



PRISONS ORG UK LTD

Opening up the Closed World of Prisons

PO Box 832
HIGH PEAK SK22 9AL

Tel 0845 474 0013

customer.services@prisons.org.uk www.prisons.org.uk

PRESS RELEASE: PR/Alt/20122016

Issued 20thth December 2016

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

INMATES AT G4S's ALTCOURSE PRISON EXPRESS "SERIOUS SECURITY AND SAFETY CONCERNS"

Serious security and safety concerns have been expressed by inmates desperate to change their way of life at HM Prison Altcourse, operated by G4S in Liverpool - including the claim that staff at the private prison had advance notice of an attack on a prisoner who was subsequently stabbed to death at the jail 18 months ago, but failed to act to prevent it.

The allegations, made by prisoners who sign themselves "*Offenders Who Want To Change*" came in a letter dated 19th November 2016 to 'Converse' – the national monthly newspaper for prisoners in England and Wales.

Mark Leech, the editor of Converse said: "The letter arrived at our offices two weeks ago, we shared that letter at the time with G4S and we agreed a response by 10am today but no such response has been received which is why we are now publishing the letter – although in light of recent events at Birmingham Prison last week, also operated by G4S, the serious claims are all the more alarming and purport to show a prison that is spiraling out of control."

The Altcourse prisoners claim that the prison "rewards bad behaviour and punishes good behaviour", saying that "Drugs, phones and weapons are widely available and don't need to be hidden as staff don't bother any more to do all the paperwork for a [disciplinary hearing] as when it comes to the adjudication the case will be dismissed anyway."

Nationally, in both public and private sector prisons, prisoners who are caught with drugs or weapons should be subject to one month on the basic level of privileges, in addition to facing disciplinary hearings, but the inmates at Altcourse say that is just not happening.

"People caught with cannabis, NPS or legal highs, or weapons, have not been put on Basic or placed in the [segregation unit]" which has the effect that newly arrived prisoners "don't see the point in behaving, or do any detox program, as drugs are openly available, weapons don't put you on Basic and mobiles just get taken, but no one worries as the one month mandatory Basic... doesn't get applied."

Mr Leech said: "It may not be instantly recognisable to others but to me this is a deeply concerning claim, and not just for those in the prison – Altcourse is the only private prison in the country capable of holding our most dangerous prisoners, those placed in Category A, as such it is subject to rigorous external audits.

“But those audits must rely on accurate records being kept at the prison and if that is not happening, because no formal privilege reductions or disciplinary processes are kicking in when drugs, phones and weapons are being found, then that is a serious failure that renders any safety and security audit completely meaningless.

“If true it means the records kept by the prison, on which the auditors rely for their ratings, clearly do not reflect what is the true day-to-day reality of life inside the prison.”

Last month auditors passed HMP Altcourse for its safety and security.

The Altcourse inmates allege that even when prisoners risk their own safety by informing staff at the prison of weapons or drugs no immediate action is taken by the prison and it can be “three to four weeks” before any action is taken, asking “what is the point?”

“Yes the prison service is in crisis but here at HMP Altcourse, which was once the best prison in England, things can easily be fixed but the security department and most, not all, of their senior managers don’t give a damn... when prisoners raise calmly their concerns they get bullied by being threatened with getting shipped to Newcastle or furthest away possible from their families.”

Prisoners state that large numbers of “the most experienced officers” at Altcourse have left “as they cannot carry on working in the conditions in which the senior management team don’t support the unit officers and overrule the unit officers when they apply that prison rules.”

Drugs, inmates claim, are rife inside the prison.

“Weed [cannabis] is a banned substance but you can smell it all over the prison, when you raise your concerns with the senior managers and security the answers you get are that “it’s better than legal highs.””

Last year an Altcourse prisoner who fatally stabbed another inmate who was days away from release was later given a life sentence. Keir Michael, 41, was convicted of the manslaughter of Darren Ashcroft, 35, in his cell at HMP Altcourse by Liverpool Crown Court – the stabbing came just a month after a prison inspection report had warned about rising levels of violence in the Merseyside jail.

In an apparent reference to the death of Darren Ashcroft the Altcourse prisoners said: “someone got killed here about 18 months ago, security was aware of the threat but nothing was done.

“A man about to be released after his rehabilitation died.”

The resignations of the most experienced staff has meant junior G4S officers are now in charge of training new recruits to the jail say inmates.

“Experienced staff left, replaced by inexperienced staff, who train the most recent staff arrivals which causes great concern amongst prisoners.”

In an ironic assertion given the events at Birmingham prison last week, the inmates say they have written because “We don’t want [what happens] here to happen in other establishments, yes we offended, yes we are paying society back for our crimes, but no one deserves to feel unsafe on a daily basis.”

“What’s a crime outside and gets you sent to prison, is still unpunished when you are at HMP Altcourse. Being in prison is the punishment, but a safe environment should be provided to get the best chance of rehabilitation.

“Being educated in following rules can only be provided if rules and regulations are followed by the prison which houses the offenders.

“This is an open letter to express our concerns about security at HMP Altcourse.”

The letter is signed: “Offenders Who Want To Change”

Mr Leech, who in addition to being editor of the national prisoners newspaper Converse, to which the inmates wrote, is also editor of The Prisons Handbook, added: “this is not about a private versus public prison.”

Mr Leech said: "As the Secretary of State made clear in the House of Commons yesterday, identical problems are effecting prisons nationwide, this is not about public versus private, it doesn't matter whose name is *over* the prison gate, it is what happens to real people who live and work on the other side of it that matters most.

"We urgently need a public inquiry into our prisons, we have started an online petition to obtain that, and which is supported by the General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association.

"The National Offender Management Service is understandably disorientated, it is on its third reorganisation in five years, we now have our third Justice Secretary in 18 months, the prison service is haemorrhaging highly experienced staff, and we cannot keep stumbling from one abrupt policy change and budget cut to the next.

"Enough is surely enough."

G4S agreed to provide a response but by the agreed deadline no such response had been received.

Ends -

Notes to editors.

Converse is published by Spyhole Press (www.spyholepress.com) a wholly owned subsidiary of Prisons org uk, (www.prisons.org.uk) publishers of The Prisons Handbook for England and Wales, now in its 18th annual edition.

Converse, which delivers around 60,000 copies a month of its award-winning newspaper to prisons in England and Wales, has been published monthly since December 2007.

Biographical details for Mark Leech, its editor, can be found at www.markleech.com

Mark Leech, who lives in northern Thailand is on +66 894444005 – note GMT + 7 hours. His UK PA is Andy Simpson on 07836 717021. Interviews can be arranged.

A copy of the handwritten prisoners' letter is here: www.prisons.org.uk/altcourseopenletter.pdf

The online petition for a Public Inquiry into our prisons is here:

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/172757>