

Robert Buckland QC MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
Ministry of Justice
102 Petty France
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20th August 2019

Dear Secretary of State,

10,000 extra prison places: announcement on 12 August

I am writing to seek some clarification of the announcement made by the Prime Minister on 12 August. Whilst the Prison Reform Trust would welcome measures which would allow prisoners to live in more humane conditions, and without the scourge of overcrowding, it is difficult on the information that has been made available so far to be confident that this is either the likely or intended outcome of the Prime Minister's intervention. It would assist both our and a wider public understanding if you were able to answer the following queries.

- A previous Justice Secretary announced a programme to build 10,000 new prison places. Our understanding is that only one houseblock of that commitment has actually been delivered, and that the commitment has in any event now been scaled back to 3,360 new places. The current Prime Minister has now committed to a programme of 10,000 spaces in addition to that 3,360. It would be helpful if you could confirm that the additional capacity promised therefore amounts to 3,360 over and above the previously announced programme.
- The previous announcement came with an allocation of £1.3bn. It would be helpful to know how much of that £1.3bn has been spent, and on what. Our understanding is that a significant portion of it has been used to cover the ministry's resource overspending in the years since 2016, but we are not clear how much of the £1.3bn remains available for its original purpose.
- It would be helpful to know your current intention is in relation to the policy objective you have set out to reduce overcrowding. Specifically, on the current range of projections for the prison population, by what degree will overcrowding reduce and to what timetable as a consequence of this investment?
- Similarly, it would be helpful to know your intention in relation to the closure of accommodation that is no longer fit for purpose. Previous Justice Secretaries have singled out dilapidated Victorian prisons as potential targets for closure, but you will know that there are also many examples of more recently constructed prisons and accommodation blocks which fall well below acceptable standards, from 1970s cells without integral sanitation to dormitories in open prisons that date from the second world war. How much unfit accommodation will be taken out of use as a consequence of this investment?

- The current backlog of major maintenance works in the prison estate stands at around £900k. It would be helpful to know how much, if any, of this investment is to go towards reducing that backlog, and what timescale, if any, has been set for eliminating it.
- The Prime Minister's announcement described an investment of "up to" £2.5bn. You will appreciate that this is a somewhat unusual formulation for a spending announcement. It would be helpful to know whether all of that provision is in fact guaranteed, and whether it includes the running costs of additional capacity, and over what period. If it does not, how are those additional costs to be met?
- Inevitably, the £2.5bn and the £100m separately announced for security enhancements throw into relief the paucity of financial support for some of the other strategic goals set out by this government in relation to prisons and prisoners. One of several examples would be the extent of funding made available to support the implementation of the female offenders strategy – a meagre £5m even by the department's own generous interpretation. It would be helpful to know if these announcements represent the full extent of new funding to deliver the government's many ambitions in the prisons field.

Since 2016, we have counted 278 policy undertakings given in public by ministers that relate to prisons. I attach our list. We supplied it to your officials in April this year with a request that it might be updated to reflect whether each commitment remained the government's policy, and whether, if so, it had been met or there was a timetable for that to happen. We have not been able to obtain those updates. Given the uncertainty about the future direction of policy created by the Prime Minister's intervention, it does seem to us to be essential that it should be made clear how many of the promises made by this government in relation to prisons remain intact. We think our analysis provides a useful framework for that task and would urge you to publish a comprehensive update so that everyone who lives and works in our prisons knows where they now stand.

You will want to know that we have written separately to Richard Heaton concerning the announcement of a sentencing review, and to Jo Farrar about the promised £100m investment in prison security measures. For information, copies of these letters are enclosed. Because of the public interest created by the Prime Minister's various announcements regarding prisons, and the scope for confusion left by the fact that they were made during a parliamentary recess without the opportunity for debate, we are publishing our letters on our website and will do the same with the responses we look forward to receiving.

With best wishes,



Peter Dawson
Director