



Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Overview: Northern Ireland Prison Service

13 February 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Ms Linda Dillon (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Pat Sheehan
Miss Rachel Woods

Witnesses:

Mr Brendan Giffen	Department of Justice
Mr Steven McCourt	Department of Justice
Mr Ronnie Armour	Northern Ireland Prison Service
Mr Austin Treacy	Northern Ireland Prison Service

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): I welcome to the meeting Ronnie Armour, director general of the Northern Ireland Prison Service; Austin Treacy, acting director of prisons; Steven McCourt, deputy director of rehabilitation; and Brendan Giffen, head of strategy and governance. You are all very welcome, and the meeting will be recorded by Hansard. Thank you for bearing with us during the previous session with the Chief Constable. Apologies for keeping you all waiting to this time of the evening. Without any further delay, Ronnie, I will hand over to you to provide an overview of the Prison Service.

Mr Ronnie Armour (Northern Ireland Prison Service): Thank you, Chair. I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee this afternoon on the work of the Prison Service. In advance of attending today, I provided a paper in which I sought to summarise the developments of the past three years. I do not wish in these opening remarks to repeat what I have said in the paper, but there are a few points that I want to highlight to the Committee. Before doing so, however, I put on record my appreciation of the support we have received from the members of the previous Committee and their respective parties over the past three years; in particular, I am grateful for the help we received as we developed our Prisons 2020 continuous improvement programme.

As members will know, following my appointment in February 2017, I set three objectives for the organisation: first, to stabilise our staffing levels, to focus on the development and well-being of our staff and to begin to address issues relating to low levels of pay; secondly, to improve the outcomes for those in our care in line with the draft Programme for Government commitment to reduce reoffending rates; and, thirdly, to make our prisons more open and transparent and, in doing so, help the public to better understand the challenging the work of prison officers and our many partner organisations. Those objectives were set at a time when the organisation faced many challenges, not

least those resulting from the critical inspection report published in 2016 that described Maghaberry as unsafe, unstable, Dickensian and one of the most dangerous prisons in Europe. To ensure we achieved those objectives, we developed, following extensive consultation, our Prisons 2020 programme, the purpose of which is to deliver a modern, progressive, respected Prison Service focused on making our communities safer by supporting and challenging those in our care to change. Central to Prisons 2020 is the Department's focus on reducing reoffending, and we in the Prison Service seek to contribute through our work on rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration. Our commitment is clear. We will seek to rehabilitate those in our care through our people, our services, our infrastructure and our partnerships.

Looking at each of those areas briefly, it is important to note that the work our staff do is complex, challenging, demanding and, at times, dangerous. Their work is largely unseen, but I believe those who visit our prisons increasingly see the real difference our staff make, both in the lives of those in our care and in the context of making our community safer. It is right that we not only acknowledge their contribution but support and equip our staff in every way we can. As a result of Prisons 2020, we have been focusing on staff salaries, training and development and well-being. For example, we have increased the Prison Service supplementary risk allowance from £2,460 in 2016 to £3,357 in 2019, bringing it line with that paid to PSNI officers. In addition, the basic starting salary, which excludes the risk allowance for our custody prison officers, has increased by 13.6% from £18,926 in 2016 to £21,500 in 2019. We have extended the salary scale, which means that the maximum a CPO can earn is £30,337, when you include the risk allowance.

We have introduced new mandatory leadership development training for all our governors and a future leaders scheme aimed at developing potential senior governors of the future. We are planning a leadership development scheme for our senior officers, and that will follow a promotion board planned for April of this year. We have not had a senior officer promotion competition since 2016.

In relation to staff well-being, last year we launched our prisons Wellbeing Enables Longer Life (WELL) programme, and we now have WELL champions in each of our six business areas. The programme is focused on prevention and support. Where prison staff need more specific support, we have contracts with the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) and Inspire to provide it. It is also a priority for us to recognise achievement as we encourage innovation and creativity.

It is encouraging that 32% of our staff are now female, but it is a matter of great regret that, despite our best efforts, the latest Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics, produced in December 2019, show that only 15% of our staff are from the Catholic tradition. On industrial relations, while I have no doubt that, in the fullness of time, they will speak for themselves, I would be surprised if our trade union partners did not acknowledge that relationships between management and our staff associations have never been better.

On the services we provide, our focus has primarily been on rehabilitation through learning and skills as we prepare individuals for life after prison. It is encouraging that all three of our prisons have now received the highest mark possible from inspectors for their work on rehabilitation and release planning, and it is important to note the comments of inspectors who said in their 2018 Maghaberry report that we were delivering amongst the best outcomes they had seen in a prison of that kind. Maghaberry's achievements have also been internationally recognised by the International Corrections and Prisons Association, which awarded us its 2019 prize for rehabilitation and offender management. As well as working with statutory partners, we deliver services with the voluntary and community sector, for example, Working Well on Positive Outcomes for Short Term Prisoners with NIACRO, on Families Matter with Barnardo's, on the Sycamore Tree with the Prison Fellowship, on Positive Learning with Extern, on Empowering People Through Therapy (AD:EPT) with Start 360 and on work on securing and maintaining accommodation with Housing Rights. Our prison psychologists also deliver a range of important programmes, all of which are aimed at helping to stabilise chaotic lives and provide opportunities and hope for the future. In the context of the work we are doing, it is important to note that our cost per prisoner place has fallen from £77,831 in 2010 to an anticipated £44,112 in 2019-2020.

