

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
HM Government
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

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Dear Lord Chancellor,

The Prison Governors' Association (PGA) welcomes you to your new role as Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice. Your portfolio is demanding, and we wish you well as you navigate the complexities and competing priorities of your new role. A measure of your success undoubtedly sits in the hands of our members, who fill some of the most senior roles both in prisons and headquarters. Your success, and legacy as Lord Chancellor will, above all else, be gauged by public critique of our prisons. It is our members you must enable to deliver the aspirations of Government, and not see our service as a cash cow in an economic crisis.

Although the PGA feels compelled to write to you spelling out our concerns for the future of the Prison Service, we are committed to working collaboratively to get the best possible outcomes across HMPPS, and it is appropriate to state that your CEO, DG and senior operational leaders in HMPPS retain our support and confidence. Whilst we have seen frequent and significant changes within ministerial teams across many Governments over several years, it is our members who have remained a constant within HMPPS. They are the experts: they are the best in their field, and we ask that you do not demand they make financial savings to an already impoverished agency.

It is likely that you will be asking your department heads to identify and make significant savings to help reduce the financial burden our country is under. This is nothing new to HMPPS: recent history has shown what a disastrous impact the austerity years had on the agency and its ability to provide the most basic of services. Our prison system was decimated by catastrophic cuts without the corresponding reduction in prison population. We lost a generation of improvements in decency and safety; our prisons were cited as being the most violent place to work across Europe.

The loss of thousands of years of prison officer experience through redundancy, followed by a much-reduced pay and reward package, caused untold damage to the staffing position and ability to maintain safe regimes. All of this was to support a fiscal ideology and did nothing to safeguard those who lived, worked, or expected protection from those in custody.

The level of disinvestment and efficiencies demanded by Government during the austerity period resulted in near total breakdown of the prison system. Scrutiny, both from external and internal bodies, has described a prison system that was broken and on its knees. Government austerity measures have resulted in untold harm and damage being caused to those within the prison system, either working or living in it. The PGA will not stand by quietly and let this happen again.

We are still seeing the impact of austerity in our Service. We have a pay system which was designed to drive out cost. Fair and Sustainable (F&S) saw the reduction of prison officer pay to unfair and unsustainable levels. Recent attempts by the Prison Service Pay Review Body to remedy some of the recruitment and retention issues caused by this out-of-date pay system were rejected by Government. This unwillingness to invest in our people is one reason our Service is in such a perilous position.

HMPPS were placed in the invidious position of implementing Government cuts or face the prospect of widespread or wholesale privatisation. Our most senior leaders were asked to make decisions no-one should be expected to make. We saw an increase in demand on prison capacity, at the same time the levels of investment in capital maintenance were at near non-existent levels. We saw the system wide dissection of prison maintenance, which placed the day-to-day upkeep out to the market with devastating effect. The lack of investment over many years in the crumbling prison estate was exposed in report after report from external scrutiny bodies; long term and sustained investment in the prison estate is still required and must not be put at risk or threatened by cuts.

The benchmarking process to deliver the cuts left prisons dangerously understaffed, allowing organised crime gangs and more bullish prisoners to fill and control the void where larger numbers of experienced staff used to be. The results of this change in the cultural dynamic led to dramatic increases in suicide, self-harm and violence as evidenced by the Ministry of Justice's own statisticians and a workforce who entered their workplace fearful for their health and safety.

It is important to state that this austerity was imposed on a prison system which was hitherto functioning well. Safety was improving and decency was underpinning the delivery of its core function. The impact of the savage cuts was immediate and devastating: so deep were these cuts that recovery to pre austerity levels of safety a decade later has not been achieved. Covid may have played a part, but the main blocker to recovery is inadequate resources for the job required.

Rolling forward to right now and we are seeing further decline in our more challenging prisons. The recruitment and retention issue remains at crisis point with leavers outstripping joiners. Some prisons are running at 50% non-effectives in their staffing profiles. Regimes are impoverished, resulting in prisoners becoming frustrated and angry at constant lock up and unpredictable daily routines. Staff bear the brunt of this with violence and disorder against them; is it any wonder our attrition rate is too high in such a working environment? The mental health and wellbeing of all grades of staff in these prisons has reached an unacceptable level.

The PGA is becoming increasingly worried at the country's financial picture and what it means for prisons. Media coverage and commentators over recent weeks are following a line that the new Government will enforce "iron discipline" over public spending to restore its battered fiscal credibility. This has been confirmed by the Prime Minister in her keynote speech to the Conservative Party Conference this week. They also report that the mood music from Whitehall is that a further period of austerity is in the offing. It is imperative that we state loud and clear to you that we already have a prison system which in many areas has not recovered from previous austerity and is still broken. To expect efficiencies against this backdrop is a recipe for disaster and we are totally opposed to it. History has shown in graphic detail what happens if you don't invest properly in prisons. We have seen first-hand both the personal and professional impact working in a broken system has on our members, let alone the lost opportunities to help reduce reoffending and protect the public.

The removal of someone's liberty is the greatest sanction a civilised society can place on one of its citizens, there is no greater sanction. To protect the public and have any hope of rehabilitating those who are locked up costs a significant amount of money. Our prisons are overcrowded, and the overall population too high. If the cost of imprisonment on this scale is not affordable to Government, we ask you to take swift action to reduce the demand placed on prison spaces. This needs to be bold and see a significant reduction at a time when we are not able to recruit and retain prison officers in the required numbers.

For as long as we can recall, HMPPS has had efficiency savings at the forefront of its own budget strategy, and as such we believe there is no more to be taken out. There needs to be public acceptance from Government that if prisons are to be places which are safe and support rehabilitation then HMPPS must see increases in resources and not be subject to arbitrary budget cuts. If this is something Government will not accept, they will carry the risk of prisons becoming warehouses for those society do not wish to see. This is not something we want or accept.

Therefore, we ask that you take urgent action to address the current crisis in our prisons by focusing on the following:

- A public commitment to maintain funding of HMPPS to deliver all recent White Paper objectives.
- A public commitment to accept future Prison Service Pay Review Body recommendations.
- Take action to deliver an immediate and sustained reduction in the overall prison population.

Yours sincerely,

Prison Governors' Association National Executive Committee



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cc. Amy Rees, Director General Chief Executive Officer, HMPPS
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