

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



PGA Office: Room 1.12,
Clive House
70 Petty France,
London, SW1H 4EX

PGA Officers: President
Vice President
Finance Officer
National Officers

Andrea Albutt
Duncan Scales
Shaun Williamson
John Attard
Dave Hoskins
Mark Icke

Telephone: 0300 047 5781

Fax: 0300 047 6858

Email: james.bryant01@hmps.gsi.gov.uk

Website: www.prison-governors-association.org.uk



@PGA_Prisons

PRESS RELEASE

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PGA response to the report into the concerted indiscipline and fire in Erne House (HMP Maghaberry)

The Prison Governors' Association was not invited to comment on the investigation report nor provided with a copy prior to it being published. There are a number of questions we have, the first being why is a key report, frequently raised by Assembly politicians, and eagerly awaited by the media, almost silently released by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) two months after the date of completion? The synopsis of the so-called independent report is damning on how the incident being investigated was managed, but silent on what the PGA considers to be equally important issues that contributed to it.

The investigation was commissioned by the Director General of NIPS (DG), Sue McAllister. However, the recommendation from the CJINI report was that the investigation should be independent and, since the DG played a key role in the management of the incident at the time, the independence of the report would appear undermined from the outset. The report does not state how the investigators were selected and who selected them.

The management of a serious incident, which this became, can be a complex matter and consequently there are many factors that can contribute to how it was started, managed and concluded. One of the conclusions in this report is "*... that the severe restrictions to the regime that plagued the prison for many months prior to April 2015 due to exceptionally high staff absence levels, was a pivotal reason in the indiscipline displayed by a small number of Erne House prisoners*". The PGA gave evidence to the NI Justice Committee on 14 January of this year (available on Hansard) that HMP Maghaberry had been operating with a significantly reduced budget and was deprived of staff. This, according to the report, was pivotal and is a matter that the PGA would expect an investigation of this nature to provide more detail on. Specifically, the PGA would expect the investigation to identify who was responsible for the depleted staffing levels and why action was not taken sooner to address it, such as recruitment, posting staff on detached duty and staff being transferred in. It must be pointed out that local management, those the PGA represent, did not have the authority to do this but merely to raise it as a concern, which they did at the time.

The choice of language in the report is also a cause for concern since it refers to members of the Silver Commend team displaying 'poor and reckless' decision making. This is very strong criticism and in absence

of better details the PGA has no alternative but to suspend judgement on whether such scathing and potentially libellous criticism is justified.

In any investigation, particularly investigations into serious incidents, the expectation is that it will get as close as it can to identifying the root cause and what can be done to prevent recurrence. In the absence of complete transparency it is difficult to comment as to whether this investigation achieves that. On the face of it, the PGA believes more could have been done.

Note for editors:

The Prison Governors Association was founded in October 1987 to represent the higher operational managers in the Prison Service in England and Wales. The PGA was placed on the register of Trade Unions on 6 November 1987 (No. 639T). On 28 July 1988 the Certification Officer under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 issued the Prison Governors Association with a Certificate of Independence. The status of the Prison Governors Association is that of an independent registered Trade Union.

For more information contact John Attard, PGA National Officer (email: john.attard@hmps.gsi.gov.uk)