Turning to our infrastructure, we have delivered Davis House, a £54 million investment at Maghaberry, on time and on budget and have redrafted our estates strategy to present alternative delivery models for a new female facility at Hydebank Wood, the redevelopment of Magilligan and a new visits building at Maghaberry. We have also opened a new learning and skills building at Hydebank Wood College that, along with Davis House, allows us to take rehabilitation to a new level. I invite the Committee to come and see these buildings, which provide examples of what our future estate could and should look like. I would also like you to come and see Magilligan.

We are working with over 40 statutory, voluntary and community-based organisations in what is real and meaningful collaboration. In addition, we work with the business sector and our local universities. Through our family strategy and with the support of our first-class team of chaplains, we reach out to those with loved ones in prison. Using our new Prisons Unlocked presentation, we also seek to reach into schools and the community in an effort to explain the work of the Prison Service. It is right that I acknowledge the work of our colleagues in probation, healthcare and learning and skills along with all those important third-sector organisations and volunteers that work alongside us in challenging and supporting those in our care to change.

While much of what I have said is positive, there is no room for complacency, because there is still much more to do. Over the past three years, we have also faced and continue to face many challenges, such as a rising prison population; too many people spending too long on remand; 78% of our population serving sentences of one year and less; 32% of our population suffering from mental health issues, and 55% with a history of self-harm; the ongoing challenge of administering separation and the implications of having to do so in terms of the threat against our staff; and the risks associated with administering pre-release arrangements, not least when individuals abscond or fail in some other way. The greatest challenge we face is in keeping complex and vulnerable people safe. During the three years since the Committee last met, 13 individuals have died in custody. We believe that seven were the result of natural causes and six were a result of their own actions. Every death in custody is a death too many, and it is right that we acknowledge the profound impact such deaths have on families and on our staff. While deaths will, sadly, always occur in our prisons, as they do in prisons across the world, I assure the Committee that, through our supporting people at risk evolution process and the Towards Zero Suicide approach that we and our colleagues in the South Eastern Trust take, we do everything we can to support those who are vulnerable and at risk.

While much has been achieved over the past three years and there is still much to do, directors, senior governors and I are determined to work together and with others to ensure that the Prison Service remains a competent, confident and compassionate organisation that is progressive and high-performing.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Thank you very much, Ronnie. I got a chance to get to Davis House when Princess Anne, I think it was, was there. That gave me an opportunity to look at the facility, and very impressive it is.

Just to question you on that one, I was certainly impressed, and I understand the arguments for it, the opportunities that it gives to improve people's lives and how it opens up greater visibility, compared with the old houses, even for staff and the benefits that will come from that. That is not to say, though, that, when I speak to people and say there is a brand new facility at Maghaberry, worth £54 million, delivered on time and in budget, to be commended — I know Austin had a role in overseeing the project — the people that I have mentioned it to do not take a sharp intake of breath and think, "My school? My hospital?". I want to give you the opportunity to explain why that investment is a good thing for the greater population and not just for the environment in Maghaberry.

Mr Armour: Our role as a Prison Service is not simply to lock people up and warehouse prisoners. It is important that we take dangerous people and offenders off the streets, but it is equally important that, when we have them in the prison system, we, as a system, work with those individuals in an effort to prevent them from reoffending and ensure that there are fewer victims in our society. I believe that our people, services and infrastructure have an important role to play in that. It is important in Davis House that we free staff up to do the important work that prison officers are there to do, and that is about building relationships with individuals and challenging and supporting them. Davis House, with its digital technology, will allow us to do that. It will take many, for example, of the routine and mundane duties away from prison officers; it will give those in our care independence to do those things themselves; and it will allow our staff to get alongside and work with very challenging and difficult people in an effort to ensure that we make our community safer. For me, it is not a competition; it is about doing the right thing and holding people with respect and decency. It is about having a more therapeutic environment where we can deal with many of the challenges that we face as a service today.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Thank you for that. I should have said before the start of this that I have read a number of the Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) reports going back to the time, six-plus years ago, when I held this position to where we are today. There has been a massive improvement from where the Prison Service was to where it is now. It is right to acknowledge that publicly. There has been significant turnover — different people have occupied the role that you now hold, Ronnie — and

there have been different personalities, but there is no doubt that there is a much more stable management and a better relationship across all levels of employees in the service. I have been able to testify to that, even in the absence of this place, from speaking to many of the people I know in the Prison Service. It is right that we note that and say, "Well done" for getting to where you are today. I know that you, as an organisation, continue to strive to do more and that there is always more to be done, but it is right to acknowledge where you have got to.

I have a couple of quick questions. One is about the recruitment process that the police are carrying out. Every time there is a police recruitment process, it impacts on prison officers who get into the police. What is the anticipated number of personnel that you expect to lose from the service?

