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Article

Invisible Men: Unlocking Compassion and Understanding the Needs of Older Men Behind Bars

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Abstract: Men over 50 years of age are the fastest-growing population group in the prison system, leading to the prison service of England and Wales now becoming recognised as the largest provider of residential care for older men. Roughly one in five prisoners (18%) is over 50 years of age. This paper focuses on the impact on both staff and prisoners of developing an understanding of the needs and concerns of older prisoners during prison officer training. The authors approach the study of the older prison population from their respective disciplines—criminology and health. Both authors are aware of the necessity for custodial staff to be prepared and equipped to respond and manage a growing number of individuals who are vulnerable and appreciate the need for prison staff to be supported in this process, with an understanding of the complexities that come with housing large numbers of ageing men within a custodial setting. This article explores the provision of training for newly recruited prison officers and considers what good practice might look like.

Keywords: older prisoners; health; policy; practice; trainee prison officers



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1. Introduction

Older prisoners are the fastest growing group in the prison system of England and Wales; they are also the group that experience the most inconsistencies in the assessment of their healthcare needs and subsequent access to appropriate care and management (Munday et al. 2017). A continued rise in numbers of male prisoners aged over fifty, sentenced and ageing in prison, has resulted in the prison service of England and Wales becoming the largest provider of residential care for frail and older men (Danely 2022). The political landscape is now changing once again; with the management of prisons and prisoners becoming a point of focus, this is an opportunity to highlight the profile of older prisoners and urge those in power to undertake a review of their care and management in the context of workforce awareness and training. The authors approach the study of the older prison population from the perspective of their distinctive disciplines—criminology and health. Although research in the field of older prisoners is more usually weighted towards establishing the views of the prisoner (Humblet 2020), there is still not a significant amount of research from which to draw information. The growing numbers of older prisoners increases the necessity for custodial staff to be prepared and equipped to manage individuals who are vulnerable, present with multiple and complex needs, and require care within a supportive prison environment. The lack of emphasis on content relating to older prisoners within the Prison Officer Entry Level Training is concerning given the extent of both the numbers in prison and the issues that this creates. This has the potential

to leave trainee prison officers with no appreciation or understanding of the situation once they are within the confines of the prison, working as officers. Collaborating with Unlocked Graduates, a leadership development programme for graduates wishing to become prison officers, the authors delivered a focused session about older prisoners as part of the 'summer school' training curriculum. Evaluation and feedback from the session highlights a general lack of awareness of the needs of older prisoners, a need for targeted training, and elements of surprise regarding the numbers of men over the age of fifty who are currently incarcerated. This paper focuses on the impact on both staff and prisoners of developing an understanding of the needs and concerns of older prisoners, and recommendations for good practice identified. The authors are particularly interested in showing what good practice looks like, in terms of addressing the growing needs of the older prisoner population and developing training and supporting new officers, ensuring that they are prepared when beginning their careers within prisons. For this work, the authors are focusing on the needs of older men in prison.

New prison officer recruits are underprepared for managing an older demographic, with inadequate and inconsistent training surrounding ageing in prison having a further profound effect on the management of a vulnerable population. Few anticipate that they are to assume the role of care worker when applying for a job as a prison officer (Cooney and Braggins 2010; Turner and Peacock 2017), however prison officers are facing the reality of managing age-related health conditions for people who may ultimately die in prison (Davies et al. 2023). Concern over caring for older prisoners is increasing; policy and prison pressure groups such as the Prison Reform Trust and the Howard League have highlighted the growing need for prison officers to develop awareness and understanding of the difficulties faced by older people in prison. Historical research indicates that prison staff in England and Wales think that specialist training in dealing with older prisoners who are frail or have long-term health conditions would be beneficial to their practice (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2004; Cooney and Braggins 2010), however the implementation of this has been inconsistent across the prison estate.

