

**All-Party Parliamentary Group on Penal Affairs**

**Chair: Paul Maynard MP**

**Vice Chairs:** Lord Carlile; Caroline Harris MP, Baroness Prashar, Marie Rimmer MP, Andrew Selous MP

**Secretary:** Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots

**MINUTES**

**Minutes of the Meeting of the All-Party Group on Penal Affairs, held on 21 February 2023  
in Committee Room 12, House of Commons**

**Guest speakers: Dame Anne Owers DBE, National Chair, IMB's, Camilla Poulton, former Chair and board member, IMB, HMP Pentonville.**

**Present**

Paul Maynard MP (in the Chair)  
Lord Atlee  
Lord Bradley  
Lord Dholakia  
Baroness Healey  
Baroness Prashar  
The Rt Revd Rachel Treweek

**Apologies**

Andrew Selous MP

**Attendees**

Zoe Burton, PRT, minutes  
Mark Day, PRT, Clerk to the Group

**Paul Maynard MP:** Paul welcomed attendees and introduced the topic of the meeting – the role of Independent Monitoring Boards. He introduced the guest speakers, Dame Anne Owers, national chair of the Independent Monitoring Board; and Camila Poulton, board member and a former chair of Pentonville IMB.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I am going to talk about the national picture of the IMB and then Camila is going to make it real in terms of what actually happens in a board at Pentonville. There are 110 IMBs across the prisons with over 1,100 members. They have the right to enter a prison at any time without warning, and they are able speak to prisoners in private, if they need to. They can see all the documents that the prison holds and attend meetings. So, they have got considerable rights of entry, quite rightly. Over the last six months, our IMB prison members carried out nearly 20,000 visits. They are always present in prisons, every week, and in most prisons more than once a week, especially in the big prisons.

Who are they? They are members of the local community with very varied experience. They come from lots of backgrounds, health, education, law, students and business people. It is very varied experience, and they are a part of the oversight mechanisms that we have, that we need to have, for places of detention - both nationally under the Prisons Act and internationally under the United Nations Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, to prevent abuse.

So, they complement the work of the Prisons Inspectorate who are paid people who go into prisons and places of immigration detention, and also the work of the Prisons and Probation

Ombudsman who investigate. So that sort of triumvirate – of inspection, which is an occasional activity; of monitoring, which is a constant activity; and investigation, for when things have gone wrong - is a very important part of the independent oversight into places of detention.

What we are not is we are not managers. We do not run prisons, nor say how exactly prisons have to be run. Nor are we a regulator, like the Care Quality Commission for example. Neither is the Inspectorate. Neither of us can say to close a prison, or to have fewer people in a prison. That can be frustrating. But it also gives you some freedom, because if you are a regulator you can only require what the prison could do right now, which at the time of the rising prison population and the staffing problems is not necessarily what they ought to be doing now or indeed what they want to be doing now. So, it does give that extra freedom, but it does mean that it can lead to some frustration.

So, what do IMB members do when they are in prison? The central role is being there, and reporting regularly to the establishment after each visit, and then using that information to alert the person in the prison service or the minister who can fix something that's been a problem. That's where the national picture comes in. Board members also answer 'applications' from prisoners, which are questions or complaints. For instance, where an individual prisoner has not been able to get their property sorted out in the prison, they may go to the IMB to try and help them to sort it.

We can be quite agile. During Covid, when of course it was neither safe nor possible to go into prisons, within a couple of months we developed an 0800-phone line so that prisoners who were able to get to a telephone, and of course more and more prisoners have phones in cells now, were able to contact IMBs directly.

We have a small secretariat in the centre which organises training, information, guidance for members and the recruitment of members. Also at the centre we do policy, such as reports back to select committees.

I want to say a few things briefly, and we will probably hear more in conversation, about what we are finding, some of the issues at national level that we are raising.

I, as some of you may know, came back into prisons, in this current role after seven years, having previously been the Chief Inspector of Prisons. I am one of those recidivists that keeps coming back. And I have to say that my perception in coming back was that the prison system is much more fragile, a lot of things have gone backwards. There was less activity, the personal officer scheme didn't exist, partly because the prison service has lost a lot of staff, and a lot experienced staff in the interim. It was both interesting and quite disturbing going back I have to say.

