

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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Bulletin 778

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Dear Colleagues,

PGA Communications Update

"As you will know, we circulated a brief COVID update last week. This was intended to go out with a brief note stating a belated 'monthly' update was to follow. This bulletin is part of our ongoing commitment to provide a less formal overview of our current work to members, an undertaking we gave after conference last year".

COVID Update

It feels a lifetime ago since we went into COVID lockdown, and we thought it may be useful to give a bit of an overview of where the PGA is at this time. For regular conference attendees we gave a commitment last October to improve our communications with you and had made some inroads to making these improvements. Sadly some events prior to COVID, then lockdown, has resulted in our commitment to write to you monthly stall.

We are longing for this year's Conference to take place, and at this stage we are hopeful that restrictions around social gathering will have been lifted to allow it to take place. We suspect that this year's Conference will be different from previous years, with an emphasis being placed on reflection and paying our respects to missing colleagues and friends. There is a possibility that October may be the first chance we'll be able to have a social gathering which will make this year's conference even more special. Please keep the date free for this year's event (13 / 14 October), we'd love to see both new and familiar faces.

We know that we can't provide much in the way of practical support, but please be assured that we remain focused on upholding the rights of our members. We are no different to other parts of the organisation and we are now working slightly differently. Our NEC colleagues remain at work in their normal roles, with your National Officers now working out of prisons. This is something they felt strongly about and pushed to be allocated a prison at an early stage of the COVID incident.

PGA officials are now working in the following: -

- HMP Wakefield
- HMP Full Sutton
- HMP Swaleside
- HMP Wealstun
- HMP Stocken

- HMP Sudbury
- HMP Swansea
- Yorkshire Prisons Group

James Bryant (james.bryant01@justice.gov.uk) continues to work remotely to manage all of the Association's business matters and like most other parts of HMPPS we have a member of the NEC isolating due to being in a high risk group. Like most other trade unions we have allocated facility time, at present this appears to be sufficient to continue to maintain our service to members, whilst the level of engagement around COVID remains relentless, normal business has reduced.

We have also noticed that there is a reduction in the demand to provide support to members, with a significant reduction in investigations and other HR matters being commissioned. We would like to think this may be down to our influence, but suspect COVID may be the cause. We do ask that members reflect about why we are not choosing to go direct to formal processes?

We are continually grateful for support that is given to our NEC colleagues from their establishments in allowing some flexibility to dial into meetings when possible. We made a decision at the start of lock down to suspend face to face NEC meetings, these are being replaced by monthly teleconferences, we'd like to have video conference or 'Zoom' meetings, but sadly we are blessed with the same IT as the rest of you!

For the majority of day to day work, Andrea Albutt remains the first point of contact for COVID, and Carl continues to provide support, working remotely from a prison.

Current COVID Priorities

We continue to raise with our employer the need to **reduce overcrowding in our prisons** – There is a clear benefit to our members and the people in our care if prisons are not operating at a crowded level. In doing so this places significant risk of infection and places a near impossible set of circumstances that our members are being asked to navigate through to enable effective forms of cohorting. There are a number of initiatives which are being considered to reduce overcrowding, which include the tactical use of transfers, potential increases in capacity across the estate and the use of 'temporary steel shed' like accommodation.

Use of temporary accommodation – In consultation, our stated position is that we can see the value of the short term use of temporary accommodation, but the 'tin sheds' being proposed are not suitable for anything other than being used in crisis management. While they may give some short term respite to prisons where shared accommodation is the norm or where shared washing and toilet facilities are the norm, these units must not be left on site to be used in a longer term use. They are not intended to be a person's permanent and only residence, and we will object to any plans that see them being left in prisons to become an unwanted legacy of COVID. We have shared a view that governors must not be compelled to use these units if in doing so it will put undue stresses on their staffing levels.

The PGA's position prior to COVID was that we believe our prisons are overcrowded, that as a society we use imprisonment too often for short sentences (12 months or less) and the quality of some of our prisons are unacceptable. Our current position has not changed.

We fully understand that one of our service's aims is to protect the public, and we must effectively execute the wishes of the courts we serve. We have, and we continue to ask Government to make the brave and bold decision to give our members a fighting chance to help protect the NHS by reducing our population. This can only be effectively achieved and sustained if people with short sentences are released from prison. Mr Buckland confirmed less than 40 people have benefited from early release so far, that's out of 2,000, or was it 4,000, we wonder where the blockage is?

We are also putting to our employer that when we do **move out of 'lockdown'** we will need significant headroom in the system to allow regimes to safely expand. We believe that there is too much uncertainty around how our prison 'communities' will react to any relaxation of the current lockdown restrictions. We do know that our members are struggling to maintain social distancing, provide robust cohorting and this is when we have the most severe restrictions placed on regimes.

