



Conference of hope

Keeping Safer!

Ministers and officials pledge to reduce the number of self-inflicted deaths in prison



Ben Leapman

Last month, in collaboration with the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP), Inside Time co-hosted the first ever Keeping Safe conference at the Abbey Centre in Westminster. The purpose of the conference was to focus on the issue of self-inflicted deaths and self-harm in prison, and specifically to make connections and find ways to reduce both. It was attended by almost 200 delegates, including MoJ officials, prison governors, prison unit leaders, NGO directors as well as members of the public; and bereaved family members of prisoners who had suffered self-inflicted deaths. Speakers included Justice Secretary Robert Buckland QC and Minister for Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Nadine Dorries MP. Director of Inquest Deborah Coles sat on a panel supporting bereaved parents, who also spoke. Chair of the IAP Juliet Lyon praised our 'tremendous partnership with Inside Time'. She said, "Keeping Safe messages are rippling through Westminster and the Prison Estate. Looking forward to working together to call a halt to the use of prison as a place of safety."

Minister's mission to reduce deaths

The Cabinet minister in charge of prisons declared a personal mission to reduce the number of deaths in custody. Robert Buckland, the Justice Secretary, said he had ordered his civil servants to inform him directly of every death in a prison and its circumstances. Last year, 300 serving prisoners died in England and Wales, including 84 who took their own lives, while there were a record 61,000 acts of self harm by prisoners.

Buckland said: "It is one of my goals in office to see a reduction. They are not just figures on a page, they are real people. I think it is really important that we learn from each death, so that we can understand what went wrong and how we could have done things differently."

He pledged to:

- End the use of prison as a "place of safety" for

people suffering from a mental health crisis;

- Ensure every prison has a working telephone hotline for friends and family to report urgent concerns for a prisoner's welfare;
- Improve the way prison officers are trained to deal with suicide and self harm; and
- Offer more support to prisoners coming off ACCT observation orders.



Robert Buckland QC: "Only prisoners know"

Before delivering his speech, the minister listened as grieving families described how the deaths of their loved ones in custody could have been prevented. Afterwards he met some of them for one-to-one discussions. Also among the audience at the conference were prison governors and senior Prison Service officials.

He praised the 1,400 prisoners who serve as Listeners, as well as the Samaritans volunteers who run the scheme. He said it was vital for prisoners to support one another ... "because only they know what being in custody is really like".

Buckland, a former criminal barrister and Crown Court recorder who has been in his current post since last July, said in his speech: "When a person loses their liberty, they do not suddenly stop being human. Their humanity does not disappear from them. They are still people. Like you and me. And every person deserves dignity, even if they are suspected, or convicted, of a crime.

"As Justice Secretary, and on my regular visits

to prisons, I am able to gain some very direct insight into what life is like for people in custody ... As the minister responsible for their safety, I feel a very personal sense of duty to them.

"Any death in custody isn't a statistic, it is a tragedy. I have asked the Ministry of Justice to inform me personally of each instance and the circumstances surrounding it."

He said it was an "enormous challenge" for prisons to deal with the 2,500 residents who on any given day are assessed as being at risk of harming themselves. An official review of the 1983 Mental Health Act, published in 2018, recommended that people suffering from a mental health crisis should no longer be held in police cells or remanded to prison as a "place of safety", but should be placed in "healthcare settings" instead.

Buckland told the Keeping Safe conference: "Working with justice and health partners, we are determined to make that happen." He also promised to speed up transfers between prisons and secure hospitals.

Most prisons offer a "safer custody line" to report concerns for a prisoner's welfare, but when the phone numbers were tested last year by researchers from the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) and the Prison Reform Trust (PRT), some were not working, while the majority went straight to answering machines.

Buckland said in his speech: "Families must be able to make contact to raise a concern over safety at any time. We are working hard with all prisons in the estate to ensure that there is a well-advertised and reliable means of speaking to a member of staff - such as a duty governor or orderly officer - where there is an imminent risk, as well as a separate voicemail service for less urgent matters where calls are monitored regularly and, yes, followed up."

This pledge was welcomed by Peter Dawson, director of the PRT, who said: "We particularly welcome Robert Buckland's promise to make sure families can easily speak to someone with authority in a prison when they have an urgent concern about the safety of a loved one. We know that not every prison yet delivers this very basic service. We will keep checking until they do."

The Justice Secretary said that every new prison officer was getting improved suicide and self-harm training, while existing staff were getting it as refresher training. He said more than 25,000 members of staff had started to receive the new training, with 14,000 so far

having completed it.

He said that prisoners who had been placed on ACCT (Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork) observation orders due to fears for their safety should get extra help after they were taken off it "so that they do not feel there is an immediate dropping off of support that we know can lead to relapse".



Nadine Dorries: "Get happy!"

Prisoners should be happy, says minister

A Government minister has said she wants prisoners to feel "happy" during their time in custody.

Health minister Nadine Dorries MP said: "When people are in prison, it's important they can lead healthy, happy lives. They are no different to people in society."

Her remark came in a speech to the Keeping Safe conference at Westminster, focusing on solutions to the problems of suicide and self-harm in prisons. Penal reform campaigners welcomed her words and said they could not recall any previous minister saying such a thing.


"No-one under the care of the state should lose their life by suicide. We are taking steps to improve the system."

Dorries, a former nurse whose ministerial brief includes mental health and suicide prevention, acknowledged that the amounts of time prisoners spend out of their cells, and the amount of contact they have with their families, have an effect on their "wellness" level. She said: "No-one under the care of the state should lose their life by suicide. We are taking steps to improve the system."

