

Unlocked | 10 years

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

900

Nearly 900
ambitious graduates
recruited.

38

Placed in 38 different
prisons across
England and Wales.

150k

Over 150,000
prisoners reached
since 2017.

18%

Retention for participants on the Unlocked programme
is **18 percentage points higher** than those joining the same
prisons via the standard entry route after two years.

£59

Analysis from independent experts provides indicative
evidence that **for every £1 spent on Unlocked Graduates,**
at least £59 is saved for society over a five-year period.

95%

of our most recent cohort rated the **training delivered**
by Unlocked as **excellent or good**.



By far the most sophisticated
example of innovation we came
across was the Unlocked Graduates
scheme.

Prison Reform Trust, Potential Unlocked 2024

A DECADE

UNLOCKED

10 YEARS OF SHIFTING THE SYSTEM

**NATASHA****PORTER OBE****CEO & FOUNDER**

When Unlocked Graduates was founded 10 years ago, we were told that what we were trying to achieve was impossible. Top graduates would never want to be prison officers. Even if they did, they wouldn't survive a week, and definitely wouldn't stay for two or more years. Real change simply wasn't possible in prison. It had all been tried, and it had all failed. We really shouldn't bother. Despite this almost universal belief that Unlocked would come to nothing, over the past decade we have delivered one of the most significant criminal justice reform projects in a generation. This is the story of how we did it – and how the system can build on this success.

Our starting point was a simple but hard-headed one: we needed to build a movement for change if we were to have any hope of shifting our prisons. A groundswell of leaders on the frontline who shared a common belief that our system should change lives for the better, and who refused to accept that the status quo was inevitable. But how do you do that against the backdrop of stubbornly high reoffending rates, a crumbling and overstretched estate, and no new money?

Our answer was, and remains, the prison officer. Prisons cannot outperform the quality of their frontline staff. They are the single most important lever for change in prisons. No one has more impact on more prisoners – and the greater a prisoner's needs, the greater that impact. But there was a huge disconnect between the way officers were hired, trained and supported, and the reality of the role. Closing that gap is the highest leverage change we can make in our prisons.

To shift the system, we need the best public sector leaders to be working on the landings, leading reform from the frontline and improving outcomes. And we need more people in leadership roles across society who have spent time working on the frontline of our prisons. Because being a prison officer is an extraordinary leadership role – and it needs to be perceived, and supported, as one.

“ Our work has shown that outcomes in prison significantly improve when you recruit according to values, train and support staff well, and trust them to make decisions on the landings.

Since 2016, we have led this change. Our programme has transformed perceptions of the prison officer role, pioneering new approaches to recruiting, training and retaining leaders on the frontline – competing with banks, law firms and other public sector schemes for some of this country's top talent. Alongside this, we have helped professionalise the prison officer role, changing the way we think about staff support and development.

We have placed nearly 900 ambitious graduates in 38 different prisons across England and Wales, who have reached over 150,000 prisoners, helping to break cycles of reoffending.

Our work has shown that outcomes in prison significantly improve when you recruit according to values, train and support staff well, and trust them to make decisions on the landings.

And throughout, we have tried to share everything we have learnt – ten years of testing, iterating and refining – codified into a practical, evidenced model for developing outstanding leaders at every level of a prison. It works. It should be rolled out.

Although this is Unlocked's final chapter, it is just the beginning for reform in our prisons – reform being led by the hundreds of inspirational leaders who have been through the Unlocked programme and are now part of our Ambassador Network. This document is not simply a celebration of the impact we have had. It is a blueprint, and a call to action. We are sharing what we have learnt so that more staff – and ultimately more prisoners – can benefit.

We would not be in this position without the fantastic support we have received from colleagues in HMPPS, our partner organisations, and our funders, who have all made this transformative project possible. We are also incredibly grateful to those with lived experience of prison who have continually shared their insights with us and helped shape and deliver our training. Our achievements over the past decade are testament to our supporters' belief in our mission, at a time when few believed it could be done.

Most importantly, Unlocked Graduates would not have existed without those working on the frontline of prisons – our participants and Ambassadors, our mentors, our trainers, governors, and others. Thank you for all you do. We hope the insights contained here will allow you to continue to do incredible work, supporting the prisoners in your care.

N. Porter

A woman with dark skin, glasses, and large hoop earrings is sitting in a black leather armchair. She is wearing a grey long-sleeved top under a black cardigan. Her hands are clasped in her lap. In the foreground, there are several glass bottles and a microphone. The background is a blurred interior space with large windows.

“ Initially I was a bit sceptical of Unlocked. I wasn’t convinced the approach would work, but I have 100 percent changed my view now. I am a complete convert.

They bring a freshness to the prison service. They have a completely different mindset in terms of what they can do to change a prisoner’s experience and cut the chances of them reoffending.

Jenny Louis, Former Governing Governor, HMP Belmarsh
and London Prison Group Director

DAME SALLY COATES

CHAIR & FOUNDING TRUSTEE



In 2015, the government of the day asked me to lead a review into education in prisons to investigate how we could improve prisoner outcomes and reduce reoffending. During the Review, we spent a huge amount of time in prisons, and it quickly became clear that real progress starts with frontline prison officers, the key agents of change in the system. We therefore recommended establishing a prestigious graduate scheme in prisons, modelled on the success of programmes like Teach First, to attract the leaders of tomorrow to the frontline to drive system reform and transform outcomes.

“**Unlocked has built a movement of exceptional leaders that will shape the criminal justice sector for years to come, and ultimately change lives.**”

A decade later, Unlocked Graduates is a beacon of light in a system that still faces many challenges. This innovative, fast-moving charity has attracted, trained and developed nearly 900 new prison officers on a pioneering leadership development programme, many of whom would never have otherwise considered a career in the prison service. These incredible leaders embody the Unlocked mission well beyond their time on the programme, determined to transform outcomes for those in prison and help break cycles of reoffending.

This celebration of a decade of Unlocked Graduates is an opportunity to reflect on a truly remarkable public sector reform initiative. We hope this document serves as a reminder of the progress we have made over the past 10 years, and as an inspiration for the change ahead. Unlocked has built a movement of exceptional leaders that will shape the criminal justice sector for years to come, and ultimately change lives.

