



What worked at HMYOI Parc?

By Angus Jones, team leader for inspection of children's custody

Today, there are fewer than 500 children in custody in England and Wales. This is down largely to the success of diversion schemes over the last 10 years and, more recently, the impact of the pandemic. While this decline in the population is positive for children and society in general, it has created its own set of challenges.

The children held in custody are now far more likely to have committed serious violent offences and be serving longer sentences than their counterparts just five years ago. This concentration of very high levels of need in a small number of institutions has meant most of the places holding children are volatile, with high levels of reckless and unpredictable violence.

This makes the outcomes for children at HMYOI Parc all the more impressive. Since 2018, we have judged outcomes for the children held there to be reasonably good or good at every inspection. Most recently in April 2022, we gave our highest grade across all four of our healthy prison tests. This is a remarkable achievement, particularly in the area of purposeful activity, which is not good enough in every other young offender institution (YOI).

A positive culture

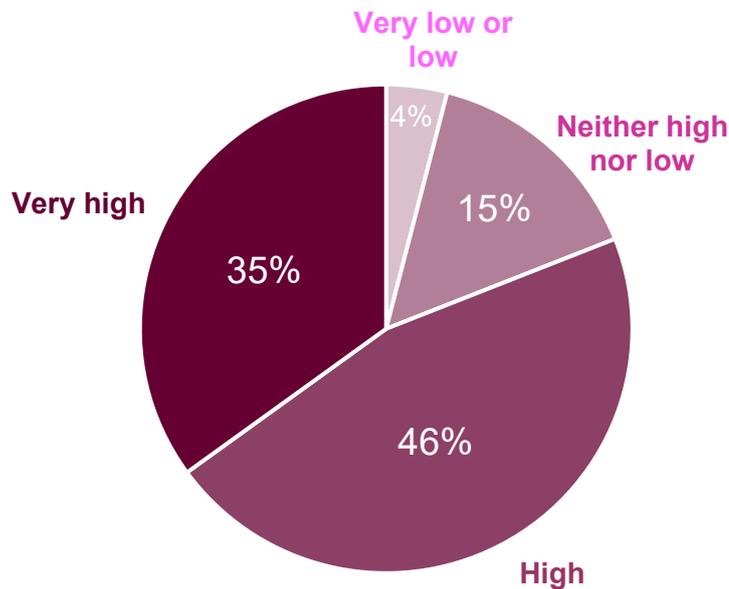
On first impressions Parc, located in Bridgend, south Wales, has little going for it. Children are held in two small units that are part of a much bigger adult prison. The living areas can feel claustrophobic and there is far less outside space than at other YOIs. Rather than focus on these shortcomings, the capable leadership team had concentrated on developing a positive culture among staff and children.

This culture was one of engagement, high expectations and incentivisation of good behaviour. Staff modelled high standards of behaviour themselves and were prepared to challenge and support children who behaved badly. Leaders had worked to get the basics right: they expected new staff to have relevant experience or to have demonstrated their skills in the adult prison before being selected to work with children. They had regular supervision and leaders were visible and accessible to both staff and children.

These may seem like the basics for any employer, but they are noteworthy because they differed from the experience of staff at other sites. The impact was clear in our

staff survey, where 81% of staff, from all areas of the prison, reported that their morale was high or very high, contrasting sharply with our findings from other sites.

Figure 1: How surveyed staff described their morale at work



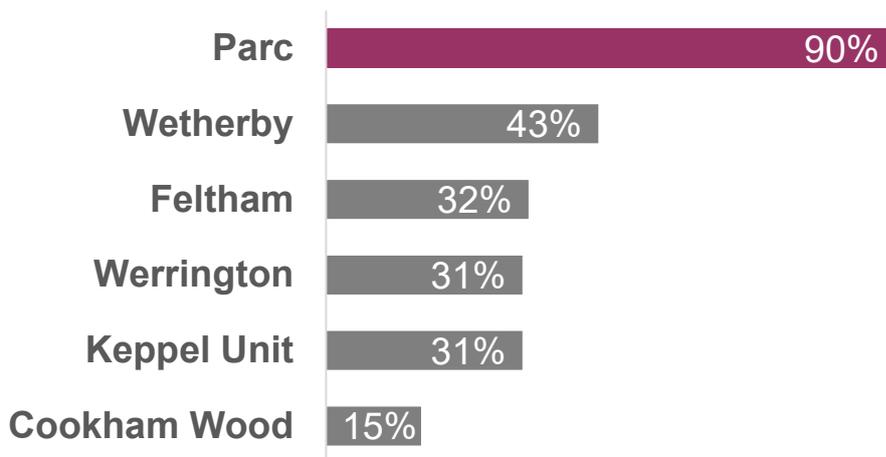
Providing purposeful activity

The support for staff and their high morale were fundamental in maintaining a purposeful regime for children during the pandemic. While education, access to the gym and a library service were withdrawn at all other YOIs, leaders at Parc decided to continue with this provision and staff had the confidence in their managers to carry on. As a result, children at Parc spent more time in education than those at other YOIs throughout the pandemic. By the time of our inspection children at Parc were typically out of their cells for eight to 11 hours a day during the week, five of which were spent in education. One child said the best thing about being at Parc was:

‘Being able to go to education and catch up on education that me and many others have missed out on.’

In our survey 90% of children at Parc said they received more than two hours out of cell a day at the weekend – again, notably different to those held at other sites.

Figure 2: Surveyed children who said they spent more than two hours out of their room at weekends



Relationships and support

The focus on children being out of their cells led to a more normal atmosphere on the units, including at mealtimes. In other YOIs children eat most meals alone in their cells, communicating with each other by shouting through windows and doors, and making some units feel noisy and intimidating. At Parc children were able to eat all three meals at a table with their peers and with staff.

Children who were reluctant to leave their cells were quickly noticed by staff and offered the support they needed to feel safe enough to come out and mix with others. This largely worked, and I was surprised to meet a child, who had been segregated because of his poor behaviour, attending a carpentry workshop one day and playing rugby with other children the next, something I have never seen elsewhere.

Parc YOI is not perfect; there were shortfalls in equality and diversity provision and consultation with children. Yet what the director, head of unit and their team had achieved in a fairly rudimentary facility was impressive and sets the standard for the care of children in all YOIs.