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Birmingham prison: the transition from public to private sector and its impact on staff and prisoner quality of life - a three-year study

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A three-year quality of life study was conducted at HMP Birmingham following its transfer from the public sector to G4S in 2011. The Prisons Research Centre team conducted detailed surveys of staff and prisoners' perceptions of their quality of life, interviews and observations, in 2011, 2012 and 2013, in order to evaluate the impact of this transition. The study found that, after an initial decline in quality of life, particularly for staff, the prison showed signs of positive progression by 2013. Seven prisoner quality of life dimensions showed statistically significant improvements from 2011 to 2013.

Key findings

- Seven of the 21 prisoner quality of life dimensions improved significantly from 2011 to 2013: 'respect/courtesy'; 'humanity'; 'decency'; 'care for the vulnerable'; 'staff-prisoner relationships'; 'fairness'; and 'personal autonomy'.
- Prisoners' overall 'quality of life' score improved each year of the study, but it remained low compared to other local prisons.
- In 2012 there were ten significant differences between dimension mean scores for White and Black/Minority Ethnic (BME) prisoners, where BME prisoners reported lower scores, primarily concentrated in the 'harmony' and 'professionalism' categories, suggesting perceived discrimination. In 2013, the only significant difference was in the overall quality of life score. Both of these groups rated their quality of life higher in 2013 than in 2012 and 2011.
- For all staff, 17 of the 18 dimension mean scores moved in a positive direction from 2012 to 2013, 13 of them at a statistically significant level. In particular, 'attitudes towards the senior management team', 'recognition and personal efficacy', 'safety, control and security', and 'relationships with line management' all improved from 2011 and 2012 levels in 2013.
- Overall staff quality of life improved particularly significantly from 2012 to 2013, reflecting a settling down, a stabilising of the workforce, and growing confidence in their leadership.
- These improvements were accomplished against a low baseline, and major challenges in the delivery of a constructive regime remained.

Background

HMP Birmingham was transferred from the public sector to G4S on October 1, 2011. Birmingham is a large Victorian local prison (population 1,450) with a long history of 'idleness and neglect' (e.g., HMIP, 2001; 2010), poor regime quality, and a reputation for having a 'traditional' and resistant staff culture. The transition of an existing operational public sector prison to the private sector, in which the majority of staff and managers were transferred across to the private sector, was unprecedented in England and Wales. The scale and impact of this prolonged transition on staff and managers was exceptional. Research on public-private sector comparisons¹ suggested that this unique development *could*, if successful, lead to a significant improvement in the culture and quality of life at Birmingham prison, by combining some of the strengths of the public sector staff (for example, experience and a traditional-professional approach to the use of authority) with some of those of the private sector (for example, more efficient staff deployment, a clearer vision, and innovative and capable management). There were also risks, such as the shedding of able staff, moving to lower staffing levels, inflexible contractual obligations, and the inheritance of traditionally resistant public sector staff, or unsuitable managers.

Methodology

In December 2011 (Time 1) members of the Cambridge University Prisons Research Centre team were invited by Birmingham's new Director to conduct a detailed survey of staff and prisoners' perceptions of their quality of life at the 'baseline' or transition stage in order to plan for and evaluate its 'direction of travel' over the year ahead. Most of the major changes planned were due to be implemented from January 2012. The team returned one year later (Time 2), and again in December 2013 (Time 3). The methods used on each occasion included Measuring the Quality of Prison Life (MQPL) prisoner surveys, Staff Quality of Life (SQL) surveys, focus groups with prisoners completing the survey in all areas of the prison (except in the care and separation unit where individual prisoners completed questionnaires), observations, interviews, and informal discussions with staff and prisoners.

111 randomly sampled prisoners completed the survey at Time 1, 142 at Time 2, and 164 at Time 3. 165 staff attending a full staff meeting completed the survey at Time 1, 126 at Time 2, and 131 at Time 3. Few staff attending these meetings chose not to complete the survey. Around 25 interviews with staff and prisoners and 16 focus groups with prisoners were also conducted during each exercise. Several additional research visits were made over the course of the study.

