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PAVA

I'm sure you will be aware of the answer given this week to a PQ from Lord Bradley about the use of PAVA in the four pilot sites. The answer prompts several concerns, which I imagine you will share.

Most obviously, the use of PAVA, far from declining, has increased significantly. That suggests that the guidance that its use should be exceptional continues to be routinely ignored, as it was in the pilot period.

In two of the four prisons, Preston and Risley, the increase in use is dramatic compared to their two obvious comparators, suggesting a sharp divergence in practice between apparently similar prisons.

And finally, the answer gives yet another set of justifications for the use of PAVA – “for personal protection, the protection of others or to facilitate the safe withdrawal of staff”. There is no mention of exceptional circumstances, or the likelihood of serious violence. On the face of it, the grounds for use described are very much broader than anything you have said previously or that was contained in the guidance for staff in the pilot.

Before the use of PAVA is extended, I think there is an obligation to answer at least the following questions:

- What does the increase in the use of PAVA overall indicate about the effectiveness of management oversight and other safeguards on which you have relied in reassuring us and others about your decision to allow its deployment?
- Is it safe to allow the continued deployment of PAVA in the two prisons where use has accelerated most strongly, and disproportionately by comparison with the two similar sites in the pilot?

- Given the multiple alternatives described in different documents and public statements over the last 14 months, what are the definitive grounds that justify the deployment of PAVA in an operational situation?

I have heard you and others in HMPPS say a number of times in recent months that there are finally some encouraging signs that safety may be improving, including a reduction in violence. We all share a profound hope that that turns out to be the start of a long-term improvement. It would be a tragedy if, at the moment your investment in good relationships between prisoners and staff appears to be bearing fruit, the deployment of PAVA undermined the fragile progress that people have worked so hard to achieve. At the very least, there must be a case to pause and reflect on what seems to be working in an estate that, overwhelmingly, operates without PAVA.

With best wishes,



Peter Dawson
Director