



Dame Anne Owers

IMB National Chair

By email

Dear Anne,

30th May 2019

IMB NATIONAL ANNUAL REPORT 2017- 2018

Thank you for your National Annual Report, published on 6th June 2019. Your report raises a number of issues which I have now had the opportunity to consider and will take each in turn.

Staffing

Your report discusses the impact of staff shortages and relatively inexperienced staff on the regime and safety within prisons. We recognise the need to recruit and retain staff and, to this end, increased staff numbers by an additional 4,767 FTE prison officers between October 2016 and December 2018; achieving 22,672 prison officers in post, the highest number of officers since March 2012.

Having recruited large numbers of new staff, it will be difficult to get the results we need unless they are well inducted and supported by experienced staff. We are therefore working with stakeholders to offer financial incentives to retain experienced staff; and plan to target the prisons losing the most experienced officers to understand why this is happening. We have also introduced a revised induction and support programme leading to improved staff capability and confidence.

Drugs

I share your concerns about the prevalence of drugs in prisons and the associated problems of bullying and debt. A joint HMPPS/MoJ Drugs Taskforce was created in Summer 2018 to tackle this. It has drawn together work from across the organisation into a National Prisons Drug Strategy, published in April 2019. The strategy is accompanied by guidance for prisons and examples of best practice.

In addition, we have trained more than 300 specialist drugs dogs, introduced better technology, and made it a criminal offence to possess psychoactive substances in prison. We are investing £7 million on new security measures, such as scanners, improved searching techniques and phone-blocking technology to address the ongoing availability of drugs; and have established a National Intelligence Unit and Serious and Organised Crime Unit. These units work with prisons, the police and other law enforcement agencies to identify and act against suppliers.

Reducing harm from debt requires work explicitly focused on debt itself, so it is now one of the areas of work in the National Prison Safety Programme. We have also developed a Debt Framework for Governors to assist in the development of an establishment's strategy in this area.

Safety

Your report highlights an increase in staff assaults. Violence against our dedicated staff will never be tolerated. The Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act became law on 13 November and

increases the penalty, from six to 12 months, for those who assault emergency workers including prison officers.

We have also invested in nearly 6,000 body worn video cameras, alongside staff training in rehabilitative conversations with the rollout of five-minute intervention training. This provides staff with skills to deal with challenging situations in a fair and just way and high-quality evidence to support prosecutions.

Segregation and Accommodation

Your report draws attention to mentally ill prisoners held in segregation units and poor accommodation conditions. I am determined to improve the process to ensure delays in transferring prisoners to secure mental health facilities are reduced, and acknowledge this is dependent on collaborative efforts between MoJ, HMPPS, DHSC and NHS England. NHS England will be consulting on its guidance soon, and the independent review of the Mental Health Act, published in December 2018, made recommendations which require detailed consideration in the context of transfers from prison to hospital. These reviews will inform our joint approach.

It is the case that we need to tackle the issue of decency in prisons as standards have deteriorated over recent years. Funding constraints have restricted our ability to invest in maintenance and renewal, exacerbated by the problems with facilities management delivery, as highlighted in your report. Government Facilities Services Ltd, which took over Carillion's services after its collapse, is still in a transitional phase of stabilising the service, resulting in current performance not yet at the levels I would like to see. We are expecting to see improvement as the organisation matures; and to underpin this, will be commencing national decency audits.

On top of our current maintenance allocation, we made c.£30m additional investment in 2018/19 to improve the fabric of prisons, targeting those with the most pressing maintenance issues. With this funding we have delivered refurbishments at a number of prisons as well as essential fire safety work. We are also focussing on the long-term actions needed to build and maintain a fit for purpose future estate. This means closing ageing, ineffective and overcrowded prisons, and replacing them with decent buildings fit for today's demands.

Property

Your report highlights the high volume of property that goes missing in transit between prisons. The PECS Generation 4 contracts have updated vehicle specifications to include a larger capacity for property storage. In addition, there is a requirement for contractors to accurately account for any property they take responsibility for during transit. A new ICT based solution, called the PECS Move Platform, is being designed to support the new contracts and part of this will be elements that allow for better recording.

Equality and diversity

The Lammy Review has given a fresh impetus to the race agenda in HMPPS and we have a programme of work to meet the recommendations made. However, I acknowledge that it will take time to effect the cultural change that is needed. To this end, Regional Equality Managers are being appointed and provided with quality data updates to monitor progress and support prisons to address any disproportionate outcomes. This will enable enhanced understanding and effective monitoring across the prisons estate.

I am pleased that IMBs have recognised some of the positive work being taken forward to support older, transgender and disabled people. We appreciate that we have further work to do in these areas and are currently working on a national project to improve the way in which information on disabilities and reasonable adjustments is recorded. This will improve the treatment and outcomes for disabled prisoners. We will also be shortly publishing revised MoJ/HMPPS guidelines concerning the care and management of transgender offenders.

Health and Social Care

The government fully agrees that strong, strategic relationships at all levels across the health and justice space are essential to achieve our shared objectives. The National Partnership Agreement recognises this, with reviewing and improving commissioning between health and justice being one of its ten priorities.

The National Partnership Agreement's first objective is to improve the health and wellbeing of people in prison and reduce health inequalities. This is a shared commitment recognising the significant multiple complex needs in the prison population on entering prison, often exacerbated by a lack of access to appropriate screening, immunisation, diagnostic and therapeutic options prior to incarceration. The National Partnership Agreement recognises prison as a health opportunity for many and the accompanying workplan evidences how health and justice partners are working together to best reduce identified health inequalities.

Education, work and purposeful activity

Our ability to recruit skilled instructional staff continues to challenge our delivery of purposeful activities in prisons. We are therefore working on a centralised recruitment and training programme that we anticipate will ease the pressures on establishments.

In addition, a range of support is being offered to prisons to improve allocation and attendance. The internal market continues to be the main employer within prison industries, and work has been ongoing to increase the volume and range of items manufactured in our workshops to meet demand. This in turn will increase activity places available. For example, toothbrush manufacture has been brought back in-house from China and production of this core decency item is now located at HMP Garth.

Preparation for release

Your report discusses issues with resettlement work in prisons, namely, prisoners serving Indeterminate Sentences for Public Protection (IPP) and Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). HMPPS remains committed to the safe progression of prisoners serving IPPs and is ensuring prioritisation of post-tariff prisoners in accessing rehabilitative interventions. We have also developed progression regimes at four prisons which are dedicated to indeterminate prisoners, IPPs, lifers and some Extended Determinate Sentence prisoners struggling to achieve release via the usual routes.

This work is translating into significant reductions in the number of IPP prisoners in custody. The latest published figures show the population standing at 2,403 at the end of March 2019. This is reduced from 2,884 at the end of March 2018.

Governors need to be able to tailor their ROTL regime to the circumstances of each offender and the opportunities available locally. In February, we consulted key stakeholders on delivering a more effective approach to ROTL and we have tested the provisions in three prisons.

Please accept my warm thanks for your thorough and enlightening National Annual Report. I appreciate the valuable role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards throughout the estate, and am very grateful for their continued hard work.

*Yours ever,
Robert*

ROBERT BUCKLAND QC MP