1.1. The Problem

The rise in older prisoners across the prison estate is now well documented (Prison Reform Trust 2024; House of Commons Library 2024). This is a phenomenon experienced by most of the western world during the last 20 years. Those over 50 represent the fastest growing demographic group in prison in England and Wales. Older prisoners now account for 1 in 5 of the prison population; over 18% of the prison population in England and Wales. For this article and in line with the organisations supporting older prisoners, we are using the threshold age of 50 to identify a person in prison as 'older'. If expectations are correct, the population of those over 50 in prisons is expected to rise by 13% by 2026. It is thought that this growth in numbers will be seen amongst those over the age of 60 plus (Ministry of Justice 2023). Despite the significant size of this population in prison and the problems that this creates for an already over stretched prison service, there remains no national strategy to support work with older people in prison. Organisations such as the Prison Reform Trust, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, Age UK have called for a national strategy, however, despite promises from the last (and previous) government, there is still nothing in place. The explanations for the rise in the number of older people being sent to prison are centred around several factors. More adult men are being sent to prison for sexual offences, society is ageing, increases in sentence length, a growth in the number of men sentenced for historical sexual offences, a lower tolerance by the courts of deviant behaviour by older people, changes to sentencing policy, increased levels of imprisonment for breach of license conditions and as a result, greater

number of recalls to prison (Ridley 2023). Prison sentences have increased over the last 20 years, resulting in 4 times the number of people in prison aged 60 and over in prison than witnessed in 2002 (Ministry of Justice 2023). A further complication to consider when addressing the needs of this population is the fact that over 43% of men in prison aged 50 and over are imprisoned for sexual offences, which results in longer sentences and lengthy periods of time spent in prison (Ridley 2023). This fact alone adds to the complications of resettlement for this group of men, who find themselves without family support, isolated and reluctantly having to start again in hostel accommodation. Those 'older old' prisoners, roughly 450 aged 80 plus in prison at the end of September 2023, many of whom were sentenced to custody whilst in their 70s, face the starkest of futures. This group of prisoners endure perhaps the most discomfort as they enter a world alien to them, suffering initially from 'institutional shock', then the realisation that the prison could possibly be their last place to call home. 171 people aged 50 or over died of natural causes whilst serving a prison sentence in 2022. This figure is over four times higher than the data collected in 2002 (Deaths Data tool, Ministry of Justice 2023).

Existing research suggests that older prisoners are very different to their younger peers. Their aspirations, beliefs, behaviours, and views are consistently different to those exposed by younger prisoners (Chu 2016). Many older people remain active well into their prison sentence, but there are those whose health needs and issues faced prevent them from engaging in any type of activity outside of their cell. It is well documented that older people in prison are more likely to suffer from chronic disease, disability, mobility issues, sensory impairment, and discrimination (House of Commons Justice Committee 2020; Nuffield Trust 2023). The Nuffield Trust (2023) also identified the additional stress on prison staff managing ill-health and death as part of their everyday duties. The Ministry of Justice (2023) figures revealed that 89% of the 195 deaths of natural causes in the 12 months to March 2023 were of older prisoners.

Age related issues are not easily identified or treated within the confines of the prison, and this is a significant contributing factor to the health decline of many older prisoners. The Chief Inspector of Prisons investigations in 2004 and 2008, reported that the older a prisoner was, the more restrictions and barriers there were to an active and health lifestyle in prison. In addition, the investigation found that the greater the physical and mental health needs, the less likely it was that prisoners would live and function with anything approaching dignity. Furthermore, there are a significant number of prisoners who are identified as having mobility issues—far higher than in the general population (Prison Reform Trust 2016; Taylor and Fazel 2014; Prisons and Probation Ombudsman 2017).

