). It is widely publicised that prisons are understaffed (Lilly, 2017) and overcrowded (Sturge, 2023), with increasingly high levels of suicide and self-harm among prisoners, and violence towards both staff and prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Prison staff are therefore exposed to trauma, ill-health, aggressive and violent behaviour, mental health crises, and the effects of imprisonment on those detained, with such role-specific stressors being evidenced as significant sources of stress for prison staff (Finney, Stergiopoulos & Hensel, 2013; Hartley et al., 2013; Kunst, 2011). The difficulties of working in prisons are further underscored by high levels of attrition among staff, with a leaving rate of over 13% among prison officers in England and Wales during the year to March 2023 (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2023). Furthermore, prisons exist in a complex political climate where the role of prisons and the work of their staff is often underappreciated by the public, and frequently portrayed negatively by the media (Crawley & Crawley, 2007; Vickovic, 2015). Collectively, these factors highlight why prisons are such challenging environments to work in, for staff at all levels, with stressors that affect people mentally, physically and cognitively (Fraser, 2014).

1.2 | Prison staff well-being

Existing literature relating to prison staff well-being has focused on prison officers, with evidence that prison officers are more vulnerable than those in other occupations to job-related stressors (Kunst, 2011). Moreover, job satisfaction and mental health were significantly poorer among prison officers when compared with staff in other emergency and security occupations (Kinman, Clements & Hart, 2016). International studies have shown that prison officers have one of the highest rates of work-related stress, injury and illness among all occupations (Dugan et al., 2016; Penal Reform International, 2016).

Research across several countries has indicated that many of the conditions associated with improved workplace well-being, such as support availability and perceived autonomy, are not available to prison workforces. Conversely, they have low decision-making input and perceived control; a lack of support, rewards and resources; poor relationships with colleagues and super-

visors; poor quality training and development opportunities; high role demands exacerbated by time pressures; role ambiguity; and multiple competing priorities between prisoners and managers and between values such as the delivery of care versus maintaining the safety and security of the prison (Bevan, Houdmont & Menear, 2010; Finney, Stergiopoulos & Hensel, 2013, Holmes & MacInnes, 2003; Kinman, Clements & Hart, 2017; Lambert et al., 2012; Liebling, 2011; Liebling, Crewe & Hulley, 2011; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). Consequently, prison officers have been found to be at increased risk of psychological distress, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression compared with the general population (Clements & Kinman, 2021; Denhof & Spinaris, 2013; Harvey, 2014), with many prison staff reluctant to seek support due to fears of appearing weak (Crawley, 2004; Nichols et al., 2024). Furthermore, Kinman, Clements & Hart (2019), found high levels of presenteeism (working when sick) among prison officers. Reasons cited for presenteeism included punitive attendance monitoring systems, pressure from management, staff shortages, not wanting to let colleagues down, fear of dismissal, fear of disbelief about being ill, and a sense of duty.

There is also evidence to suggest that the strains arising from prison officer work can impact negatively on personal life (Armstrong, Atkin-Plunk & Wells, 2015). Time-based conflicts where long and unpredictable working hours impact on time spent with family; strain-based conflict, such as exhaustion and anxiety arising from the working environment impacting on emotions outside of work; and behaviour based conflicts, where authoritarian interactive styles may impact on other life domains, have been evidenced (Kinman & Jones, 2001; Kinman, Clements & Hart, 2017; Lambert et al., 2006). Ruminating over work-related stressors during personal time can delay or negate recovery from conflict and strain and there is evidence of this among prison officers (Cropley & Zijlstra, 2011; Kinman, Clements & Hart, 2017). Crawley (2002) further highlighted that prison officer work extended beyond the prison through a contamination of prison life into the family home, such as intrusive thoughts about things officers had heard at work, and concerns about the impact on their own families. Family members also expressed concern about their loved ones working in prison (Crawley, 2002).

Collectively, existing evidence suggests a poor picture in relation to prison officer well-being. However, prison managers have specific roles in prison establishments to ensure that both staff and prisoners feel safe and are able to maintain their health and well-being, while offering rewarding and fulfilling careers for staff (Fraser, 2014). Given the importance of prison leaders in delivering effective prison regimes and staff support, and the ongoing issues with staff retention, it is therefore important to understand their well-being.

1.3 | The specific challenges of working as a prison governor

Bryans (2000, 2007) highlighted the complex, multi-faceted requirements of a competent governor, including balancing the priorities of prisoners, prison staff, members of the public and politicians, all of which require general management competencies, as well as prison-specific knowledge and competency. Despite such complexity, there has been considerably less research into the well-being of prison governors, when compared with prison officers, with Bryans (2000) positing that this is due to governors, historically, not wanting to be studied and researchers prioritising other areas of prisons as more worthy of study. Liebling & Crewe (2012) noted that, while prison managers are pivotal in the translation of prison policy and shaping prisons, access to prison managers for participation in research is difficult and it is unfortunate that so little is known about them.

