STANDING UP FOR THE JUSTICE SECTOR

SAFE OPERATING SOLUTIONS CHARTER
Community represents more people employed in privatised justice and custodial sectors than any other UK trade union. Thousands of our members are employed in the prison sector, secure immigration centres, young offender institutions, secure training centres, courts and prisoner escorting and electronic monitoring services.

Our members’ work is vital to the UK justice system. They are uniformed in the same way as the police, fire, and armed services and they work in a situation of considerable risk, almost continually in a dangerous situation. Accordingly, promoting and protecting the health, safety and wellbeing of our members is of the utmost importance.

Figures published by the Ministry of Justice this year revealed that assaults on prison staff are at the highest level since 2006. When at least one prison officer is seriously assaulted every day it’s time for the government to wake up and take action. These figures merely illustrate the consequences of increasing the prison population at the same time as reducing the number of prison officers. Our members have serious and legitimate concerns for their safety, which have been heightened since the first death of a prison officer in the line of duty. Lorraine Barwell, a prisoner escort officer, tragically died from her injuries following an assault by a prisoner outside Blackfriars Crown Court in June.

The loss of experienced staff and pressures to drive down costs across the prison estate are having a direct effect on the ability of our members to keep prisoners and fellow officers safe. In the five years of the last government, there was a 40 percent increase in serious assaults on prison officers.

These issues must be addressed. We want to work with the government and employers in the sector to find solutions to these problems – and that starts with improving the safety of our members.

So we’ve developed a Safe Operating Solutions (SOS) Charter, along with Community’s Justice and Custodial Services Sector Committee, which aims to establish common standards that can be adopted by both the government and companies competing for justice services contracts. Adopting the charter would ensure protected and safe-guarded environments for staff.

It is important to introduce our SOS into companies for the long term interest of our members and their employers alike to enhance the wellbeing of employees, promote equality within companies and advocate improved policies with a view to work in partnership with employers to reduce reoffending.

We hope you’ll support the charter, and the introduction of these principles to the justice and custodial services sector to secure a safe place to work for everyone.

Roy Rickhuss
General Secretary
Community
Community wants all providers of justice and custodial services awarded through the government’s procurement process to adhere to these standards:

1. **Reduction of Violence**
   Policies that significantly reduce violence against staff and provide proper aftercare.

2. **Agreed Staffing Levels**
   To protect and safeguard employees, including the end of a lone-working culture.

3. **Health & Safety Delivery**
   Commitments to protect and improve the health, safety and well-being of employees.

4. **Consistent Training**
   Consistent, effective training and mentoring for all employees.

5. **Positive Partnerships**
   Partnerships with local employers and community groups to help reduce reoffending.

Community calls on the government to enact these principles by ensuring that all new contracts adhere to the charter and by reviewing all current contracts to ensure that they meet these minimum standards.
1. REDUCTION OF VIOLENCE

The number of assaults on staff has increased by 30% in the 12 months from September 2014 to September 2015. The number of serious assaults on staff is up a huge 33% in the same period of 2014-15 and represents the highest figure under current recorded practices which began in 2003. Since 2012, the number of serious assaults in total, and the number of serious assaults on staff have more than doubled.

The Ministry of Justice’s Safety in Custody report also included data showing an overall increase in the numbers of violent and sexual assaults in prisons.

There were 18,874 assault incidents in the twelve months to September 2015, up 19% from 15,886 incidents in the same period of 2014. It also showed that self-harm incidents increased by 22%.

Evidence from HM Inspectorate of Prisons, the Government’s own performance data, Independent Monitoring Boards and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsmen all indicate deterioration in standards of safety and performance across the prison estate over the last two years, with an increase in assaults and self-inflicted deaths.

A recent report by the House of Commons Justice Select Committee stated that the fall in staffing levels stemming from redundancies and increased turnover have affected safety for both prisoners and officers. Evidence given provided a picture of deteriorating standards in terms of staffing levels, resulting in less prisoner to staff contact and less surveillance.

Community wants commitment from companies to introduce robust policies that significantly reduce acts of violence against staff. These policies should include a structured approach to aftercare.

Community wants a proactive commitment from companies in assisting the union during the prosecution of its members’ interests following any such incident.
Staff and prisoners are regularly put at risk because of unsafe staffing levels. Staff are expected to perform their duties without having the appropriate and safe staffing levels and with assaults on staff at an all-time high, this means staff arrive at work frightened for their personal safety.

Prison officer and Community member
2. AGREED STAFFING LEVELS

The prison system as a whole has been overcrowded in every year since 1994. Further cuts to public services have worsened the situation. At the end of March 2014, 77 out of 119 prisons in England and Wales were overcrowded. Ministry of Justice data compiled by the Howard League for Penal Reform has revealed that there were 82 prison suicides in 2014 in England and Wales, which is the highest figure since 2007.

The Howard League attributed the increase to ‘the cuts to the number of staff, particularly more experienced staff, in every prison’. This coincides with a rise in the number of prisoners. These figures show the impact of high pressures, staff shortages and low staff retention among prison officers.

Attrition continues to be a problem with reports of many staff leaving their jobs due to increased assaults on staff, long working hours or inadequate working conditions. Recently, patterns in the predominant reasons for staff leaving the Prison Service have changed: in the year to September
Community’s members on the frontline in prisons are in a daily struggle to ensure the safety and welfare of prisoners as well as their fellow prison officers. There should be agreed staffing levels in place during the bid process, the eradication of lone working, agreed policies relating to the shortfall of staffing levels and a consistent approach from all Justice Sector companies locally or nationally.