Older prisoners also appear to endure both poor mental health and overall wellbeing. Rates of depression and stress, among older prisoners are three times higher than in the comparable population living in the community (Ridley 2022). The overarching difference for older people in prison is what Crawley and Sparks (2006) refer to as the appliance of 'life review'. The older population tend to look backward at what life was, evaluating achievements, failures, and losses. Any attempts at looking forward are futile and can trigger even more depression due to the sense of loss and fear for what the future may hold. The entry to prison for the first time in later life, for a significant number of prisoners, is nothing short of catastrophic and contributes to the overall psychological state of trauma that they experience. 'Entry Shock' is a term used to explain how older first-time prisoners may feel (Crawley and Sparks 2006). For so many men entering prison for the first time, their profound sense of loss and deprivation comes from that 'life lived' before imprisonment. Ninety-two percent of people in prison aged over the age of eighty were sentenced for the first time at the age of seventy plus (Ridley 2023). Therefore, the reality of never living a normal life again is the cause of hopelessness and despair.

The nature of the offences that many older men are sentenced for, can result in loss of family ties and support, contributing to a reluctance to want to leave or move on to potential further isolation on release from prison. In addition to the reluctance of men to want to move on, resettlement services lack the ability to explore the genuine issues facing older prisoners—health and social care needs, isolation, and fear—being the most reported. Research has suggested that release planning for older prisoners was often non-existent, causing additional anxiety and frustration for prisoners (Forsyth et al. 2023; Forsyth et al. 2015; Prison Reform Trust 2024). Loss of family ties and anxiety regarding release are factors known to cause great concern for this older population. Given the nature of offences committed (over 44% of men sentenced to imprisonment in later life are convicted of sexual offences), older men will face the prospect of release into unknown parts of the country, potentially in managed accommodation.

There has been limited response to the now unsurprising rise in the number of older prisoners appearing in our prisons. Lack of any national strategy has hindered any significant response to the rise in older prisoners across the prison estate. What we do see is pockets of good and better practice, but with poor practices adding to the overall picture. Interestingly, good practice is due to forward-thinking leaders within the prison estate and delivered because of the goodwill amongst staff teams. There are examples of prisons which have dedicated wings or house blocks for older prisoners; however, other prisons will see their older population dispersed throughout their prison. There is mixed evidence on what works best, but in general those older prisoners supported on wings for their sole use find life easier. However, prisons must not lose sight of purposeful activity for this group of men. It is easy to neglect this group of old and quiet men, thus adding to their invisibility within the overcrowded, understaffed prison estate. Prisons and prisons staff should acknowledge the role that these men can play in developing their own ‘supported communities’. Opportunity and empowerment would enable imprisoned older men to shape and transform their lived environments. Research has shown that older prisoners consistently request meaningful skill development activities; activities that are vital for maintaining both physical and mental health (Ridley 2022; Prison Reform Trust 2022). However, the response from prisons is often one that is caged within the language of risk aversion or simply not understanding the plight of those serving long sentences, facing the possibility that they may die in prison.

1.2. Staffing

It is evident that the older prisoner population within the prisons of England and Wales is one that provides a significant issue for staff working in prisons. However, there is another view of this population and that is the one of ‘old and quiet’. ‘No problems—old and quiet’ was an entry in an older prisoner’s wing history sheet found by those conducting research for the prison inspectorate (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2004). Indeed, the fact that a considerable number of prisoners within this age group are ‘old and quiet’ explains the fact that they overlooked or ignored and the lack of urgency surrounding the delivery of a national strategy. Few prisons take seriously the needs of this group of prisoners, those examples of good practice are rare. We also know that when prisons are short staffed, wings housing older people are the first to be subjected to restricted unlock, as it is the opinion of prison staff that this group of older prisoners will cause the least fuss. Category C prisons have been identified as establishments more likely to be reducing levels of activity and it is within these prisons that the majority of the older population reside (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2024). Whilst many in the sector would welcome strategic direction, this alone will not solve the problems created for both prisoners and staff working with the older population in prisons. Prisons face significant challenges around staffing, violence,