S. A Coates

THE CHALLENGE

“**Unlocked reminds me that change is possible, and that excellent work is happening all across the prison service. It is easy to end up with blinkers on working in a prison. Unlocked lets me step back and see what a better prison service can look like.**

Keir, Unlocked Ambassador

Unlocked Graduates exists to **develop outstanding leaders to break cycles of reoffending** in prison and throughout society. Currently, prisons are not able to do this, and **around 80% of offending is reoffending**. This has a significant human and social impact. And it's expensive, costing the taxpayer over £23bn every year. But, to a large extent, it's preventable.

Supporting those doing the most challenging role

Our prisons hold some of society's most challenging and vulnerable people:

1/4

Around 1 in 4 spent time in care while growing up.

50%

Almost 50% have no qualifications.

50%

Around 50% of prisoners have an identified drug problem.

Prison officers are uniquely placed to drive change in prisons, able to reach all prisoners – even those who refuse to engage with the rest of the system. In prisons we see the failure of every other public service, and it is prison officers who are left to turn this around. They do this in incredibly challenging environments, with significant overcrowding and understaffing in prisons, and extremely high levels of violence, self-harm and drug use.

Yet most new officers receive just seven weeks of foundation training, and little – if any – ongoing professional development. This disconnect between how officers are hired, trained and supported and the reality of the role adds huge risk into the prison service.

Prison officers are doing one of the most challenging public sector leadership roles. They need – and deserve – the highest quality support. For the past decade, we have sought to lead this change.

THE UNLOCKED SOLUTION

Our vision is a prison system where every prisoner receives the support that they need to flourish and desist from crime.

“ Unlocked has had a significant impact on prison culture.

Unlocked participants are influencing prisoners and staff to work with greater professional boundaries, more open communication and towards a rehabilitative environment.

Unlocked Ambassador

Finding the best public sector leaders

At Unlocked, we believe prison officers are the agents of change in prisons. We need the best public sector leaders working on the landings, driving system change from the frontline while transforming outcomes for those in their care. 10 years ago, we set out to build a movement for change that could lead these efforts in prisons across the country and throughout society, with the ultimate aim of breaking cycles of reoffending.

Initially, that meant **CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRISON OFFICER ROLE** so the next generation of top talent saw it as a career where they could develop as future leaders while making a real difference. It meant **FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE WHO HAD A SENSE OF POSSIBILITY**, who believed that the system – and the people within it – could change.

Then it meant **TRAINING THEM EFFECTIVELY**, so they were able to build transformative relationships with some of the most challenging and vulnerable people in society. Once they started, it meant providing **ONGOING SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT** so they could keep improving, thereby increasing retention of outstanding officers.

Finally, it meant accelerating the impact that they were able to have by developing the **NEXT GENERATION OF OUTSTANDING MIDDLE LEADERS** in the prison service. These custodial managers are uniquely placed to drive rehabilitative change across entire wings and support the band 3 officers they line manage to make a real difference, yet too often they don't get the training and support they need.

The principle underpinning all of this: **BUILD LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY** then trust it, shifting culture to devolve real power to the frontline. Not leadership as a nebulous, abstract concept, but as a defined, domain-specific discipline, based on evidence and ultimately for the benefit of prisoners. We have codified what good looks like, ready to be rolled out across the system by a movement of people who believe change is possible.

This document sets out our approach to **radically rethinking the recruitment, training and development of frontline prison staff**, ensuring they have the support and resources they need to do their jobs excellently and transform outcomes.

A NEW COHORT OF PRISON LEADERS

In 2016, Unlocked Graduates set out to change the perception of prison officers. We were determined that those carrying out this vital frontline role be seen as the 'brain surgeons of the public service', working with some of the most challenging and vulnerable people in some of the toughest environments.

Our future leaders

Since 2017, we have recruited and trained nearly 900 outstanding prison officers and placed them in 38 prisons across England and Wales. Many would never have considered a career in the prison service before hearing about Unlocked Graduates. Our officers bring a wide range of experiences to the role, and that breadth helps them find innovative solutions to some of the most entrenched problems on the landings.

Some minority ethnic groups remain significantly over-represented in the prisoner population, and there can be deep mistrust of those in authority within the justice system. Our programme recruits the best and brightest future prison leaders, and we have deliberately sought out a racially diverse cohort as one way of tackling this, a commitment we have kept throughout the past decade.

The Unlocked generation

73% of those on the Unlocked programme attended Russell Group, Ivy League, and other top universities, including a significant number from Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard.

35 different subjects at university were studied by participants in our most recent cohort before joining the Unlocked programme.

30% of our participants are career changers, bringing experiences and insights from other sectors, including accountancy, law, finance, teaching and social care.

71% of our participants across our cohorts identify as female, compared to around 30% of band 3-5 prison officers across HMPPS.

18% of our participants across our cohorts identify as BAME, compared to around 16% of staff across HMPPS.

10% of all Unlocked participants attended international universities, making Unlocked a destination for top graduates worldwide.

THE ROLE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

The importance of lived experience insights

We believe that hearing directly from people who have been in prison is vital for recruiting and training effective prison officers. A remarkable officer can radically alter the outcomes for a prisoner in their care, and learning from former prisoners shows our participants from the very start that people can break cycles of offending and go on to build law-abiding, fulfilling lives.

“ Giving prison officers that living proof that rehabilitation is possible is always going to give them that hope and drive to do the job in prison and understand that they can help a prisoner.

Godfrey, Unlocked Lived Experience Trainer

Too often, the perspectives of those with lived experience are ignored. On the Unlocked programme, former prisoners play a vital role in recruiting and training the next generation of prison leaders. They humanise parts of the training that risk becoming procedural, reminding new officers that the job is fundamentally relational. They also keep our charitable purpose at the heart of the programme throughout: supporting prisoners to break the cycle of reoffending.

Our approach

Insights from our lived experience experts have helped shape our programme over the past decade, and our fantastic team of trainers play a key role throughout our participants' journey with Unlocked.

This starts during the selection process, where applicants are interviewed by former prisoners at their assessment centres. This supports our efforts to ensure that we are bringing the right people into the prison service: frontline leaders with a sense of possibility who will be able to build transformative relationships with those in their care.

“ You can always spot an Unlocked Graduate, they are optimistic, professionally curious and adept, full of enthusiasm for the role and dedicated to ensuring our prison system is purposeful, effective and rehabilitative.

Paula Harriott, CEO of Unlock and Lived Experience Leader

During their initial training at Summer Institute, lived experience trainers then support the delivery of training and share their insights to help develop the next generation of outstanding officers. They also provide discussion spaces away from these structured sessions for more informal conversations where our participants can better understand the perspective of those in prison.

MAINSTREAMING OUR MODEL

Solutions that work

Over the past decade, we have built some of the world's richest datasets on the experiences of early career prison officers and what works to enable them to have the greatest possible impact on those in their care. This evidence base has allowed us to continually innovate and refine our approach to recruiting, training and developing frontline leaders to ensure our programme is as effective as possible.

We know it's having an impact, and we want more prison officers – and ultimately more prisoners – to benefit from it. That's why we remain committed to sharing our insights and solutions in order to mainstream our approach.

A suite of resources for outstanding leaders

Our learnings are already informing wider change across the sector, including as part of HMPPS's Enable Programme for staff development. But we know that long-lasting, whole-system reform only happens when outstanding leaders have access to the resources they need to implement solutions that they know work.

Our programme has created a generation of incredible frontline leaders – more than 650 of whom are now part of the Unlocked Ambassador Network, carrying our mission forwards. And we are creating the resources that they – and others across the system – need to replicate our model.

In 2025, we published **Leading Prison Landings: The Unlocked Guide to Jailcraft**, a training manual which codifies our unique approach, sharing our model for mastering effective relational practice with anyone for the first time. In 2026, we launched the accompanying Pocket Guide, adapting the full training manual for everyday use giving prison officers and their mentors and coaches the tools they need to continually improve.

“ An important and vital piece of work. Clear standards and expectations are revolutionary for a prison system trapped in crisis. Unlocked shows how professionalism can be matched with compassion, security and progress.

Rory Stewart OBE, Former Minister of State for Prisons,
on **Leading Prison Landings: The Unlocked Guide to Jailcraft**

A decade Unlocked

And now, as we celebrate 10 years of Unlocked Graduates, this document shares our approach to transforming leadership in prisons and the theory behind it. The pages that follow outline the key elements of our model and the data demonstrating its impact. Our hope is that this serves as a blueprint for applying our learnings across the system, ultimately improving outcomes for prisoners across this country and beyond. To find out more, visit unlockedgrads.org.uk

OUR MODEL FOR CHANGE

**LEADING
CHANGE
ON THE
INSIDE**

unlockedgrads.org.uk

RETHINKING RECRUITMENT

“ [Unlocked] brings in people who would not have otherwise considered a career as a prison officer. Everyone is positive, they bring a fresh perspective to the problems in prisons and have a real genuine interest and curiosity in learning more and making prisons better.

Amy Frost, Governing Governor, HMP Wormwood Scrubs

90%

of participants had not considered a career in the prison service before hearing about Unlocked Graduates.

THE CHALLENGE

A prison cannot outperform the quality of its frontline staff. To transform outcomes for people in prison, we need the best public sector leaders working on the landings, and being a prison officer must be a prestigious role that top talent in this country aspires to. But for too long, this has not been the case.

THE UNLOCKED SOLUTION

The Unlocked Graduates programme has continuously challenged public perceptions of the prison officer role over the past decade, attracting a new generation of transformational leaders to the landings. We have put the role on the map as a career where ambitious graduates can gain outstanding leadership skills while making a real difference to people's lives.



In 2019, the Unlocked programme entered the prestigious **Times Top 100** list of graduate employers, marking the first time the prison service had ever featured and reaching a high of **22nd** in 2023.

WHAT DO WE LOOK FOR IN FUTURE PRISON LEADERS?

Sense of possibility

to believe in the capacity of people and systems to change

Leadership

to influence culture change

Decision-making

to act decisively and prioritise

Relationship building

to work with all those in their care

Resilience

when working in difficult environments

Self-awareness

reflective practice to continually improve

Motivation

shared mission to help reduce reoffending

Challenge seekers

To attract the leaders of tomorrow, we look for “challenge seekers” with a sense of possibility about the capacity for people and systems to change. We focus on the opportunity and demonstrate how they can drive efforts to solve one of society’s most complex problems while developing incredible leadership skills, ultimately helping to break cycles of reoffending.

Unlocked’s attraction campaigns project the prestige that we believe should be associated with a career on the frontline of prisons, with a strong and easily recognisable brand, and a powerful and important mission these future leaders would work towards. A clear and engaging application and onboarding process reflects the high status of the role and the level of support that they would receive once on the programme.

A new generation of leaders

The Unlocked programme has created a generation of leaders who believe that rehabilitation is possible. We have challenged, trained and placed nearly 900 ambitious graduates as prison officers, who have reached over 150,000 prisoners. They are some of the most impressive public sector leaders in the country. They bring a range of experiences and a diversity of approaches to problem solving and frontline innovation to help catalyse change in our prisons.

Diversity in recruitment

It is vital that the prison workforce is representative of the people it works with. Since we were founded, we have been determined to recruit a diverse cohort of transformative prison officers from a range of different backgrounds, and the Unlocked programme was recognised by the Lammy Review in 2017 for our work to create a diverse workforce in prisons. Find out more about our approach on Page 16.

TRANSFORMING TRAINING

“ [Unlocked] supports effective learning, creates role models for other staff, and gives me people who have a thirst to learn.

Esther Dainton, Governing Governor, HMP Send

100% of governors at our partner prisons rated the quality of Unlocked's training as good or excellent.

THE CHALLENGE

Staff in prisons are asked to reach some of the most challenging and vulnerable people in society. Yet once new prison officers start on the landings, most receive little further training or development. Too many are left without the tools, ongoing support and training they need to build transformative relationships with those in their care.