Mr Armour: I hope not too many, Chair, but you are right in saying that there are individuals who join the Prison Service, get trained and skilled and then take those skills, which are easily transferable, to the PSNI. It is difficult to quantify how many people that will be in the current recruitment campaign, but we heard the Chief Constable talking about the numbers that he is looking to employ. We will, I have no doubt, lose people to the police.

On our recruitment process, I gave a commitment to senior governors three years ago that I would keep the recruitment tap running. One of the issues that I faced was that we had not had a recruitment campaign for a while. We lose staff for a number of reasons, as all organisations do. We are now into our third recruitment campaign in three years, and plans are already afoot for a further recruitment campaign that will start towards the end of this year. I do not underestimate the challenge that it will be in the context of the ongoing police recruitment.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Internal opportunities to get promotion are, obviously, a factor. I have noted the increase in the basic pay to make it more financially attractive to apply and then to stay, but some individuals will want to have the opportunity to come through the ranks. When do you anticipate having a recruitment process that would allow people to move up the ladder?

Mr Armour: We started last year with our future leaders scheme and recruited 10 individuals internally who are now on that very specialised programme with a view to them being our senior leaders. The next stage of that will take place in April this year, when we have our senior officer promotion opportunity. We are carrying a significant number of vacancies at the moment, and it is a priority for me to fill those. That opportunity will allow people from the lower ranks to move up the organisation. We are a small organisation, and it is difficult to keep that movement. Our staff have become increasingly young.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): We touched on my next point with the police as well. You highlighted the diversity imbalance in the Prison Service in both gender and religious background. What is the Prison Service doing to get the sort of support that you need in the Catholic community, for this to be a career that people want to go into? How are we breaking down those barriers? Also, how are we increasing the opportunities for females to see it as a career that is attractive to them?

Mr Armour: I have been very encouraged by the number of females. We have taken it from single figures, percentage-wise, up to 32% in a relatively short time. We are seeing some of the females whom we recruited seven or eight years ago moving through the ranks; indeed, some of them were successful through future leaders and in temporary promotions to governor grade and so on.

My concern is that we find it difficult to reach into the Catholic community and into some hard-to-reach areas in the Protestant community. That is partly why we have developed our Prisons Unlocked programme, which we are piloting and taking into schools. We are also doing impressive work, I think, with sporting organisations such as the IFA, the GAA and Ulster Rugby and are trying to use them as avenues to reach into the communities. It is a challenge for us, and it would be wrong of me to suggest otherwise. As an organisation, we still face a severe level of threat. Officers' names are periodically painted on walls in estates across the Province, and that makes it difficult for us and for individuals who might be interested in a career. I have been encouraged by the work that the police have been doing recently, and we want to build on that for our recruitment.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): OK. This is my final question. I know that Doug needs to leave shortly, so I will bring him in after this question. Separated prisons are a long-running issue that you will be very familiar with. The decision on the prisoners who meet the criteria to be housed in Roe House is still a matter for the Secretary of State: is that correct?

Mr Armour: It is a matter for the Secretary of State to establish the criteria for admission for both Bush House and Roe House, yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Yes. I know that the numbers were significantly higher in the past than they are now. Is there a trend whereby you can see the numbers getting to the point where we will no longer need separated status? I know that a review was carried out in the past and there was a desire to eventually move to mainstream the whole prison population. Is that under consideration in the Prison Service as a potential review with recommendations?

Mr Armour: The administration of separation is and always has been challenging for the Prison Service and is something that we are required to do. There was a recommendation in the Fresh Start framework that the operation of separation should be reviewed. That is an issue that I will discuss with the Justice Minister in time. It is not something that, I felt, we, as a service, could take forward in the absence of a Minister. This problem is much too complex and sensitive for the Prison Service to take forward alone. I will want to talk to the Minister about that and how it might move forward.

The answer to separation does not lie with the Prison Service; it is much more complex and challenging than that. However, we certainly look forward to the day when separation is no longer necessary, although I could not comment on the time frame for that. You are right that the numbers at the moment in Bush House and Roe House are probably at their lowest, but they could increase at any time, should the courts send other people our way and should the Secretary of State's criteria be met.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Could you manage the integration of current separated prisoners in the mainstream?

Mr Armour: That would be challenging for us. I suspect that what would happen if we did not have Bush and Roe is that the individual prisoners would not cooperate with the prison system and would not cooperate in integrated accommodation. We would then have to deal with that potentially by moving them into our care and supervision unit, and my fear is that you would almost end up with a form of separation by the back door. In answer to the question, it would be very challenging for us to manage those people in integrated accommodation without their cooperation.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): I understand the arguments, but, disproportionately, people end up focusing on that when you are dealing with a prison population of well over 1,000. We often focus on that area, but I do not underestimate the challenge in trying to normalise the situation, albeit that that is my view: ultimately, that is where we should get to.