self-harm and living conditions ([Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2024](#); [Davies et al. 2020](#); [Davies et al. 2021](#)). The impact of COVID-19 on prisons and prison staff has been long lasting and impacted activities outside of normal regimes, often those enjoyed by the older populations in prison. The Chief Inspector of Prisons in his annual report (2023) noted the slow response of prisons to return to normal regimes post pandemic. Add to this the substantial increase in the prison population, the shortage of staff and the difficulty of maintaining staff, and we see the perfect storm for prisons. The reality is that managing the needs of older people in prison is simply adding to a hugely complex picture for our many inexperienced prison officers ([Nuffield Trust 2023](#)). The Prisons Strategy White Paper ([Ministry of Justice 2021](#)) sets out a list of positive aspirations, but most will be unachievable until prisons have enough staff, experienced staff, and time for staff to take part in needed training.

Both the decline in the number of prison uniformed staff and prison staff experience has had a significant impact on the prison estate, for both those living and working within the prisons of England and Wales ([Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2024](#)). The prison service had more than 24,000 staff working at the end of August 2010. By 2014 this figure reduced to 14,710 ([Howard League for Penal Reform 2014](#)). ([HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2024](#)) concluded recently that there were 40% fewer experienced officers than were in post in 2010. By 2024 there were approximately 23,614 prison officers in England and Wales. However, the number of officers with 10 years or more experience now sits at around 6681, down from 11,000 in 2017. Around 36% of officers now have three years' experience or more, up from 27% in 2017 ([HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2024](#)). It is well documented that this decline in staff and experience is a significant cause for instability visible in the prison system at every level.

Data shows that 13% of frontline officers left the service in the past year. These figures indicate the fact that the workforce is consistently topped up by new, inexperienced staff ([HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2024](#)). A report by the [Criminal Justice Joint Inspection \(2024\)](#) indicates the scale of the problem and how inexperienced staff struggle to deal with complex prisoners, often reluctant to unlock those deemed to be more difficult to manage. In addition to the above, there remains a fundamental problem around leadership in prisons, which contributes to the overall poor culture found in several prisons across the estate of England and Wales.

Weaknesses within leadership teams, significant staff shortfalls and a poor regime provision made it very challenging for prisons to create or maintain a positive and engaging culture that supported prisoner rehabilitation. The availability, experience, and visibility of leaders at all levels affected the quality of attitudes and behaviours of staff and outcomes for prisoners ([HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales 2023](#), p. 24).

In the year to June 2024 the prison service lost 3168 band 3–5 officers, significantly 17.8% of this number were dismissed, the rest resigned ([HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2024](#)). Recruiting prison staff is not easy and keeping prison officers in post for more than a year is a challenge. Providing new prison officer recruits with the right sort of training is essential in order to create a positive prison environment that supports both staff and prisoners. Dealing with complex health and social care needs and managing the dying older prisoner requires significant preparation and training. The reality of working with older men in prison is not something that new recruits think about. Prisons are seen still as the domain of the younger man, existing within the austere concrete landscapes and landings of our prison system. If staff are to stay in post they must be prepared for the many and complexity of the problems presented by an ever-increasing older prisoner population.

For staff, the realities of an ageing prisoner population mean they may be working with prisoners with dementia, chronic health conditions or even people in receipt of palliative or end-of-life care as part of their job role. The Prison Officers' Association has raised concerns about the pressure this puts on staff and the need for specialist training (BBC News 2019).

2. Materials and Methods

In exploring the literature surrounding the support for older prisoners, the Older Prisoner Health and Social Care Assessment and Plan (OHSCAP) project (Forsyth et al. 2017) was identified as a potential vehicle for increasing prison officer awareness of the health and social needs of older prisoners. OHSCAP sought to establish the prevalence of dementia in older prisoners and to implement routine testing to identify older prisoner needs. The plan proposed collaboration between prison officers and health care staff working together with the older prisoner to identify and implement interventions that would support a better lived experience of prison. Forsyth et al. (2017) acknowledge that the challenges of trying to embed a project requiring collaborative working into a prison system working in crisis was a main contributory factor for the project being unsuccessful. It is likely that, had OHSCAP succeeded, general awareness for prison officers of the challenges of ageing in a custodial environment would have increased. However, without the fundamental awareness and knowledge required to support and manage an older generation, and with limited resources available, any changes to practice have remained limited and inconsistent.

