

Summary of the Prison Staff Wellbeing Workshop

Vilnius, Lithuania

14-15 October 2025

Introduction

EuroPris organised the Prison Staff Wellbeing workshop in Vilnius, Lithuania, marking an important milestone in the European effort to promote staff wellbeing across correctional systems. The two-day event, hosted by EuroPris in cooperation with the Lithuanian Prison Service, brought together experts and practitioners from across Europe to explore the Five Drivers of Wellbeing – **Health, Relationships, Leadership, Work Environment, and Purpose**. The workshop programme was developed by the EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert Group, chaired by David Espina Jimenez and co-chaired by Iva Prskalo, and featured interactive exercises, case studies, and reflective discussions connecting research and practice.



Setting the Stage

Opening remarks were delivered by Gustav Tallving, Director of EuroPris, and Mindaugas Kairys, Director General of the Lithuanian Prison Service, who underlined the shared European vision that staff wellbeing is central to safe, humane, and effective prison systems. After that, Iva Prskalo opened the day with a body-awareness exercise on daily stress factors in prison work, grounding participants in the realities of the topic.



Challenges and Solutions Resulting from Working Conditions in Prisons: The Case of Norway **Raymond Nielsen and Tommy Fredriksen, Norwegian Prison Service**

Tommy Fredriksen and Raymond Nilsen shared survey results from about 2,000 Norwegian Correctional Service employees, revealing high exposure to workplace threats and violence—over 70% had been threatened, and more than half experienced violence. Many witnessed severe incidents, including inmate or colleague suicides. Staff reported widespread exhaustion, stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD, especially in high-security facilities. Measures implemented include management training, better communication, and increased staffing, while future plans focus on sustainable staffing, decentralised education, proactive psychological support, and standardised risk assessments.



From Evidence to Action: Demonstrating the Digital Tool on Prison Staff Wellbeing **David Espina Jimenez, Chair of the EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert Group, Catalonia and Debra Slater, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, England & Wales**

- **Demonstrating the Value of Wellbeing Investment** Evidence shows that organisations prioritising employee wellbeing achieve measurable gains – higher productivity, stronger retention, lower absence, and improved shareholder returns – equating to a £5.30 return for every £1 invested.
- **The Five Drivers of Wellbeing** Workplace wellbeing is shaped by five interrelated drivers: health, security, environment, relationships, and purpose. Together, these determine levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and overall life satisfaction among staff.
- **The Importance of Organisational Culture** Research indicates that working conditions – including fair treatment, realistic workloads, flexibility, and supportive management – have a stronger impact on wellbeing than individual-focused interventions like mindfulness or resilience training.
- **Measuring and Embedding Wellbeing** Effective wellbeing strategies require clear objectives, consistent measurement, and leadership commitment. Combining objective data (e.g., absence, retention) with subjective indicators helps build an evidence base for sustained organisational improvement.



The expert group's main output is their work on a **digital staff wellbeing tool, designed to support staff wellbeing in prison services across Europe**. It fosters a culture of awareness, prevention, and continuous growth through training and leadership. It provides an evidence-based, collaborative response to the pressing need for resilient and well-supported prison staff. The tool is going to be published at the end of this year.

Health Driver

The Health driver explored physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions of wellbeing. Iva Prskalo led an exercise on how “macho culture” can discourage help-seeking in prisons, while Dr. Helen Nichols demonstrated how creative writing can serve as a therapeutic outlet for managing stress and reflecting on work experiences.

Breaking the Code: Macho Norms and Generational Shifts in Prison Support Iva Prskalo, Co-Chair of the EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert Group, Croatia

- **Cultural Change is Essential**

There is a need for a systematic shift towards a more open and supportive culture around mental health. Mandatory initiatives and peer-mentoring programmes can help drive this change.

- **Create a Supportive and Open Environment**

Building trust and openness within teams is crucial. Staff wellbeing should be integrated into everyday structures and practices, not treated as an add-on.

- **Engage All Staff Groups**

Different groups (uniformed staff, new recruits, and long-serving officers) have different needs and experiences. Engaging all levels of staff and external partners ensures a shared responsibility for wellbeing.

- **Raise Awareness and Educate**

Staff need training to recognise their own need for help and to understand what services are available. Clear information and education are key.

- **Build Confidence and Trust in Support Services**

It is important to strengthen confidence in using available support by ensuring services are visible, reliable, and stigma-free.



Health and Wellbeing for Prison Governors & Managers, Creative Writing Intervention Dr. Helen Nichols, University of Hull, UK



Dr Nichols’ research, conducted with the Prison Governors’ Association and universities of Lincoln and Hull, identified a “Masculinity Contest Culture (MCC)” in prison environments — a set of unwritten rules and expectations that create pressure to perform toughness and suppress vulnerability.

