

Justice Unions Cross Party Group (JUCPG) Second Meeting held on 4 March 2015

Present: Julie Morgan AM, Leanne Wood AM, Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM, Aled Roberts AM, Mike Hedges AM, Colin Paltry (Lindsay Whittle AM support), Vicki Evans (Chris Chapman AM support), Sian Mile (Julie Morgan AM support), Robert Jones Cardiff University, Tracey Worth (NAPO), Jane Foulner (NAPO), Emily Cannon (UNISON), Huw Price (UNISON), Kay Powell (Law Society) and John Hancock (POA).

1. WELCOME

Julie Morgan AM (Cardiff North) welcomed everyone to the third Justice Group Meeting, she asked for everyone to introduce themselves. Due to time constraints Julie asked if the group minded if we went straight to our speaker as AMs were keen to hear from him.

2. SPEAKER - JOHN HANCOCK (PRISON OFFICERS ASSOCIATION)

John introduced himself to the group as the NEC representative for POA. He went on to say that he will be retiring in May; however his replacement will be attending the group in his place. He said he wanted to provide an overview of his members' current difficulties. The Secretary of State, Chris Grayling, had recently said: "Prisons are not in crisis." NOMS has in fact created the perfect storm, they have closed prisons and made prison officers redundant. They assumed that prisoner numbers would decrease when they have done the opposite. They made too many prison officers redundant which has meant that the ones left have to travel across the UK to cover prisons where they are desperately short of officers (some are living in London hotels); all this at a great cost to the tax payer. The redundancies of prison staff cost £50 million pounds, only to try and recruit them back within months. Staff shortages is an immense concern to POA. Suicide rates have increased dramatically which has a huge impact on staff and their families. It has become a daily occurrence where an inmate dies in custody. Members of POA can't just leave their job at the prison gate; a death of an inmate comes home with them. Prison Officers are being made to travel across the UK to cover prisons where they are desperately short of officers.

John described an increase in violence within the prison. Reflecting on his 27 years experience of being a prison officer, he said you would once expect to break up a fight now and then but now it was becoming too regular which was of grave concern. He told the meeting that not only are violent assaults between inmates on the increase, attacks on prison officers has also increased. John felt that the assaults are linked to overcrowding and the rise in legal highs such as Spice - such drugs are difficult to detect. All this coupled with severe staff shortages means that daily checks on cells aren't being completed and mail isn't being checked for example.

John said that he was delighted to hear that the new prison in Wales will be run by the public sector, this he feels is a victory for the POA and the Welsh Government. However, 35% will be outsourced such as education, medical needs and maintenance of the prison.

However he said that the POA has concerns over the size of the prison as it doesn't believe that a 'Titan prison' is effective. He described it as a potential breeding ground for all types of problems. POA will be fighting for the prison to be appropriately staffed with a mixture of experienced and new staff. He described HMP ISIS as being very poorly run due to there being no experienced staff working there.

John said that he has met with members in HMP Swansea, HMP Cardiff, HMP Usk and Prescoed, who are all concerned about potential job losses due to the new prison and the expansion of HMP Parc. He said that he had received reassurance from the area manager in South Wales that there are no plans to close any of the South Wales prisons. He said he is hopeful that the government has learnt from their mistakes regarding prison closures.

Mike Hedges explained that many of his constituents work at HMP Swansea. He voiced concerns regarding the issue of overcrowding and commented that it is not appropriate to move staff around the UK as they don't get to build a professional relationship with the inmates. John informed the group that NOMS is increasingly utilising agency staff to fill the gaps which in the short term is positive for his members as it offers an immediate solution, however it's less than ideal.

Leanne Wood asked two questions; firstly about female prisoners specifically, as we have no female prison in Wales, and secondly whether the privatisation of probation has impacted on prisons. John agreed that there are concerns over the lack of provision for female offenders in Wales. He said that he had spoken with Napo and both unions feel that there are many areas of opportunity for joint working; however in terms of the privatisation of probation, the impact hasn't been felt yet but he felt that it will be. He made reference to the new (Offender Rehabilitation Act) ORA which has introduced the 'through the gate' legislation which he said will not work. He said that NOMS should focus on reducing the number of female prisoners, which Leanne wholeheartedly agreed with.

Tracey Worth stated that Napo members have voiced concern over the amount of times a prisoner has experienced a change in officer in the last 12 months. Some long term custody cases are losing out due to the changes within the service which has an impact on parole etc. John stated that they have also got rid of the personal officer within custody which makes it difficult for inmates to find out key information of their sentence.

Aled Roberts reflected on John's earlier comments on lessons being learnt. He explained that there is a forum that he is involved in which is discussing the new prison in Wrexham and asked if the POA could get involved with that. John explained that the POA will be putting a "wish list" to NOMS and would like to be involved with the group if they can.

Julie Morgan asked what can be done to minimise dangers of a titan prison. John said that security needs to be looked at, but again he reinforced the fact that the POA is against titan prisons. Vicky Evans, AM Support, informed the group that Christine Chapman chairs a group on Women in Prison which sits on 10th March at 12.30pm, which she said all are welcome to attend.

Aled Roberts informed the group that there is a pilot being run in North Wales focusing on female offenders. Julie Morgan stated that we **shouldn't have** a women's prison in Wales. Jane Foulner informed the group that there is a lack of provision for female prisoners, explaining that there are no approved premises or bail hostels specifically for women. Jane went on to say that it was difficult to resettle women close to their home.

Emily Cannon made reference to the “perfect storm” that Grayling has created in the criminal justice sector and asked what this group can do. John said that this group is vital for together on issues such as the titan prison.

Robert Jones informed the group that there is a seminar on Women in Prison at Ty Hywel on 22nd April. He stated that the number of women in prisons is up when the number of offences that they commit is down. Robert also informed the group that a recent MOJ document suggested that one prison in Wales could be closed? He also made reference to the recent speech by Stephen Crabb which suggested that there is no consensus on devolution in Wales. John stated that the titan prison will in the main be occupied by English prisoners. Robert asked specifically about Wrexham and whether the new prison will create jobs. John said he suspected that they will transfer prison officers from prisons in the north. John told the group that the POA believes criminal justice should be devolved. Tracey Worth stated that all unions in the room had empathy for the POA and cannot even begin to imagine how awful it must be for staff having to work under such difficult circumstances. She congratulated the POA on their campaign, specifically mentioning the recent reports conducted by Channel 4 News; however she voiced disappointment that mainstream media don't seem interested. Is this because society views prisoners as second class citizens, she asked, and does their treatment in not custody matter? John felt that the media are only interested if there's a full scale riot or a strike. The group discussed the media's lack of interest in general, and Robert Jones suggested getting in touch with Welsh media as they may be interested.

Actions

- To write to the Secretary of State for Justice outlining the group's concerns over the lack of approved premises and bail hostel provision for female offenders in Wales. A copy of this letter would be sent to Lesley Griffiths, AM for Women.
- To write to Mark Drakeford, AM Minister for Health and Social Services, to highlight the increase in suicides among prisoners in Wales.
- To establish links with journalists in Wales to promote the work of the Cross Party Justice Group.
- To contact Aled Roberts, Regional AM for North Wales to clarify the purpose of the panel he referred to during the meeting.
- To write to Stephen Crabb, MP for Pembrokeshire, to discuss his recent speech regarding Welsh devolution.

Minutes Prepared by Tracey Worth, Napo Cymru.