Impact on the frontline

“There has been an increase in lone working in recent years. Staff are expected to work alone during the Core Day while being responsible for the secure custody and care of over 60 prisoners. The majority of staff we work alongside are inexperienced or new and that means that the more experienced staff have to not only protect these officers but shoulder the burden of an increased workload. It is taking its toll personally.

Many of these more experienced officers are making the decision about whether to leave and look for employment elsewhere with lower stress levels and less risk to their health and safety.’

‘Budget cuts have had a profound effect on our working lives. It’s presumed that the private sector is protected but that is untrue and in some cases the effects are worse as we suffer from worse terms and conditions. Private sector prisons and custodial services are faced with a race to the bottom.

We’ve had high increases of workloads in all areas, an increase in general responses as prisoners know when we are short staffed (which is putting officers at risk and the welfare of other inmates), increases of self-harmers and assaults and also staff fatigue and stress related illness, which has serious knock on effects when staffing levels are already low.’

Prison officer and Community member

2014, of the 3,400 staff who left (representing 11%), 24% resigned, 15% retired, and 17% took voluntary redundancy. In the previous year these figures, relating to 5,300 departures, were 16%, 14% and 50% respectively.

Private sector prisons are able to develop their own plans for recruitment and retention and this flexibility should be utilised to deliver safe staffing levels and sustainable working practices which ensure the safety of both prisoners and staff.
3. HEALTH & SAFETY DELIVERY

Research carried out by the University of Bedfordshire found that officers are at a high risk of emotional and physical stress with 60% of staff considering leaving the prison sector in the near future.

A larger scale survey conducted by National Offender Management Service shows that only 52% of staff feel that they work in a safe environment, 21% feel that their pay adequately reflects their performance and the same proportion feel that the prison service is well managed. Staff also report that high stress levels are leading to rising numbers of security breaches.

The increase in exposure to ‘legal’ highs in prisons has led to an increase in violence between inmates, and admission of staff to hospitals. The widespread abuse of these drugs has led to a 40% rise in ambulance callouts to prisons in the last two years.

A report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman found that new psychoactive substances played a part in at least 19 prisoner fatalities between 2012 and 2014.

- Community wants a commitment from companies to deliver an effective risk assessment for health and safety of employees, and a consistent approach to agreed policies which establish a duty of care to the health and safety of employees.

- Community wants companies to recommit to engaging and consulting with Community health and safety reps when carrying out risk assessments.

- Community supports the gradual roll out of a full smoking ban across the prison estate. Community calls on the Ministry of Justice to ensure that support is provided to our members and those prisoners who smoke whilst ensuring that appropriate staffing levels are utilised to ensure the safety of prison staff and prisoners throughout the transitional period.

- Community calls on the government for urgent action on so called ‘legal’ drugs to protect prison staff.
Our health at risk every day

“We do not have any isolation rooms on site. Staff members are expected to monitor inmates with confirmed cases of tuberculosis yet the rooms have no glass, there are no masks for staff to wear, no aftercare or health checks. Many staff members are still waiting for their Hepatitis vaccinations. It’s a disgrace how staff members are treated.’

‘Our colleague was contaminated with blood and became anxious. When I investigated this it became apparent that there was no procedure for staff that may come into contact with blood or other body fluids and the threat of Hep B & C virus as well as HIV was not being risk assessed appropriately. We developed a clear procedure with a local NHS specialist but it is clear to me that this is not consistent across the sector. This must change as management have a duty of care.’

Prison officer and Community member
Private prison contractors are required to provide training for both prisoners and staff in line with Prison Service Instructions and Prison Service Orders as part of their contracts. However, members report that the standard of training delivered by private contractors is inconsistent and varied in quality particularly compared to the public sector. As highlighted below, there has been a vast contrast between the amounts spent on training prisoners and employees.

Companies should deliver a top class and consistent training model, culminating in accredited qualifications that are valid across the sector working closely with Community learning reps.

There should be investment in continuous training and staff should be given individual training plans tailored to individual needs and ambitions.

Probation periods should be meaningful processes that properly prepare staff for the realities of working in the justice sector. A review of probation periods would help tackle the high staff turnover within the sector.

“...The prisoners are treated better than we are. They are an asset for the contractor because they get money for them. We are seen as a cost.”

Prison officer and Community member
5. POSITIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Effective training programmes develop confident and knowledgeable staff that help to take their companies forward in the drive for good service.

A relationship with the League Managers Association has been established that has delivered training for both prison officers and prisoners in a number of contracts, namely; HMP Forest Bank, HMP Peterborough and HMP Kilmarnock. The aim of the project is to provide skills and training for prisoners and assist in supporting initiatives relating to rehabilitation.

We have had some high profile managers involved, not least the ex-England Captain Terry Butcher, with the initiative jointly-funded by Community and the employers.

In many instances, Community has led the way in seeking positive partnerships within the communities surrounding our members’ work places.

It is important that employers commit to working with local employers and community groups as part of the tendering process. Rehabilitating prisoners and finding innovative ways to improve their experience of prison has a direct impact upon the wellbeing of staff.

Community is committed to working with service providers and local communities to help reduce reoffending rates. The workforce within the justice sector can play an important role in rehabilitation and Community is committed to being a constructive partner in that process.

“Working alongside prisoners on the football project has made a big difference to my day to day job. The relationship between prisoner and officers will always be a difficult one, but projects like this out in the local community mean that my job is easier back in the prison.”

Prison officer and Community member
We are Community.
The modern union for a changing world.

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