The MCC operates through four key norms:

1. **Show No Weakness** – Emotional restraint and avoidance of vulnerability.
2. **Strength and Stamina** – Valuing endurance and constant performance.
3. **Put Work First** – Prioritising professional demands above personal or family life.
4. **Dog-Eat-Dog** – Competitive environments that discourage mutual support.

Results from a short writing exercise:

Prison working culture...
"...should be supportive"
"...is complicated"
"...the hardest job in the world"

These expectations, often internalised by staff, have tangible impacts on mental and physical wellbeing. Governors and officers described maintaining a facade of being “fine” even after traumatic incidents, with little privacy or safe space to process experiences. Many feared that seeking support could damage reputations or career prospects.

Relationships Driver

Exploring Relationships as the Foundation of Workplace Wellbeing

Debra Slater, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, England & Wales, and Davina Bracken, EuroPris, Staff Wellbeing Expert, Ireland

- **Relationships Are Fundamental to Wellbeing** Relationships at work, especially with colleagues and managers are as important as physical health for workplace wellbeing. They act as a buffer against stress and are a core part of a healthy work environment.
- **Line Manager and Peer Support Are Critical** Support from line managers and peers are the strongest protective factors against stress and burnout, particularly in high-stress environments like prisons.
- **Managers Shape Wellbeing Culture** Managers have a significant impact on team wellbeing. Their ability to role-model healthy behaviours, foster psychological safety, and hold regular wellbeing conversations is crucial for building resilient teams.
- **Peer Support Enhances Engagement and Inclusion** Structured peer support programmes improve mental health, reduce burnout, and foster a culture of openness and inclusion, leading to higher engagement, retention, and productivity.
- **Strong Relationships Lead to Better Outcomes** Staff who feel connected and respected are more resilient, engaged, and likely to stay. Strong workplace relationships contribute to team cohesion, psychological safety, and better outcomes for both staff and those in their care.



Employee Assistance Programme and Peer Support in Ireland

Shane Kitson, Irish Prison Service



1. Comprehensive Support Framework

The Irish Prison Service (IPS) Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provides confidential, non-judgemental support to staff and their families, enhancing wellbeing and organisational effectiveness.

2. Expanding Engagement and Reach

In 2024, EAP Officers directly supported 245 colleagues—an increase of 42% on 2023—while Staff Support Officers assisted nearly one-fifth of all IPS employees, demonstrating growing trust and utilisation of the service.

3. Prioritising Mental Health and Resilience

Mental health, stress, and attendance were the top presenting issues in 2024, highlighting the EAP's critical role in promoting psychological wellbeing and early intervention.

4. Professional Standards and Training Excellence

All Staff Support Officers undergo rigorous selection, mandatory completion of a BA in Employee Support & Wellbeing, and continuous professional development to ensure best practice and consistency of care.

5. Embedding Critical Incident Support

The EAP oversees the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) system, with 120 trained Peer Support Workers providing evidence-based psychological first aid—endorsed nationally as best practice—to safeguard staff following traumatic events.

Leadership Driver

Coordinated by Lee Currie and Teijo Mustonen, the Leadership driver invited participants to engage in self-assessment exercises exploring leadership behaviours, drawing on examples from Scotland and Finland. “What you role model today is the culture tomorrow,” noted Lee Currie, encapsulating the session’s core message. Dr. Jutta Tobias Mortlock concluded with a focus on psychological safety and team trust, emphasising leadership’s relational nature.

Leading by Example

Lee Currie, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, Scotland

Teijo Mustonen, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, Finland

- **Leadership Shapes Organisational Wellbeing** Leadership can be the difference between burnout and engagement. How leaders act, communicate, and support others directly shapes how teams feel and perform—your behaviour is your loudest message.
- **Resilient Leaders Build Resilient Teams** Resilience starts with the leader. By prioritising their own wellbeing, managing stress proactively, and leading with compassion and clarity, leaders create stability and confidence in those they lead.
- **Embed Wellbeing into Everyday Leadership** Normalising self-care, recognising stress signals, modelling empathy, and embedding supportive practices in daily routines fosters trust, openness, and psychological safety across teams.
- **Role Modelling Creates Culture** Leadership is a continuous journey shaped by reflection and learning. Real-world examples from Scotland and Finland show that consistent role modelling, structured support, and reflective practice can transform organisational culture and wellbeing outcomes



Leading for Team Effectiveness and Wellbeing

Dr. Jutta Tobias Mortlock, City St George’s, University of London, UK

- Effective leadership involves embracing interdependence, reflecting on challenges, and creating environments where wellbeing and performance grow together over time.
- Leadership wellbeing isn’t just personal - it’s relational. How leaders show up emotionally and behaviourally influences the entire team’s culture and performance.
- Leadership is the outcome of effective teamwork, not individual agency.
- Cultivating open communication starts with intentional behaviours - use inclusive body language, ask thoughtful questions, rotate meeting chairs, invite quieter voices to speak, keep agendas focused, take breaks, show you’re listening, and ensure everyone has a chance to contribute and receive feedback.
- Mindfulness helps leaders observe thoughts and emotions, enabling better decision-making, reduced stress, and improved focus, especially in high-pressure environments.