THE UNLOCKED SOLUTION

We have radically rethought the way that we develop outstanding frontline leaders. Our programme provides two years of postgraduate-level ongoing training, placing a greater emphasis on supporting officers to build strong relationships with prisoners – alongside the core procedural elements of the role – and promoting continued learning and development.

Unlocked's unique model

We are led by the evidence, and our approach draws on learnings from other sectors and best practice from around the world. Our model supports new prison officers to master both procedural and relational practice to create safer and more rehabilitative prison environments. Alongside the theory, our training focuses on practical learning, using carefully designed practice to build new skills with constructive feedback from both trainers and peers to promote reflection and continued improvement.

95%

of our 2024 cohort rated the quality of training provided by Unlocked as good or excellent.

Our programme starts with **Summer Institute (SI)**, an intensive five-week training residential, ensuring participants are day-one-ready for the landings. Throughout Summer Institute, we use scenario-based training to ensure that new officers are prepared for what they may face on the landings and can apply the skills they have developed to real situations. Classrooms have pop-up cells to support learning, while lived experience trainers share their insights and perspectives in sessions.

“ I believe that Unlocked supports individuals to be innovative in an environment that is continuously resistant to change.

Unlocked Ambassador

A two-year programme

However, we know that so much learning happens after new officers start in their prisons. Therefore, training on our programme continues over two years, ensuring our participants are able to develop while they are in the role and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Our team of Mentoring Prison Officers also deliver high-quality coaching and support alongside ongoing training throughout participants' time on the programme.

95%

of participants on the Unlocked programme agreed that they have the knowledge, skills and abilities they need to perform their job effectively.



Leading Prison Landings: The Unlocked Guide to Jailcraft

Learnings from the Unlocked programme are already influencing wider change across the system, with our insights being applied to new approaches to staff development on HMPPS's Enable Programme. To ensure that more prison officers – and ultimately more prisoners – can benefit from our approach, we published

a training manual in 2025, codifying and sharing our training model for the first time.

Leading Prison Landings: The Unlocked Guide to Jailcraft establishes 24 key techniques for transformative prison practice. It gives prison officers the tools to build powerful relationships with those in their care and allows them to take their development into their own hands.

COACHING LEADERS ON THE LANDINGS

“**Unlocked Graduates has been a transformative experience. On the programme, I have been encouraged to reflect on my practice and challenged to think critically about my role as a prison officer. [It has] broadened my perspective, and equipped me with the skills to make a meaningful difference on the frontline.**

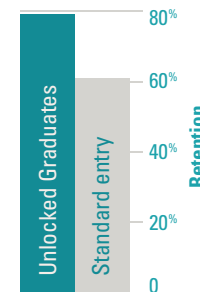
Danny, Unlocked Ambassador

THE CHALLENGE

Prison officers are doing one of the most complex jobs, working in some of the toughest environments. Too often, a lack of support and professional development restricts the impact they are able to have. With limited development opportunities, many outstanding officers leave the service early.

THE UNLOCKED SOLUTION

We developed a bespoke mentoring model to give our participants tailored support and coaching from experienced prison officers throughout their time on the Unlocked programme. Our team of **Mentoring Prison Officers (MPOs)** are entirely focused on supporting and developing their mentees, ensuring they have the tools they need to continue having the greatest impact possible.



Our model is working

Data published by the Ministry of Justice in 2026 showed that retention for prison officers on the Unlocked programme after two years is 18 percentage points higher than those in the same prisons who joined via standard entry. Our model is ensuring more outstanding officers are able to remain operational for longer and continue having a real impact on those in their care.

Mentoring Prison Officers

Our team of mentors are experienced prison officers who exemplify excellence in the role. During their time with Unlocked, they receive bespoke support from our team – alongside an accredited coaching qualification – to ensure they are effective mentors for the participants on our programme.

The model

Through-year training. Throughout our two-year programme, MPOs deliver ongoing training on both relational and procedural practice, so their mentees keep developing their expertise and learn from their experiences on the landings.

Coaching. MPOs observe participants on the landings and meet them one-to-one every other week, offering positive and constructive feedback so they keep improving. Instructional coaching has always been at the heart of this work, and since 2025 it has been underpinned by our bespoke model, built around the 24 techniques for transformative prison practice set out in our training manual, **Leading Prison Landings: The Unlocked Guide to Jailcraft** (see page 31). MPOs balance support with challenge, consistently pushing participants to stretch themselves and raise their ambitions for what they can achieve.

Supervision. In the weeks between these one-to-one sessions, MPOs bring participants together for group supervision, where frontline staff can work through challenges collectively and share solutions to familiar issues. This provides a safe space to problem-solve and share knowledge.

Leadership development. Our mentors identify development opportunities for their mentees, arranging visits to other prisons to learn from colleagues and best practice, encouraging them to implement new ideas, and challenging them to take on additional responsibilities and pursue promotion.

96%

of our most recent cohort rated the quality of support from their MPO as excellent or good.

We know this model works. Now, it is inspiring our approach on the Unlocked ChangeMakers programme as we aim to transform the quality of middle leadership in prisons and make this level of support available to more officers. This programme is giving custodial managers the tools they need to provide the right support to the band 3 officers they line manage, accelerating their impact.

Promoting a culture of knowledge sharing

To support frontline leaders, we are determined to foster a culture of knowledge sharing in prisons, where solutions developed in one part of the system can be applied elsewhere. As a result, we offer participants a range of different development opportunities to learn from others and share their insights. This includes study visits to high-performing prisons to learn from best practice, work placements to share their experiences on the landings with other organisations, and our unique Annual Conference designed for – and focused on – frontline staff.

Alongside our own internationally recognised research into the experiences of early-career prison officers, we have also continued to promote research carried out by those on the frontline. During their time on the Unlocked programme, our participants complete research projects as part of a master's degree in Applied Custodial Leadership. Hundreds of these research papers have now been completed by prison officers working on the landings.