Considering this, and as part of a literature review for another piece of work that aimed to identify and establish the inclusion of older prisoner content in prison officer training, the syllabus for Prison Officer Entry Level Training (POELT) in England and Wales was explored. The programme aims to deliver an overview of working in a prison, educating recruits about the complexities of their role and how they are perceived as an officer. Training takes place over a 12-week period and provides trainees with skills and knowledge required to support and manage prisoners during custody and towards rehabilitation and release. Teaching about the management of the prison population is firmly weighted towards the needs of the prisoner, as opposed to the needs of the workforce (Humblett 2020), and the focus of the training is on maintaining safe custody and prison security. There is some inclusion of training and education on managing prisoners with mental health challenges, including dementia, however within the training, there is nothing to inform, support or develop knowledge about working with an older prison population who are ageing, and little to inform trainees about the associated health and social care challenges that accompany this process.

Following this, contact was made with Unlocked Graduates, a graduate training scheme for prison officers established in 2016. The scheme was founded in response to managing high levels of reoffending; the aim of the scheme being the use of skills and attributes possessed by graduates to develop a network of prison officers who develop and implement rehabilitative cultures across the prison estate. The programme supports and trains graduates to become prison officers over a period of two years through initial training and 'on the job' learning, alongside academic study. Completion of the course enables graduates to remain in the prison service or to move out to jobs within the public or private sector. The ethos of Unlocked Graduates, to promote rehabilitation and develop deeper insight into managing the complexities of prison populations, aligned with the authors' interest to improve prison officer understanding of older prisoners, and to raise awareness of the older prisoner population.

Initial contact was with the programme leadership team to establish the content of the training programme; through discussion, it was quickly established that that there

was no reference to older prisoners within the curriculum. However, it was agreed that it would be valuable to include reference to this in the training programme. Both authors were invited to the 'Summer School' to deliver a short session to 60 trainees, the aim of which was to share information and knowledge to raise awareness about older prisoners, to highlight that they are a growing population, that they have specific needs, and that due to multiple factors, those needs are often not acknowledged, recognised, or met. Unlocked Graduates acknowledged the importance of the older prisoner agenda and asked the probation service to deliver another session on the same day, giving greater focus to the older prisoner agenda.

Developing the teaching materials required the authors to explore current provision not only that delivered by the Unlocked Graduates programme, but also to access materials delivered elsewhere. Exploring materials created by both AGE UK, Clinks and RECOOP, was useful for this developmental stage. Materials such as these were highlighted as extra resourcing for new recruits to access. These materials are very much geared towards supporting staff who are already working with older prisoners within the prison environment. However, the authors sought to develop materials that would inform prison staff about the challenges of working with older prisoners within the prison officer training programme. Focusing on the new prison officer recruits and asking them to think for themselves about what they had experienced to date and how they may improve or do things differently going forward. Challenging some of the pre-conceived ideas about older men in prison and exploring possible new responses to the issue or concerns raised. The developed materials for teaching were built on the authors experience of working with older prisoners over a 15-year period. This period of work resulted in an initiative to support older prisoners being developed with AGE UK and delivered into all prisons within a local geographical area.

Developed teaching materials and content was then sent to Unlocked Graduates training team for consideration. The authors had to work within constraints of slides designed by Unlocked Graduates. Unlocked Graduate trainers closely monitored content and delivery of the session, including the recommended reading and tasks for the session. At the end of the session the authors were able to hand out some evaluation forms asking the students to comment on both the delivery and content of the session. The authors were also mindful of the limitations of the content provided, and invited comments about any areas of this topic that trainees felt were not covered or explored in depth in the time available. It was noted to the trainees that their feedback would be used to support any future delivery.