Of the national and systemic issues that we pick up, one of them is issues about prisoners' property. And that may sound as if it is not very important, but it is if you are locked away in a cell and you can't get access to your property, and that includes things that are very personal to you, like photographs, things that matter a lot to you, the only personal things that you are allowed. And I am afraid the prison service is not very good: even airlines

manage to get people's property across the rest of the world. But it seems to defeat the prison service to get someone's property 20 miles down the road to the nearest prison.

We also regularly raise maintenance issues, for example in the old Victorian prisons which are sometimes in a terrible state, like the ones for example that Camila goes to.

One of the things that IMBs were the first to pick up was that the use of Pava spray had spread from the prisons where it was originally planned to other prisons without any actual national announcement or anything. So that was one of the things we followed up.

We have also followed things up like disproportionality in the use of force. . Just before I came here, I looked at a report from a board where 50% of the use of force was used on prisoners who were black and they represented 30% of the prison population. Those are not uncommon findings.

We picked up very early on that Foreign National Prisoners had not been advised of their right to apply for settlement after Brexit, so the prisons were being given three working days in which to tell prisoners that they might need to apply. So actually, we took that up with the independent monitoring authority and that has now been changed. We are pleased to say that people will now be able to apply at any time.

We did a lot of work with the Criminal Justice Alliance on equality and diversity in women's prisons. One of things of course that we are picking up a lot is poor regimes. Sometimes there seems to be a reluctance to go back to pre-covid. Sometimes there is a slowness. Sometimes it is because of staffing issues in the prison system. It is more difficult to recruit and retain staff, but the population is rising, so the combination of those two things is not great. Again, just before I left, I was looking at a report from one prison where 50 % of prisoners are locked up 22 hours a day. Sadly, that is not uncommon.

We also very early picked up that the new probation contract, following the creation of the National Probation Service, did not cover remanded or short sentenced prisoners, particularly in terms of housing. This is something that John Plummer and Safer Homes and the London Prisons have been working very hard on, particularly about women prisoners' access to accommodation. That is an increasing problem and of course if people don't have accommodation the likelihood of them reoffending is great.

Again, I was just looking at a report from a women's prison outside of London this morning where 20 % of their women are released to no fixed abode. That means not only are they at risk of reoffending, it affects things like reuniting with children, it can all have a detrimental effect.

The issue of mental health and particularly mental health for those held in segregation for long periods. The more ill you are the more likely you are to be in close confinement or segregation. And still there are delays in moving people to other secure mental health accommodation.

One of the issues that the boards are really exercised about at the moment is those prisoners serving IPP sentences. The Justice Committee in this case recommended resentencing for those prisoners. I think that many of those prisoners who we were in contact with in prisons believed that therefore that was policy, and they were of course disabused of that when the government responded to the committee. We are now collecting more evidence about the current situation for people serving IPP sentences and the effect this decision has had on them, that we will be presenting to the Justice Committee.

And finally, another issue that we are keeping a very close eye on at the moment because of the prison population, is the use of police cells temporarily under Operation Safeguard. In many of the regions now police cells are being used overnight, prisoners are arriving at the prisons first thing in the morning, at seven o'clock, just when the prisons are trying to get people out to court, and the prison population is very close to maximum capacity. So I think staffing and population are issues that we are going to be looking at very closely.

That's the national picture. Camilla can give you much more about what it is like to be an IMB member on the ground.

**Camilla Poulton:** Thanks very much. I monitor at HMP Pentonville which is a Victorian prison in north London close to Kings Cross. It opened in 1842 originally for 520 prisoners in a single cell and is now holding approximately 1,150, mostly in double cells. About 100 of those are young adults, and the maximum number of prisoners that can be held is 1,170. It is near the top of that. It is one of the busiest prisons in the country, about 4,200 prisoners are received every year and it also has one of the most challenging populations in the country. It has more gang nominals, members of serious and organised crime gangs than any other prison in England or Wales. And currently at least 75% of the population are on remand. Before Covid this would have been around 30% but due to the court back log and barrister strikes we are looking at around 75%. Many prisoners have been there on remand for three years or more and many still don't have court dates.

Our independent monitoring board is larger than many others around the country due to the size and complexity of the prison population. We are currently 14 members, we could be 16. I have been a member since 2014 and I was chair between 2016 and 2020. Our local MP is Emily Thornberry. The current governor, a very experienced governor, has been in post since 2019. We have touched on the role of HM Inspectorate of Prisons – they visit at regular intervals and are due to do a return visit in April following a full inspection last July. They are returning to focus particularly on early days in custody and attendance at activities and workshops and safety. These are all issues the independent monitoring board has been keeping a careful eye on for some while.

So as Anne has said we have pretty much unfettered access to the prison that we monitor. And we have three main statutory duties. To monitor, ie. physically visiting; to deal with problems from prisoners; and to produce an annual report for the Secretary of State. And through our physical presence in the prison every week of the year - at Pentonville there could be members of the board in anywhere between three and five days of every week -

we are able to spot and raise small issues with managers and governors as soon as we become aware of them and to hopefully stop them becoming major issues.

In that respect, we are quite different and distinct in our role from HMIP who would come in every one to two years. We are fortunate as a board that we enjoy very good working relationships with the management. I would say we have developed them, and they take a lot of care to keep to a good standard. If we have issues when we are physically in the prison we could definitely just go and speak to the governor of the prison or the governor responsible for a particular function or wing and say – do you know about this?

But to the extent there are issues that we can't resolve or raise satisfactorily at a local level, then as Anne has said boards can escalate those issues up to the minister or to the Secretary of State.

In my time on the board, we have done this to several prisons ministers and that is in addition to the formal annual report which is produced each year and which is publicly searchable. You can also search for the government's formal responses online. The most recent letter that we sent to the Secretary of State was on the 12<sup>th</sup> December. We wrote to express concern about proposed increases to the operational capacity or the maximum number of prisoners that were proposed to be housed in Pentonville and the negative effect that this would have on a prison which is already struggling with its physical infrastructure. For those of you that haven't visited, it is everything you might imagine a Victorian prison to be. By which I mean poor and outdated physical conditions, and problematic staffing levels which Anne has already mentioned. Partly because of the board's frustration with responses to its annual reports and formal letters over the last few years, we also shared our letter with interested members of the press and other people, including former prisons minister Rory Stewart.

Our letter set out a chronology of the board's experience of the prison's changing population pressures and the reasons why that operational capacity had changed over the last ten years. It basically argued that Pentonville should not be forced to take any more prisoners. HMIP had also last year spoken out in its formal inspection report about the decrepit state of the prison and the negative effect this has on prisoners. We also quoted back to the Secretary of State his previously stated desire that prison "give prisoners a better shot at rehabilitation".

We argued that overcrowding at Pentonville on top of its physical structural problems was not conducive to any kind of rehabilitation. We got a response from the minister on the 29<sup>th</sup> December, effectively stating that overcrowding would be necessary for the foreseeable future. And it didn't particularly address the specific issues that we had articulated.

But moving on, to how we come to know about practical problems experienced by prisoners. In my experience prisoners speak with great candour to us about their life in prison and about their personal situations. It is always quite mind blowing I think how easily they will open up to someone they don't know. These informal conversations lead to revelations about which often management are not aware. And because we visit very regularly, every week, we just check the temperature, wing by wing, function by function.

Therein we can manage how we present our observations to management in a way that is helpful and non-confrontational.

Several years ago, while I was on rota, prisoners in the early days in custody wing, who had just come in from the street or from court or another prison, told me that they were having to use their underpants to dry themselves after showers because there weren't sufficient clean towels. And they said 'we have told wing staff about this, but nothing has been done'. So clearly this wasn't a decent situation for somebody to be in. And of course if prisoners are not treated decently and fairly and humanely it can become a safety issue. Why would a prisoner do what he was asked to do by an officer if he felt he was not receiving the basics that he was entitled to?

So, I put the issue straight to the governing governor at the time, who was unaware of the problem, but immediately got on to the right managers and governors to get this supply chain problem addressed.

More recently, I took allegations of intimidating behaviour from an officer towards several different prisoners to the governing governor. It doesn't feel good to report things like that because staff are doing a difficult job in a very challenging environment. But it is definitely part of our role to do that, and in this case it turned out that this behaviour was part of a pattern which was being monitored. And while as Anne said we are not investigators or managers, as a board, at Pentonville, we see it as part of our role to look for patterns, trends in complaints about members of staff, or particular functions not working well. Or the underpants situation where the supply chains are just not working as they ought to. And this is either based on what prisoners tell us directly or from what we observe ourselves during visits. Then we report back in a variety of ways, it could be a direct conversation or an email. It could be that we raise it in a board meeting (we hold monthly board meetings with the governor), or we raise it in our formal written reports, which are written every week of the year, about two pages, sent to the governor with questions for him to answer.

A functional area about which the board has been concerned for a while is the Offender Management Unit (OMU). It is the department responsible for the very complex job of managing prisoners' sentences, transfers, applications for HDC (Home Detention Curfew). And for probably a couple of years or so we have been very concerned about it operationally the quantity and quality of staff, the turnaround of responses to prisoners. We were getting such a slew of complaints from prisoners about the lack of responses, lack of timely responses. When members of the board went to the department to follow up on these complaints, we found that we were not getting the help that we needed in order to help prisoners.

We addressed these concerns in our formal annual report. We had already spoken to the governor about it, month on month, but we decided it was something that needed to be highlighted at that level and publicly. Obviously the Minister became aware of that as well and then, pleasingly, I would say, since our report was published at the end of last summer, the department has started to rebuild itself, with some extra support from region. I think this is in no small part due to the harsh spotlight that the IMB placed on it. The prison has

been able to start to rebuild the confidence and training of its staff and improve the service levels to prisoners.

And just to pick up the point Anne made about the smaller complaints, the applications, that we have a duty to deal with every week from prisoners. At Pentonville we get about 20 a week. But they are just the ones that come to us via this freephone telephone number or on paper. If I was on rota and I was going about having conversations with prisoners, trying to get a feel for what was going on in their lives and on that wing, I could quite easily pick up at least ten or twelve again. In fact, if you spend too long in a wing you will pick up problems with everything - lost property, sentence calculations, problems getting numbers onto their telephone accounts, problems with their health and with cell mates.

Not every issue that we discover affects hundreds of prisoners, and as Anne said individual issues are hugely important. A mislaid pair of trainers, family photographs, legal papers, can lead prisoners to say to you 'I am going to hang myself if I don't get this'. They really feel it and it is very frustrating because more often than not, it is not possible to find these things.

But there are positive examples of where we have managed to do that. And quite recently I helped a prisoner get back about 99% of his photographs that he had had sent into him, but which had been kept back by security because a very strict approach had initially been taken as to whether those photographs were suitable for him to have in his possession. And of course, he was immensely grateful to have some photos to look at in his cell.

Some of the big concerns at Pentonville are around the physicality and the underinvestment in the prison. As I have said, Pentonville is a Victorian prison with chronic underinvestment. Another of the things we have been concerned about is the poor state of the cell windows. Integral to the safety and security of a prison is that the windows are secure. And in autumn 2016, the year I took over as chair, within a couple of weeks in the autumn there was a homicide and two prisoners escaped and both of those incidents were directly connected to the poor state of the windows. A formal report was commissioned, and it was decreed that all the windows and the safety grilles should be replaced as soon as possible. And yet seven years later that job is not complete, and most recently the Minister told us it won't be complete until 2030. So that is just an example of some of the frustration around the basic, physical infrastructure issues.

**Paul Maynard MP:** Well thank you both of you for that, immensely helpful. The topic for today was the role of IMB and I think you have described the role very well. At the prison level, within the prisons, within the management, also the role of IMB within the Ministry of Justice. I am sure each minister has their own approach as to how they see the IMB. Although during my recent time in the Ministry I did have the opportunity to visit inquests where Juliet [Lyon] and I had a really interesting dialogue over her concerns around deaths in prisons and how they were being treated at inquests. I found that she was telling me what was going on, not what they wanted me to know what was going on. That is quite a difference in my view. You are the canaries in the coal mine and the phrase that jumped out to me to me was critical friend. If I was a minister, I would want to see the granular detail of what is actually going on.

So to my mind the role you play, the volunteer role, you and your other 14 other members, I think is integral to the function of our prison estate and perhaps undervalued by the politicians in this place.

Anyway, enough of me, shall we take some questions please.

**Danny Barrs, PPMI:** It's not so much a question but a request for comment on the OMU and the overcrowding issue. So, we have a situation where there are 400 prison cells requested and at the same time I think it is 642 D cat spaces available, it might be 624, but over 600 anyway. I wondered if you could just comment on that and the overcrowding issue. In other words, the request from Dominic Raab for the 400 prison cells is completely ignoring the fact there were over 600 places available in D-cat. In other words, the problem was the lack of progress of prisoners through the prison system.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I think that is right. There are certainly spaces. I am not sure how many exactly. One of the questions I have just asked our boards to tell me is how many places there are in D cat prisons. The progression does seem to have closed down. We are trying to find out what is behind it. Because I agree open prisons are really good places for people being able to reengage as you know. It is a very important part. If people have served a long sentence, it is a managed way of return.

**Danny Barrs, PPMI:** The D cat estate allows people to monitor people's behaviour outside the normal estate so it's actually a danger to the public that people have not been identified. Because if you can't monitor people in an open prison then you are taking a risk which is unjustified.

**Paul Addicote, SIG:** My question is about independence. You talked about your roles in prisons and your relationships with prisons teams. I wondered how you ensure that your board members are maintaining their independence and not becoming part of the greater management team as it were.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I think that is something that you have to take very seriously when you are there as frequently as IMB members are. That's why we have strengthened our training and our information and our whole national governance structure which didn't exist before. But Camilla you can talk more about what it is like on the ground.

**Camila Poulton:** When I am responsible for a particular week in the year, which is how we organize ourselves on our board, I would make three to four visits but I might not then be in the prison for another few weeks or until our next board meeting. So it's not the same people who are in all the time in my experience.

When we meet as a board to discuss issues that we are concerned about, and we try to decide how we raise it with the prison, sometimes we talk amongst ourselves and people who were perhaps trying to get a little bit too involved in thinking like a manager are brought back into thinking like a monitor. It can be very frustrating, as Anne said, because often people have got particular professional backgrounds, we might have headteachers, businesspeople or IT people and they are seeing problems which are just not being



managed in a way they would have done in their work. But it is important that we all keep that distance, and you present a problem or an observation to a member of staff or a manager and you let them get on with it. If you were to observe the same problems affecting prisoners again then you would raise it again, but it is very important that we just keep that distance

**Paul Maynard MP:** Can I just ask a follow up question. How do you avoid 'group think', how lively are your debates, how do you ensure you have not all got the same backgrounds, as it were, how do you make sure there are different voices being heard?

**Camilla Poulton:** Well, we certainly don't all have the same background. The recruitment process, while it is a public appointments process, and it is inquisitive, there has never been a group of people, in my experience on the board, who are all like each other. Our board is very lively and there is a lot of debate in between meetings, on email and on other forums. So I think through the range of ages and experience we are able to keep that arm's length distance from becoming too close to the prison management and also not interfering too much in how they react to what we raise.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I agree, I think it is always being aware of the fact that you are part of the IMB, you are not part of the prison. And that is why we have spent a lot of time developing national training, a sense of national identity, we might be 110 different bodies, but we are actually all part of the same organisation.

**Ben Leapman, editor at INSIDE Times:** It seems to me that the people who know best about what is going on in prisons are the people who have served time in one. I had the pleasure of interviewing a man in 2020 when Covid was breaking out and I asked whether it was possible for ex-prisoners to join IMBs and the reason I asked that question was because I had heard that this is impossible and that they were always turned down on security grounds. Only one ex prisoner was accepted at IMB and that was because his conviction was quashed. When I asked that question in 2020, he told me that we don't keep records on whether or not we have got former prisoners but there is no bar to them in applying. And he went on to say we want to expand equality and diversity from people of all backgrounds and that includes people with lived experience of prison, you learn a great deal from people with lived experience which sounded great. But I just wanted to check three years on now what progress has been made on this front.

**Dame Anne Owers:** Well, I can assure you that there are IMB members who have been in prison whose convictions have not been quashed. I can't tell you the numbers as we don't keep those records. Understandably you are right that there is some nervousness in prisons about security issues but every time that has been raised, I have challenged it, because as you say, people with lived experience are important. But the other important thing is that we don't sit in a holy huddle, protected. Just because we have to be independent of the prison service we have to be independent of everybody else. So the links that we can make through the Prison Reform Trust, the Howard League, other groups of ex-prisoners, that is also really important in our knowledge base, and our understanding of what is going on. So, it's keeping everybody's mind open and not just people who have been in prison.

**John Plummer, London Prisons Mission:** Thank you I found that extremely useful and I am pleased to see that so many prisoners are open to speaking to members of the IMB who are going around. I find that anybody who is not wearing a white shirt and a tie predicated candid conversations with prisoners. Just commenting quickly on the issue of repairing windows, I was showing some visitors around Wormwood Scrubs recently and several of them complained to me about the horrible smell coming from one of the wings. The reason for it was that the windows had been recently repaired after a long time and therefore it was not possible to throw faeces out of the prison windows and the toilets were not flushing properly. And that was the reason why that wing was so smelly, so these things do connect up.

Also, can I also just ask about the issue of responses, to your reports, going to prison governors, particularly also to Ministers or Secretaries of State. I am aware for example, HMIP reports go to the Secretary of States with a list of recommendations, some of them quite strongly expressed. However, the quality and effectiveness of those recommendations and the responses to them is rather doubtful and I just wondered rather whether you feel you are getting adequate responses and whether your reports ought to be seen by parliament more than they are at present and attracting therefore some media and public interest in them, which I think would be very positive.

Finally, it was largely because of the reception of the report by the IMB on a prison outside of London that a lot of attention was attracted to the fact that about 50 women per month were then being released to no fixed abode and destitution. Now sadly because of what Anne just mentioned very briefly, the process of decontracting and the reunification of the National Probation Service, this has escalated and now one prison has something like 65% of prison leavers without accommodation to go to. Now the consequences of this are really very serious indeed. I wonder whether you are satisfied that this is receiving an application, thank you.

**Dame Anne Owers:** recommendations, yes, as I said earlier, the downside of not being a regulator is that you can't make things happen. The downside of being a regulator is you can only make happen what is possible today. So like with the Prisons Inspectorate both now and when I was Chief Inspector of Prisons, sometimes you have to play a long game. My predecessor, as is well known in this group, as Prisons Inspector, David Ramsbotham, started a campaign against slopping out in prisons. When I went on my first inspection of Dartmoor, which was a bit of a revelation, I found that there was still a wing slopping out and I was told that actually it was quite good because it allowed prisoners to socialise in the morning. I don't know how many people socialise with a full chamber pot, but certainly it has not been part of my lived experience. But now it does not exist.

So sometimes you have to play a long game. And the fact you are right does not mean necessarily that anything happens. But it is just important to keep on. I mean one of the things that I went on about when I was Chief Inspector of Prisons, and boards like Camilla's still go on about, is that I can't think of any other public building in the country where it would be permissible for two people to share a cell with an unscreened toilet in it where they eat their meals. If it was any other public building it would be a public health hazard. It would be completely closed down. But it is still happening. It is happening less than it did.

But I suspect it is now going to happen more than it did because of the population pressures. You have to keep on saying it because it is right. If you only say it because it is possible that's wrong.

Yes, there are frustrations about ministerial responses, some of them I suspect have been passed through the minister rather than by the minister, in fact most of them will be in that category.

Accommodation yes, a major issue. I said there are specific things about women but also a lot of male prisoners are now being released to no fixed abode. The problem with setting people targets for accommodation is that well known phrase you hit the target but miss the point. That people are saying they have accommodation but what they actually have is a couch in someone's room for the night. Because it looks better on the statistics.

One of our boards in Cardiff actually interviewed every prisoner about to be released and their statistics on what was actually fixed accommodation were somewhat considerably different to the figures that the prison was providing. It is this kind of in-depth work that some of our IMBs can do in terms of surveying. It is like what you were talking about Paul, the difference between what's supposed to happen and what actually does.

When I was Inspector I had something that I called 'the virtual prison'. This was the one that ran in the governor's office and it is a pretty good place really. And in a well-run prison it wasn't that different from what you found on the wings. But in the prison that was not so well run it could be an enormous difference from the virtual prison.

**Paul Maynard MP:** I would just observe ministers can choose what appears in their boxes and they can make requests over what appears in their boxes and occasionally choose what not to have in their dispatches and have a lighter box.

**Camilla Poulton:** From the point of view of being an on the ground board member, it is frustrating when you get a ministerial response, and it doesn't really address or appear to really get the point that you are making. Or you say let me show you around, let me invite you, nobody has ever taken us up on that offer. But as a board we stay motivated because of the difference we make on the ground every week that we are there. Every day that you are there you will make a difference to an individual prisoner or maybe a wing, even maybe the whole jail. But it is a long game in terms of a satisfactory response at a higher level. The underinvestment is a known example. There is no point getting exercised about that any more than you can because there simply isn't enough money in the pot. But there is lots we think we do that make a positive difference.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I should have mentioned it, the tendency to focus on the high level stuff and the recommendations in the reports and so on, but to not forget the day to day, week to week, the kind of things that Camilla was describing, the boards are doing under the radar every week in prisons, pointing out things that governors didn't know were happening, or thought were happening, and aren't, that is not recorded. It is not in any major report, but it happens and where it does, it makes a difference.

**Peter Merrifield, SWIM Enterprises:** I am CEO of a black and minority ethnic service which is based in Hackney and in the space of criminal justice and Pentonville comes under our duty. First and foremost, I have to say it was quite refreshing to hear about some of the unrecognised, or some of the unknown pieces of work that you are talking about which goes on the ground. The headline things are great but the prisoners that we work with, it's those small things that you just talked about and that's excellent, it fills me with hope that in a situation and a climate where things are getting more difficult, you talked about things going backwards, it is nice to see that there are still foot soldiers on the ground connecting with prisoners.

Obviously, I am particularly interested in issues on disparities, in discrimination. I was interested to find out, do you find that the black inmates actually feel able to have conversations with your teams more so than they would be able to with prison staff? Because quite often people will tell you that everything is all right because some people don't have faith in any kind of change coming about. So, I would be interested to hear if you get any of those genuine concerns where people feel discriminated against and if you do, how is that received when you are interacting or relaying that information to those in a position to try and bring about and could bring about change?

Finally, the other thing is around resettlement, we talked about housing where we do a lot of work. I think 80% of the challenges that we have are people coming out and they get put in a hostel. When they may have had a window of opportunity for rehabilitation and they get put in a hostel and the next morning someone comes knocking on their door and says do you want to go halves on a bit of crack. And before you know it, they are off and running again. So, resettlement planning and whether anything is happening in that space would be another interest of mine.

**Camilla Poulton:** Well if I take the first question in terms of my experience, I think that prisoners of a black and ethnic minority background speak openly to us very regularly. I think there is a lot of frustration with requests not being taken forward by prison officers, either because they are too busy or because there is actually nothing they can really do. And that frustration may just be at that level or it could be a feeling of discrimination in which case there are formal systems for reporting that as you may well know within the prison system. It is committing your allegations to paper and being prepared to go through that process.

Some prisoners feel they are discriminated against by officers of different ethnicities, and we don't investigate, we don't comment on their feelings, but we will make sure that they know what is open to them in terms of reporting that to the highest level within the prison for investigation. If the response to that is not to their satisfaction, or it gets lost, or there are other reasons why they feel that the process was unsatisfactory, then we would step in, nudge it along and make sure it was being properly considered. Beyond that we don't get involved in that sort of particular space but we would look at statistics from the equalities meetings that we go to, the data the prison holds around the use of force and IEPs, and percentages of prisoners from BAME backgrounds who were (or were not) taking up activities or education.

**Peter Merrifield:** It sounds like there are limits to what you can do, and you talk about the rules and what you actually can do and what you can't. So you can be a listening ear but not do much necessarily in terms of changing systems or holding people's feet to the fire to some extent. Clearly you are not able to do that which is one of the frustrations I would say because prisoners know that there are these procedures but they have no faith in that procedure. So in a way what is the point in repeating to them well you could write it down when actually it probably won't go beyond the next step. But okay I hear clearly what you are saying but the resettlement element?

**Dame Anne Owers:** Can I just say a bit more, you are right we cannot fix problems and that can be a frustration. But what we can do is point to patterns, and the disproportionality in patterns. And as I say we were the first ones to point out Pava spray was being disproportionately used against certain kinds of prisoners. And we also did a joint report with the Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA), on the experience of black and ethnically diverse women in prison, which used the evidence from our boards in women's prisons and as the CJA was pointing out and the prison service said yes, there clearly is a problem. So prisons are very good at collecting statistics which show things but they are not very good at saying the 'so what' question.