We need to have the headroom to manage the inevitable return to normal regimes – This will not be achieved through the ad hoc application of early release. We raise with our employer that our current reduction in population is not as a direct result of any type of early release, but is in the main due to the lack of upstream activity within the wider criminal justice system. This slowdown will not continue and once law enforcement and the judiciary return to anywhere near normal, unless we have significant capacity, we will be at our most vulnerable by being asked to expand regimes while again being asked to operate in overcrowded and unsuitable conditions.

Safety – We continue to have good engagement with the HMPPS Safety team. We genuinely feel the views of our members are being listened to. We are giving a consistent message that our members are doing all that they can to ensure our people and those in our care remain as safe as possible. What we are certain of is that we must learn from our current COVID regimes. While it would be easy to dismiss any improvement in safety as being purely down to locking people up, we are getting a feeling that it is deeper than this. We believe that our colleagues in prisons have far surpassed any expectations that were placed upon them, our success in maintaining order and dignity across prisons has been remarkable. No one would have dreamed of running prisons with such restrictions, but against the odds we have done this and the majority of our people have grown with experience and confidence during this period and this is having a positive impact on the relationships between all those who work and live in prisons. Would we have chosen such a drastic and dangerous change to our regimes? No, but what we must do is learn what are the best elements we want to take forward.

What is becoming a common theme in the feedback we are receiving, is that the men and women in our care see the legitimacy in what we are doing, and that they prefer to have order and control in the places where they live. If we can hold on to few of the things we are experiencing during COVID, then legitimacy, order and control must be high on the list.

PPE - We trust that our members know what PPE is and are happy that we refer to it simply as PPE, it bemuses us that news presenters constantly feel the need to tell us what PPE, Personal Protective Equipment, is (Sorry had to do that!). Having so many actions plans returned for not writing out in full abbreviations the habit sticks!

We have raised on members' behalf concerns about quality and quantity of PPE, we do believe that our employer is working to source and provide sufficient amounts. We do not believe we are there yet, but with our current levels of success, stock may build up to an acceptable level.

We are having reports of colleagues experiencing employees providing their own PPE, whether this be gloves or protective masks. We understand that in doing so this gives a level of personal assurance, but we are asking the employer to give central guidance to ensure consistency across all sites.

We are also aware that members are being asked to consider becoming clean shaven. We believe this is to be a personal choice for individuals to make.

Redeployment to prisons - Our membership covers a broad church, with members across private and public sector providers, in prisons, headquarters and other support roles. We have and continue to support all our members regardless of grade, role or workplace. We are a union and as such our strength is formed by the collective. We are aware that there has been some feeling that

members in prisons have been left out on a limb, and that the resources that may or may not have been allocated to support the frontline has not come to fruition. This has been raised to us by members, informally and more formally.

We were told during the pre-planning period just before we went into lockdown that where operational colleagues who were not in key and operationally critical COVID roles, they would be liable for redeployment into prisons. We welcomed this as it would give our members greater resilience in prisons. We are aware that this has taken place in some areas, as members of your NEC have confirmed this and other forms of intelligence has indicated the same. We are not however in a position to know what the exact status of all operational managers are, and it is not our place to seek individual or collective confirmation that colleagues who are not currently in prisons are in critical roles. *This is something for the employer to determine.*

We value all our members, but we are after all the **'Prison Governors' Association'** and it should be no surprise that most of our concern and effort will be directed to improving the working conditions of our members in prisons. We do however understand and appreciate the difficult and hard work that takes place outside of prisons in headquarters. Some people would say that one could not exist without the other, some people have described a symbiotic relationship between Prisons and HQ and on occasion we believe it's even been described as a 'love-hate' relationship. What we are sure of, is that in times of crisis, the things which make all our members stand out is that they are prison governors, they have all worked in prisons and when the call goes out they can, will and should if asked go back to the frontline.

We are aware that there are a number of our members who are desperate to get into a prison to support their colleagues, but their work has been determined by their managers as being critical to the operational line, or COVID crisis, and that they must remain in their current roles. To these members we thank you and we are sure that your efforts are being appreciated on the frontline. We have been genuinely impressed by the awareness shown by colleagues outside of prisons when contacting or seeking information from prisons. This has been kept to a minimum and we are in your gratitude for the hard work and effort put in to ensure all our essential services and processes continue.