Mr Beattie: Ronnie, thank you for that. Every dealing that I have with your department and with you is first-class. You answer straight away any email or telephone queries that I have. Thank your staff for that, in particular, Alan Smyth, with whom I have engaged on a particular issue and who has been fantastic. I have engaged with you a lot over the past three years, and there has been a real transformation. Some of the questions that I was going to ask have been asked by Paul, so I will not waste your time.

I am looking at one of the tables. When the Budget comes out, you will be looking with a keen eye at what the budget is for the Prison Service. I notice that, from 2010 until now, the budget has gone down continuously, and, with that, operational staff levels have gone down continuously. When you look at the budget, you see that it collates to what you can afford. Are staff numbers at critical mass? If you had another budget cut, for example, would that result in another staff cut?

Mr Armour: Like every other public-sector organisation, we hope that we do not face another budget cut. Certainly, managing a budget for an organisation like mine is challenging. We are on track to bring in this year's budget on budget, but it has been undoubtedly challenging. The organisation has greatly changed from 2009-2010, which you will see when you look at the budget figures. Our staffing level has reduced significantly, but we deal with more prisoners today. In the system today we have 1,596 prisoners. That, again, comes back to my earlier point about the rising population.

At this point in time, Doug, we have the resources that we need. If the budget were to be cut, we would undoubtedly be in a different and much more challenging situation. That would probably result in our having to keep people locked up for longer periods, if it were extreme enough for that. We have spent the last three years getting to a position where, for example, we are not locking people in in the evenings. Austin and I would expect a governor, if they had to restrict association in the evening, for

example, to notify us so that we had oversight of that and could question it. In Maghaberry, over the last two years, there have been two restrictions on two evenings, and they have involved only one house. I would not want us to move away from that; it would be a retrograde step. However, you are right: we need the resources to do that.

Mr Beattie: You are not helped by a slow justice system, Ronnie, where you have so many people on remand among your prisoners, the number of whom almost equals the number of prisoners.

I want to ask a brief question that was asked by the Chair of the PSNI so that we are tight on this. You know about the new emergency legislation that has been brought out in England to stop terrorists being released automatically after 50% of their sentence: have you been approached in any shape or form in the Department of Justice or in the other role that you have with regard to reoffending about that?

Mr Armour: About the change in the legislation in England and Wales?

Mr Beattie: It is happening in England, Scotland and Wales; it is not happening here. Has anybody said to you, "Ronnie, what do you think? If we were to change this in Northern Ireland, what would be your opinion?"? Has anybody come to you on that?

Mr Armour: No. I have not been consulted on that yet. I am obviously aware of it. I am aware of what is happening in England and that the Minister is looking at those issues here. Certainly, if it were to happen here, it would mean people serving longer sentences in prison, and, I suspect, that would have an impact on our prison population.

Mr Beattie: Where I was trying to get to was in case somebody came to you and said, "What is your view if we suddenly said to the terrorists who are in prison now in the separated prison regime that their sentence would automatically go to a three-quarter sentence instead of a half sentence?". Nobody has come to you with that, and nobody else has gone to the Department of Justice that you know of.

Mr Armour: I have certainly not been approached. I suppose, in fairness, it is not for me to comment on a legislative change; it is for me, as director general of the Prison Service, to deal with the outworkings of that.

Mr Beattie: I was not asking for comment, Ronnie; I just wanted to know whether somebody had engaged you in consultation on it. You say that they have not.

Mr Armour: Not me, personally, no.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Or anyone in your organisation who you are aware of — just to clarify what you mean by, "Me, personally" *[Laughter.]*

Mr Armour: No. I was not saying that to be difficult. Obviously, in the Prison Service, we are aware of this, but we are not actively involved in the process.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): OK.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you for your overview, Ronnie. There is a lot in it to be commended. However, I want to pick up on one issue that the Chair spoke about: the community background of the workforce. You must find that disappointing.

Mr Armour: I do.

Mr Sheehan: Even the police have got the figures up to 30%, whereas the Prison Service sits at 15%. I cannot understand that at all. If the police, which, I would say, would be considered a more dangerous profession, can get to 30%, even if there is a threat that prevents people from the nationalist community joining the police, what is the difficulty? What is the Prison Service not doing that the police are doing? Have you any explanation of why you sit at 15%?

Mr Armour: All I can say is that we have had three recruitment campaigns. We have actively encouraged people across the community to apply to join the Prison Service. It is a matter of deep regret to me and to my senior colleagues that the percentage from the Catholic community sits at 15%. I want to be open with the Committee today and say that.

I have to be honest and say that the threat does not help us. There have been numerous occasions over the past year when the names of our officers have been written on gable walls with targets and very derogatory comments. We have had two officers, very sadly, murdered in the last seven years. I am not saying that that is the only reason, but I think that it is a significant contributory factor in our inability to reach out and get people to apply. We would welcome applications. Nobody would like to see that 15% increase significantly more than the senior staff of the Prison Service.

Mr Sheehan: Would you welcome a 50:50 recruitment campaign?

Mr Armour: Again, that is not a judgement for me to make; that is a political judgement.