The MQPL and SQL surveys constitute a reliable method 'by which to measure prisoners' perceptions of prison life and obtain a "temperature gauge" of a prison's social climate' (House of Commons, 2005: Audit 69; see also Liebling with Arnold, 2004).² These surveys aim to redress the methodological and conceptual limitations of other prison evaluation techniques by grounding their development in lengthy consultation with staff and prisoners. They constitute an efficient, conceptually well-informed, and carefully designed prison social climate measure (see Liebling, Crewe and Hulley, 2011b).³

The MQPL is a self-administered questionnaire based on sustained qualitative fieldwork in a number of prisons over many years. It has identified 'what matters most' to prisoners, and includes social climate dimensions such as staff professionalism, relationships, fairness, organisation and consistency, safety, and personal development. The survey contains 143 statements that form 21 dimensions. Prisoners are asked to consider statements concerning their quality of life and rate them according to a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). Factor analysis allows for the overall dimension score to be calculated as a mean of the composite items. Thus, the relative quality of

¹ Liebling et al., 2011a; Crewe et al., 2011; Crewe et al., 2014.

² The MQPL/SQL surveys are also used by NOMS within the Prison Rating System.

³ Limitations include its reliance on randomly selected prisoners' willingness to complete the long questionnaire (which is often high, but can be impacted by staff cooperation), resulting in some self-selection; the tendency for different prisoners' age and sentence length groups to be more critical of their conditions and experience; and the complexity of the data. However, due to group administration with two facilitators, and a focus on dialogue with survey participants, response rates are frequently over 70 per cent. There can also be problems with the SQL, for example when more disaffected staff groups choose not to complete the survey during a full staff meeting.

life is represented by the mean score for each dimension, ranging from one to five, with a 'neutral' score of three. All items are positively scored, which means that a score above the neutral threshold of '3.0' is desirable and anything below is negative, and an area that needs improvement. There is also a standalone 'overall quality of life' question which is scored on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is low and 10 is high.

The SQL is the staff version of the survey, consisting of 18 dimensions reflecting the quality of working life, relationships with managers and the organisation, and orientation to prisoners and prison work.

Results

At Time 1 (2011), Birmingham prison was performing poorly. It was characterised by long-serving (and therefore highly experienced) staff who had been operating a well-oiled, but restricted regime.⁴ The senior management team (SMT) reflected this traditional character, consisting almost exclusively of older men, with operational backgrounds. Trust in the SMT was low, following a protracted bid process, but staff were willing to give the new Director a chance and expressed confidence in him. The 'moral balance' (see Liebling with Arnold, 2004) at Birmingham was too heavily weighted in favour of security rather than relationships. Staff-prisoner relationships were mixed, and were very poor on some wings. Many staff in the prison were keen to work with the new management team to improve the prison's performance. Some expressed lack of clarity about the direction of travel or confidence that they had the right 'tools to do the job'.

The Prisons Research Centre team returned in December 2012 (Time 2) to conduct a one-year follow-up with the aim of assessing how well the prison had transitioned and the impact its change of management had on the perceived quality of life of

those living and working within it. There were some significant improvements in prisoners' evaluations of their quality of life, from a low level, over a relatively short period of time, particularly in levels of respect.⁵ Most of the MQPL scores had moved in a positive direction. These improvements to prisoner quality of life were not being enthusiastically led by staff however, on the whole, but were in part the result of perceived losses in staff power and some retreats from direct engagement with prisoners. Staff reported feeling emotionally fraught at the time of the second research visit, which coincided with a programme of voluntary redundancies, and drops in SQL scores reflected this. The eagerness for change and willingness to adopt a new agenda had waned, as staff reported feeling fatigued from multiple alterations to their working practices and numbers, with little support or clear leadership. A drop in prisoners' rating of 'policing and security' reflected this. Overall, Birmingham prison had not yet successfully combined the strengths of both public and private sector prison staffing and management models, but was showing some of the weaknesses in each (negative attitudes and underuse of authority respectively).

The third visit to HMP Birmingham took place in December 2013 (Time 3). We found a prison that had undergone significant changes in a relatively short amount of time, showing signs of consistent improvement. Both prisoners and staff rated their quality of life and treatment significantly better than in 2011 and 2012, and were feeling as though their prison 'was finally settling down'. Staff views of senior management were positive, and feelings of safety, control and security were positive, for the first time, although there were still concerns about the flow of power among prisoners and its policing by staff. There had been some symbolically significant and (in the view of the research team) well-judged promotions of senior officers to junior managers. Professional orientations towards prisoners were improved. Prisoners noticed and appreciated these changes.