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She said liaison and diversion services, in which clinical staff are based in police custody suites and magistrates' courts to spot offenders with mental health needs and remove them from the criminal justice system when appropriate, would be extended throughout England by next year. And she pointed to £20 million funding for Reconnect, an NHS "prison leaver service" intended to ensure that ex-prisoners transfer smoothly to a GP and other healthcare services in the community.

Dorries also said that magistrates were making too little use of mental health treatment requirements, which can be added to a community sentence to compel an offender with mental health needs to accept help.

One in two cells has a phone

More than half the prison cells in England and Wales are now fitted with telephones. The milestone was reached after thousands of in-cell phones were installed over the past 12 months to help prisoners stay in touch with friends and family. This was announced by Phil Copple, the Director General of the Prison Service, in a speech to the Keeping Safe conference.

His officials said that as of February, 66 prisons had phones in some or all cells. A total of 44,500 cells had phones. Some of the cells are doubles, so the number of individuals with access to an in-cell phone will be higher. However, funding has not yet been secured to extend the initiative to every prison. Mr Copple admitted: "There's more money needed to do the rest."

As well as improving family contact and allowing prisoners to phone support services like

the Samaritans, the Government hopes that in-cell phones will reduce the violence sometimes associated with payphones on landings, as well as cutting the demand for illegal mobiles.

The installation programme is ahead of schedule. When the Ministry of Justice announced £17 million in 2018 to fit in-cell phones, it said 50 prisons would have them by March 2020. Scotland has lagged behind England and Wales, but the Scottish Government last year asked the Scottish Prison Service to "explore the options" for installing in-cell phones at Polmont Young Offenders Institute.

"In particular, Mr Copple said acts of self harm should never be dismissed as 'attention-seeking'."

In his speech, Mr Copple acknowledged a link between the decline in the number of prison officers over the past decade and the rise in the number of deaths in custody. He spoke of the importance of staffing levels, officer availability, time spent by prisoners out of their cells and access to purposeful activity and programmes.

He praised prison officers who treat prisoners with respect and help them through difficult times, but admitted: "There are some [staff] whose behaviour and attitudes aren't what we need them to be, and they are letting us down. Sometime that can contribute to tragic outcomes." In particular, Mr Copple said acts of self harm should never be dismissed as "attention-seeking".

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Grieving parents address minister

The parents of a man who took his own life in custody have told prison chiefs how their pleas for help were ignored. Mark and Donna Saunders described how their son Dean, who was suffering from a mental health crisis, died in his cell after the jail took him off constant watch.

The couple spoke of their loss at the Keeping Safe conference, which focused on preventing suicide and self-harm in prisons. Among those listening were Justice Secretary Robert Buckland and Director General of the Prison Service, Phil Copple.

Dean, 25, died at HMP Chelmsford in 2016. He had been arrested weeks earlier after Mark was stabbed while trying to stop his son harming himself. An inquest found Dean was "let down" by the prison and mental health services. Mark told the conference: "He should have gone to a mental health ward. He went to prison as a 'place of safety', he went in on constant watch.

"When I found out he had been taken off constant watch, I begged them to put him back on. I told them, "If you don't put him back on constant watch he will kill himself - the paperwork has told you, the courts have told you, the police have told you and I have told you. They still would not put it back on. Our son lost his life. We don't want him to have died in vain."

Donna Mooney told the conference how her brother Tommy Nicol took his own life at HMP The Mount in the sixth year of an IPP sentence for which the tariff had been set at four years.

After delivering his speech, Mr Buckland spoke with Dita Saliuka, whose brother Liridon Saliuka was found dead in his cell at Belmarsh in January.

An analysis of Coroners' reports following deaths in custody has found that the same failings are being raised repeatedly. Alexia Durran, the Deputy Chief Coroner, told the conference that the research had looked at 20 "prevention of future death reports" in which Coroners make recommendations to improve safety. Issues raised following suicides in prison included: over-reliance on prisoners saying they had no suicidal thoughts; unacknowledged phone calls from families; observations not being done; falsified records; failure to share information and administrative errors.

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Working together to keep people safe



Juliet Lyon CBE

In summing up the impact of the Keeping Safe conference, I truly felt the inspiring nature of the day and respected the way in which a large, diverse group of people made a strong commitment to do all they could in their different ways to protect lives. Now the IAP will do all we can to make sure that practical points and proposed changes put forward by speakers and delegates can be progressed over the coming year and beyond so there will be good outcomes. This would mean:

- Involving families, whenever possible, as advisors at every stage in the criminal justice process;
- Ensuring that the helpline for families and friends works well in every prison;
- Supporting and strengthening invaluable work done by the Samaritans and Listeners in every establishment across England and Wales;
- Emphasising the importance of good leadership, strengthening the influence of decent, compassionate staff and improving staff training;
- Making more effective use of reports and recommendations made by Coroners, regulators and independent monitors and supporting the development of a national oversight mechanism to ensure compliance;
- Developing a risk assessment to examine impact, and report, on prisoner and staff safety before major policy and operational changes are made;
- Applying research to practice to reduce self-harm;
- Gaining a proper response to people with mental health needs by strengthening liaison and diversion services and increasing court use of community sentences with mental health treatment requirements;
- And, above all, working with partners to call a halt to the use of prison as a place of safety.

I cannot say enough how grateful the IAP is to all involved in making the conference a success and how optimistic we are for the work we will do together to ensure lasting impact. Now in the face of the very real threat of the Coronavirus, we have written to our partners Inside Time, Prison Radio and the Samaritans to pledge to work together to help keep people safe. There are many ways this can be done, including ensuring that people in prison and their families and friends get the clear, accurate information they need and that Listeners and peer mentors receive additional support. It is a time for reassurance, coming together and small acts of kindness which everyone can do.

Juliet Lyon is Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP)