

Nominate a Professional

Tracey Hoult

Working in prisons is challenging to say the least, which is why it is so important to give employees a safe space to talk where they can develop coping skills to support their mental wellbeing. Tracey Hoult, the on-site counsellor at HMP Doncaster and HMP Dovegate, provides just that to an exceptional level. In supporting circa 750 employees, her commitment and willingness to go the extra mile has in many cases changed lives.

She plays a key role in altering attitudes and breaking down the stigma around seeking psychological support, making it not just acceptable to 'talk to Tracey' but also normal to prioritise mental wellbeing as part of the everyday demands of the job.

"In 33 years of working in prisons, I have never come across an individual that has had so much impact on the care and wellbeing of prison staff," Mark Hanson, Justice Director, Serco.

Tracey's journey with Serco prisons started in 2016, when she was brought on board to help a staffing group that felt undervalued, uncared for and professionally exhausted at another prison. Her work was so successful that her role was expanded, and she now dedicates her time to supporting staff at two establishments – HMP Dovegate and HMP Doncaster.

HMP Dovegate is a Category B adult male prison near Uttoxeter in Staffordshire and HMP Doncaster is a Category B local resettlement prison in South Yorkshire. Without doubt for the 750 staff at both prisons, this is a challenging workplace environment with the potential to have a detrimental impact on their mental health.

Similar to other prisons, our staff at these sites frequently come into contact with complex individuals and are likely to witness and experience traumatic incidents at work such as self-harm, suicide and substance misuse. It is also extremely common for them to encounter violent incidents and to be required to apply restraint, which makes them susceptible to physical injury.

This is why it is particularly important for employees to have access, without having to wait, to high quality interventions, such as counselling services, so they can talk openly about their health needs and build coping strategies. The services which Tracey has been providing at HMP Doncaster and HMP

Dovegate for the past 4.5 and 5.5 years respectively, do just that. It is different to the psychological support available to staff at most of the other 120 prisons in England because Tracey is based on-site and many of the sessions she runs are face-to-face. This means that she is particularly in tune with the needs of the individual prisons where she works and she tailors her support accordingly. We believe and she believes that she can provide a better service through face-to-face sessions, which she provides on-site or in a safe neutral space if required.

As well as the pressures of the job, Tracey helps staff to manage the many challenges of modern living such as grief, family and financial issues and historic trauma. Time and time again Tracey's interventions have had a positive impact, particularly on employees in crisis, often preventing or reducing sickness leave by helping them to manage their mental health more effectively.

What other people have said about Tracey:

Mark Hanson, Justice Director at Serco says:

"In late 2016, I inherited a prison as the Director that can only be described as being in crisis. At the heart of the issues was a staffing group that felt undervalued, uncared for and professionally exhausted. I recognised that to turn around this institution I would need to invest in staff support and care. Having worked with Tracey Hoults previously, I immediately realised that her skills, care and dedication to her role of counsellor would play a significant part of the prison staff recovery jigsaw.

"Within weeks Tracey had gained the confidence of the staff and management team - her service was fully subscribed within a month. I extended her hours and she then single handedly worked tirelessly with a staff group that had experienced trauma, personal stress and mental health issues. She again worked tirelessly both in clinics within the prison and outside of hours often taking calls in her own time. During my 6 years at the prison the person referred to simply as 'Tracey' was known and respected by staff of all grades- she carries real credibility for her care and compassion. In 33 years of working in the prison environment I have never come across an individual that has had so much impact on the care and wellbeing of prison staff.

“Tracey's role has now expanded across the Serco prison estate, where her care touches more staff. Prison work demands high levels of resilience, our staff often give so much of themselves to the role that it at times impacts on their health and wellbeing. Tracey Houlton has consistently and selflessly gone about supporting people who sometimes don't even realise they need it- such is her dedication she makes herself available in her own personal time to support others in crisis.

“I would highly commend Tracey Houlton for an award for services to Prison Staff in crisis and in need of someone to listen and most importantly genuinely care.”