HMIP Urgent Notification: Exeter

Thank you for your letter dated 31st May about the urgent notification which was issued in relation to HMP Exeter, and for your continued co-operation with the Committee on this very important issue.

The Committee were disappointed to see another urgent notification issued with regard to a failing prison. Of most concern to us is that safety in HMP Exeter had worsened since the inspection in August 2016. I will not restate all of the Chief Inspectors findings as his letter does sufficient justice to the issues at hand, but I would like to note how deeply concerning it is that 6 men had taken their own life in the prison since August 2016. In your evidence to the Committee in January this year, you stated a commitment to getting back to basics, and surely the most basic expectation one could have is that prisoners are not un-safe.

Again, much like at HMP Liverpool, failures reported in previous inspections were not acted upon adequately, and issues were not resolved. This is another indictment of the state of our prison system, and a poor reflection on HMPPS' failure to respond to the recommendations of the inspectorate. We hope that this failure in Exeter highlights the importance of a strong inspectorate with capacity to follow-up on their recommendations. As we have said before, investment in a proper inspection regime with robust follow-up could prevent costly and dangerous failures later. I would appreciate it if you continue to keep the Committee up to date on how you intend to ensure that when the Chief Inspector makes recommendations, they are acted upon and improvement is demonstrable.

We would also like to note our concern at such a decline in one of the "10 most challenging" prisons that the Ministry earmarked for additional funding in 2016-17. In fact, since October 2016 when the "10 most challenging" were identified, the Chief...
Inspector has reported a decline in standards in all of the four challenging prisons he has visited (Liverpool, Nottingham, Exeter and Leeds), and a fifth challenging prison (Winchester) has been put into special measures.

As you are aware from our previous correspondence, we will continue to examine failures in individual prisons as a means to have a better understanding of the performance of the estate as a whole. We will decide in due course whether we intend to take oral evidence, and whether to report, in relation to the prisons about which you have been notified. We might also write to request additional information, as we did for HMP Liverpool and HMP Nottingham, to support further scrutiny.

In the meantime, you have noted that a fuller plan will be published alongside the Inspectorate's more detailed recommendations which we will be sure to look at and consider in detail.

Thank you again for writing and for your continued co-operation.

Bob Neill
Chair, Justice Committee