Justice Committee

Scottish Government Draft Budget 2012-13 and Spending Review 2011

Written submission from the Prison Officers’ Association (Scotland)

Whilst welcoming the increase in the proposed funding for the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) we note that current and projected inflation will impact considerably on perceived benefits. However following discussion with the SPS we are content that the proposed budget will adequately fulfil the day to day, requirements of an increasing prisoner population.

The POA(S) welcomes the continued commitment by the Scottish Government towards investing in providing a modern fit for purpose prison estate within the public sector. With HMP Low Moss opening this year and the pending completion of redevelopment work at HMP Shotts throughout 2012 -13 significant opportunity exists to not only help manage the increasing population but to do so with the aim of providing decent and modern facilities in which to focus on the interventions necessary to contribute to addressing offending behaviour. Further commitment to modernising the estate through the construction of HMP Grampian and development work around a future HMP Highland and HMP Inverclyde is eagerly anticipated and is a significant endorsement of the partnership approach between the POA(S) and SPS management of providing efficient and effective prison services to the Scottish Government and Scottish public. We support the Scottish government’s aim of addressing the female estate and consider that this should be developed in accordance with an overall strategy for the management of female offenders in the context of tackling the execrable rise in the female prisoner population as well as the general prisoner population. With the movement of females to HMP Edinburgh, there is an easing to some extent of conditions within Cornton Vale. However, some areas within Cornton Vale are not fit for purpose, and do not lend themselves to contributing positively to the rehabilitative environment required to help the staff address the issues that are evident within the female prisoner population.

We are conscious of the requirement that areas of the prison estate not currently identified for specific development, such as HMP Dumfries, receives assurances regarding its role and long term future and sufficient monies are made available to maintain and invest in the fabric of the prison to allow it to contribute fully to the overall aim of delivering a safer Scotland.

Whilst development in the estate and modern working practices has allowed for increasingly efficient staffing models the continued rise in the prisoner population places a considerable burden on maintaining safe staffing levels. Although such mechanisms as ex-gratia payments provide incentives for staff to work additional hours this inevitably can raise issues around long working hours and associated fatigue and in the long term is not a substitute for having the correct staffing level and appropriate cover arrangements.

The question is put around whether there is sufficient funding for interventions and rehabilitation work with offenders, whilst the level of resource available for this is important and we have no reason to suggest there are insufficient monies available,
the principle barrier to providing effective interventions is the level of prisoner population. What might appear as a well rehearsed and old chestnut about the impact of overcrowding the reality of persistent and increasing prisoner population means that the Scottish public are put at greater risk through the lack of opportunity to attend to prisoners offending behaviour and make the suitable interventions that may help prisoners readjust and make a positive contribution when returned to their communities. Recent figures determine that despite the drop in overall crime. Scotland locks away 155 persons per 100,000 populations with almost 20% of those being remanded in custody (pre-trial or convicted awaiting sentence) Although violent crime has slightly increased it remains difficult to reconcile the apparent conflicting picture. We believe however that the Scottish Government has the right approach in focussing on managing offenders in the community where it is safe and appropriate to do so thereby allowing prisons to be left to manage those offenders who pose a serious risk to the public and allow staff the time and opportunity to deliver the interventions required. Nonetheless it remains an enigma in our minds, why a country the size of Scotland feels compelled to lock away more of its citizens than the vast majority of Western Europe.

Other issues

The POA(S) appreciate the level of confidence shown by the Scottish Government towards the public sector prison service and continued investment in the development of the prison estate will serve the Scottish public well in the future. Nonetheless crucial to the success of the SPS is the morale of staff. Maintaining good order in a prison is not an easy task and requires prison officers to manage relationships with prisoners skilfully, with confidence and with the knowledge that they are supported and valued for the role they undertake.

The Scottish budget provides no relief for those prison officers who face another year of a pay freeze (pay cut), increases to their pension contribution and the prospect of working longer to achieve less whilst dealing with the demands of an increasing prisoner population and real cuts to their standard of living. Maintaining staff morale against this background will be one of the most significant challenges to face the SPS in the immediate future.

Stability and good order in our prisons should not be taken for granted and we risk becoming complacent as a result of the hard won efforts of our members to build and maintain constructive and positive relationships. Demoralised and under-rewarded prison officers risk becoming vulnerable to malign pressures, on the other hand, well motivated and properly rewarded prison officers make a difference to society, contribute to making Scotland safer and deliver a service the country should be proud of.

Prison Officers’ Association (Scotland)
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