UNISON Scotland

UNISON Scotland Response to the Inquiry by the Scottish Parliament’s Health and Sport Committee Healthcare in Prisons Inquiry.

UNISON is the largest union amongst Healthcare workers in Scotland. We have members working in a variety of roles working as part of the Healthcare team in Scotland’s prisons. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the Committee’s work.

What do you consider are the current pressures on health and social care provision in prisons?

We believe that the most pressing issue is staffing. This is both in absolute terms and a lack of staff in a variety of specialities. In this regard the most commonly mentioned requirement mentioned by UNISON members working delivering Health services in our prisons are more mental health staff and staff working on drug and alcohol issues. Alongside this staff report a lack of clinics and GPs is preventing the level of service being delivered that they would wish to see

There is a perceived need for more resources for primary mental health interventions. This would allow for a change of focus away from pharmacological interventions and more scope for other interventions (psychological / occupational)

How well do you consider that these pressures have been responded to?

Staff feel that whilst there have been some positive changes since responsibility was transferred away from the SPS there are also a considerable number of issues. Staffing has already been mentioned, alongside this is a belief that senior management have paid little attention to developing services or possess a longer term strategy.

A perception exists that the SPS has little interest in dealing with issues raised by NHS staff.

To what extent do you believe that health inequalities are/ could be addressed in the prison healthcare system?

We believe that with appropriate focus and drive inequalities many inequalities could be addressed. There are currently within prisons systems which do deliver well developed, high quality nurse led clinics in a variety of specialisms. – recognised as good practice which could be shared.

A significant impact on health inequalities is possible but will require both strategic development and investment – our members point to, mental health and drug addiction services in particular.
There is much support for the vision outlined in the Unlocking potential – transforming lives service review. This could be the basis for an approach which could deliver serious improvements in tackling inequalities the view however is that there has been insufficient effort put into delivering this strategy on the ground.

A greater emphasis on early intervention would also be helpful. Staff feel that they would manage more if they had the opportunity to tackle problems at an earlier stage.

What are the current barriers to using the prison healthcare system/ improve the health outcomes of the prison population?

Sufficient and appropriate staffing is clearly felt to be an issue with a need to recruit more GPs and for greater training of clinicians to work in a custodial environment.

Communication between GP practices and prison healthcare could be better with staff reporting that although this is improving the idea that they are working in partnership is still some way off.

There is felt to be too much emphasis on medication to manage problems and too much ‘siloed working’. This means the complexity of the comorbidity and the challenges these present is not addressed.

**Can you identify potential improvements to current services?**

Staff recommend a number of areas of potential improvement. These include expanded psychology services to provide counselling for PTSD and sexual abuse, long term condition clinics, greater use of Allied Health Professionals such as Occupational Therapists. More modern prescribing arrangements using prescribing nurse practitioners to run alongside the current GPs to fill the gaps.

These will allow for a more bespoke package of care and a more focussed assessment of the complex issues supporting and hindering effective community integration.

Improvements to the IT system are looked for.

**What do you think the main pressures will be in the next 15 years?**

Perceived challenges relate mainly to concerns about funding and how this will impact on staffing. Fears about capacity to recruit – both in general and specifically GP’s, figure highly in concerns. The lack of a career development path for staff is highlighted as an issue in future staff recruitment/ retention.

New trends in addictions and an aging prison population are expected to put further demands on staff