MIDDLE LEADERS EMPOWERING FRONTLINE IMPACT

“ I have noticed a significant improvement in my line manager’s effectiveness since joining the ChangeMakers programme [...] He has been giving us more responsibility and opportunities to take ownership, while supporting and encouraging us along the way.

Direct report of an Unlocked ChangeMakers participant

THE CHALLENGE

Prison officers are the agents of change in prisons. They are able to lead system change from the frontline while building transformative relationships with those in their care and helping to break cycles of reoffending. Yet we continue to see one primary limitation to the impact that many band 3 officers are able to have: a lack of high-quality, day-to-day management.

THE UNLOCKED SOLUTION

Our Mentoring Prison Officer model has shown us the impact of effective coaching and leadership for the prison officers on our programme, supporting them to make a real difference on the landings and significantly improving retention. We are determined to make this level of support available to all officers across the system by creating a generation of transformational middle leaders.

Why custodial managers?

Custodial managers occupy a unique role, simultaneously translating the strategy of the senior leadership team to the landings while often line managing up to 30 band 3 officers. A good middle leader has the potential to accelerate the impact prison officers can have and drive culture change on their wings.

Unlocked ChangeMakers

An excellent custodial manager (CM) can radically improve outcomes for an entire wing, driving rehabilitative change while helping to shape the prison service's future leaders. Despite this, most CMs receive very limited training. The Unlocked ChangeMakers programme is changing this.

100% of direct reports reported an improvement in their line managers' effectiveness since they joined the ChangeMakers programme in 2026, particularly in the areas of team management and driving culture change.

Building on the success of our graduate programme, we created a bespoke middle leadership scheme focused on giving CMs the tools to lead teams and people and drive culture change. ChangeMakers is building a network of transformational, mission-aligned CMs across the service, supporting them to be inspirational leaders and enable the prison officers they manage to have the greatest possible impact.

Led by the evidence

We know that band 3 prison officers are the agents of change in prisons, and our approach is rooted in evidence that shows how important custodial managers are to enable these officers to have the greatest possible impact. Independent research using Unlocked data found that effective line management is the single best protective factor against prison officer attrition and has a direct impact on prison officers' engagement and performance:

“ Participants who feel their line manager treats them fairly and respectfully are more confident taking action to go above and beyond to improve the organization.

J. A. Yesberg, L. Fenn & E. Sargeant

100% of our second ChangeMakers cohort say they have improved as a leader since joining the programme and that ChangeMakers has increased their motivation to make positive change in the prison service.

The programme applies tried-and-tested approaches to developing exceptional leaders, combining evidence-based theory with practical learning and reflection. Crucially, the training is domain-specific: rather than generic management content, it is designed around the realities of leading in a prison, from managing teams on the wings to driving rehabilitative culture. With residential training, access to external expertise, structured group supervisions and study visits to high-performing prisons, Unlocked ChangeMakers gives this vital group of middle leaders the space and resources they need to focus on their own development, often for the first time.

Challenge Goals

Turning theory into real-life application, participants on the ChangeMakers programme each take on a Challenge Goal. They identify a specific issue in their prison, then lead their teams to develop and implement a solution. Supported by mentoring from experienced prison leaders, as well as the Unlocked team and their peers in group supervisions, CMs use Challenge Goals to practise the leadership skills the programme builds: setting direction, bringing their staff with them, and driving change that lasts beyond their time on the programme.

“ The projects they have undertaken as part of the programme have [...] delivered some excellent performance improvements as a result.

Governing Governor, ChangeMakers partner prison

UNLOCKED VANGUARD WINGS

“ This is the least stressed I’ve ever felt in this job. I used to dread coming into work. Now I can’t wait to get in and start work with the men on the landing.

Prison officer, Vanguard Wing

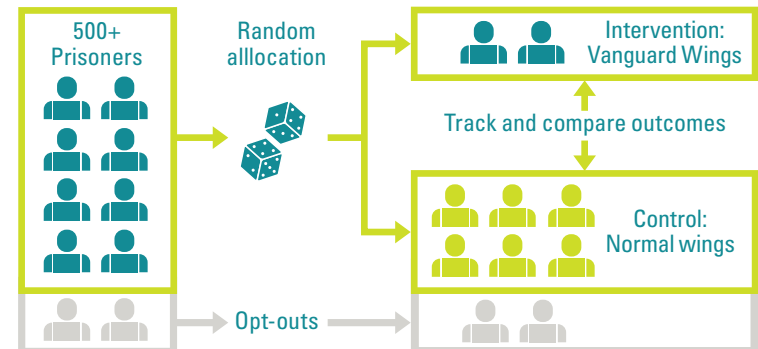
THE CHALLENGE

Over the past decade, we have seen the impact that our participants and Ambassadors have had in prisons, leading change from the frontline and transforming outcomes for those in their care. To mainstream our unique approach and shift the whole system, we knew we needed more data to prove conclusively that our model works.

THE UNLOCKED SOLUTION

The Vanguard Wings initiative applies the Unlocked model for recruiting and developing outstanding prison officers to entire wings for the first time in two London prisons. An independent randomised controlled trial is evaluating its impact, building the robust evidence needed to catalyse system-wide change.

Gold-standard evidence



Proving our model at scale

In 2025, we launched the Vanguard Wings at HMP Wandsworth and HMP Pentonville to test a simple but transformational idea: a prison cannot outperform the quality of its prison officers.

The current approach to staff development doesn't match the complexity of the role, so we have spent a decade building a different way of recruiting, training and supporting prison officers. The Vanguard Wings apply that model to entire wings for the first time, and researchers at King's College London are comparing outcomes for staff and prisoners with those on control wings.

“It’s a totally different experience [...] it doesn’t feel like the same prison.”

Prisoner, Vanguard Wing

What are we testing?

Values-based recruitment – staff have been selected for their relationship-building and decision-making skills, leadership potential and sense of possibility in the prison domain.

Immersion in an exemplar environment – they attended a week-long visit to a high-performing prison to observe best practice.

Ongoing in-person training and development – fortnightly training led by Unlocked focusing on relational practice, culture setting, decision-making and leadership.

Delegated decision-making – staff are given more autonomy to shape how their wing runs day-to-day.