Mr Sheehan: I suppose that the question should have been this: at some stage, if you cannot significantly increase the number of Catholics in the Prison Service, what steps can you take, if you are going through the process of recruitment campaigns and going out to schools and to the GAA, which you talked about, and so on and there is still no dent in those figures?

Mr Armour: We want to continue to work with political parties, the Church, sporting organisations and other organisations that we have mentioned. We have been trying to open our prisons up. We have been encouraging people to come and see what we do. We have done things in the past year that were pretty unprecedented. The 4 Corners festival was launched from Hydebank Wood, and we have had live broadcasts from Maghaberry. We are trying to explain to people that the role of a prison officer is not just about locking people up; it is about building personal relationships. I know that there are lots of people across our community who have the skills to do that. We want, working with others, to encourage them. All that we can do is continue to encourage people and ask them to judge us on what we are achieving.

We have talked today about negative reports on the Prison Service in the past. Those have not helped us either, if we are honest. However, the reports that we are getting now are much more positive. Our prisons are much more stable and much safer. I hope that all those things together will encourage people. However, I do not think that we can do more than what we do at the moment to get alongside people and work with them to encourage applications, particularly from the Catholic community but not exclusively.

Mr Frew: There is a world of difference between the presenters here today from the Prison Service and how they were when I first came on to the Committee many years ago. It is not just about the atmosphere and the regime in the prisons; it is the engagement and the information flow. That was one of the things that were wrong before. We could have been in a position to help, but we were not allowed to because we were not getting the information. I welcome all the engagement that you, Ronnie, and your team provide to us, even as individual members. I long for that to continue.

You talked about being aware of the Terrorist Offenders (Restriction of Early Release) Bill that is going through Westminster. Have you done or will you do an assessment of the impact that that could have if it were brought in to Northern Ireland?

Mr Armour: We have not done that, up to this stage. It is certainly something that we need to look at and will look at.

Mr Frew: OK. I think that I am right in saying that separated prisoners is a decision for the Secretary of State, but the cost of separation is burdened on the DOJ budget. Can we clearly define and separate the cost of separation?

Mr Armour: We estimate that the cost of separation currently is in the region of £2 million per annum for the accommodation in Bush and Roe and the service that we provide there. If, for example, we had a female placed in our care, that cost would increase further.

Mr Frew: It is something that we should pursue, because £2 million is money that could be used in other ways in the Prison Service — indeed, spread through the DOJ budget. It is something that we

should pursue with the Secretary of State, especially now that we have a new, fresh one, to see whether we can get that burden shifted off DOJ and placed on the NIO. Those are my views. Members might have different views, but I think that that would be an assistance to us regarding the money that the Prison Service gets.

It is unfortunate that I have not been able to visit a fully operational Davis House. The timing has been wrong every time that I have been invited. Thank you for the invites; I look forward to the day that I get to see the operation of the house. How has that affected the rest of the prison estate and population? I know the prison grounds and infrastructure pretty well, but how has that affected other blocks and houses?

Mr Armour: It has not affected them yet, because we will start moving individuals into Davis House on the 24th of this month. We took receipt of the building, as I said, on time and on budget. We then wanted to do some groundbreaking work on biometrics; indeed, I think that it is the first of its kind in Europe. We now have that in place. We are testing our systems and ensuring that our staff are trained, and we will start to move in on the 24th of this month. The result is that we will close down a number of our old square houses. We will move people across.

As the Chair will know from his visit, Davis House will be a very progressive regime. People will start on the ground floor and work their way up. It will have a massive impact on Maghaberry. I have said repeatedly that it will allow us to take rehabilitation to a new level. The building has digital technology; it has its own healthcare suite and learning and skills suite; it has a number of safer cells that will help us to manage and care for vulnerable individuals much better than we can at the moment. We are excited about the prospect. By the time the Committee comes, it will be fully operational, so you will see for yourself at that stage the impact that it will make.

Mr Frew: You talked about a number of square houses: do you have an exact number?

Mr Armour: Three, is it?

Mr Austin Treacy (Northern Ireland Prison Service): Three and a half.

Mr Frew: How does that lend itself to a shifting of emphasis on that ground and how that ground could be used more positively?

Mr Treacy: There are two aspects to the question. One is that we did not want tumbleweed in the older part of Maghaberry. The other thing is that we are very conscious of our running costs, and we have to keep those buildings in warm storage for contingency. We then thought that some of the communal areas would lend themselves to some enhancements to the Maghaberry regime. We are costing interventions for older people and vulnerable people so that we can build on the stability that we have had and take advantage of the space provided.

I will take a few minutes to tell the Committee that the reason we went down the technology road is not just to make it look pretty and for us to have good straplines. There are real, good business opportunities. As a senior team, we take seriously how we run the service within budget. Davis House will hold 360 prisoners and will have a shift strength of 27 people. We do not feel that our staff are in a disadvantaged position from that. The reason that we use technology is so that we can eliminate all the rubbing points, the things that prisoners need for their daily life but which do very little for rehabilitation, such as checking your bank account, checking your visit status, making a meal request, making a tuck shop request, seeking a chaplain or making a dental appointment. All those things can be done without the engagement of an officer.