The authors were aware of the challenges of delivering content covering a multi-faceted, complex issue within a two-hour session. There were limitations to the areas that the authors were able to include, so it was decided to focus on the largest group of older prisoners in the system; men over 50 years of age. Session delivery comprised of a combination of information sharing, discussion tasks, and case study examples, followed by an opportunity for 'questions and answers' before moving to feedback and evaluation.

3. Results

The session began with a general discussion of 'how old is old', asking trainees for their perspectives and thoughts on how the prison system might define and older prisoner. Setting this context supported the discourse within the literature about the threshold for defining someone as an 'older prisoner' and demonstrated how such disagreements leave a weak foundation on which to build and respond to the challenges created by imprisonment (Ridley 2022). Establishing the views of the participants was important in explaining the challenges of managing the unconsidered health and age-related challenges a growing, ageing population presents (Health and Social Care Committee 2018; Her

Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons and the Care Quality Commission 2018; Institute for Government 2019; Wilkinson and Caulfield 2020; Davies et al. 2023). It was important that trainees were made aware that whilst many older men in prison remain active and involved in the prison regime, others face several issues that are pertinent to their age and vulnerability (Ridley 2022). The literature exploring older people in prison acknowledges that prisoners' often chaotic and unhealthy lifestyles before custody combined with the experience of imprisonment can speed up elements of the ageing process, resulting in chronic health disorders and disabilities that are typical of those ten years older (House of Commons Justice Committee 2013; HM Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales 2016; Turner et al. 2018; Ridley 2019; Codd 2020; House of Commons Justice Committee 2020; Humblet 2021; Davies et al. 2023). Whilst there is recognition that many of the health needs typically associated with an ageing population can also be found in younger prisoners, rates of physical disability, mobility issues and chronic health conditions related to communicable and non-communicable disease are often higher (Fazel et al. 2001; HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2009; Bedard et al. 2016; Munday et al. 2017; HM Prison & Probation Service 2018; Ministry of Justice et al. 2018; Stürup-Toft et al. 2018; Wilkinson and Caulfield 2020). A final point on the health needs of older prisoners that the trainees were asked to consider was that, on average, older prisoners will each be experiencing at least three chronic conditions that affect or impair their functioning (Ahalt et al. 2013).

The results of the evaluation comments were studied, and some conclusions were drawn. The trainees were forthcoming and asked for more content focusing on lived experiences of older prisoners, and/or case study focused tasks. In addition, they commented on poor room set up (it was a standard tiered lecture theatre) and noted that this was detrimental to the group tasks presented. One trainee also asked for a prison officer with experience of working with older men in prison to be able to give some insight into the complexities of working with this group inside a prison. Another trainee noted their experience already of working with prison officers who offered very negative attitudes towards older prisoners and asked for suggestions of ways to respond.

Understanding both the rise in the older prisoner population and the reasons for this expansion in the population is important. Trainees were surprised at both the numbers in prisons and the potential explanations for this. Prison is an unrepresentative environment in terms of the age of people held in custody, with the majority (33%) of those held behind bars aged 30–39 years of age, a distinct shift in the demographic of prisoners from 20 years ago when prison populations were dominated by young adults (House of Commons Library 2024; Trotter and Baidawi 2015; Wilkinson and Caulfield 2020). Older people have historically been viewed as victims of crime, not perpetrators (Goetting 1983; Goetting 1984), and for those who were imprisoned, they were typically regarded as a 'forgotten minority' (Ham 1976). Today older people in prison are fast becoming the 'forgotten majority'. A hidden group, lost within the complexity of our prison system and the rigidity of prison regimes.