We are also aware that we have a number of members who are having to shield. This must be one of the most challenging and difficult period in their careers, not only being fearful for their own health, but not being able to be in your normal place of work to 'muck in' and lead your teams. You have our utmost respect and support. Each reason for shielding will be different, but the consequences for the individual for not doing so is the same. Our members have long made sacrifices for our profession, ignoring PHE advice and coming into work as opposed to shielding would be a sacrifice too great – stay safe and we again thank those who are still able to contribute.

We have also heard of instances where members have refused to go back into a prison with no valid reason, or they have publicly stated that they will never go back and would have to be "dragged back in". It is not our place to go looking for these members, and we ask our members not to inform us of anyone who they believe has forgotten where they have come from. What we would ask, however, is if you are someone who feels like it's beneath you to support your colleagues on the frontline, and that you would have to be dragged back in to a prison to support our members, then please consider if you wish to remain a member of the PGA.

Regular Engagement and Briefings – We receive a weekly briefing from Phil Copple, and have ready access to Executive Directors to both receive briefings, but more importantly to be able to bring to their attention any significant matters which may be impacting our members. We are also being afforded a streamlined 'Annex A' consultation process on most of the instructions that are being published about COVID. It would be wrong for us to say we have read every bit of information

which has been issued. We are however prioritising our responses to those areas we believe to be the most critical to our members and our prisons at this time. We believe that we have influenced some positive change.

Communications - We have upped our game a little with social media. We believe we are getting the balance right between highlighting the excellent core work of our prisons, lobbying to reduce the population and paying our respects to the bloody hard work being done across the CJS during the COVID crisis. We are aware that not all our followers share our view of the importance of teamwork, specifically when this is being portrayed in group 'tik tok' dances – Whilst we do respect all our members' views, just be grateful you've not seen us dance!

There is a serious point though, we do acknowledge that there is excellent work taking place across all prisons and probation, and where we could we would of course give our public support to all of our colleagues. Sometimes we miss things, sometimes it's a judgment call – personally we don't think we're doing too bad at the moment. We have purposely refrained from putting out lots of bulletins because we're pretty sure you know what's happening.

What we have also been doing in our downtime is sending out short emails to regular conference attendees or active, named Twitter followers, just to check in with them and give a bit of an update – sorry if we don't get everyone, but we'll get to you all eventually!

Website - Further to our last update, we are working with a website provider to update our existing website. We are hopeful of further work on the new look to be ready for evaluation by members of the NEC within the next week or so.

Prior to COVID this is some of the work which the NEC were pursuing:

JES Review – We were at the stage where some of the initial findings from the JES review had been disclosed to us. These findings demonstrated a number of issues, which were of no surprise to us. Findings demonstrated that a number of establishments were operating outside of JES, that there were some confusion around the application of Job Descriptions and the level of approval and assurance for any changes to structures or posts was weak. Once we return to normal business, we are set to continue to challenge JES and look for opportunities that will benefit our members.

Operational Manager / Duty Governor Review – Again, prior to going in to 'lockdown' the NEC had been given a written update about the work which had been commissioned to look at the work of Operational Managers / Duty Governors within prisons. This review was commissioned as a direct response to successive requests by the PGA that work of operational managers in prisons is not sufficiently resourced or rewarded. The findings of this initial review were again unsurprising, a picture of inconsistency across the estate has been painted, with our members often working both in excess of their contracted hours, but also not having sufficient time to fulfil the core elements of their functional job descriptions. We remain set to continue our work to address this unfairness when lockdown ends.

Prison Service Pay Review Body – At the beginning of the month, we attended by teleconference this year's Prison Service Pay Review Body (PSPRB) oral evidence session. As in previous years, we felt that the PSPRB asked some searching and relevant questions and challenged a number of aspects of our written submission. We collectively came away thinking we had put forward a strong case in support of our evidence, in addition to our written submission, we believe we were able to articulate our concerns to the Board that the COVID response would more likely than not remain an issue for our members long into the next financial year, and as such this should be reflected within their considerations.

We have been informed by the PSPRB secretariat that the ETA for publication of the PSPRB report is sometime in June. Of course, this may change and we will inform you if there are any changes to this timetable.

OMiC and SPO – Our position still has not changed and we are looking forward to continuing our ongoing decisions with our employer about line management of senior probation officers, we remain positive that this areas of misalignment can be addressed.

In finishing off, please be assured that we continue to have our members’ best interests at the forefront of all that we do. We remain positively engaged for the wider membership and are as always on call for individual members should they need help or support from the PGA. We acknowledge that on occasion we can’t please everyone all of the time, but we must remain focused and have belief in what we are doing. We are hearing of some fantastic work taking place across Prisons and HQ, let’s remember we are one HMPPS.

Stay safe.

Andrea Albutt
President

Carl Davies
National Officer

Adrian Turner
Vice President