

From the Desk of the Editor

THE PRISONS HANDBOOK

The Definitive Annual Guide to the Penal System of England and Wales

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Dame Anne Owers
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OPEN LETTER

23rd November 2017.

Dear Anne,

Thank you for your reply to my letter, I genuinely appreciate you writing back with your views so quickly – as I published my letter to you, so I will publish your reply and this one in response to it.

I do not want to spend too much time on why The Prisons Handbook 2011 was dedicated to you, but suffice to say the book has an editorial board and their vote (by a majority against me) was to dedicate it to you.

It is absolutely right that in your published Inspection Reports as Chief Inspector you did criticise poor conditions, self harm, suicides, lack of decency – it was all there, absolutely.

But unlike your predecessors you never once to my recollection, in your nine years as Chief Inspector, held a press conference and publicly confronted Ministers with the misery that you continued to rediscover in prison after prison, and demand to know why so many of your recommendations for improvement were tossed in the MoJ trash.

You also seem to have missed the point completely about Colin Bell – my comments about the suicide of Colin Bell wasn't about the dreadful circumstances of his avoidable death – but the fact that IMB's rarely if ever exercise their powers to visit at night – that failure contributed to a culture at the prison that saw prison officers routinely rolling out mattresses to sleep during the night – while Mr Bell lay slumped dead against his cell door.

The IMB need robust, forceful, independent, public leadership right from the top – that's you by the way.

The IMB are in a complete mess, distrusted by prisoners, viewed as a nuisance by staff, completely ineffective, terrified of speaking out in case they are sacked (as Faith Spear was) – that is not evidence of an effective independent watchdog of the public interest at work; it's a group of people who, to a large extent, have been gagged by grooming to shut up and be quiet.

Nowhere in your reply to me do you set out your 'vision' of an Independent Monitoring Boards system of the future.

Nothing about ensuring IMB Members can speak to the press without fear of disciplinary action;

Nothing about ensuring Boards carrying out routine night visits exercising the powers that parliament invested with – for a reason;

Nothing about defending their statutory independence;

Nothing about why so many IMB members going around a prison have neither keys nor a radio – how are they supposed to ‘monitor’ incidents if the prison has no way of contacting them – even when they are physically inside the prison at the time?

Nothing about recruitment, widening it so it more accurately represents the a cross-section of the prison population they are in place to monitor – it is no joke to say that invitations to join the IMB are pinned up on notice boards in the Golf Club, and the last thing we need is even more of these ‘V-neck pullover, Volvo-owning, middle class, largely white male, retirees sitting on our IMB Boards.

When was the last time that the IMB advertised for members in The Sun, Daily Mirror, Daily Telegraph?

I can give you the answer because I know people who work on all three of these newspapers and they have checked the veracity of what I say; the answer is never.

What is your IMB vision Anne?

Watchdog or Lapdog?

Time will tell and people like me will not hesitate to keep publicly rattling your IMB ‘Gates’ if you do nothing to bring about the vital change that is so urgently needed.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Leech', with a stylized, cursive script.

Mark Leech FRSA
Editor
The Prisons Handbook