

Criminal Justice Alliance Members Meeting

Friday 1 July 2016

Peter Dawson

Peter Dawson, newly-appointed as incoming Director of the Prison Reform Trust, gave a speech about the charity's current priorities and his thoughts on the impact recent political decisions might have on penal reform and the prison estate.

Peter would like to see himself as a 'passionate pragmatist'. But there are some impacts of the EU referendum result that we must take into consideration.

Firstly, the fiscal position was almost certainly going to be worse. There is likely to be further austerity and more cuts which will inevitably have an impact on prisons. It could jeopardise the £1.3 billion committed to building new prisons and risked leading to a lack of an investment in officer skills, IT systems and other important areas.

In London there were plenty of jobs for individuals coming out of prison. However, this is not the case for most of the country and opportunities might deteriorate further as a result of Brexit. Social attitudes towards minorities might possibly deteriorate too, with ex-prisoners included among them.

The likelihood of a quick election was minimal and therefore, hopefully, we will be working with the same Queen's speech and the promised Prison Reform Bill will go ahead. There is an opportunity for 'grown-up politics'. There needs to be support for proper governing.

The main priority of the Prison Reform Trust remains to reduce the unnecessary use of imprisonment. There are still some relatively short term ways to bring down the prison population. You can reduce the amount of time an offender spends in prison by having them spend more of their sentence in the community. Further pressure could be placed on politicians to release IPP prisoners. There is also an appetite in the MoJ for early release and encouraging people to make better use of time in prison.

However, more generally there needs to be a better quality of discussion and analysis about what does and doesn't require imprisonment. For example, in Scotland politicians and policymakers are considering extending the presumption against short term sentences from three to 12 months.

There has been a lot of talk about the autonomy that will be given to governors in the proposed new reform prisons, and that they will be the blueprint for the future. However, governors will still need to know what framework to operate within. This creates an opportunity to create and apply enforceable standards within prisons in England and Wales, below which floor you cannot go. That framework is both uncertain and incomplete, much of dating back to the Prison Act 1952.

The current national prison system doesn't allow for any degree of local ownership or provide an incentive to take control of local prison populations. Local authorities can use prisons to deal with what they see as problem individuals at no expense to themselves. Devolution offers an exciting opportunity to alter that. A federal system could, for example, see long term prisoners placed in national prisons while short term prisoners go to locally-controlled, managed and funded prisons.

Prison conditions have worsened over the last few years leading to a corrosion of trust between officers and prisoners. Every prison inspection report warns about levels of violence. One way of beginning to deal with this is to listen and engage with prisoners, take advantage of where they are solving problems themselves, allowing them to play a bigger role where appropriate.

Tensions in prisons have escalated. The solution isn't simply having more officers. It's about taking control of prisoner numbers and making sure only those who should be locked up are inside. ROTL has a significant role to play. It opens up the potential for prisoners to do things and take part in activities that are far harder and more expensive to do in prison. It also provides bigger incentives, compared to the current IEP scheme, for prisoners.

Although only the latest incarnation of an age-old issue, new psychoactive substances are having a dramatic effect on prison life, leading to increased violence and mental health problems. Greater thought needs to be given to how to reduce demand and not simply tackle supply.

There are solutions and policy changes that could make big differences to prison life without huge resource implications. There should in-cell phones in every prison and the cost of calls should be reduced. Visits could be made much more accessible, in the same way that hospital visiting has been transformed over the last two decades. Clothes and food and the canteen shop could be improved and men should be able to dress as they want, as in the female estate. Such 'nuts and bolts' issues could be addressed relatively easily.

The voluntary sector will need to provide research support to the MoJ and NOMS. The policy team has shrunk, there is more being demanded of them and at the same time they are listened to less.

During questions after Peter's speech members raised a number of issues including:

- What impact will Brexit have on foreign national prisoners?
- What will happen to the prison building programme?
- Rehabilitation activity requirements could be better marketed to sentencers.
- Mental health problems continue to increase in prison.
- Will there be any replacement for European Social Fund support?
- How will rehabilitation work in the new reform prisons?
- Delivery of sentence plans often does not include face to face time between offender manager and their offender.

Peter noted in response:

Freedom of movement is more than likely to remain in place and therefore there shouldn't be a big impact on EU national prisoners. In prisons he visits nearly always it's foreign national prisoners who are at the centre of innovative practice and thinking of ways to improve local regimes.

The £1.3 billion prison building programmes is money not yet spent so the Treasury could withdraw it, although hopefully not. The location of new prisons is absolutely key. Public services and families must be able to get there easily. Some old prisons need to close; they can't offer suitable modern regimes because of their layout. Money saved could support innovation in current prisons. For example, some governors are loathe to let prisoners out on ROTL because they fear them returning with illicit goods. These fears could be alleviated by having a discrete wing kept separate from the rest of the prison. It

is important that any new prisons aim to house most prisoners for their entire sentence; moving around the estate is not good for prisoners or building relationships with staff.

Mental health issues are certainly worsening across the prison estate. It's hoped that the continued development and promotion of liaison and diversion services, if funding doesn't dry up, will go some way to improving the situation. Greater thought should be given to where we house people with serious mental health problems who are involved in crimes. There's a risk that you simply swap imprisonment for hospital only in name, with little difference in service provision. It remains important that health services commissioned in prison are decided by health experts, not governors.