

STAFF EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

LEEDS, ENGLAND

24 - 28 NOVEMBER 2025

INTRODUCTION

The EuroPris Staff Exchange Programme in Leeds brought together prison professionals from several European countries for a week of shared learning, observation, and discussion. Participants travelled from Bulgaria, Poland, Croatia, Romania, and Hungary to explore prison practice within the English system and to exchange experiences with colleagues working in a variety of custodial environments. Leeds, the host city, offered a dynamic backdrop for the programme, with its mix of Victorian heritage, cultural venues, and contemporary development.



This edition of the Staff Exchange was hosted by Custodial Manager Julia Portrey and supported by a former participant of the Staff Exchange in Luxembourg, Martin Copley from HMP Leeds. Participants had the opportunity to visit 3 prisons over the course of the week, namely:

- HMP Leeds
- HMP Wealstun
- HMP Askham Grange



THE PROGRAMME

The programme began on Monday with the group's arrival at HMP Leeds. Participants were welcomed by staff and taken through a brief induction before meeting individuals involved in recovery and rehabilitation work, including a lived-experience speaker, Gordon Hampshire, and the Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team. A meeting with the Deputy Governor Vicky Pryce provided insight into the prison's leadership structure and current priorities. The morning concluded with a guided tour of the prison, during which the group observed the serving of meals and the roll-check process. After lunch, the afternoon focused on operational practice, including visits to the Reducing Reoffending department, the visitation area, and further discussions with staff responsible for safer custody, healthcare provision, and education, skills and work.

On Tuesday, the group returned to HMP Leeds to continue exploring different aspects of the establishment. The morning covered the inmate induction process, including the "bus to bed" system and an introduction to the induction wing, followed by a meeting with the Governing Governor, Diane Lewis. The afternoon was devoted to activities, workshops and education, as well as discussions with the Head of Chaplaincy and the team responsible for the departure lounge, which supports men during transition and release.



Wednesday expanded the experience beyond Leeds with visits to two additional prisons. The first stop was HMP Wealstun, where participants were welcomed with an introduction to the site and a visit to the Creating Future Opportunities wing before touring the wider establishment and engaging in a question-and-answer session with staff. From there, the group continued to HMP Askham Grange, an open prison for women. The afternoon included a visit to the Mother and Baby Unit, a tour of the prison, and further discussion with staff about the unique rehabilitative approach of an open female establishment.



THE PROGRAMME

On Thursday, the focus returned to education and rehabilitative practice at HMP Leeds, specifically within the Learning and Development building. Participants met tutors and foundation learners, observed lessons, and saw demonstrations of intervention training. In the afternoon, they met with senior staff responsible for security, psychology, and offender management, gaining a deeper understanding of how these teams work together to support safety, behavioural development, and sentence progression.

The final day of the programme, on Friday, featured a historical tour of HMP Leeds led by an Operational Support Grade staff member. This allowed participants to place the week's learning within the broader history of the establishment and its evolving role within the prison system. The formal closing session followed, offering time for questions, reflection, and discussion about the lessons taken from the exchange before the group returned to their respective countries.

KEY LEARNINGS

The schedule balanced structured learning with opportunities for dialogue, enabling participants to gain insights into English prison operations while sharing their own practices and challenges from across Europe. Participants also had the opportunity to divide into smaller groups based on their professional roles and speak directly with staff performing similar duties within the English prison system. This allowed them to compare and discuss role-specific practices in greater depth. For example, prison officers met with the Head of Security, while psychologists and social pedagogues formed a group to speak with the Offender Management Unit and the Head Psychologist.

Participants reported that the English Prison Service demonstrated many practices they could bring back home. They noticed that both systems face similar challenges, which made the experience relatable and relevant. A strong theme was the value placed on communication and de-escalation, particularly the idea that “the greatest tools are words,” reflecting a calm, skilled approach to managing aggressive situations. Many were impressed by the high level of professionalism supported through strong staff training, attention to detail, and a culture of cooperation. They highlighted the balance in England between security and rehabilitation, with meaningful activities, education, and structured routines contributing to a purposeful environment. Several participants emphasised the care shown toward inmates and the respectful way staff communicated, especially in HMP Leeds. Important operational insights were also noted, including effective suicide-prevention procedures and risk-assessment processes. Overall, participants felt that the English Prison Service models a combination of strong security, humane treatment, and well-supported staff, offering lessons that could be effectively adapted to their own prison systems.