The other thing is the logistics. We have a Prison Service that wants so many people in our care to get into activities. Ronnie mentioned a world first: our access control. That is about people being able to move smartly, efficiently and quickly to other areas. The next thing that we are looking at is what artificial intelligence, big data and machine learning mean for custody and justice. We know that there has been research around the world, particularly with older citizens in mind, to do with life-monitoring, including motion detectors in case somebody has taken ill or collapsed; CO2 monitoring, perhaps for somebody who has asphyxiated; and remote blood pressure monitoring. Building on our responsibility towards people in our care, particularly those who are vulnerable, we are looking to see what technology might mean for us.

The other thing, to come back to it, is bringing the building in on time and on budget, but there is also the issue of the resource cost. The year-on-year running cost is, we believe, good value for money.

Mr Frew: I have one final question. With modernisation, this may now be an obsolete concern, but how do numbers on landings compare now with what they were before you took office, Ronnie? Numbers on landings or lack of numbers was a major concern when I first joined this Committee many years ago.

Mr Armour: At that point, we had a significantly higher number of prisoners. We had staffing issues and a high level of sick absence. I suspect that we did not have enough staff for the number of prisoners that we then had. Governors now tell me that they have the staff that they require. At the moment, we are around 68 staff short between prisoner escort and custody services (PECS) and the operational grades in prisons. We cover that flexibility with overtime. We want to bring down the number of vacancies, and that is why we have the ongoing recruitment campaign. However, the fact that we are running a full regime in each of the establishments is an indication that governors have the resources that they need. I hope that that answers your question.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Ms Dillon] in the Chair)

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I have a couple of questions. I apologise for having had to step out. I hope that you have not already addressed some of my issues. I do not think so.

I do not want to focus on the separated prisoner regime. I have spoken to Ronnie. I would like to go and visit all the prisons. It is much easier to talk about something when you know what you are talking about, when you have seen it and had an actual, proper view of it. You have a better understanding of it, instead of sitting remotely, making judgements. I would prefer to talk about all those issues after I have seen what I am talking about.

Mr Armour: Certainly.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I want to talk about innovative thinking around the recruitment process, because that is a real issue. Maybe it is because the police are very visible, while prison officers are largely unseen. You do not come into contact with prison officers unless your circumstances are not good [*Laughter.*] Could prisoners who have done well in prison and reformed have conversations in their own community? That may already be going on. Only 15% of prison officers come from the Catholic community, but I am a pretty certain that the percentage is a wee bit different when it comes to inmates. Although they are not in there for a good reason and it is not a nice experience for people to go to prison, nor is it nice for their family, I know that there are prisoners who will say that their experience was made easier by prison officers, the work that they did with them and how they treated them. That might be a way of doing it.

I see you looking at one another, so excuse my ignorance. I am new on the Committee. I know a lot about policing, because I was on the Policing Board, but I do not know a lot about this. You do not need to go into detail, but I would be interested in anything you could send me to say, "Here is what we have, and here is what is in place", and to make me aware of it. We can have conversations when I visit the prisons. There is obviously a major issue with recruitment. Security is, no doubt, an issue — I do not take away from that — but it is an issue for policing as well.

Mr Armour: It is.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Pat touched on 50:50 recruitment. That is what has got us to where we are with policing, if the truth be told, but I do not want to get into that. It is not for you to have to answer that: it is a political call. That kind of innovative thinking may be what is needed. There is an awful lot of innovation in all the other stuff that you do. Another reason that I would like to see the prisons is to see how you use electronics. The Chief Constable talked about the use that he wants to make of it, and it will make a difference to providing all those services.

I think it was Paul who talked about chasing up whether the £2 million cost should be the burden of the NIO. I have no issue with that. The NIO absolutely should carry the burden of it. I do not see why we should carry that burden. I am just not sure about trying to do away with it, given your explanation that it would end up being separation by the back door. You would end up having a cost somewhere else. That is probably the more prudent way to go about it.

Those are the only ideas that I have at the minute. As I said, I will be much more informed at meetings and have better questions when I have seen what I am talking about.

There is the stuff around the well-being of prisoners. The only other thing is around the well-being of staff. I talked earlier about the police estate. Let us be honest: when you are not working in nice surroundings, that sometimes makes you not want to go to work. It is important for prison staff, as well as prisoners, to have nicer accommodation in which to work to make their job easier to carry out. There has to be a recognition that, if we do not look at the well-being of officers, we will not recruit anybody, never mind from the Catholic community or any other community. We probably need to focus on all of that.

I have one quick question. The percentage of female staff is up to 32%: what percentage was it before?

Mr Armour: It was in single figures — 6% or 8% — probably 10 or 12 years ago. It was very low.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Dillon): I am comparing the Prison Service with the PSNI a lot, because there are many similarities, but a lot of research has been done into how many applications are received, how many make it through the process and at what stage applications fall out of the process. The same issues will be prevalent in the Prison Service as existed for policing. You have people who come from families who have had members in the Prison Service for many generations; you will not have that in the Catholic community. Are there barriers at different stages in the recruitment process? If so, are there ways in which those can be overcome?

