



Bob Neill MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

19th May 2016

JUSTICE SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT – PRISON SAFETY

I wanted to write to you following the Committee's report on Prison Safety, not only to thank you for producing such a detailed analysis, but also to share the steps being taken to deal with issues you have so correctly highlighted.

I am well aware that the most recent figures for deaths in custody and violence in prisons, which the Committee's report highlights, are terrible. These cause me considerable personal concern, and I have no wish to minimise, excuse, or divert attention away from these increasing problems. I want to assure you and the Committee that there is no complacency in dealing with these issues.

Our violence reduction programme is now being led by an experienced ex-Governor, drawing on the best available expertise from across NOMS, public and private prisons, and academic research. We have taken some significant steps already. We have recruited 2,830 prison officers since January 2015, a net increase of 530. We have trialed the use of body-worn cameras, and now plan to make them available for use across the estate. Our tough new law on psychoactive substances comes into force at the end of this month – including sentences of up to two years for their possession in prison.

As the Justice Committee report highlights, there are a number of new threats faced by prisons, particularly the increase in new psychoactive substances (NPS) and a much more volatile adult male population. We need to improve our ability to respond to these challenges. I therefore wanted to make you aware that in addition to the £5m which we have committed to rolling out body worn cameras and additional CCTV, I have, with immediate effect, allocated an additional £10m to deal with prison safety issues.

Building on our existing work on violence reduction and feedback from the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman and HM Inspectorate of Prisons, as well your report, we have significant evidence to enable us to identify those prisons with the greatest safety challenges, so that we can target and allocate the additional spend to best effect.

How the funding is spent will be for their Governors to decide. We are keen to learn from how individual Governors use the additional funding to help spread good practice. Whilst we are quite deliberately not

being prescriptive about how Governors may use the additional funding, some of the ways they could use the funding include:

- **Additional staff**, be that more Prison Officers, more front line supervisors, dog handlers and / or more first line managers. This will allow staff to deal with specific issues, but also to improve consistency in delivering purposeful activity.
- **Additional investment in staff training** in areas such as case management, managing conflict, understanding suicide and self-harm risk, supporting vulnerable prisoners, and prevention measures.
- **Additional equipment**, such as the roll-out of Body Worn Cameras and CCTV referred to above, as well as additional physical measures to prevent drugs being thrown into prisons and to inhibit the use of drones.
- **Additional drugs testing**, particularly for NPS.

Ultimately I am clear that the only way to reduce violence in our prisons is to give Governors and those who work in prisons the tools necessary to more effectively reform and rehabilitate offenders.

I also want to increase the emphasis on rehabilitation in our prisons, and reward prisoners for taking positive steps towards becoming responsible citizens. This will also, I believe, make prisons safer. As I outlined in a speech to Governing Governors last week, I propose to reform the current Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme. The widespread view is that the current scheme does not do enough to encourage good behaviour, or contribute to rehabilitation. I want to give Governors far greater autonomy to shape incentives and privileges in a way they consider right for their institutions. We are urgently designing a scheme that will emphasise prisoners' personal responsibility, both for their own behaviour and for the efforts they make towards rehabilitation.

I also want to rethink the use of Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) to reintegrate offenders into society. Properly used, ROTL can do a huge amount to improve a prisoner's chances of finding a long-term job. ROTL eases the significant transition between custody and liberty, and enables prisoners to adjust to the expectations and demands of society. Crucially, it also provides a positive incentive for good behaviour. I am sure that increasing opportunities for prisoners to make constructive use of their time in prison will make a significant contribution to reducing violence and self harm.

I am clear that allowing a prisoner out on temporary release is not an easy option - it is a preparation for the hard choices that life outside prison demands. ROTL requires prisoners to commit to proper work, the discipline of new routines, and respect for rules set by others. Nor is ROTL just to help prisoners prepare for employment. It also helps prisoners strengthen the family ties which are crucial to rehabilitation.

We know that the three most powerful factors helping to keep ex-offenders from re-offending are a good job, strong family ties and a stable place to live - ROTL makes all of these easier to achieve. The system, of course, is not infallible. Mistakes in the past led to an understandable tightening-up of the rules. When individuals abuse freedoms, regimes will be tightened. But ultimately, public safety is better served by allowing prisoners to develop the skills and characteristics they need to succeed on the outside through ROTL, than by releasing them ill-prepared and unready for life outside - more likely than ever to go back to a life of crime.

The number of prisoners to benefit from ROTL has fallen by 40 per cent since 2013. So now is the time for a change. After careful consideration, I have decided to give governors more control. With the help of

careful assessment processes, I am confident that our reform-minded governors can identify the most promising candidates.

I am genuinely grateful for the spotlight you and the Justice Committee have turned on safety in prisons and I hope this letter provides assurance on how seriously I take the issues raised. As your report rightly notes, the Prison Service faces new complex threats but I believe the steps we are taking will reverse the current unhappy position. I look forward to working with the Committee as our plans develop.

Yours,
Michael

MICHAEL GOVE

