

# Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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## PRESS RELEASE – Justice Committee’s Report on Prison Reform and Governor Empowerment

The Prison Governors’ Association (PGA) welcomes the Justice Committee’s report on prison reform and governor empowerment. It is an excellent report that captures many of the concerns the PGA raised and acknowledges the importance of the need for Governor support. The damage done to prisons over the last five years has been significant and cannot be undone in a matter of months by rushing through policies. Unless Government slows down it will squander a once in a generation, golden opportunity, to make a meaningful difference.

The Government’s commitment to making prison governors genuinely accountable will only happen if there is an equal commitment to making them genuinely autonomous; and there are clear signs that this is being diluted. We have seen this in the change of terminology from autonomy to empowerment, the ability to plan financially beyond 12 months being removed, the freedoms to alter management and staffing structures not supported with the money to do it, and insufficient resources to go outside of national contracts.

Central oversight in key areas remains important. The need to transfer prisoners out and receive them back is vital since without some central oversight there is the potential to damage not just the ability to address prisoners’ needs but also a prison’s stability. However, this central oversight needs to allow sufficient flexibility for governors to be able to innovate. There is still clearly a desire to introduce league tables despite the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) declaring it will be publishing performance data instead. Comparing prisons with schools in support for the introduction of league tables is like comparing apples with oranges and the suggestion that there is not a system already in place for comparing performance is not correct. There is no support from any informed quarter for the introduction of league tables and there are too many variables beyond the Governor’s control to make them meaningful.

Staff shortages remain a significant factor in many prisons and, despite assurances to the contrary, have still not been recruited in sufficient numbers - not even in the 10 Pathway prisons identified to receive the 400 additional officers announced in October last year. The importance of this cannot be overstated in that the new offender management caseworker model, a key feature in the plans, cannot be implemented until prisons have sufficient staff. It also remains the case that

500 prison governors were let go in the last five years resulting in those that remain working longer hours with increased stress levels.

The Government issued performance agreements for Governors to sign on 1 April this year, which were lacking in detail and were not shared with the PGA prior to issue. Consequently, it was not possible to support them and the PGA reluctantly advised Governor's not to sign them. That advice has not changed. There have been a number of meetings between the PGA and MoJ since that advice was given and each time changes have been made to the agreements. Whilst this is encouraging in one respect, in that it demonstrates Government is listening, it is concerning in another in that it reveals the agreements are incomplete and should never have been presented for signature in the first place.

The PGA remains committed to introducing changes that improve safety, public protection and the rehabilitation of prisoners. How Governors will be able to do that is hard to see at this moment in time given the lack of clarity. The relationship between MoJ and the new agency, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, feels more competitive than collaborative in its infancy resulting in policies being introduced at an alarming rate having not been subject to the usual scrutiny.

Many of the proposed changes are welcomed as they put prisons back on the right path. It does seem, however, that constructive engagement and recognising the importance of Governors' buy-in are being traded off for speed of implementation which, paradoxically, is slowing it down.

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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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