

Prison Governors Association

Representing: The Prison Governors of the United Kingdom since 1987



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PRESS RELEASE

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PRISON CAPACITY AND OVERCROWDING

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On the 30th of November 2022, the Prison Governors' Association (PGA) released a statement in response to the commencement of Operation Safeguard, the use of police cells due to the prison system reaching near capacity with a population of 83,000. Three months later, and Government does not have a plan in place to address this dangerous crisis and the population continues to grow.

The prison population is rising exponentially week on week and the system is now full. This constant upward trend is driven by several factors, including an increase of 23,000 police officers, an increase in custodial sentences, an increase in length of sentences and an increase in recalls into prison who stay for longer. The remand population is the highest it has been since records began; there are now insufficient spaces to meet demand.

For several years, the PGA has voiced concern over Government's "tough on crime" agenda and the impact on an already stressed system, which has suffered from lack of investment for well over a decade. Many of our prisons are not providing a safe, decent, and rehabilitative environment; under-invested prisons do not work to reduce re-offending and protect the public from crime.

A rigorous process was carried out in 2022 to look at the maximum number of prisoners any establishment can hold to maintain safety, decency, order and control. This risk assessed project was done by expert senior operational leaders within His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service, taking into consideration the uniqueness of each prison. This maximum number is called the operational capacity and when filled, a prison is full. Currently most of our prisons are full, and we are now using police cells for the overflow. Where there are spaces, it is in the lower category open prisons, and Government policy has made it much more difficult to move prisoners into these conditions.

Any further increase in overcrowding will have significant ramification on the health and safety of those working and living in prisons. We have a prison officer recruitment and retention crisis, with a current shortfall of 1,500. To increase prisoner numbers against this backdrop will lead to an increase in austere regimes, resulting in more disorder, violence, suicide, and self-harm; loss of accommodation due to concerted indiscipline is a real threat in these circumstances. The health and well-being of staff will be further compromised in such a toxic environment.

The PGA are clear that they are totally opposed to increasing overcrowding in prisons. Our members must not be put in a situation where they are told to hold more prisoners than it is safe to do so. This dangerous situation is due to reactive Government policy which has failed to ensure sufficient prison places for the demand they have created. The political rhetoric, rather than being tough on crime, has created a situation where further overcrowding will turn our prisons into little more than warehouses of despair, danger, and degradation, with staff refusing to work due to their health and safety being compromised. Government is failing both the people prisons hold and community they serve.

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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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