In more recent years, there has been literature published about the specific challenges faced by prison managers. For example, Bennett (2015, 2019) highlighted the challenges of prison governors due to trends of managerialism in which the monitoring of a range of performance-related factors including targets, audits and ratings systems, has increased over time. He argued that this has also yielded specific alterations to the culture and orientation of prison leadership, such that the orientation is more economics and efficiency focused, and less welfare focused. He reported that this has led to toxic workplaces, characterised by factors including entrenched inequality and ineffectiveness, and that monitoring practices miss the nuances of individual prison settings, which are heterogeneous (Bennett, 2020).

Alongside this change in organisational leadership focus, Bennett (2015) highlighted the challenges of leading prisons during a period of austerity. This refers to government reductions in expenditure in England and Wales, during which the National Offender Management Service (NOMS; now HM Prison and Probation Service) was required to deliver £900 million in savings. The cuts saw reductions in the most experienced prison staff and decreased pay, which had a significant negative impact on morale and motivation (Prison Service Pay Review Body, 2014) and feelings of uncertainty about the future of prisons (Bennett, 2015). Bennett (2015) reported a negative impact on the health and well-being of prison governors during and after these cuts, most notably as a result of the emotional labour they experienced from needing to portray a more positive perspective on policy which they did not necessarily support themselves.

Crewe & Liebling (2015) found that women prison leaders described additional challenges to those experienced by males within the same roles and they indicated that women seemed to be disproportionately represented among people leaving the service. Smith (2021), reported that women governors felt there was a male-dominated culture which was isolating and they altered their appearance and displays of emotion with the aim of portraying what was perceived to be a more acceptable and legitimate image.

1.4 | Aims of the current research

The literature presented has highlighted the complexity and challenges of working within prisons. There is a volume of evidence about poor well-being among prison officers, but comparatively little is known about the well-being of prison managers and what, aside from managerialist practices, may influence this. The current research aimed to address this gap by qualitatively exploring the well-being of prison operational managers and governors working in prisons in England, Scotland and Wales. This article reports an academic overview of the headline findings from this research (Harrison et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022). The original and significant contribution highlights the role of workplace culture factors on well-being among the under-researched group of prison governors.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Sixty-three participants were recruited for interview via a well-being questionnaire, circulated by the Prison Governors' Association (PGA) to its membership. The PGA is the main Union body for prison governors and managers in the UK. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were able

to opt in to the online interview. The research team had no part in the distribution or analysis of the questionnaire. No incentives were provided for participation in interviews. Forty-three (68%) were male and 20 (32%) were female. The mean age was 49.7 years ($SD = 7.30$), with a range of 28–61 years. Sixty participants (95%) were white British. Specific ethnicity detail for the three remaining participants is not provided to maintain anonymity. The mean length of service reported was 24.2 years ($SD = 7.79$) with a range of 2–35 years. PGA monitoring data indicated that this demographic breakdown was representative of their membership.

Participants were from a range of settings across all HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) regions and including all four HMPPS prison security categories, the Scottish Prison Service, women's estate, juvenile secure estate, and HMPPS headquarters. In addition, participants were from a range of roles including Head of Function (Operations, Security, Residence, Safety, Reducing Offending), deputy governors, Governing Governors, Controllers, and a range of headquarters strategic leadership and project-specific roles. Throughout this article, the word 'governor' is used to cover all roles, except when Governing Governor.

2.2 | Measures

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed specifically for the purposes of the research. Participants were asked their gender, age, ethnicity, job title, name of the establishment and number of years' experience in HMPPS. Six main questions asked participants to describe their health and well-being over the past year, strategies and support available to them to manage health and well-being, changes in strategies since the outset of Covid-19, impact of work on home life, and feelings towards their role. Each question had a series of follow-up prompt questions to explore answers in more detail.

2.3 | Procedure

Participants who expressed interest in completing an interview were contacted by a member of the research team, provided with a Participant Information Sheet and asked to complete a consent form. Interviews were conducted online and recorded using Microsoft Teams. Interviews took place in 2021 and lasted between 35 minutes and two hours and 30 minutes.

2.4 | Analysis

The transcripts were entered into NVivo version 12. Broadly, the analytical strategy followed the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006). The research team met to discuss their initial thoughts about the data having collated initial codes under identified themes, providing an initial description of each of the areas. Three members of the research team coded the data separately. Once all data had been coded, the team met for a second time to discuss the codes, define new codes, arrange codes into themes, and agree on a final definition for each theme. A fourth member of the team subsequently reviewed the data under each of the codes and themes to determine if the data were representative of the agreed definitions.

2.5 | Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by The University of Lincoln ethics application service (Reference: 2021_6526). All participants were advised that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw up to one week post-participation without giving a reason, that data would be anonymised and stored securely, and sources of support were provided via Participant Information Sheets.

3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicated that the well-being of participants was not good, with several systemic and cultural factors driving this: relentless workload, macho culture, competing expectations, low levels of autonomy and with high levels of responsibility, a lack of role appreciation, and a number of more discrete exacerbating and mitigating circumstances. Data demonstrating poor well-being is described below, followed by a discussion of the factors identified as driving this.

3.1 | Well-being of prison governors

Prison governors specifically stated that their well-being was not good and that they did not tend to look after their health:

As governors we just get on. And so, do we look after our own welfare? Possibly not.
(PGA39)

My mental health is probably at the lowest I've experienced it as an adult male.
(PGA33)

There were indications of trauma from witnessing deaths in custody and self-harm incidents:

If I close my eyes when I get a few seconds, I will be able to recall all the deaths ... all those images that you see when you open a cell door, I can see those really quite vividly. (PGA21)

It is understandable that witnessing traumatic events would lead to the presence of acute stress. However, there were indications that this led on to chronic stress. For one governor, a protracted period of poor mental health had led to suicidal ideation:

I was sat in my car one day thinking, I'm going to drive my car into a tree. I don't want to be here, anymore. I've had enough. I just couldn't see any point. (PGA62)

Despite evidence of poor mental health, many governors reported portraying a resilient persona, but there were concerns about the long-term impact of this, indicating further concerns about the cumulative impact of acutely stressful and traumatic situations:

[I] go in my head and say, well, 'I'm resilient, we'll get through that', it's sort of everything building up and building up and at some point, it's going to explode. (PGA26)

This was accompanied by a reticence to ask for support and lack of confidence in the well-being support offered:

I just feel there's a general disregard for most of our well-being, that it's more a rhetoric around it and there's no real meaning behind the care that they're saying we get and support that we get ... The counselling you get while you're off is all about your well-being, 'You need to go for a walk each day, get your vitamin D', 'You should do sport', 'You should eat healthily', it's everything someone in a real dark place just doesn't need. (PGA34)

Physical health was also reported to be poor, characterised by a repetitive pattern of working, eating unhealthily, and sleeping, with little scope for much else in their daily routine. A range of symptoms included being overweight, poor sleep, reduced physical fitness, headaches, exhaustion, increased sickness during periods of time away from work, and cardio-vascular symptoms such as increased blood pressure and elevated heart rates:

I'm overweight ... I tend to be knackered when I go home. So, I'll just sit on the sofa, eat crap ... I think it's got worse ... since I've been governor. (PGA20)

I remember just crying some days with exhaustion, thinking I don't know how to put one foot in front of the other anymore. (PGA16)

When I did have a day off, I would end up with headaches and everything all day and it would take a whole day to cure. (PGA15)

Alongside symptoms of poor well-being, participants reported a 'non-existent' (PGA19) work-life balance whereby they were 'murdering [their] life in lieu of everything else' (PGA33). For many, work had become all encompassing, dominating homelife and leaving little time for family and hobbies where 'all seven days are interrupted by work' (PGA31).

Even when not physically working, participants reported frequent cognitions related to work during their time away from the workplace:

It's not that necessarily you're giving hours to work. It's the impact on your mind. Because you're always thinking about the decision you're making, the impact on people if it's the right decision. (PGA4)

These experiences of poor health and reduced work-life balance had led to several consequences including getting agitated more easily and general risk of burnout:

I think you've probably snapped a little bit sooner than what you probably would have done previously when dealing with frustrating situations. (PGA10)

The risk of burnout is really where it's coming to. A lot of people are at significant risk of burnout. (PGA45)

In addition, performance and motivation in the workplace had also been negatively impacted:

I'm sort of stuck in this position, feeling kind of less motivated, more knackered. (PGA35)

[Governing Governor] really hammered the pressure on at a time when I really couldn't keep up with the pace. (PGA43)

Overall, this had led participants to feel disenchantment towards a service they had previously felt loyal to; a job they had previously viewed as a vocation had become about survival. Such feelings had caused them to rethink their career in the prison service:

I feel let down by a service that I've given years to ... after everything I've given and the amount of commitment over the years and the amount of dedication to a very specific, important role, the treatment I had was appalling, and [I] have lost faith in the service. (PGA29)

The findings summarised here indicate poor mental and physical well-being alongside a lack of work-life balance, leading to feelings of disenchantment. These findings are reflective of existing literature which has evidenced the link between poor work-life balance and decreased well-being in other professions (see, e.g., Wong et al., 2021). Poor health and well-being, and a negative impact on personal life among prison governors also echoes existing findings in relation to prison officers as outlined in the introduction to this article. The disenchantment of prison governors is somewhat reflected in official statistics which suggest that the number of governor grades leaving has almost doubled for band 6–8 managers, and has more than quadrupled for band 9–12 senior managers between 2018 and 2024 (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024). The rate for band 6–8 managers was lower than the attrition rate for prison officers (just under 7% compared with 13%), suggesting they may become stuck within the stressful working environment described within this research. The attrition rate for bands 9–12 was similar to that seen among prison officers. Disenchantment has implications, not only for the future workforce, but also for the ongoing health and well-being of governors after leaving their current roles, as indicated by Crewe & Liebling (2015) who highlighted the extreme sadness and feelings of loss felt by Governing Governors after leaving the public sector to work in the private sector. Having discovered that prison governor well-being was poor, our analysis turned to examining what may be driving this. A number of factors relating to workplace culture were identified and will now be discussed.

3.2 | Relentless workload

High volumes of work was a prevalent theme within the data, with many participants working far more hours than they were contracted to:

I was easy doing 60 hours ... It was unhealthy but it's what you needed to do to get you through the week. (PGA12)

There was a strong perception that not completing required work would lead to punitive consequences:

I absolutely believe if a governor only did 37 hours a week ... you would be talking to them around performance. (PGA39)

A culture of working long hours had become normalised and ingrained within senior roles and was perceived to be linked to progression:

It's expected of you. There is this ... ingrained culture where if you want to do well, it's expected that you just flog yourself. (PGA48)

Multiple factors contributed to high workloads including a lack of uninterrupted time to get work done, volume of work emails, poor IT facilities, short deadlines on tasks required by more senior staff, frequency and duration of meetings, staff shortages, a lack of experienced or capable staff across grades, breadth of role, frequency of audits and inspections, and increasing complexity of prisoner need. These factors, some of which can be described as managerialist, contributed to the inflation of workloads and were viewed as punitive among prison managers. Such perceptions align somewhat to existing literature (Bennett, 2016) which suggests that managerialism is underpinned by punitive discipline, with managers subjecting themselves to punitive self-discipline. Furthermore, Bennett (2019) highlighted that, through the evolution of reform prisons in England, managerialism had been reduced by fostering greater autonomy, but, due to a process described as 'managerial clawback' (p.46) which resists progressive reform, this was not sustained. This provides some explanation for why such challenges to governors seem to have endured and were highlighted in the current research. The importance of addressing high workloads aligns with previous research, which, although not specific to prison occupations, highlights that unmanageable workloads are associated with reduced job satisfaction, reduced mental well-being, emotional exhaustion, and physical symptoms (Bowling et al., 2015).

3.3 | Macho culture

Many participants reported the presence of macho culture whereby people were reluctant to talk about mental health for fear of it being perceived as a sign of weakness:

We have a macho culture ... that doesn't want to accept that we suffer from stress, or anxiety ... we don't want to show when we are suffering from it. (PGA46)

That's just the culture ... nobody wants to be perceived as weak. (PGA37)

This reduced the likelihood of people asking for or accessing support, even following serious incidents:

There's this attitude of 'just get on with it': be a bit macho, be a bit rough, tough, 'oh it was only a bit of self-harm', 'It's only a bit of claret' or 'he's only a bit blue'. (PGA45)

It also resulted in reports of people being reluctant to take sick leave when they needed it:

This individual was fearful of going off sick because they were going to be identified as a malingerer. That was an individual who is operating at a fairly senior level, in a big jail. (PGA7)

This was perpetuated by a lack of confidence in support available, a fear of negative consequences from accessing services, and concerns about a lack of confidentiality:

I wouldn't use that [support] because you know that will go back and almost be used against you ... like 'You're weak,' or 'You need to get on with it'. (PGA34)

They didn't want to go off sick ... [despite] feeling so overwhelmed. Because if you're off with stress, details go around the morning meeting that you're off with stress ... there's little or no privacy. (PGA7)

The overriding culture arising from these factors was one where people felt the need to adopt an impenetrable persona whereby they just continued to get on with the job, despite experiencing difficulties:

We probably are still in a culture whereby the expectation is that people kind of soldier on and get on with it. (PGA35)

We all have to come to work and pretend we're made of Teflon. (PGA3)

While described by participants as a macho culture, in the literature this actually translates to a Masculinity Contest Culture (MCC) characterised by emotional toughness and stamina (Berdahl et al., 2018; Nichols et al., 2024). This perception of emotional expression as a maladaptive trait has similarly been highlighted among prison officers (Arnold, 2005), with research showing that prison officers quickly become adept at masking behaviour and feelings. Macho cultures are significant when exploring well-being because it may be implicated in reduced help-seeking behaviour (Galdas, 2009). Engagement in MCC appeared across participants within the current data, irrespective of gender. Crewe and Liebling (2015) argue that such a macho culture punctuated by a discourse of 'manning up' alienates women and, indeed, many men, leading to marginalisation, and negatively impacting well-being and confidence. Existing evidence suggests that women are disproportionately impacted by male-dominated work cultures, whereby to be successful, they feel a need to act like men (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). Women experience a reduced sense of belonging, increased isolation and increased imposter feelings (Smith, 2021; Vial et al., 2022). MCC is therefore a further important factor to address for those concerned with the well-being of prison managers.

