

Brook House Interview 12 Notes
Luke Instone-Brewer (DCO) – 19 July 2017

28 years old. White British. Floor manager at Lloyds TSB. Worked here for 8 years, pretty much entirely Brook House. Activities: football, cricket, IT, library. Done that for 2 years. Before that, residential, which is literally looking after them in their living space. There's much more to res than activities: it's more in your face.

Average working day? It's long. Something new every day. It's testing. Can be confrontational. Some of it can be rewarding, depending on the situation.

2 mins: Anything changed? Yes. It's gone more from being custodial and it's turning more into customer service based, it feels like. We used to have deterrence against poor behaviour. It's now more, you feel more like your working at Tesco's in a prison environment. It's that sort of feeling.

What kind of deterrents did you have previously? Used to have warnings. Still have them, but now they don't have any backing to them. Previously: 3 warnings then end up down E wing for 'reflection'. There's not an appropriate deterrent anymore, which I think causes quite a lot of the stresses in this place. Not an appropriate deterrent.

Is it a small number of detainees? It's just continuous of the same poor behaviour. You're not setting the precedents against them.

'I didn't know this sort of place existed. Honestly, when I first applied, I thought I was gonna be stamping passports. [Laughs.] It's only when I came to training and I saw all the barbed wire and thought, "Where am I?"'

4.45 First impressions? I kinda just kept it in the back of my head. It's a very unusual situation to be in. As I say, didn't know they existed. If I thought about it too much, I probably wouldn't have stayed as long as I did. I treat it more like working in a prison. It practically is a prison.

5.30 Why are you leaving? 'It's just what I said before, there's no support anymore. I don't think it's safe. I think it's safe in relation to other custodial places anymore. It's just not safe anymore, you don't have a deterrent. It's not safe for the residents, it's not safe for us. Subject to continuous verbal abuse, nothing to back yourself up with. The reason I'm not on residential is cause I got attacked on the wings, which is a criminal matter. Cut by a bladed object and company took no action. Did nothing with the accused, didn't throw a deterrent at you, kept him on the same residential unit I was working on. Lost a lot of trust in the company.

N.B. He is a distinctly demoralised member of staff who feels things have changed too much and that he is on his way out.

7 mins – 8.30 – Society finds the next victim of oppression! We're seen as the oppressors and criticised by people who don't know what we do (we're just trying to look after their welfare and wellbeing) and don't know the criminal activity that lots of them have been up to.

An employee described being cut by a detainee with a 'bladed object'. There was no prosecution and the detainee was on the same wing the following day. Having lost trust in the company and feeling he is not sufficiently supported, he connects this to a broader trend:

'It's happened the last couple of years. They don't wanna take any approach that could be perceived as an oppressor, y'know? I dunno whether it's the state of society at the moment where society fights against the oppression and everyone's gonna find the next victim of oppression. I just think it's the way society is nowadays. It's not a good area of work to be in at the moment. I think quite a lot of it's been dictated by people who don't work in this sort of

environment who don't know what it's like to be in this sort of environment. They look at these people as being oppressed and hard done by, and are not aware of their criminal activity or what they are capable of doing. And they look at us as the evil oppressor, when we're just here trying to look after their welfare and wellbeing. Obviously you get the few that just wanna take it out on us and we need that deterrent.'

8.30 Describe BH to someone who knew nothing? It's...a prison layout, um, immigration centre. But to work here, if someone said they were thinking of working here I would say, if you fancy doing Tesco customer service desk in a prison environment, go for it. I'd also say, if I didn't like you, I'd say this is your job for life. If I did like you, I'd say stay away until there's some sort of reform. But I've heard it's the same in the prisons as well.

Friends work in prisons? Yeah. It's just support and deterrence.

9.30 In terms of support, what do you think is missing? It's deterrence. I'm not saying we need to go full on and be aggressive, we just need appropriate deterrence.

Do you feel like you have a professional identity working here? Not anymore, no.

Was there a time when you felt that you did? I would've said I was an officer, now I just feel like a customer service advisor.

10.20 Assaulted: when? About a year ago.

What happened? Should've had time to put reports together etc. We were short-staffed. Had to get one of the other residents to help me get the bandage on.

Was there a care team involved? There should've been but there wasn't. It's advertised but not really there.

12 Company losing staff? Experienced, like myself. Frustrated, just can't take the abuse. New staff, not supported and they don't have the training. People coming straight off training course, trained by people just finished the same course. Now, you're trained by people in the job less than 6 months. It's a shambles.

13 Emotionally demanding? Oh absolutely. I knew there would be challenges but I knew there would be support behind it. I feel like I've had my hands tied behind my back. Sitting on your hands while someone is verbally abusing you and there's nothing you can do. If you feel you answer back or do something, that could be your job on the line. And a lot of officers, they've got themselves in trouble with the company because they're so frustrated with the abuse, and because there's not an appropriate deterrent, as a human being they can only take so much and they're using inappropriate deterrents like swearing or...Say they make a racist comment or something against your family, cause you don't have that deterrent. [He says more stuff about deterrence etc.] They're using their words. If someone says FU [fuck you] they say it back, cause they're frustrated. 13 hours maybe six days on the trot and there's this verbal abuse every day, as a human being you can only take so much. And then, the Ds go back and do a complaint and next thing you know the guy's suspended. It's frustrating, it's upsetting. Put in that situation. We've got no way of challenging this behaviour.

15.30 You sound disempowered? Oh absolutely.

Anything else (other than deterrence) that might help? Mental health and staff. Subjected to a lot of verbal abuse, actual abuse, you see people SHing, you can see horrendous stuff. Especially when working 13 hours. You don't see your family. Say I'm working three days on the trot, I don't see my family for three days. It can have a huge toll on someone's mind. It'd be great to see a workplace counsellor in this place. That would be fantastic.

What it takes is for a staff member to go off with depression. It's the companies loss.

17.30 What makes a good member of staff? Supporting each other, teamwork, being able to ...what's the word? ... empathise with the detainees. That middle ground, able to have a laugh with the lads, but if they do cross the line, being able to challenge it immediately. Being organised, that's a big thing. There's a lot to it.

You're multiple things in this place for these guys, you're literally their go-to to the outside. You organise everything, you feed them, you clothe them, you could be their counsellor. You can act as a light version of their solicitor, there's so many traits that they expect from you. You do become a jack of all trades for these guys. They do expect so much from you. You are such a crutch to them.

19.20 Bad member of staff? Someone you can't trust. Trust is a big thing. Being lazy, that's a big one. Being introverted, I would say. You just can't in this place. A lot of these guys use the power of their voices, so you've gotta be able to stand your ground.

20.15 Healthcare? They have a difficult job to begin with. Lot of constraints. A lot of these guys are on medication. I've never known so many people to be on medication.

21 Staffing levels? Haemorrhaging staff. Revolving door of staff coming in, which can demoralise staff more.

22 Relationship with senior management? Don't really approach them, they don't approach me. They could be more present. Honestly I feel like they don't have much of a clue. In their ivory tower, but not on shop floor. Not saying they're bad, they just don't know much about what goes on. Keeping the contract signed and dotted. On the shop floor, they don't really know. In the morning briefing, they come in and tell us what we're not doing.

23.30 Gender? It's all up the individual. Some *detainees* treat women differently. Jamaican nationality: if kitted, won't touch a woman, so they'll send a three woman team, so he'll have to walk due to chivalry.

25 Ethnicity? It does in a way. I think it's harder if you're black in this place. My friend Babs gets a lot of grief from the Ds. They call him things like coconut, a traitor and stuff like that.

26 Can you trust staff here? Meh, some of them.

Is mental health or anything more complicated? No, our level of knowledge has changed.

27 Can detainees tell if staff are inexperienced? What do they do? Oh yeah, they manipulate them. They're very observant. You can put on a bit of weight and they'll notice.

If you were detained, what would concern you? Probably who I'd be sharing with. They're gonna lock you in at night with that person, I'd find that worrying. It'd also be how much control the staff has. Say another D attacked me, will staff have the confidence to help me or will they just stand there pressing their button? And the drugs situation. It's a confidence thing.

Young or naïve people? I wouldn't put it down to age, it's down to the person.

Work-life balance? No. Used to be alright.

33 I've struggled over the past couple of years. Dreams of people screaming at me and you can't say anything back. If someone calls you a piece of shit, you feel like a piece of shit.

34 Was once seriously concerned about a colleague.

G4S, Olympics, tagging

36 Do you talk to people outside about this? Generally not.

37 So political and I don't want to get into a political debate.

37.25 HO are why they're here, but we take the abuse for them. We're their shield. Supposed to be temporary and some people are here for years.

39 ACDT? It does its job. Never had a death in custody, so I'd say it does its job.

He lists a number of important things – deterrent, but also support etc.

40 Do you feel quite demoralised? Yeah, absolutely. I have been for a while.

Could they have done anything? [...] You feel less of a person, y'know.

42.40 The ones that have committed the most horrendous crimes are the ones that get released cos we just can't send them back cos of their human rights. Send them to country of origin, they could get killed. The ones that just wanna make a better life for themselves, they're the ones that get deported, cos it's easy. It's madness.