4. Discussion

Throughout the two hours the trainees were encouraged to think about the makeup of the older prisoner population and consider that fact that older men in prison are not a homogenous group. The study of older prisoners over the decades has identified four broad groups of older offenders. Recidivists with recurring experiences of custody, those sentenced at an early age to a long sentence, those sentenced in later life for a short sentence, and those sentenced for the first time in later life for a long sentence co-exist within the system. All have different needs and face different challenges; however, all will continue to age and grow older whilst within the prison system, subsequently developing into a

'greying population' (Howse 2003; Kakoullis et al. 2010; Jang and Canada 2014; Heidari et al. 2017). These needs, combined with the health needs outlined above add another level of complexity and challenge to the management of an older population within prisons.

In considering the wider challenges that impact on the lived experience of older men in prison, the session considered three other areas alongside the highlighted health and social care needs. At the point of attending Summer School, the trainees had been working in their placement areas for approximately one week and were invited to reflect on their own experiences of the prison environments they had worked in, to understand how the prison building itself may impact the custodial experience of prison populations. Currently there are 32 prisons in England and Wales with Victorian-era architecture and accommodation, housing approximately a quarter of the custodial population (Moran et al. 2022); through the discourse about working environments, it was apparent that despite building adaptations and additions to older estates, there are difficulties in housing and accommodation provision that trainees working within newer built prisons were not aware of. Thinking about the differences within their respective workplaces, trainees in the older prison estate noted that the physical environment was often a barrier to ensuring that men felt safe and supported. Whereas there were elements of the physical environment offered by newer estates which trainees felt could be deemed as supportive to older men living in prison. For example, an absence of lift access to upper floors, a lack of age adapted shower facilities, narrow cell doors and corridors, lack of adequate support, appropriate furniture, combined with a lack of access to aids and adaptations used to support mobility and self-care, can result in men being unsteady when mobilising. These are all challenges to both the confidence and comfort of an older person in any situation, but within the confines of the prison, these challenges can feel impossible to overcome, leading to further health deterioration. Discussion widened to incorporate consideration of prisoners who may be living with and experiencing sensory impairments, and trainees started to offer examples observations of prisoners they had been working with. Trainees acknowledged that the impact of both noise levels and lighting within the prison environment was an issue they had not previously considered in the context of how the older prisoner experiences being in prison; noise levels can have an adverse effect on those with a hearing impairment which can lead to difficulties with hearing verbal instruction, and poor lighting can be an issue for those with poor sight (Munday et al. 2017; Wangmo et al. 2017). Cognitive decline may bring its own significant repercussions and challenges, and again referring back to the OHSCAP project (Forsyth et al. 2017), this aspect of ageing is one that requires prison staff to understand the ageing process in the context of living within a prison setting, to be able to recognise it, and to understand how a prisoner needs to be supported. In addition to recognising that a prisoner needs support, prison staff also need to know the processes for securing support for that prisoner.

It was evident from the session that the trainee prison officers had not considered that there would be so many older men in our prisons today. Some had briefly witnessed older men within their placement prisons but had not considered the implications of working in an environment where they would face—on a daily basis—dealing with the complexities generated by the incarceration of this older age group. It was evident from the concluding discussions and feedback, that this had come as a surprise to all the trainees. Comments such as "The session made me realise how prisons are built for young men, and that I will need to be aware of the needs of the older prison population" and "Understanding older prisoner issues makes me feel like I can do a better job on the landings", indicated the lack of awareness prior to the event. In addition, the overall response from the trainees to the question 'What surprised you the most' was unanimous in that they were all surprised by the numbers of older men, the lack of strategy and the potential for the lack of care in

so many prisons. Evidence of the value of the session to the trainees was apparent with a sizable number commenting that this session had prepared them for the possibility of working in prisons where there would be a significant population of ageing men. One trainee commented that they would be “. . . more mindful of certain age groups and to look out for them when I go back to my establishment”. Another trainee commented that they would think about their responses to requests from older prisoners and think about what that person may need which could be vastly different to responses to younger prisoners. One inspiring quote from a trainee who said, “There is a long way to go to make a change and even though it will not be at a national level, we can make a change whether locally or even on an individual level for a particular prisoner”.

