

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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PRESS RELEASE – Resolution of Riot at HMP Birmingham

The retaking of HMP Birmingham so quickly demonstrates that lessons can be learned when compared with the management of the riot at HMP Strangeways over 25 years ago, which lasted over three weeks. It is also a testament to the professionalism and courage of the staff both on the scene and in the command suites. Without such swift and decisive action, this disturbance may well have dragged on, potentially putting staff, prisoners and the prison structure itself at greater risk. There are reports of serious injuries but it is with a massive sigh of relief that there were no fatalities.

Two months ago, the PGA called for an independent Public Inquiry into the unprecedented rise in violence in prisons. Since then, there has been a fatal stabbing, escapes, three riots, and a further increase in serious assaults on staff and self-inflicted deaths are showing no sign of reducing. That call must now be heeded in order to cure NOMS from the corporate amnesia it is clearly suffering from. The reduction of staffing is the biggest contributory factor in the decline of our prisons but other changes and factors have also played their part. The constant tinkering of staffing, for example, saw the removal of the Principal Officer, the most senior uniform grade, which was hastily replaced with the Custodial Manager and then the removal of the Senior Officer grade, which was introduced following recommendations of an inquiry into prison escapes and security. The imposition of a flatter management structure and rigid setting of grades and numbers has resulted in Governors being less able to respond to the unique demands of their particular prisons. The added impact of synthetic drugs, drones, the proliferation of mobile phones and overcrowding is producing a most toxic cocktail. The fact that this riot took place in a privately managed prison is irrelevant. The public sector is the biggest provider of prison places and it is inconceivable that these changes will not have a contagious effect on the whole of the prison estate – including the private sector.

This disturbance will be investigated and there will, inevitably, be lessons learned. The hope is that this happens very quickly with any recommendations prioritised and implemented. Taking nothing away from what looks like the outstanding handling of the incident, the outcome could have been much worse – the repair bill will be enormous and there were no fatalities. The loss of places at the prison will now put additional strains on other prisons across the UK already under

severe pressure. Prison governors will need to be supported with greater resources and the freedoms to act if there is to be a genuine commitment to prevent further similar incidents.

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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