3.4 | Competing expectations

Participants reported multiple competing expectations from external sources. First, linked into the macho culture described above, many governors reported a sense of expectation from others that they needed to portray themselves as capable leaders at all times:

If you're a leader and you're in a position, you've got to be of the metal. You've got to be sophisticated. You've got to be switched on. You've got to be capable. (PGA 33)

As leaders, we're expected to, you know, get right up front and lead by example. Be untouchable and unbreakable. (PGA 21)

Second, governors felt there were constant and unrelenting expectations from their managers and from HMPPS headquarters to get tasks done quickly, and sometimes with limited expertise. For some, this led to an uncomfortable dissonance between expectations and the reality of what could be achieved:

There's an awful lot of pressure to do things quickly and get things in, you sit there thinking maybe around the corner, we'll have a little bit of a stable period, and things will just let up for a little while and we can just give ourselves a bit of breathing space. And that just never, ever happens. (PGA5)

You know so little about it, but you're expected to deliver at such a high level ... And the expectation that we will do everything as well, is never going to happen. We'll always end up disappointing somebody. (PGA56)

It was felt that often these expectations failed to consider and account for contextual factors which may affect a person's ability to get the job done:

What's annoying and really has upset me is the attitude of our senior management above me and Gold Command and Ministers to basically say, 'I don't care, just get it done'. (PGA34)

In addition, there were expectations from external sources such as the public and the government:

They are expecting us to be delivering everything ... everybody knows we're not. And of course, those reports are public ... the media picks up on them. I think governors feel very worried about being exposed to that sort of pressure, public criticism in a way. (PGA51)

That pressure has become a lot worse and scrutinised a lot more by ministers. Ministers over the years have become a lot more operationally focused, rather than allowing us to run the business. (PGA5)

Within this culture, there was a perceived expectation to not take time off sick, to work while on sick leave, and/or to return to work before being ready to:

There's a pressure to not be off sick, or to get people back from the sick off your manager. Because you need to perform, you need to deliver, you've got stuff to do. (PGA45)

These expectations were also linked to the perceived expectations to work long hours. While no specific previous research about workplace expectations among prison occupations was

identified, workplace expectations have been implicated in subjective well-being in other professions (Graham & Shier, 2013). The expectations outlined in the current data of prison governors to 'just get things done' seem to convey a lack of humanised care towards governors. There was also a perceived expectation in the current data of a need to not utilise sick leave, aligning to existing literature among prison officers and presenteeism (Kinman, Clements & Hart, 2019).

3.5 | Autonomy and responsibility

The expansion of managerialism, previously highlighted, yields a drive for conformity and compliance (Bennett, 2015, 2019; Bryans, 2007), conditions not conducive to allowing governors autonomy in their roles. Autonomy and responsibility were interlinked within the current data. Overall, participants felt a limited sense of autonomy which they felt needed to change:

Let governors govern and hold them to account if they don't, that's fair ... Give us autonomy, hold me to account but give me the autonomy to do things and deliver things. (PGA20)

Participants reported that autonomy had decreased over time, despite increased autonomy being promised:

In 2016, the government white paper, it set out about governor autonomy. The irony of it since that was launched, we've had autonomy stripped from us, less autonomy now than when we were given in 2016. It's frustrating. (PGA17)

Participants described a dissonance of feeling a great sense of responsibility within their roles, but a lack of autonomy and trust placed in them to govern which was perceived to be particularly problematic:

Hold me to account but give me the control to actually deliver it ... give governors autonomy, trust governors to deliver it. They talk about autonomy but then take it away, because they want to control everything. I'm carrying the risk if a prisoner dies in my prison, I'll be the one that's in the coroner's court ... They need to trust us to actually govern. (PGA20)

This meant they had little control over key components within prisons which contributed to effective delivery of services to support rehabilitation:

I'm responsible for the quality of prisoner education, but I have no influence whatsoever on the contract that's been provided. (PGA17)

It was felt that this lack of perceived autonomy stifled innovation or made people feel like 'mavericks' (PGA13) when they did innovate:

Because the organisation really stifles you being creative. And you think you're onto a good thing. And then there's a rule that says you can't do that, often a rule that doesn't really make any sense. (PGA14)

On the national calls, they'll say this governor's done this, it's brilliant, but they've broken all the bloody procurement rules. (PGA20)

Existing literature has indicated autonomy as being important in well-being and productivity (Johannsen & Zak, 2020). Alongside reduced autonomy, some participants felt they were not trusted to govern their prisons, yet feeling wholly responsible for them. This is important because trust, alongside autonomy, empowers people to take ownership of their work, provide creative solutions and foster a culture of transparency from management (Brown et al., 2015; Seppala & Cameron, 2015; Zak, 2018); factors which subsequently impact on well-being. More significantly, employees who feel under increased demand with little control have increased risk of cardiovascular illnesses (American Institute of Stress, 2021). What is striking within the findings of this theme is that despite the issue of trust being raised by Liebling in 2004 (Liebling with Arnold, 2004), who described prisons as low-trust environments and again by Crewe & Liebling (2015) and Bennett (2019), and the fact that the UK government policy indicated in 2021 that prisons would have increased autonomy, independence and freedom (Ministry of Justice, 2021), this issue is clearly an enduring one which requires intervention. Changes in autonomy over time have been described by Bennett (2023) in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby at the outset of the pandemic, prison managers had a greater sense of autonomy. However, over the course of the pandemic, the process of managerial clawback, previously also observed in the evolution of reform prisons, whereby managerialism increased and autonomy decreased, was observed. This, too, was reflected in our data, as discussed below.

3.6 | Lack of role appreciation

Divisiveness between roles was highlighted in the current research. A divide that was particularly prevalent was a lack of role appreciation between governors operating within prison establishments and those working from HMPPS headquarters. Governors within establishments felt that those working from headquarters did not understand the prison environment:

What really frustrates me is the fact that it's something like 4,000 people that work in business service headquarters, and they're demanding stuff and you just look at it and think '[have] you ever been into an establishment to understand the pressure we're undergoing on a daily basis?' 90% of them haven't. (PGA15)

There was tension between headquarters staff having substantial power over the running of prisons and governors working within them, but not being perceived to have the knowledge and awareness to do so, which caused friction:

They've got an awful lot of power at the centre. It just makes my job irritating.

The operational environment is entirely different to the non-operational environment, the HQ environment ... they're our masters and unfortunately, we have to dance to their tune. (PGA36)

Tensions were exacerbated by a lack of co-ordination in communications from headquarters staff:

I think the relationship between headquarters and prisons is very pathological. Very back to front. And nobody's got an oversight of it. So, what happens is, from the perspective of prison, you get 101 demands from the centre from 101 different people, none of whom are taking into account the other 100 people. (PGA1)

As a result, it was felt that the work of staff in headquarters was a hinderance to the operational management of prisons, rather than a supportive role:

They feel like a hindrance, they feel like a bother, they feel like they just give us extra work to do, and they feel like they don't understand us. (PGA16)

Top-down pressures from headquarters, alongside the daily pressures and expectations from prisoners and prison staff were assimilated to an hourglass, creating dual pressures on governors from multiple directions:

[It's] basically like an hourglass. And at the top you've got headquarters, at the middle you've got a prison governor, and the bottom you've got each prison. And from the bottom, it all makes quite a lot of sense ... you just look up to the governor ... But the governor is at this ridiculous pressure point in the system, where they are responsible to their own prison, but they're also responsible for this mass outside ... nobody's gripped the implications of the way we work and how damaging it is for frontline delivery. (PGA1)

There was some acknowledgement that the misunderstanding was bi-directional, with prison-based governors also not understanding the roles and challenges faced by staff in headquarters, and a need for better role appreciation and a more collaborative approach was identified:

We don't necessarily understand the pressures on non-operational people at headquarters, but equally they don't understand the pressures on us. There needs to be a better appreciation. (PGA36)

The lack of role appreciation and collaborative working had led to some ostracism and incivility. Such factors in the workplace have been further linked to a range of outcomes, including employee depression (Rasool et al., 2019). Divisiveness between roles is indicative of operations of power and power imbalances within prisons, similar to those shown in existing research between prison officers and prison managers, and prison officers and prisoners (Arnold, 2017). The current research indicates that, similarly to prison officers, prison governors are subjected to power, as well as exercising power, and that the way they experience power could subsequently impact their working relationships with prison staff, in addition to their well-being.

3.7 | Exacerbating and mitigating factors

Alongside cultural factors involved in driving well-being among participants, there were several other factors which exacerbated or mitigated this impact. First, this research took place during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, participants were keen to express that Covid had not caused

the issues reported, but it had exacerbated them. For example, workload, a macho culture and role appreciation were exacerbated by strategic and operational changes resulting from Covid:

On top of all the normal stuff that we have to deliver, you've then got all of the Covid stuff ... we're being asked to deliver additional tasks without an [additional] officer resource ... [video] visits ... testing for staff and prisoners, that all comes with a resource, but there's no resource. (PGA4)

Covid has really, really taken its toll on people. And of course, as leaders, we're expected to, you know, get right up front and lead by example. Be untouchable and unbreakable. And that's particularly wearing. (PGA21)

The Covid stuff it's come from the centre down ... and then I'm the guy who has to face the prisoners and explain it to them and deal with all the complaints and issues, whereas the people sat in offices making decisions aren't having to face the people every day. (PGA40)

Conversely, as indicated above, at the outset of the pandemic, some participants felt there had been an increased level of autonomy for a temporary period, which had been positive:

The refreshing period, we ... had significantly more autonomy, less bureaucracy and less demands to meet other agendas, that was a really welcome opportunity. (PGA17)

However, participants also reported fears for their own health and that of their family:

I have colleagues who had family members with underlying health conditions. And I think the biggest fear, and I had it to a certain extent, but probably at a lower level was about the risk that I was taking it back home. (PGA46)

Elsewhere, Covid has been found to have increased psychological distress in the workplace and this has been linked to increased workloads and therefore is echoed by the current research (Dobson et al., 2021; Hoogendoorn et al., 2021). Another factor which had both a mitigating and exacerbating influence was the perception of feeling valued as an individual in the workplace. On the whole, people did not feel valued and even felt dehumanised by their employer; they were disposable and nothing more than a number:

You're literally a number on a spreadsheet to the prison service ... They don't care who I am ... You're here at the current time ... Someone else will come along ... you're as disposable as the food containers from last night's food. (PGA43)

There were clear concerns that this lack of perceived value could be contributing to disenchantment and attrition among staff at all grades:

I think if somebody is doing a job they don't like or they're unhappy, or they feel underappreciated, I don't think it matters how much you pay them, eventually, they'll leave. (PGA24)

It was felt that a display of genuine concern for the workforce, alongside investment in training and well-being would help facilitate increased feelings of value:

They need to invest in people in their training, in their well-being. (PGA4)

In addition, perceived value was linked to public perceptions of prison governors and their staff, with the prison service seen as a 'forgotten service ... behind big walls [where] nobody knows what truly happens' (PGA61). Conversely, displays of public appreciation did increase feelings of value:

When it came to Easter, we got given Easter eggs, but they were donated by Mars and Cadbury's. But that had a big impact. (PGA11).

Such findings resonate with those outlined by Crewe & Liebling (2015) who found that Governing Governors, specifically, were emotional about their work but wished that their employers were more emotionally invested in them, that is they wanted to receive a more human or 'personal touch' approach. This perspective had arisen from feelings of anger about the treatment of staff at all levels and lack of perceived value and humanisation. Feeling valued has been linked to staff retention, with 21% of employees who feel valued reporting that they intend to look for a new job in the next year, compared with 50% of those who do not feel valued (Bossolo & Bethune, 2012). More significantly, feeling valued is linked to improved physical and mental well-being (Bossolo & Bethune, 2012).

Finally, well-being and coping strategies were viewed as mitigating factors. Participants reported a range of individual coping strategies including setting boundaries, taking time out, leaning on colleagues, and the provision of safe spaces:

Try to log off a sensible time now and not be working past half past five. (PGA9)

I get a lot of support from just spending time with people that I've got some rapport with, just quietly reflecting over stuff ... my safe, go to people. And it might be that nothing changes in the brief time that I'm sitting in a meeting or sitting in their office or on the phone to them, discussing things ... it is healing, just having that space. (PGA3)

It was clear the governors relied on informal support structures. They felt that more formal support structures were not suitable for them and therefore they tended not to access them:

And we've also got the staff Care Team, which is a group of staff here that are trained to offer support to staff. Personally, I wouldn't go to them because they're junior to me. (PGA16)

Where formalised support had been accessed, such as the Employee Assistance Programme and PAM Assist occupational health support, it had mixed feedback:

I did counselling through the PAM Assist national team. But then it got to a certain point where they stopped paying for it, after certain sessions they say no more, no matter where you were, I really needed it at the time it stopped. (PGA43)

It was literally just ring PAM Assist and they're not great. I mean, even before the pandemic, you get mixed results. (PGA 61)

One exception to this was the availability of structured professional support or reflective practice sessions. These had been mandated in some prisons which had facilitated people accessing support who may not otherwise have done, with seemingly positive results:

They did roll out structured professional support to us as governors ... a trained professional, where you get the space and time to talk about effectively how we feel about our work ... So, I was mandated to have that at the end of 2019 ... and I was a bit in a huff about it really like: 'I don't need help', and actually, I did it, and it was fabulous. (PGA8)

While it does not appear that reflective practice among prison managers has been investigated within existing literature, the importance of reflective practice has been highlighted as a factor in improving well-being in other professions (Cigala, Venturelli & Bassetti, 2019) and in forensic settings (Davies, 2015). Furthermore, it has been found that reflective practice, delivered through formal support structures, as well-informal peer support, can facilitate effective learning and development for health-care managers, but requires appropriate time and resource allocation (Walsh & Bee, 2012).

4 | CONCLUSION

The current research aimed to explore the well-being within the critical occupation of prison governors. Findings indicated that, overall, the well-being was not good. Poor mental health and a range of physical health issues were evidenced, alongside challenges to work-life balance which further impacted on well-being. Factors relating to prison workplace culture contributed to this picture and high workloads dominated feedback from participants. A further cultural factor was the implication of the presence of a MCC, characterised by showing no weakness and reduced help-seeking behaviours. Multiple competing expectations were contributing factors which played into the MCC through governors feeling there was an external expectation to be tough and untouchable. Expectations included those from more senior positions in headquarters, the public and government. A dissonance between high levels of responsibility and reduced autonomy were prevalent, and some participants felt they were not trusted to govern their prisons and that innovation was stifled. A lack of role understanding and appreciation was present, particularly between governors operating within establishments and those operating from HMPPS headquarters. This was linked to trust and autonomy and resulted in tensions, creating a further detrimental impact on well-being. Finally, Covid and not feeling valued had further exacerbated, but did not cause, the issues highlighted. Access to support was limited, with many feeling that the existing support provisions were not suitable or accessible to them. However, access to reflective practice or structured supervision was beneficial. Many of these findings mirror literature on prison officer workplace well-being and the limited literature on prison governors.

Collectively, the findings from the current research have important implications for HMPPS and other providers of prison services. There is an urgent need to improve the occupational culture among prison governors in order to improve well-being and reduce staff attrition. More specifically, steps to manage workload are required and a pertinent starting point for this would

be in targeting factors that influence workload (Macdonald, 2003). Based on the current data, and somewhat supported by previous work (e.g., Bennett, 2015), this would include reducing managerialist practices, reducing email traffic, improving IT facilities, negotiating more realistic deadlines, managing the frequency and duration of meetings, managing the frequency and impact of audits and inspections, and ensuring clearly defined roles.

Increased autonomy and opportunities for innovation without fear of negative repercussions are required. This could be done through job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), which would require structural, relational and culture change. Job crafting is typically found in autonomy supportive workplaces (Slemp, Kern & Vella-Brodrick, 2015), whereby employees are able to modify the number and type of tasks they perform (task crafting), can control the interactions they have with others in the workplace (relational crafting) or can change the way people perceive their jobs (cognitive crafting). To achieve this, however, job redesign (the rearranging of tasks and responsibilities to better align roles with the changing organisational environment) would be required. Staff training and involvement in redesign, as well as managerial commitment, is required to achieve change and have a positive impact on well-being (Daniels et al., 2017).

Aligned to this, improved role appreciation and understanding could be achieved through initiatives such as job exchanges to reduce power imbalances and build perspective taking and collaboration, although it is acknowledged that there is limited research into the success of these. The current data also suggested that increasing perceived value would further support well-being. Methods to increase value in the workplace include authentic feedback, flexible working options and providing development opportunities (Roberts et al., 2020). An increase in access to tailored reflective supervision is required, but in parallel to this, there is a need to increase awareness and propensity to discuss and seek help for matters relating to well-being within the context of the prevailing MCC. This requires systemic change to reduce the managerialist practices identified within the existing literature (Bennett, 2015) and within the current data.

Throughout the reporting of these findings, what seems to be a consistent theme is that governors experience a sense of not being humanised. This is not uncommon in managerial roles whereby managerialism often elicits thoughts of logistics and systems, yet this removes the human elements of managing and being managed as people, with emotional investments and responses, and by interpersonal relations (Crewe & Liebling, 2015). We therefore argue that the current research indicates a need for a more person-centred and humanised care approach to the treatment of managers and staff within prisons, factoring in the human elements of emotion and relationships in order to improve well-being and culture. Multiple authors have highlighted a need for increased humanisation and compassion towards prisoners (see, e.g., Tran et al., 2018; Van Zyl Smit 2006); we argue this is also needed for prison managers, as well as prison staff more broadly. One prison in the UK has previously implemented such an approach. Based on kindness, humanity and people-focused collaborative leadership, the prison evidenced positive cultural change with improved working conditions for staff (Fitzalan-Howard, Gibson & Wakeling, 2023). Despite the apparent success of the approach, it has not yet been widely implemented within prisons and it is unclear why this is. The findings from the current research indicate that further consideration should be given to the wider implementation of leadership approaches, with kindness and compassion placed at the fore.

While it is recognised that such changes require investment from HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice, it is predicted that the result would reduce costs in the long term through improved staff retention, attendance and productivity. In addition, evidence suggests that leadership has a significant role in workplace emotions as a whole (Bono et al., 2007) and therefore improving governor well-being is likely to impact the well-being of other prison staff.

4.1 | Limitations and future research directions

The current research is not without limitations which need acknowledgement. First, the participant sample was drawn entirely from PGA union members which may have resulted in some bias. While the sample was representative of PGA members, it is unclear how representative the sample was across all prison governors and operational managers in England, Scotland and Wales. Furthermore, existing literature indicates that Union members can have more negative perceptions of their workplace safety climate than non-Union members (Le et al., 2021). Future research should therefore seek to explore well-being with a broader sample of governors.

Second, the research provides a significant but broad qualitative exploration of the well-being and culture within the governor group as a whole. The data have provided hypotheses about cultural drivers of well-being, which now need formulating into quantitative measures to further test. Additional exploration is also required of the gendered implications of MCC experiences. Work across both of these areas is underway by the research team. Any subsequent interventions adopted to improve workplace culture and well-being require a commitment to ongoing evaluation.

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