Mr Armour: You raise a number of points there.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Dillon): There were a lot. Sorry.

Mr Armour: I will deal with the last one first. We look carefully at the number of applications that we get, and we monitor that right through the process, until eventual appointments are made. We are not getting the number of applications that we need, and that is the problem for us. I am happy to have a conversation with you and anyone else on the Committee about recruitment. As part of the Prisons Unlocked programme that we have developed, some of the people in our care come along and talk to communities about what life in a prison is like. Staff members talk about the job that they do, and we bring in some of our partners to talk about the work that they do. We are keen to get that programme out into all communities. It would help significantly if people across the community could hear at first hand, as you said, from prisoners but also from prison staff to get an explanation about the work that they do. We want to encourage that and to roll it out. We will take every opportunity that comes our way to go into any community and talk about the work that we do to try to encourage people to come and work with us. You are welcome to come to all our establishments. I encourage you and the Committee to do that, because, as you rightly said, it is only when you see for yourself what happens that you get an appreciation of it.

You touched on the work environment for prison staff. You are absolutely right to say that it is important. If I had the choice either to work in Davis House or to work in some of the old square houses at Maghaberry or, indeed, some of the accommodation at Hydebank or Magilligan, there is no question about what I would choose. Davis House is good for the people who live there and for our staff.

We have an ambitious capital estates programme. Over the coming weeks, we will submit business cases to the Department for the redevelopment of Magilligan and for a new female facility and visiting area at Hydebank. Of course, those projects will be dependent on capital funding, and that will undoubtedly be challenging for the Department and the Executive.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Dillon): Thanks very much, Ronnie. Sorry, I have been asked to take over in the Chair.

Mr Dunne: It has been a long afternoon for you. I have a couple of quick questions. You mentioned senior officer recruitment: is it right that nothing has been done on that since 2016?

Mr Armour: That is the senior officer promotion. That is an internal promotion competition. That is correct.

Mr Dunne: What was the reason behind that?

Mr Armour: There are a number of reasons.

Mr Dunne: Stormont did not get the blame for that, did it?

Mr Armour: No. On this occasion, I cannot blame Stormont.

Mr Dunne: Good.

Mr Armour: It is a significant undertaking for us to organise a senior officer recruitment competition. We have a significant number of staff — around 700 — who would be eligible. When I came in, the priority was to recruit into the organisation. We now have some stability, and the priority is to give people opportunities to move through the organisation. We have been working to design a process for running that competition that will help us to manage the significant numbers that will apply.

Mr Dunne: There are obviously a number of vacancies.

Mr Armour: There are a number of vacancies, yes. People are on temporary promotion at the moment to cover them, but, strictly speaking, those are vacant posts.

Mr Dunne: The posts are filled.

Mr Armour: Yes. There are people on temporary promotion, but there are substantive opportunities for people.

Mr Dunne: People are in there on a temporary basis getting experience, which is good.

You mentioned the cost per prisoner. It has reduced significantly, from £77,831 in 2011 down to £44,112 in 2019. That is extremely significant.

Mr Armour: It is very impressive. Following the devolution of policing and justice, we, as an organisation, rightly took significant criticism for inefficiency and cost. I was at the Committee when the issue was raised, and members rightly asked, "How can that be, when you compare it with the Republic of Ireland, England and Wales, and Scotland?". We have worked hard over the years to bring down the cost per prisoner place. It has been helped by the fact that we have fewer staff now, so that cost has gone down. We have looked carefully at our accommodation. Buildings such as Davis House undoubtedly contribute to the reduction.

It is hugely encouraging for me to be able to tell the Committee that, although the cost per prisoner place here is still higher than it is in England and Wales and in Scotland, there is not much difference now, probably about £4,000 or £5,000. Of course, they have economies of scale that we do not have because of the number of prisons there and the fact that they have open prisons. We have only three establishments here. At Maghaberry, for example, you have everyone from remand prisoners to lifers to separated prisoners. I would argue that is more difficult for us. That we have achieved what we have achieved is a tribute to the organisation and to the staff.

Mr Dunne: Well done.

Drugs are an ongoing challenge. As a former member of the Health Committee, I recall that the South Eastern Trust came in about eight years ago to take responsibility. Was that across all your establishments?

Mr Armour: The South Eastern Trust has the clinical responsibility for healthcare across our three establishments. Our responsibility, as a Prison Service, is to keep people safe when they are on the landings, but the health dimension and the health input is for the South Eastern Trust.

Mr Dunne: There are health professionals in there working.

Mr Armour: There are, absolutely.

Mr Dunne: Are they non-prison-related?

Mr Armour: They are nurses and doctors, in exactly the same way as you have nurses and doctors working in any hospital or GP practice across the Province.

Mr Dunne: Has that worked reasonably well over the years?

Mr Armour: It has worked well. The South Eastern Trust has the expertise that we, as an organisation, did not have in the days when we had our own prison officer nurses. It was absolutely the right decision to take eight or nine years ago. It has been very positive.

Mr Dunne: Who pays for it?

