

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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PRESS RELEASE

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PGA response to the Inspection Report into HMP Maghaberry

It is extremely unusual for the Prison Governors' Association to respond negatively to the publication of an Inspection report into a prison. The importance of independent inspections is fully understood and essential improvements have been made in prisons as a result of the Inspectorate's forensic investigations.

However, as much as the PGA welcomes the positives identified in the follow up inspection of HMP Maghaberry, it cannot pass without critical comment that this was an opportunity missed to stimulate a real and positive change. The fanfare with which this unprecedented Inspection was announced has not been matched with what was promised – addressing the depth of concerns about what was found and the urgency with which this needed to happen. It is in our view a bland report that lacks sufficient detail.

Following the last inspection in May 2015, the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) and HM Inspectorate held a press conference and lambasted the prison, particularly local management. HM Chief Inspector, Nick Hardwick, said, *"This is one of the worst prisons I've ever seen and the most dangerous prison I've been to . . . Dickens could write about Maghaberry without batting an eyelid."* The inspection was apparently so bad that the Inspectorate took the unprecedented step of announcing that they would return in January, 2016, to carry out a further inspection to assess the impact of the work underway and progress against the inspection recommendations. *"It will only be at this point following an impartial assessment that our concerns may be allayed."* said Mr. McGuigan of the CJINI.

The inspection could not fail but to find some progress since the management team had been bolstered, the Prison Service eventually took steps to increase staffing through the use of detached duty, transfers into the prison and recruitment, and the prison population had been reduced by around 150 prisoners. Further, the prison population had been reduced by around 150 prisoners. The question the PGA has been asking, and will continue to ask, is why this did not take place prior to the inspection and prior to the removal of all but one of the entire senior management team?

This inspection has not rescored the four measures by which it assesses a prison but instead focused on its nine recommendations made following the May 2015 inspection. It is apparent from the overview report that progress towards achieving many of the recommendations has either not been sufficiently made or is silent as to whether they have been. This is not a criticism of the new management team since the challenges they and their staff face at Maghaberry are enormous and should not be underestimated. There is no quick fix to improving any prison described as poor, as the Inspectorate described Maghaberry, but unless the real issues are identified there will be no fix at all.

The report referred back to a failure in leadership, compounded by an ineffective relationship between headquarters and local management, and a general malaise which sought to apportion blame rather than find solutions to problems. What that inspection failed to do, as did this one, was either to understand the reasons for that or, if it did understand, sufficiently articulate what those reasons were. The PGA has provided compelling evidence to the Justice Committee of Northern Ireland of where accountability sat for some key matters that contributed to the prison's poor performance. One of those key issues, for example, was a serious staffing shortage, responsibility of which sits with headquarters to address. Without sufficient staff, almost everything that is required to take place for the efficient and smooth running of a prison is detrimentally affected – prisoner supervision, getting prisoners to work / education, official visits, social visits, healthcare appointments, managing security intelligence, escorts, searching, serving meals, resettlement, and staff/prisoner relations, to name a few.

Staff are the lifeblood of a prison and without sufficient numbers prisoners will react and the prison will inevitably struggle to survive. Unfortunately, the prison continues to be hampered with staffing shortages and the PGA remains concerned over the levels of drugs, and the levels of threats and assaults by prisoners on staff, as highlighted in the latest report. We also have concerns on the dual role of the Governor, who appears to not only be the Governor of the prison but also the Director of Operations within NIPS. Being the Governor of Maghaberry prison is a complex enough job in itself without the additional responsibilities of another job higher up in the organisation.

It is with regret that we note that not much has significantly changed given the additional resources and the report, rather unusually in our view, gives much emphasis to 'plans' to address issues. As a professional association, the PGA welcomes the increased investment local managers had been requesting prior to the May 2015 inspection and would expect current levels to continue after the spotlight has faded on this particular prison and it is operating as it should. Notwithstanding the obvious political sensitivities of Maghaberry prison, it is difficult to understand the vitriolic assault on it when other prisons in the UK being inspected around the same time and since, which have received equally poor or, in some cases, worse inspection reports than this one did not get the same attention.

If genuine progress is to be made in Maghaberry then local managers need to be empowered to make appropriate decisions without fear of recrimination and NIPS Headquarters need to understand and accept that they must also take responsibility and lead from the front. Furthermore, future inspections need to hold all staff who impact on the operation of a prison to account and not just those on the frontline.

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.

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