The authors take aways from the session and the subsequent feedback provided was that there needs to be much more awareness raising and actual training for new prison officers, focusing on the complex issue of managing and supporting older men within our prisons. This is necessary for both staff and the prisoners. It was also evident that more time was needed in order to fully cover the materials that the authors had developed. Not providing staff with adequate training is akin to leaving this group of men to remain invisible, and potentially neglected within the walls of our prison system. Avoiding what could be termed as ‘institutional thoughtlessness’ (Crawley 2004) is paramount when considering how we equip new prison officers to care for our ageing prison population. A terminology used often when explaining the way staff act in caring professions that have at their focus the care of the elderly.

The authors have provided their rationale for focusing on older men in prison. The focus on this wider demographic is justifiable given the numbers in prison today. However, it is important to stress that older men in prison are not a homogenous group and that many facets of wider society are represented within the prison environment. Using the learning, feedback, and evaluation from the Unlocked Graduates training session will enable the authors to adapt and expand the session content to encompass genders and ethnicities, recognising the diversity of the growing older prisoner population.

5. Conclusions

Trainee prison officers should have adequate training that addresses the realities of working with a growing population of ageing prisoners. Not only is the population increasing, but as the men age within prison, the problems presented also increase. Dealing with an ailing prisoner, and the increasing number of deaths of older men in prison requires significant input from training and support. Currently this does not exist. The older prisoner agenda requires immediate response from Government who now must deliver the older prisoner strategy. The latest report from the [Prison Reform Trust \(2024\)](#) indicates that many older men in prison suffer additional burdens due to their age and length of sentences, with many describing this as exacerbating the already numerous deprivations of imprisonment. In addition, the report talks of men feeling helpless, without autonomy and feeling lost in a system designed for younger men. The recommendations from this report are succinct and are welcomed here.

The MoJ and the Department of Health and Social Care should establish a ‘living inside’ network of older people with lived experience to inform and help drive change including—but not restricted to—the implementation of the national strategy and the expansion of age-appropriate purposeful activities. In commissioning new prison spaces and infrastructure, the needs and future needs of the prison population needs greater attention, and commissioning should involve co-design processes with older people with lived experience of prison, including those with a range of health—including chronic health—needs ([Prison Reform Trust 2024](#), p. 47).

If Unlocked Graduates, or any other organisation, aspires to provide adequate training to new prison officers regarding the dilemmas of managing complex health and social problems created by the incarceration of older men, then both time and consideration must be afforded to this process. Ideally, a full module would be offered that considered the older prisoner's journey and identified key timings for interventions and support and indicated where and when staff could assist, and/or seek further guidance. This should be delivered throughout the first year of the trainee programme. Prisons should be able to access training and be resourced to do so, enabling staff who do not come through graduate programmes to receive adequate training to support them working with older populations.

Moreover, the Prison Reform Trust recommends the development of a 'living inside' pathway available to all those serving long sentences. The 'living inside' pathway also recommends the involvement of older people in developing roles where we see older prisoners supporting others. The use of peer support within prisons is vital for the success of wings housing older prisoners. There are already examples where this activity is both effectively encouraged and supported ([HM Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales 2016](#)). Whilst welcoming the above recommendations, it is vital to consider both the training and involvement of prison staff in new policy implementation. It is critical that development for older prisoners includes resolute and interested staff, who share a desire to see positive change for this age group. Furthermore, at a time of new government and an overcrowded prison estate, the stage is set for a re-think and ask the question do we need to send every older person convicted to the secure prison estate. Bold policy makers must work with those involved in the care and support of older prisoners, consider the facts unearthed in the [Nuffield Trust \(2023\)](#) Report and embrace the recommendations of the [Prison Reform Trust \(2024\)](#). Referring to an earlier question raised within this work, policy makers must be more confident in asking the question 'do we need to send every convicted older person to the secure estate?' More appropriate placements for older, vulnerable prisoners should be considered, where care can be the focus of the institution, encouraging both compassion and understanding for men who in many cases will live out their last days within the confines of those walls.

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