Same prisons, same prisoners – different outcomes?*

↓45%

Assaults are down 45%.

↓57%

Self-harm is down 57%.

↓1½

Staff sickness has approximately halved.

*Interim results as of August 2026, full data expected end of 2026

“The early results from the Vanguard wings show just how much of a difference well-trained staff can make when they are given the support and freedom to improve the way a prison operates.”

Professor Jordan Hyatt, co-principal investigator of the Scandinavian Prison Project in Pennsylvania

Catalysing system-wide change

Our aim is to mainstream what works, so that prisoners across the system benefit. When the full results are published, we want them to make a case for change that cannot be ignored.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This document is a call to action. The momentum is real; the only question is who carries it next.

Over the past decade, Unlocked Graduates has created a movement of leaders who believe that rehabilitation is possible and have the tools to lead this change. We have proven that a prison cannot outperform the quality of its prison officers.

Unlocked was built to prove that a different way of thinking about frontline staff is possible, and to move that idea from the margins to the mainstream. The organisation may be closing its doors, but the evidence, the people and the principles are now there for the system to take forward.

So, what can you do?

Everyone has a part to play in the next stage of this work:

If you are an Unlocked Ambassador, you are the movement. Keep leading from the frontline, keep raising the bar for what a prison officer can be – and bring others with you. Mentor the next leader, share what works, and hold the door open behind you.

If you are a prison leader, find ways to apply parts of our model in your prison to develop and support your staff.

If you fund work in prisons, continue to back initiatives that support and develop outstanding officers.

If you make policy, ensure investment in the prison workforce becomes the default and make sure their domain expertise is used to shape the policies they will be asked to deliver.

And whoever you are, encourage those with influence to learn from the Unlocked approach to developing outstanding frontline leaders.

People are at the heart of change – in prisons and across society. Outstanding leaders change entire systems, and in doing so they change lives. Where, in your work, can you carry this momentum forward?

Read about some of the individuals who have driven real change from the frontline over the past 10 years.

**PEOPLE AT
THE CENTRE
OF CHANGE**



CAPRICE

2020 COHORT

“ It can be easy to see rehabilitation through the employment lens, but there are seven pathways to desistance and they are heavily reliant on one another. All of these ducks need to be in a row to genuinely make a difference.

On her wing, Caprice sat down with one of the men in her care and helped him write a CV. Then the application. Then he got a job – with an employer invited to the prison who was willing to do something different. It sounds like a small thing. But we know employment is one of the strongest protective factors against reoffending, and most men leaving prison never get as far as a first interview.

What happened next mattered more. Other officers started asking to help. They wrote CVs and disclosure letters alongside her, and in the process, career conversations became more normal on the landing. One officer's side project had become the way that wing did things.

What the work taught her was where the obstacle actually sits. The men she was preparing were willing and capable. What they were up against was employers who would never read the application. The bottleneck was outside the gate.

So Caprice went and stood on the other side of the hiring desk. She is now Rehabilitation Lead at a major engineering company, bringing people leaving custody into work, and Chair of the Employment Advisory Board at one of the country's largest prisons – the room where employers and governors decide what jobs actually exist for people on release.



“ Once I started supporting the project there began to be a real buzz from other officers wanting to help and get involved.

RHYTHM

2022 COHORT

A man on Rhythm's unit was homeless and facing the prospect of release with nowhere to go. Rhythm asked colleagues what could be done and was told it wasn't his job. He kept asking anyway – other staff, other departments, on his own breaks – until he found someone who could act, and the man got the support he needed.

Then he made sure it wouldn't happen again. He built his own network across probation and the Offender Management Unit so that the next time a man asked him about housing or work, he would have the answer himself rather than a dead end.

“ Giving a book to a prisoner on their first night in custody is an act of kindness that helped to ease their anxiety and gave them a sense of ownership.

On the induction wing he did the same thing at scale. He rebuilt the induction process around how people actually take in information, sat down one to one with men in custody for the first time, and had the induction video translated for foreign national prisoners. He wrote a guide so colleagues who found public speaking difficult could deliver it well. And he set up a wing library, because a man on his first night with a book in his hand is a man with something to do and something of his own.

Ultimately, providing the kind of support that leads to better outcomes – refusing to accept that things have to stay the way they are.

“ I always do what I say. And if I cannot do something, I say no.

SABRINA

2017 COHORT

“ Unlocked has always been about people – people who believe change is always possible. Ten years in, that mission matters more than ever.

Sabrina was part of Unlocked's very first cohort. Before there were Ambassadors, before the model was proven, when so many said it would be impossible to convince the country's best and brightest graduates to work in prison.

Nearly a decade later, she's still there – as Acting Deputy Governor of one of London's busiest prisons.

But she wasn't always so sure she wanted to rise up the ranks. In fact, as she approached the end of her time on the programme, Sabrina considered leaving the prison service altogether. What kept her was her 'why': to help those from a similar background to her avoid becoming just another statistic.

To enable those on the frontline to have the greatest possible impact, transformational leadership is required at every level. Sabrina has been able to draw on her experiences on the Unlocked programme to drive real culture change from an influential leadership position, supporting the next generation of outstanding officers.





“ It’s definitely been one of the best parts of the job, being able to build seriously strong relationships with people who perhaps haven’t been listened to.

JIM**2024 COHORT**

A prisoner has diabetes. His blood sugar crashes and he becomes confused, unsteady, and hard to rouse. The officer unlocking him in the morning isn’t aware of his condition, and treats the prisoner as if they are under the influence. That was the gap Jim identified within weeks of arriving on the landings: information that mattered clinically was sitting in a file that almost nobody on the wing was reading.

It was not his job to fix it, and there was no obvious solution. But he found one anyway. With funding from Unlocked’s Innovation Acceleration Programme, which backs pilot projects designed by officers on the frontline, Jim introduced medical wristbands for prisoners with diabetes and epilepsy – visible, instant, and costing almost nothing. He ran discussion groups alongside them so staff and prisoners could talk about their conditions rather than work around them.

“ He genuinely felt that this band was like a safety net in the prison.

