

## Keeping Safe Conference February 2020

Good afternoon and I am delighted to be given the opportunity to briefly speak to you today. For those of you who don't know anything about me, I have been President of the Prison Governors' Association since 2015 and come from an operational background, having governed 4 prisons, latterly HMP Bristol.

Every person in this room will be committed to keeping all who live in, works in and visit prisons safe. It is a fundamental part of our role, implicit in all we do. Unfortunately in recent years the ability to keep people safe has become an enormous task in many of our prisons. A myriad of obstacles have conspired against us which have impacted on the safety of men and woman in our care. I think it is important to acknowledge some of these things, whilst also acknowledging that there are some improvements and when we all work together to achieve a common aim, there is a much greater chance of success.

Without a doubt funding cuts across the wider community last decade has impacted on society in general. We all know that prisons are a microcosm of society, so as a result things have changed significantly in prisons too. Prisons were not protected from austerity, so as things changed in our prisons, we were unable to react and respond to prevent the decline due to lack of resource and specifically lack of prison officers. Prison Officers are key to achieving safety in our prisons. The relationships they forge with prisoners can be the difference between stable or unstable, life or death, harm or not. The consistent regime they deliver does the

same. We were unable to do this because we simply did not have enough Prison Officers. Things are changing. We have increased our numbers of Prison Officers to deliver Offender Management in Custody and there are signs of improvement, albeit very tenuous with the potential to go backwards. One area we are struggling to improve is self-harm, and particularly amongst women prisoners where the level is astonishingly high.

Imagine the impact such a situation has had on some of our most vulnerable prisoners? Governors report to me that the level of men and woman in prison with significant mental health issues is growing and they struggle to deliver the care required to keep them safe. Mental Health Teams, whilst incredibly committed to the care of their patients, do not have enough resource to meet demand. It is wholly inappropriate to use a prison as a place of safety for such people because the experience in the custodial setting is extremely scary and they feel anything but safe.

The Prison Governors' Association has been working with the Independent Advisory Panel to look at the use of place of safety orders. During our Annual Conference last October, we received a mandate from the Membership in support of the work they wish to do around this issue. It stated:

**This Conference mandates the NEC to demand from the Secretary of State for Justice that the practice of using prison as a place of safety for some of the most vulnerable in society ceases immediately.**

Whilst I acknowledge the mandate is simplifying a very complex problem, its sentiment is right and something we all should be working towards. To that end, the PGA and the IAP are developing a

very short and simple survey of Prison Governors in Local Prisons. Its purpose is to get some idea of the level of use of place of safety orders and the impact they have on the individuals subjected to them.

We all know that people with mental health issues need calm, supportive, therapeutic environments to improve and flourish. Prisons struggle to provide this environment, they are noisy and busy with insufficient expertise and staff time to give vulnerable people the true level of support they need. Let us all work together to change this situation, so the most vulnerable in the criminal justice system are cared for in the most appropriate place so we can genuinely ensure their safety and care.