

Statement to Parliament: Prison governor empowerment and accountability

I have today introduced the Prisons and Courts Bill, which will create a new statutory framework to support the Government's plans to make prisons places of safety and reform. The measures in the Bill are a vital part of the wider structural reforms announced in the Prison Safety and Reform white paper published on 3 November 2016.

The right framework and standards for improvement

In the white paper we committed to reforming how the prison system is structured in order to make lines of accountability clear and create sharper and more transparent scrutiny.

To deliver this, the Prisons and Courts Bill will enshrine in statute the purpose of prison, setting out for the first time that reform of offenders is a key aim for prisons. The Bill makes clear how the Secretary of State for Justice will account to Parliament for progress in reforming offenders.

The Bill also provides strengthened powers to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, including enabling the Chief Inspector to trigger an urgent response from the Secretary of State where they have significant concerns about a particular prison that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. It puts the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman on a statutory footing, giving them greater permanence and powers.

The white paper set out how this new framework will be underpinned by new standards, a new commissioning structure and new powers for governors. This will create a more focused prison system where governors are clear what they need to deliver and are empowered to do so.

To deliver this, we will create new, 3 year performance agreements signed by the Secretary of State and the governor of each prison. The agreements will be phased in over the next two years: the first third of prisons will sign the new agreements on 1 April, with the other two thirds moving to this approach by 1 April 2019. The agreements will include the following standards, based on the aims for prisons set out in the Bill, which governors will be held to account for:

- Protecting the public. We will do this by measuring, from April 2017:
 - The number of escapes from closed prisons;
 - The number of absconds from open prisons; and
 - Compliance with key security processes such as searching.

- Reforming offenders. We will do this by measuring:

- Time spent out of cell, starting from April 2017 in the prisons where the technology to track this has been introduced;

- Progress made in getting offenders off drugs. Prisoners will be tested on entry and exit with a phased roll out beginning in 2017;

- Progress made in health, starting with a measure of medical appointments attended by prisoners starting in England from April 2017;

- Progress made in maths and English, starting with qualifications gained from April 2017 and introducing testing on entry and exit in the longer term; and

- Progress in maintaining or developing family relationships. This will be a new measure which we are currently developing.

- Preparing prisoners for life on release. We will do this by measuring, from April 2017:

- Rate of prisoners being released to suitable accommodation;

- Rates of sustainable employment, including apprenticeships, and education in the period following release.

- Improving safety. We will do this by measuring, from April 2017:

- Assaults on prison staff and prisoners;

- Disorder and self-harm; and

- Staff and prisoner perceptions of safety.

We want the public to understand what progress is being made in our prisons, so we will publish data setting out how prisons are performing. We will collect the data from April 2017 and begin publishing official statistics regularly from October 2017.

To support delivery of these reforms on the ground, on 1 April we are creating a new, operationally-focused executive agency, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, which will be responsible for all operations across prison and probation and will refocus headquarters on supporting, not micro-managing, governors. The Secretary of State will set standards, commission services, and hold them to account.

Empowering governors to deliver

If we are to hold governors to account for meeting this new standards, they must be given the power to deliver change. We are devolving key operational policies to give governors greater flexibility, and have already cancelled 101 policies to help reduce bureaucracy for prisons. We will also remove current restrictions so that from 1 April 2017, governors have the freedom to:

- Design their regime to meet local delivery needs and target training and work in prisons to match the local labour market. Prisoners could, for example, work shift patterns to deliver new commercial contracts. This would help them to meet the standards to reform offenders and prepare prisoners for life on release.
- Decide their workforce strategy, including their staffing structure, to support meeting the standards. They could bring in specialists to work with particular types of prisoners, and tailor their staffing to support the prison regime they have designed.
- Control how they spend their resource budget. They could choose, for example, to pay for increased dedicated police officer time to reduce criminal activity in prison to improve safety and protect the public.
- Plan and take decisions about health services jointly with local health commissioners, through a co-commissioning framework.

Over the coming months, we will build on these essential freedoms even further by giving governors additional scope to:

- Decide what education opportunities they offer. Over 2017 and 2018, we will give governors control of the education budget, so that they can overhaul education and training to match the skills and qualifications prisoners need in the local labour market.
- Control how family support services work. From autumn 2017, governors will control budgets for family services, like visitors' centres and parenting skills classes, so they can choose the right way to support family relationships.
- Have more say on the goods and services in their prison. As each national contract ends, for example on food or equipment, we will determine how to devolve responsibility to governors.

This process of devolution and deregulation is being supported by learning from the work of the six reform prisons. These prisons will continue to explore and identify options for devolution across the estate as wider reforms are implemented. We have commissioned a formal evaluation to support this with regular feedback being provided to inform policy development ahead of the final report in early 2018.

These reforms are major changes that will result in sustained improvement over a decade. By the end of this Parliament this strategy will have delivered much needed new facilities, empowered governors and introduced modern technology to improve regimes, support reform and combat security threats.