You have to be fluid”: Exploring prison officer types and their relationship with staff-prisoner relationships and burnout: A mixed methods study

Dr. Sinead Meade, Queen's University Belfast, Ireland



- **Fluidity as a Core Professional Trait** Irish prison officers emphasised the need for adaptability and flexibility in their roles, with “fluidity” identified as essential to managing daily challenges and maintaining effective staff–prisoner relationships.
- **Four Distinct Officer Profiles Identified** Quantitative analysis revealed four key officer types within the Irish Prison Service – All-rounder, Measured Engaged, Measured Disengaged, and Alienated – reflecting varying levels of engagement, adaptability, and resilience rather than fixed personality types.
- **Adaptability and Organisational Justice as Predictors** Individual adaptability and perceptions of fairness within the organisation were found to be significant predictors of officer type, influencing both engagement levels and workplace wellbeing.
- **Burnout and Relationship Quality Vary by Officer Type** The study found clear differences in perceived staff–prisoner relationship quality and burnout across the four officer groups, suggesting that engagement and organisational support play vital roles in mitigating emotional strain.
- **Practical Implications for Policy and Training** The findings highlight the importance of targeted wellbeing initiatives, fair management practices, and training focused on adaptability to foster resilience, reduce burnout risk, and strengthen relationships in prison settings.

Environment Driver

Profiles, Perspectives, and Experiences

Elena Nanni, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, Italy

Jozef Valuch, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, Slovakia

Elena Nanni and Jozef Valuch guided participants through an exploration of environmental factors influencing wellbeing in the Italian and Slovakian Prison Services. Through group discussions, participants identified barriers to a healthy workplace and co-created solutions to enhance working conditions.

- The quality of the work environment depends on how spaces and organisations support both personal and professional growth, as well as the balance between work and family life.
- Fair policies on time management and approved absences foster trust, balance, and respect in the workplace.
- Recognition of employees’ merit – through promotion, responsibility, or fair compensation – strengthens motivation and commitment.
- Well-designed physical and relational spaces encourage collaboration, creativity, and shared purpose.
- A healthy work environment values people as its core resource, integrating well-being, inclusion, and professional development.



Purpose Driver

Introduced by David Espina Jimenez and Virginija Stoniene, the Purpose session used a Golden Circle exercise to explore the deeper meaning behind prison work.

The Golden Circle: Exploring Purpose in Correctional Work

David Espina Jimenez, Chair of the EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert Group, Catalonia

Virginija Stoniene, EuroPris Staff Wellbeing Expert, Lithuania

- **Purpose is our deepest “why.”** It’s not a goal or a temporary motivation, it’s the reason that gives meaning to what we do, the inner compass that guides us even in challenging moments.
- **Working with purpose protects and sustains us.** In high-pressure environments, reconnecting with our “why” helps us maintain emotional balance, motivation, and a sense of meaning in our daily work.
- **The Golden Circle helps us see our work through a deeper lens.**
 - a. **WHAT:** what we do (our concrete tasks and responsibilities)
 - b. **HOW:** how we do it (our values, attitudes, and professional style)
 - c. **WHY:** why we do it (our beliefs, purpose, and sense of calling).Starting with why transforms our perspective from routine to meaning.



- **Sharing purpose strengthens connection and trust.** When we speak openly about why our work matters, we inspire others, reinforce a sense of community, and remind ourselves that we serve something larger than procedures.
- **Even tasks without a clear “why” have value.** Recognising the parts of our work that feel routine or mechanical helps us appreciate their role in maintaining structure, stability, and safety, essential foundations of correctional work.



Conclusion

The workshop concluded with a dynamic World Café session, where participants exchanged ideas across all five wellbeing drivers, fostering cross-national collaboration and creative problem-solving. This final exercise generated practical strategies for embedding wellbeing into organisational structures, strengthening leadership, and nurturing cultures of trust, openness, and shared purpose. Overall, the workshop reaffirmed that staff wellbeing is central to effective prison systems and must be integrated into daily practice through training, policy, and peer support to build resilient, engaged, and compassionate workforces across Europe.

