

Written evidence from a serving prisoner, HMP Swaleside

Thank you for your time. I am writing with my thoughts on the current issues with the prison service, more in support than criticism.

Now myself, I am a person whom maintains my innocence of my offences, (although not part of this letter as my case is currently under investigation with the CCRC), however I know I am not alone as an 'innocent' man in jail. This subject is a little out of the scope of my findings of the prison service. Most of my findings relate to the little things within the system. As I'm sure you are aware the little things have caused considerable difficulties as highlighted by the news.

Here on the Vulnerable Prisoner Unit (sex offenders) in Swaleside we have no access to the library, other than in writing. This is to maintain our safety from the 'mains' (general population). It would of course be nice for this issue to be resolved.

On to one of our most exciting topics, food. We are informed portion sizes are defined by budgets. Money covers many issues in the prison service but on several days in the last week, me and other inmates on H wing have been served with no more than 800 calories for the whole day. My understanding is that to maintain an adult male 2000 calories is recommended. When details are asked from the kitchens we are politely declined, with budgets blamed for our complaints. Many celebrity chefs have been involved with government projects in nutrition and cost perhaps one could be approached to review this situation.

Even more basic things like language could be improved. Clearly the term 'offender' has been focus grouped and chosen, however this is flawed. Maintaining innocence aside there are many people in prison whom are on remand, therefore not being convicted leaves the term offender inaccurate. Perhaps prisoner would be more apt and lower tensions.

Again individual cases aside I'm sure that there are similar situations in other establishments. When I arrived on H wing in December 2016 we had approximately 7 washing machines 3 of which were broken. The solution to this situation was to remove 42% of the machines and we were left with 100% working. Now there are no plans to replace the 3 broken machines and no information regarding extra washing time. Again a small thing but causes tension.

Now the brilliant stuff. The prison staff. Here at Swaleside we are encouraged to use first names of all the staff. This was confusing at first, it was comforting to have a personal yet professional relationship with the staff.

Being on the VP wing it's very different to being on the 'mains'. The various programmes on TV have no relation to these units at all. Even the staff comment on the difference. Even to the point, suggest they are bored. It's very quiet, partly due to us not being violent, historic nature of our 'offences' /allegations and ages. I would estimate an average age of the near 180 prisoners on H wing of 50-55.

Which nicely brings me to the 'future'.

Staff retention – We had 40 vacancies for staff here in December, 3-4 weeks later 5 staff left/retired on the same day. Prison in most cases is a dangerous place caused by a multitude of things, many issues I'm sure your committee is aware of. Some staff also make dealing with inmates more confrontational than required, many inmates defuse situations more effectively than staff, the authority can inflame situation when a simple chat would help.

Low-risk – There is presently no SOTP for low risk of re-offending prisoners, leaving us languishing in prison with little to do. Distance learning is hard to obtain and complex to access with little to no meaningful education within prison, as highlighted by BBC Panorama on 13 February 2017, inmates colouring in Peppa Pig. Reduction of crime and re-offending is important to all both in society and custody, yet lip service is paid to this caused by the prison service and NOVUS (education provider) is dangerous.

Prisoner earnings – currently here I am paid approximately £20 per week. My views on this are based on my knowledge of myself, life, desire not to return to prison and having not offended in the first place £100 per week would be more sensible as well as cheaper for the public purse.

£20 per week for spends

£80 per week for prisoner savings. This could be used by resettlement near end of a sentence to arrange accommodation, training and transport at release. I understand that re-offending costs the tax payer some reported billions of pounds, much of which I understand to be due to homelessness and petty crimes to eat, obviously a more complex area than I could write here but worth further research. The current situation is obviously perpetuating the cycle of offending.

Second chance/Tagging – there are many calls in the press (mostly prison publications – Inside Time, Jail mail, and Converse) to reduce the prison population by various charities. The Queens speech in 2016 informed a plan for second chances and tagging. Politically sex offenders would be unable to access this at present. But perhaps, due to costs of an older prison population, low-risk offenders and certain historic crimes, obviously risk-assessed, could benefit from some of these schemes. Personally I'm hopeful yet realistic but I believe my time could be better served paying tax rather than costing £40,000+ per year. As an experienced, multi-skilled tradesman there is a shortage of my experience and paying minimal tax at present should tagging be made available my contribution would be positive rather than negative with my freedom being limited by GPS and the sexual offences register. I imagine that this technology is being investigated, but as the current system was designed and is based on hundreds of years old practices, perhaps technology and second chances could, with monitoring, relieve the stresses the system faces and protect the public by other means.

Timescales - everything in the prison service seems to take weeks. Some simple requests for information can and have taken 6 weeks to get a response. It's hard to believe staff are busy constantly for that period of time no matter how short-staffed the prison service is.

To summarise my opinions, the system is not in crisis, yet a few small tweaks could resolve a lot of tension and reduce the violence. Eradication of violence would not be realistic due to the nature of the environment. Additional staff will help but 2,500 staff split between approx 137 establishments once shifted and on rota leaves 18 staff per prison max, that's not many even if noticeable per wing. Population reduction would be nice, and a volunteer is here, but non-sexual offenders would also free up staffing time.

Apparently your committee visits prisons. In the 18 months I've been in custody and on my second establishment I have not yet seen an MP, however from the inmates on H wing at Swaleside I would like to invite you to come and visit us. Perhaps you have some words of hope, much needed in prison, to share with us. We would like to show you the community we have established with our staff.

I look forward to hearing from you and please feel free to request more information about or from myself. I would be happy if a system exists to give evidence to the Justice Select Committee.

Please excuse any spelling or grammar issues. I'm usually quite good at those things but that's with access to a computer and a word processor. Please reform so we can type letters.

February 2017