⁴ For example, prisoners complained that staff did not unlock on time – a typical characteristic of a 'traditional' culture reflected in daily practice. Prisoners had to 'choose between a shower or exercise'. Applications and letters went missing. Staff did not mix with prisoners on the exercise yard. Prisoners said, even at Time 1, that 'attitudes have changed since G4S have taken over'.

⁵ Achieving significant improvements on MQPL scores within a year is unusual and difficult (Leeds prison, for example, took three MQPL surveys and four years between the first and the last survey to achieve upwards cultural change, see Tait, 2005; 2008).

Themes arising in the 2013 study were:

- a) elevated staff morale linked to feelings of job security and a more stable work environment;
- b) optimism from both staff and prisoners that Birmingham was on a positive trajectory;
- c) improved staff-prisoner relationships, arising from greater engagement;
- d) the successful streamlining of the visits system, which enabled prisoners to maintain higher quality family contact;
- e) decreased reports of racial discrimination towards prisoners;
- f) an increase in reports of staff favouritism and delegated power to certain 'trusted prisoners';
- g) increased concerns for vulnerable prisoners (specifically those with mental health issues, but also for foreign national prisoners), including rising numbers, and exploitation by other prisoners;
- h) negative experiences of healthcare specifically related to substance abuse treatment, prescription distribution, and general access.

The research team observed examples of outstanding work (this was on the rise) and some highly talented and committed staff members, who were beginning to set a new tone in the prison. Active work on the prison's cleanliness, organisation, and infrastructural upgrading was underway, and improvements since 2012 were apparent on the wings and around the grounds. Some important and clearly led transitions (e.g. the role of the segregation unit aimed at shortening stays and reducing its use) had been enthusiastically embraced and implemented by management, and were viewed as positive steps toward modernisation.

Several of the problems arising in both the 2011 and the 2012 studies reappeared: limited availability of activities for prisoners, inhibiting personal development and progress; a lack of organisation and consistency in regime delivery; and a lack of support and recognition of staff from management (especially amongst uniformed staff).

Prisoner results

A comparison of dimension score means from 2012 and 2013 revealed two statistically significant differences, both of which were in a positive

direction. The first was in 'family contact', which improved from 2.99 to 3.22 ($p < 0.05$). The second was in 'care for the vulnerable', which improved from 2.95 to 3.09 ($p < 0.1$).⁶ All of the other changes in MQPL scores were non-significant when compared to 2012 scores, but most were in a positive direction: 14 of the 21 MQPL dimensions received a more favourable rating in 2013 than in 2012. Prisoners' overall 'quality of life' score increased from 4.44 to 4.75. In 2011 (Time 1), the overall quality of life score was 3.99. These are noteworthy findings, and indicate a highly positive direction and degree of change. An ANOVA test for linear trends confirmed this conclusion. Seven prisoner quality of life dimensions improved significantly from 2011 to 2013: 'respect/courtesy'; 'humanity'; 'decency'; 'care for the vulnerable'; 'staff-prisoner relationships'; 'fairness'; and 'personal autonomy' (see Table 1). Five of these were 'harmony' dimensions, suggesting that relationships in particular had undergone the most significant improvement since the transition from the public sector to G4S.

A notable finding at Time 3 was the decrease in reports of racial discrimination. Racism towards prisoners by staff was a common complaint in 2012, but was heard rarely in 2013. In 2012 there were ten significant differences between dimension mean scores for White and BME prisoners, primarily concentrated in the 'harmony' and 'professionalism' categories. BME prisoners rated their quality of life much lower than White prisoners. In 2013, the only significant difference was in the overall quality of life score, with White prisoners rating their overall quality of life at 5.12 and BME prisoners rating their overall quality of life at 4.18 ($p < 0.05$). Both of these groups rated their quality of life higher in 2013 than in 2012 (4.66 and 3.88 respectively).⁷

Staff results

The staff survey measures staff feelings about their own working lives and treatment, and their attitudes and orientations towards prisoners. At Time 3, staff were feeling generally optimistic and positive, and their scores on the SQL strongly confirmed this. For all staff, 17 of the 18 dimension mean scores moved

⁶ In this case, the term 'vulnerable' refers to prisoners at risk of suicide or bullying by others.

⁷ The percentage of BME prisoners participating in each survey was 41, 33 and 41 respectively.

in a positive direction since Time 2, 13 of them at a significant level. 'Dynamic authority' (the intelligent use of power through relationships; Liebling, 2011) was the only dimension that did not improve. This is noteworthy change, especially in just a year. Overall staff quality of life improved significantly from 4.47 in 2012 to 5.93 in 2013 ($p < 0.001$). This also exceeded the 2011 score of 5.52. The staff results showed a distinct 'elbow' shape, with a drop in quality from 2011 to 2012, then a very marked improvement, to above 2011 levels, on the whole, in 2013 (see Table 2).

Staff reported feeling more secure in their jobs and in the vision for the future of their prison by 2013 ('Knowing that we have a 15-year contract makes things feel more secure; it's a huge relief'). Reductions in staffing levels/pay and conditions in the public sector placed the recent changes into context: the 'grass is no longer greener on the other side'. Although reluctant or cynical staff were still present, they were now the minority. The prison felt lighter to both staff and prisoners, and a more positive regime was being delivered. There was greater acceptance of the business-oriented private prison model, though some resentment at the 'tightness' of the new working model was still present.

An ANOVA test for linear trends with all staff revealed that only one dimension had consistently moved in an upward direction from 2011 (most went down, then up): 'Relationships with peers' increased from 3.67 in 2011 to 3.83 ($p < 0.05$) in 2013. The majority of staff listed this as one of the 'most satisfying' things about working in Birmingham. This camaraderie was viewed by many as a 'survival tool' and rallied the 'collective pride' of 'The Green' (a reference to Birmingham's local name, Winson Green).

The overwhelming message from the SQL results at Time 3 was that staff were feeling more stable, secure, and confident in their roles and their prison's future, though some complaints persisted: many staff felt disconnected from, unsupported or unrecognised by management; and staff throughout the prison expressed concerns for safety linked to reduced staffing numbers. However, staff also expressed optimism and elevated morale. Discipline staff ratings of their quality of life in particular

improved very significantly from 3.80 in 2012 to 5.52 in 2013.

The loss of hope and the absence of a clear vision for the future of the prison expressed in 2012 was largely absent in 2013, although with a few staff actively resisting the new model and attempts at change. Adaptation to an evolving regime was widespread and morale was significantly higher than in 2012. Pride in their work was growing. Loyalty toward G4S had still not been fully developed, though commitment to a notion of public service (which had typically been linked to serving 'the crown' under the public sector) had been rekindled. For all staff, their 'relationship with the organisation' significantly increased from 2.51 in 2012 to 3.10 in 2013. Many staff expressed relief that 'the worst is over', which allowed them the space to focus on the task at hand and the future of Birmingham prison.

Conclusion

The transition process at Birmingham between 2011 and 2012 had not included any explicit articulation of, and therefore preservation of, the strengths of the public sector, in order to combine these strengths with those of the private sector. At Time 2, some of the weaknesses of both sectors were detected, as staff 'gave up' their professional use of authority and conceded power to prisoners, in the face of reductions in staffing levels and an implicit message that their past expertise was no longer valued. In the 2013 research visit, the team found a much stronger adoption of traditional public sector strengths, as professional confidence and pride was returning. The use of voluntary sector resources was growing, and some staff were displaying an impressive creative energy in their work and departments. A respectful culture was developing and healthier staff-prisoner relationships were clear evidence of this.

The key lessons are that protracted means of organisational change bring risks, that competition and staffing reductions lead to turbulence, but can bring about positive improvements, that strong leadership and fair processes are necessary, and that clear messages should be communicated to staff about what needs preserving, what needs change, and the vision on which new staffing arrangements are based. There are further important research lessons to be learned, including the explanation for cultural change, which can be

rapid and unstable. Longitudinal studies of changes in prison quality and management are instructive.

Many improvements had been made to staff and prisoner quality of life at Birmingham, after some initial turbulence. The prison was showing strong signs of stabilisation and positive progression. The quality of life scores were still low compared to the better performing local prisons. A great deal of work had been done by the Director and senior management team to reach this point. Stable and strong leadership would be needed in order to keep the prison moving along this trajectory and to make improvements in areas where this was needed (such as entry into custody, fairness, organisation and consistency, drug control and personal development). As one officer noted: 'Yeah, we're doing all right. We'll be okay. We're Birmingham.'

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Table 1: Prisoner dimension mean comparisons – ANOVA test for linear trend 2011 to 2013

HMP Birmingham - Prisoners⁸

	<i>N=111</i>	<i>N=142</i>	<i>N=164</i>
	2011	2012	2013
<i>Harmony Dimensions</i>			
Entry into Custody	2.55	2.72	2.64
Respect/courtesy	2.91	3.13	3.21 **
Staff-prisoner relationships	2.91	3.07	3.11 †
Humanity	2.76	2.90	2.97 *
Decency	2.54	2.63	2.73 *
Care for the vulnerable	2.90	2.95	3.09 *
Help and assistance	2.85	2.92	2.95
<i>Professionalism Dimensions</i>			
Staff professionalism	3.14	3.20	3.13
Bureaucratic legitimacy	2.59	2.62	2.57
Fairness	2.60	2.70	2.77 †
Organisation and consistency	2.46	2.49	2.61
<i>Security Dimensions</i>			
Policing and security	3.13	2.97	3.02
Prisoner safety	3.16	3.23	3.23
Prisoner adaptation	3.34	3.30	3.24
Drugs and exploitation	2.71	2.74	2.66
<i>Conditions and Family Contact Dimensions</i>			
Conditions	3.18	3.22	3.25
Family contact	3.19	2.99	3.22
<i>Wellbeing and Development Dimensions</i>			
Personal development	2.68	2.73	2.77
Personal autonomy	2.71	2.89	2.86 †
Wellbeing	2.56	2.56	2.63
Distress	3.41	3.36	3.34
Quality of life score (1-10) mean	3.99	4.44	4.75

⁸ † <0.1; * < 0.05; ** < 0.01; *** < 0.001; these significance levels denote the level of confidence with which we can conclude that the difference is not down to chance (e.g. 0.05 means that we can be 95% confident that the difference is not down to chance) Mean scores of 3.00 (the 'neutral' threshold) or over are shaded.

Table 2: All staff dimension mean comparisons – 2011 compared to 2012, and 2012 compared to 2013⁹

HMP Birmingham - All staff¹⁰				
	<i>N</i> =165	<i>N</i> =126	<i>N</i> =126	<i>N</i> =131
	2011	2012	2012	2013
<i>Management Dimensions</i>				
Attitudes towards the Director	3.27	3.01*	3.01	3.55 ***
Attitudes towards the SMT	2.66	2.59	2.59	3.07 ***
Treatment by senior management	3.11	2.98	2.98	3.32 **
Treatment by line management	3.13	3.07	3.07	3.60 ***
Relationships with line management	3.47	3.45	3.45	3.80 ***
<i>Job Satisfaction Dimensions</i>				
Relationship with the organisation	3.12	2.51***	2.51	3.10 ***
Commitment	3.64	3.13***	3.13	3.44 **
Recognition and personal efficacy	2.75	2.70	2.70	3.11 ***
Involvement and motivation	3.60	3.30**	3.30	3.66 ***
Stress	2.48	2.24**	2.24	2.46 *
Relationships with peers	3.67	3.74	3.74	3.83
<i>Authority Dimensions</i>				
Safety, control and security	2.91	2.39***	2.39	3.13 ***
Punishment and discipline	2.84	2.58**	2.58	2.80 *
Dynamic authority	3.38	3.27	3.27	3.24
<i>Prisoner Orientation Dimensions</i>				
Professional support for prisoners	3.68	3.57	3.57	3.74 *
Positive attitudes to prisoners	2.78	2.73	2.73	2.87
Trust, compassion and commitment towards prisoners	3.76	3.69	3.69	3.73
Relationships with prisoners	3.69	3.59	3.59	3.72 †
Overall Quality of Life score (1-10 mean)	5.52	4.47***	4.47	5.93 ***

⁹ An ANOVA test for linear trends with all staff revealed that only one dimension had consistently moved in an upward direction from 2011 (most went down, then up): 'Relationships with peers' increased from 3.67 in 2011 to 3.83 ($p < 0.05$) in 2013.

¹⁰ † < 0.1 ; * < 0.05 ; ** < 0.01 ; *** < 0.001 ; mean scores of 3.00 (the 'neutral' threshold) or over are shaded.