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SPEECH GIVEN BY HM CHIEF INSPECTOR OF PRISONS TO THE GOVERNING GOVERNORS' FORUM

Thank you very much for having me here today. But I know these gatherings aren't just about hearing from the speakers, they are also the chance to get away from your prisons and catch up with colleagues. On that note I apologise then to Becky at Grendon and Emily at Isis for HMIP being the cause of them not being able to attend!

Today I am going to talk about the role of the inspectorate, some current themes that we are finding on our inspections and finally to say a little bit about leadership and the Self-Assessment Report.

After 20 minutes or so, you will have a chance to ask questions, and please don't hold back, be assured, we don't bump you up the list to be inspected if you ask something difficult.

Since I became Chief Inspector two and a half years ago, I have been consistently struck by the way that governors and their teams engage with the inspection process. As a former headteacher, I know the strain of being inspected, and yet you are always welcoming, professional and supportive.

I remember well that horrible feeling when you get the phone call, and then the reality begins to sink in. And it doesn't matter how well prepared you know you are, it doesn't matter how confident you are in your team and in your establishment, during an inspection, you feel uniquely exposed. However much we talk about distributed leadership, ultimately, as the governor, it's on you.

And we know you have invested huge amounts of energy into the job. Some of you drive ridiculous journeys to your jails, you work long hours often at the expense of time you could be spending with your families, because of that profound sense of duty that is felt more strongly by people in the prison service than in any other sector I have come across. Governors tell me that even on holiday phones stay on, because in the periphery of your consciousness you are always thinking about your prison.

In the inspectorate we recognise the strength of that commitment. We understand that when we deliver important, but potentially difficult, feedback we must do it with care and sensitivity. When you have worked so hard, we know that hearing about those things you still need to address is inevitably difficult.

However hard it can be at times, and recent tragic events in education have put that into perspective, I believe that independent inspection is essential for any public service and even more so for institutions that exist outside the public's experience. It is too easy for prisons, and the people living and working in them, to be out-of-sight and out-of-mind.

Everybody uses the health service, and we all went to school, we know the state of our roads or whether our bins get emptied and as a result demands get made, money is spent and politicians are held to account. But people walking their dogs on Wandsworth Common or students in Exeter walking up the hill to the university can pass the prison every day without having any idea of what happens behind those walls.

This means that as an inspectorate our job is twofold; to provide independent scrutiny of the conditions for and treatment of prisoners, and to report on our findings, shining a spotlight on what is going on to parliament and the public. It is our belief that scrutiny and transparency are for the benefit of everyone.

I want to go on now to talk about some themes that we are seeing in recent inspections.

Levels of purposeful activity continue to be my biggest concern. In some prisons it is as if the pandemic has only just ended, with far too many prisoners spending too long behind their doors, while workshops and classrooms are empty, and farms and gardens have become overgrown.

We are given many reasons for this inertia; not enough staff, officers who lack experience, relationships with unions, too few teachers or instructors and I recognise, for many of you these are real concerns.

However, while I have sympathy with the poor staffing situation we find in many jails, there does not always seem to be a direct correlation between the number of officers and the level of purposeful activity. Stocken, published yesterday, is a case in point, where despite a fairly dire staffing situation, activity levels were good. For the first time since the pandemic we saw free flow of up to 500 men and it remained one of the safer Category C prisons in the country.

I am hopeful that we are beginning to turn the corner - recent inspections at Moorlands, Holme House and Preston have shown an improving picture.

The openness of the regime seems often to have roots in the culture. Jails like Coldingley and Elmley have had a successful history of getting prisoners out of their cells, while elsewhere locking prisoners up seems to be the habit. At the inspectorate we want to see more workshops open and a real sense of purpose returning to our jails.

I am not suggesting that it is easy – and I know that it can take time - but too often plans for purposeful activity are not as dynamic as we would like to see, and progress has been too slow. And this is the critical point - if prisons are not providing good quality training, education, teaching, reading, providing work, qualifications and ROTL, then they are not performing their essential public protection duty which is to make prisoners less likely to reoffend when they are released back into the community.

I am very pleased to say we have recently had a run of encouraging inspections of reception prisons with better safety scores at Swansea, Hewell, Leicester and Birmingham.

Much credit must go both to the prison service and to governors for their work in reducing the supply of drugs that are so often the cause of debt and violence. An officer who showed me round Hewell told me that, four years ago, there would have been alarms going off within minutes of morning unlock and ambulances at the gate were an almost daily occurrence.

I think the psychological strain that was on the prison service at that time may be part of the reason why purposeful activity is taking so long to increase, with an understandable reluctance to give up hard-won gains on safety. But the risks that prisons experienced during that time have now reduced considerably and, bear in mind, fifteen years ago, there was more unlock and less violence.

As with Category C prisons, levels of purposeful activity are still much too low in reception prisons. When it comes to drugs, reducing demand - by giving prisoners something meaningful to do - is every bit as important as reducing supply.

In our joint thematic about OMIC (offender management in custody), we found that keywork was often little more than a welfare check even for the most vulnerable. Given the importance of relationships in helping prisoners to turn their lives around, a greater emphasis on keywork is vital.

At New Hall, Julia Spence had prioritised key work for all prisoners, despite shortages of staff. The result was a calm, settled prison with far lower self-harm than we are seeing across the rest of the women's estate. Leaders at Wakefield, Feltham B and Gartree were also prioritising key work, with promising results.

Our thematic review of the experiences of black adult male prisoners and prison staff again highlighted the central importance of building trust between staff and prisoners. Too often we found fractured relationships between black prisoners and white staff and developing key work will be a way to break down barriers and increase trust.

At the Inspectorate, our focus is of course on the experiences of and outcomes for prisoners. I am however acutely aware that some of the things that we criticise in our reports are at least partly out of your control, such as education provision, building works and healthcare.