Mr Armour: When responsibility for healthcare transferred from the Prison Service to the South Eastern Trust, we transferred the budget. In short, the South Eastern Trust pays for it.

Mr Dunne: It pays for it.

Mr Armour: We transferred the budget at the point of the transfer, and the trust took responsibility thereafter.

Mr Dunne: OK.

Miss Woods: Like Linda, I am brand new to the Committee. I would certainly welcome a visit.

Mr Armour: Absolutely.

Miss Woods: I do not want to make any judgements or have conversations about things of which I am not aware physically.

I have just two questions. I appreciate the honesty in the report about where you have come from and where you are now. It is really good to see that people can say, "Yes, there was a bit of a mess, but we are coming out the other side". Maybe because I am new, I want to ask about annex A on healthy prisons. What are those marks out of?

Mr Armour: What happens here is that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, along with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI), the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate, come to a prison and do what is called a "full inspection". They measure us against the four areas that are named there: safety, respect, purposeful activity and rehabilitation and release planning. The scores that they give are out of four, with a score of four meaning that you are good. If you get a one, you are in a very different place.

We have been working carefully on each area to try to improve our scores. As some members of the Committee will know, the Maghaberry scores are significantly different from what they were in 2015, when we were inspected. As I said, we were described as unsafe, unstable and Dickensian.

Maghaberry has come a long way. The scores in the annex are now a year and a half old. I would like to think that, if inspectors were to come back, Maghaberry would score higher than it did then. You can see that the Hydebank Wood scores are very impressive. Those are from our most recent inspection. CJINI's chief inspector will publish a report following her inspection of Hydebank Wood, probably in the spring of this year. The Committee will see that report. I have given you a flavour of what we have been told so far, but you will see it for yourselves.

Miss Woods: That is great. My next question follows on from Gordon's comment about drugs in prison. How big an issue is it for prisons in Northern Ireland? How are addiction issues dealt with? Obviously, a high percentage of the prison population have other issues, including mental health.

Mr Armour: It is a significant issue. I will ask Austin, as director of prisons on the operational side, to answer that for you.

Mr Treacy: Northern Ireland's prison officers, unlike those in other jurisdictions, including colleagues in the Irish Prison Service, face a very different problem. What is endemic in the civil population in

Northern Ireland, particularly post conflict, is a higher reliance on prescribed medication or the misuse of it. We see that as a significant threat. We see young men coming into Hydebank who have been on diazepam from the age of 13. I cautiously say that we do not have a hard drug culture. That is not to say that, on occasions, we do not get small batches of it, but we work hard.

The Committee will understand that you can significantly eliminate the opportunity for narcotics or other prohibited substances to come in, but our prisons would then look like some transatlantic prisons that are non-contact and where prisoners are behind glass. Here, we place significant value on family contact — on a father being able to hug his child or a child being able to hug his or her mummy and all the rest of it — and so we leave ourselves open to some misuse of that. We work intelligently, but we hope that we do not work in a brutal, desensitised way. We use intelligence, passive drug dogs and CCTV, and we monitor telephone calls. We also work with the Police Service when we get intelligence that some people might be thwarting our systems.

We also look at other opportunities. One of the biggest opportunities but also one of the biggest risks for us is with those who have worked hard, demonstrated good behaviour and get temporary release prior to final discharge. They come under tremendous pressure to bring stuff in. Of course, the other thing is protecting ourselves from staff or other people who work in our prisons bringing something in.

It is quite complex, with a lot of moving parts, but be assured that it is something that we are constantly on top of. That is particularly the case when we work with the health service, and it tries to normalise along the lines of what the community interventions would be with the possession of medications. That causes us some concerns, but we work together to mitigate the risks. We do medication checks and things like that. It is not a job in which you can ever say that you are at the top of the mountain; you have to keep at it all the time.

Miss Woods: Finally, I want to talk about the issues that we have covered: where you have come from; what you are working towards; and, in particular, the challenges that staff face. I noted that staff who deal with separated prisoners face threats, and we have gone over that, but there is also the issue of staff morale. You talked about the tap being on for recruitment, and I especially noted that staff health and well-being is an issue. How are you tackling that? What measures are in place for staff who are having well-being issues, such as mental health issues and stress?

Mr Armour: Brendan has been leading on well-being.

Mr Brendan Giffen (Department of Justice): Following on from Prisons 2020, the continuous improvement programme, we launched the Prisons WELL programme, which is directed specifically at our staff. You are right: they face specific challenges. We have started to roll out programmes to inform them and to give them the support they need. There is a lot out there by way of public services and things like that. For those who have deeper issues, we have a relationship with the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust, through which staff can be referred to psychology services.

(The Chairperson [Mr Givan] in the Chair)

That is an ongoing process. To be honest with you, it probably started from a low ebb. Through the Prisons 2020 consultation, staff told us that they wanted more services, and we are building on what they told us. We are holding WELL checks in the next few weeks, at which people can get their blood pressure checked etc. We do that to show that we are a caring employer.

Miss Woods: OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members have no other questions. I thank you all for coming to the Committee. It is much appreciated.

Mr Armour: Thank you.