Jim on the impact the wristbands have had for those in his care

The wristbands are now in use in a number of prisons across the country, and in 2025 Jim was nominated for a Ministry of Justice Award for Outstanding Leadership in recognition of the initiative.

SARAH

2021 COHORT

Many people arrive in prison with just the clothes on their backs. That means they don't have access to suitable clothing while in prison, and end up preparing for release without them. This can shape how a person is seen at precisely the moments when being seen well matters most – a court hearing, a visit or their first day out.

“ Beyond the clothing itself, it has helped reinforce the message that people are valued and deserve the chance to rebuild their confidence and prepare for a more positive future.

Sarah saw an opportunity to address this. She launched Inside Threads, a community shop based within her prison, run by prisoners and supported by donations, to provide clothing for anyone who needs it. In its first few months it delivered over 100 clothing packages.

Despite the challenges of introducing a new solution in an incredible busy Category B prison, Sarah's initiative has had a real impact, providing prisoners with a sense of dignity, safety and confidence, and ultimately helping to improve outcomes for those in her care.



“ Unlocked gave me the confidence to challenge the idea that things have to be done the way they've always been done.

NIYI**2020 COHORT**

A prisoner on Niyi's wing noticed a ribbon on his uniform. It read 'Together Against Racism'. He asked Niyi to help him file a discrimination complaint – the first time he had ever reported his experience of racism inside.

“ It creates the opportunity to change a narrative and break barriers and misunderstanding, both amongst prisoners and amongst staff.

Niyi joined the Unlocked programme in 2020, determined to help address the lack of representation of people from BAME backgrounds working within the prison services. Whilst on the programme, he applied to Unlocked's Innovation Acceleration Programme to create and fund something deliberately small: a ribbon that officers could choose to wear, which identified them – without anyone having to raise the subject – as somebody who would take it seriously.

It spread through Niyi's prison first – officer to officer, wing after wing – before 27 other establishments signed up to bring the ribbons in, helping to drive real culture change across the system. The campaign earned Niyi a Butler Trust Award in 2022-23. He then continued this work as a Regional Project Lead at the Zahid Mubarek Trust.

“ It's about inspiring other people and saying please come into the system and make substantial change.



GEORGIA

2020 COHORT

A prisoner arrives in prison without their reading glasses. They cannot read the letter from home, or the application form that is the only way to ask the prison for anything, or the induction paperwork explaining what happens next. The wait for a replacement pair can run to months.

During her time on the Unlocked programme, Georgia worked on the induction wing of her prison and watched this happen time and time again. So she did something about it. She worked with colleagues across the establishment to fund and source 1,000 pairs of reading glasses for those on her wing.

“ Too many people on the induction wing came into prison unable to read applications, letters, and watch TV. I wanted to make people’s time in prison easier.

For many of these prisoners, delays to access glasses while in prison may otherwise be substantial, meaning they spend most of their time there without being able to read properly. The glasses made those first few days for new prisoners on the induction wing easier. It enabled them to settle, read letters from loved ones, and improved engagement on the wing, ultimately improving the environment. It meant the prisoners that Georgia worked with trusted that staff members cared and were willing to help them.

NATHAN

2019 COHORT

“ By being there, you can be part of the change. [...] Like any environment, you need the diversity of experiences and thoughts to solve different problems.

A boy on Nathan's unit was preparing for his maths GCSE, but struggling. Education provision in the YOI was thin, and the teaching he was getting wasn't enough. He had been in this position before, and always given up. But, because Nathan had taken the time to build a relationship with him, this time he asked for help.

The easy answer was sympathy – it was a shame he couldn't access more support, but that it wasn't his job and he didn't have the time. Instead, Nathan tutored him 1:1, an hour a day, while all the other boys were out in the yard exercising.

Another boy was writing poetry, as a way of expressing things for which he would otherwise have resorted to violence. Nathan read it each day and talked to him about it.

Neither is in a prison officer's job description. But because Nathan knew that education is one of the strongest predictors of what happens after release, particularly for those young boys in custody who face the biggest barriers to reengaging with it, he decided to use the relationships he had built to push them towards it. He found a way of reaching those in his care, when others might not have.

After graduating from the programme, Nathan joined Unlocked's board of trustees, where his job has been to ask of every strategic decision whether it helps an officer on a landing better support the prisoners in their care.

“ It can be hard, but if you want to change things you have to find a way into the system to change it.

MAX

2020 COHORT

Levels of self-harm remain incredibly high in prisons, and a large proportion of prisoners face significant mental health issues. Those who have just arrived in custody are particularly vulnerable, so the officers working with these prisoners are uniquely positioned to support them.

As a participant on the Unlocked programme, Max was based on the induction unit in his prison, and he was determined to find ways to reach those in his care. He quickly realised that the resources being given to these prisoners to help them in their first days in prison were not working.

So he found a solution, providing new packs specifically designed to help prisoners adjust. They included supplies such as a birthday card to send to friends or family, exercise routines to improve mental wellbeing, and advice from others in the prison. The packs had a huge impact on those in Max's care during an incredibly challenging time: following their introduction, self-harm among prisoners in their first weeks in custody fell by over 35%.

“ He pulled out the birthday card we provided in the pack and said it was his daughter's birthday soon and he was worried he wouldn't be able to get her anything. Simple things like that make a difference.



“ Even just offering something with the intention of improving their initial experience of [prison] seemed to flip a switch in our conversations.

MAT

2024 CHANGEMAKERS COHORT

“ We’re shifting the mindset. We’re creating an environment where people care again – about the job, about each other, about the impact we can have. And that’s what leadership is about.

Mat did not come to the prison service through a graduate scheme. He joined nine years ago as a band 3 officer, he was good at it, and was promoted for being good at it – first to supervising officer, then to custodial manager. But nobody taught him how to lead. He was managing a team of officers on the basis of having once been one.

He describes hitting a wall. It’s something we see often. The service is full of capable people in middle leadership roles who are simply left to work it out alone, which is why the officers they line manage so often don’t get the support they need – and it’s why so many outstanding officers leave the prison service early.