Another critical area is recruitment. I know that, for many of you, staffing is one of your biggest challenges and I think we have a model of recruitment and retention that is based in a different era. I continue to find it absurd that governors have no say on the recruitment of frontline officers to their jail, a point I raised with the Justice Select Committee in March.

Whereas in the past recruits were often older and more experienced, we now have officers starting who are only just out of school. Now, that isn't to say that some won't go on to do an outstanding job – we always meet fantastic officers on inspection – but they will undoubtedly need more support, training and mentoring.

We have seen some good work to begin to address this challenge. Laura Whitehurst at Featherstone had set up a learning and support hub for new officer apprentices, while Emily Thomas at Isis had appointed 'new colleague mentors' and developed reflective practice to improve support for staff. This is not just a local challenge, it is also something for the prison service to take on to reduce the high numbers of staff who leave within the first year.

Equally, everyone in this room will have experienced difficulties with the provision of prison education that we have reported on in recent months. Ultimately, I don't see there being real progress until more commissioning power is put in the hands of governors.

I want to talk further about leadership, but first I want to thank you for the work that you have put into the SARs. But I thought it might also be helpful to give you some feedback. The quality has improved markedly and most of the time we get clear, honest reflection from leaders on the state of their prison and their plans for the future.

The use of data in these reports is also continuing to get better. For example, measuring assaults using the rate per thousand, produces much more useful information than the raw number which can be skewed by other factors.

The one area of the SAR which can improve is in the section on priorities. Governors are usually clear about what they want to achieve, and most of the time, we agree that you have chosen to focus on the right things. Where we would like to see improvement is in the way you assess progress.

We want this part of the SAR to set out the measures that governors will use to show that the priority is being achieved. If your target is to reduce violence then you need to show where it is now, what you are doing about it, and what you want the rate to be in, say a year.

Of course, there's not a neat metric that you can pull off the hub to measure progress against every priority, but there are useful proxies. For example, if improving staff-prisoner relations is a priority, we would want to see evidence of what relationships are currently like. Surveys of staff or prisoners would help (and feel free, as some governors already do, to take the relevant sections from HMIP's survey). Other useful measures might be assaults on staff, warnings and adjudications, and information from prisoner or staff forums.

Put together these provide useable data that give you a benchmark from which to start and also measures through which you can demonstrate that what you are doing is making a difference.

When it comes to leadership, I worry about the pipeline for governors of the future. On my travels I meet many outstanding officers and functional heads, some of whom, I am sure could go on to be brilliant prison leaders, but, because they are so good, they could easily be snapped up into other roles or professions and therefore lost to the service. Staff are much more likely to switch jobs than they were in the past and at every level we can no longer rely on people to give us thirty or forty years of uninterrupted service.

If the prison service doesn't help the brightest and best to plan their careers, then other people will do it for them. It remains a challenge for the prison service to identify the next generations of leaders and then offer them the sorts of training and experiences (a stint with the inspectorate, for example) that will help them to stay committed and interested, so that they go on to be the great governors of the future.

I introduced the leadership section of our reports because I knew that it is the single most important factor in improving a jail. The work of Paul Newton at Birmingham, Ralph Lubkowski at Hewell and Emily Martin at Feltham have transformed those jails. But it isn't just about turning round an institution in dire straits, governors like Janet Wallsgrove at Parc or the recently retired Lynn Saunders from Whatton have led their prisons outstandingly for many years with an unrelenting focus on improving standards.

I worry however about the shelf-life of prison leaders – running a jail is an enormously difficult task and I am concerned that too many great governors have chosen not to govern or have left the service. It is as important to support existing leaders with their careers – giving them enough time in each post to make a difference, but also providing them with the support and pay to make the sacrifices worth it.

Another challenge for leaders is the bureaucratic burden that is placed on them by the centre. It is why we stopped making laundry lists of recommendations, because I was worried we had become part of the problem – feeding the bureaucratic beast and taking leaders away from what matters most.

Governors still tell me that they spend too long chained to their computer terminals and the introduction of better tech is a double-edged sword, while you are now able to communicate with the outside world, the outside world is now able to communicate with you.

What are the things that governors do that are most important? We could all make our own list. Walking round the jail, talking to prisoners and staff, setting priorities and communicating them clearly, holding their leadership team to account, developing, training and supporting their staff and setting an example of how to behave and work.

If these are the most important things – then these are the activities on which governors should be spending the most time. But you look at your average day, what proportion of it is spent on the things that really make the difference, that improve your prison and give you a sense of satisfaction as you drive home? In one deeply depressing conversation I once had, a governor said to me, “I sometimes feel more like a contract manager than I do a leader”.

But leading a prison is a noble calling, you are at the apex of a complex ecosystem that can only function if you yourselves are functioning. Just as the best leaders pass down responsibility to the lowest level possible, giving good people the freedom to make decisions while making them accountable for what they do, so it is incumbent on ministers, the prison service and prison group directors to do the same thing. Find the most talented, support their development and then step back and let you get on with the job.

At the Inspectorate, we will continue to champion effective leadership and we hope our reports are a useful tool, helping you to continue to improve your prisons.

Thank you again for inviting me today, and for the welcome and support you and your teams always give to our inspectors. And most of all, thank you for your commitment to making our prisons safer, more decent places. Places not just of detention, but ultimately, we all hope, of rehabilitation.

Notes to editors

1. This is a copy of a speech given by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Charlie Taylor to the Governing Governors' Forum on 17 May 2023.
2. HM Inspectorate of Prisons is an independent inspectorate, inspecting places of detention to report on conditions and treatment and promote positive outcomes for those detained and the public.
3. Please email media@hmiprisons.gov.uk if you would like more information.