In 2024, Mat joined the first ChangeMakers cohort – Unlocked’s programme for custodial managers, drawing learnings from the support model on our graduate programme and built on a simple proposition: fix middle leadership and every officer on the landings gets better at their job and retention is significantly improved. Mat has become an inspirational leader, building performance tools his colleagues actually use, and leading change projects on his wing.



TAMARA

2019 COHORT

“ Working on the landings was an incredibly steep learning curve and one of the most rewarding yet most challenging times of my life.

In order for the Unlocked model to have the greatest possible impact, we need some of these incredible leaders to continue this work in influential roles across society, carrying our mission forwards. Tamara did her two years on the landings and then moved into prison policy and research, first at the United Nations and then at HMPPS.

But in 2022, she saw an opportunity to expand her reach. She had seen firsthand what happens when the right people are recruited into prison work and supported properly, and what happens when they aren't. So she founded Richtungswechsel, an Austrian-based charity that aims to support prison services across Europe to recruit values-aligned frontline staff, and then train and support them effectively.

She is able to draw on her experiences on the frontline of prisons as part of the Unlocked programme, broadening the impact of our approach and transforming perceptions of the work that prison officers do on a wider scale with the ultimate aim of reducing reoffending. In recognition of this incredible work, Tamara was named on the Forbes Austria 30 under 30 list.

“ Without Unlocked, my organisation would not exist - and all the people, all the projects, all our impact would not exist.



“ One prisoner told me, ‘We just needed someone to let us try’ – that’s stuck with me ever since.



ABDUL

2024 COHORT

A lack of purposeful activity in prisons has a real impact on outcomes for prisoners, and too often, many are spending most of the day locked in their cells with limited access to activity. On a visit to a high-performing prison during his time on the Unlocked programme, Abdul identified a solution that he could adapt for his environment to make a real difference.

“ Watching men who’d avoided education get absorbed in bookkeeping, or seeing unlikely peers interact for the first time, showed me that the potential was always there; it just needed permission.

Last year, he launched the Inside Out project on his wing. This initiative encourages the prisoners in his care to share existing skills and learn from others – increasing purposeful activity with no additional cost. The project focuses on peer-to-peer learning and support, fostering engagement with activities led by other prisoners and creating a more positive community on the landings.

The project has had a real impact – both for engagement with activity and wellbeing on the wing. Nine months after the launch of Inside Out, attendance to Tier 2 activity on Abdul’s wing was 2.5 times higher. A survey of participants showed that over 90% felt more connected to others and 88% felt more confident.

HANNAH

2018 COHORT

“ I still believe that frontline staff are the solution, and I want to create the space for them to question, improve and lead change themselves

Hannah's account of her time on the landings is about persistence rather than breakthroughs. Initially, her biggest impact was simply being willing to question why things were done the way they were, and identify alternatives. This didn't always look grand, but showing up, thinking critically and building solutions every day meant she could improve the outcomes for the men on her landing.

It was that determination that fuelled her ambitions to achieve promotion. She realised that she could have a much greater impact by leading change from inside the system. Now, she's a governor at HMP Wandsworth, and leads G Wing, one of the Vanguard Wings – a chance to test the Unlocked model at scale and prove that investing in frontline staff is the highest leverage intervention in the system.

And it's working. Interim results from the trial show assaults across the Vanguard wings down 45% and self-harm down 57% against comparable wings. Staff lose roughly half as many days to sickness as colleagues elsewhere in their prisons. Retention on Hannah's wing is markedly better than the rest of the prison.



“ Not just believing that prisons can be better, but taking responsibility for making them better.



ALAN

2019 COHORT

“ My colleagues and I pushed ourselves to broaden the scope of a youth justice worker’s duties.

Alan arrived on the landings of a Youth Offenders Institute and then the country went into lockdown. Education stopped. Activities were cancelled. The boys in his care were locked up with less to do than at any point in living memory, at an age when unstructured time does the most damage.

Alan had spent years working in a secondary school before joining the service, so he did the obvious thing. He taught them. Extra tuition, marking practice papers, without assuming what any individual child could or couldn’t do.

He describes that period as the thing that decided his career. He came back to Unlocked as a Mentoring Prison Officer, the role that supports participants through their own first years on the landings before returning to his establishment to continue this work.

“ Reflecting on a challenging but ultimately successful two years, I realised I had found my calling.

KEIR

2024 COHORT

“ That space away from the landings with someone who will listen and encourage me to think of solutions was so helpful for my own development and confidence. I think a lot of people would benefit from that in the prison service more broadly.

As an Unlocked participant, Keir had something most new prison officers don't: a Mentoring Prison Officer. Dedicated support on and off the landings, regularly, from an experienced prison officer whose job was to listen, coach and push him towards finding solutions. Prison officers do one of the toughest jobs, but effective support allows them to have a real impact.

We know that a lack of effective support is one of the most reliable predictors of a good officer leaving in their first two years. Keir realised that he had access to something that his colleagues on the same house block did not.

So he applied to become a New Colleague Mentor, determined to change this. He now supports a cohort of new officers, and he is deliberately replicating Unlocked's one-to-one model in his prison. He has created probation resources, promoting reflective practice and encouraging new colleagues to engage with senior management and seek feedback so they can continually improve, receiving recognition from his prison's leadership for the impact this work is having.



“ I want to encourage optimism and a belief that the prison service can be better and that staff are at the forefront of that.

Unlocked

Leading change
on the inside

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

THE  TIMES
TOP 100
GRADUATE EMPLOYERS

Transforming perceptions of the prison officer role, reaching a **high of 22nd position in the prestigious Times Top 100** list of graduate employers.

90%

of participants **had not considered a career in the prison service** before hearing about Unlocked Graduates.

3/4

of our Ambassadors **continue to work towards our mission** of breaking cycles of reoffending in their primary role after completing the programme.

100%

of our partner prison governors would **recommend Unlocked Graduates**.



A prison officer is integral to anyone's prison experience. If you ask anyone who's served time or is serving time, they'll tell you that a good officer can make all the difference. A bad officer can also make all the difference.

Femi, former prisoner