**Camilla Poulton:** Yes, so in terms of the quality of the accommodation, well it is a big challenge at the moment in Pentonville because there is such a high remand population which means many prisoners will be going to court and then finding that they are released straight away. And actually I was in this morning and two men were saying 'I am going to be on someone's sofa when I come out, what can I do?' And I think there are very slow motions underway to try and change the contract for the housing services, but I was honest with one of the men, it is not going to help you in the next three weeks, later in the year maybe, prisoners in your situation would get that help. It is something that we are raising with prison management but it is not an easy fix because of the way the contracts are negotiated.

**Dame Anne Owers:** But also because once they are outside, one of the things that I have said ever since I started looking at prisons is that we need to invest in not prison, we need to invest in what happens afterwards, we need to have an investment in what happens before. If we just invest in prisons, it's like a health service that only invests in the accident and emergency unit and doesn't have any primary care and doesn't have any treatment afterwards. It is as daft as that. And putting more and more money into prisons without looking at what can stop people going there in the first place and what people need afterwards is a recipe for the kind of things we are talking about. And the prison service can't fix it, and the prison service can't build homes, the prison service can't find jobs for people, they can do what they can to negotiate that move. Juliet Lyon used to call them the capacious social service. When you see people in prison you can see why they are there. And that is not something that prisons can fix, still less the IMBs.

**Lee Morgan, PPMI:** I would like to raise the issue of autistic prisoners, we have seen an increase in the number of autistic prisoners in the last year or so and there is an issue with progression through the system, people being underdiagnosed, if they are diagnosed at all. Which raises a separate issue, the level of suicide and self-harm, and with these conditions

for autistic people, with the loss of control over their lives, with that being more so in prison than in the average day to day life, are the IMBs on board with that and whether or not neurodiversity is being considered.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I can talk about the prison system in general and then Camila can talk about the board. There has been a greater focus on neurodiversity in prisons partly because when Robert Buckland was justice secretary he knew from his own family the issues people face who have autism. And there is now a framework lead on that. It is a long way to go, and I think that we as IMBs are more aware of it than we were, but it does, as you say, it often leads to people being in segregation too. I was talking to a young guy in prison who was autistic and didn't really know what was going on and I said to him has anyone talked to you about the prison rules and he said 'no miss I don't know anything about the rules but I know if they send me down the block I have probably broken one'. Therein lies the electric fence and it is not right. We have done some online training on neurodiversity and the different issues that boards might expect. One of the interesting things about the phone line that both I and Camilla were talking about is that it does mean for people who find writing anything down difficult or have any other type of disability they can more easily talk on the phone.

**Camilla Poulton:** Pentonville is unusually well equipped in this respect. Since last summer a designated neuro diverse unit was established which is largely made up of men who have autism and ADHD diagnoses. They live together in the unit which is run by a governor, wing officers, speech and language therapists, psychologists and a dedicated unit manager. They take part in the same activities as the main population, it is just they live together. All the officers on the unit are trained to be sensitive to things like knocking on doors before entering cells or other methods which cause as little stress as possible, knowing to avoid unnecessary touch, more diverse ways of communication -all that sort of thing. It has been very successful so far and there is a really special atmosphere on the unit.

It is not to say that every single prisoner with one of those diagnoses is on the unit, they simply can't accommodate that. But the hope is that many of them will be stabilised in terms of their prison experience and might afterwards be able to go and live in the main population to free up space for those who are finding it the hardest. Before that, if the board came across prisoners who told us that they have got this diagnosis we always made sure that we let the right people know who largely at that time were the speech and language therapists and the psychologists. And it was a bit disjointed but through the drive of a particular wing governor and doctor something has blossomed, but that is not the case in every prison.

**The Rt Reverend Rachel Treweek:** Thank you so much Anne and Camilla, it is really good to hear what you have to say, and one of the words I have heard quite a lot is frustration, and relationship. It seems to me that when I go round prisons quite often IMB members will say I am so frustrated because we are doing reports and we are not getting those little movements. Or governors who get frustrated because they want to do things about it but there is not enough resources and everything is limited.

Which brings me back to Anne's point: yes, we need to be reimagining no prison, or a limited prison. There is something in what you were saying Camilla, the fact that members of boards have very different professions, have lived experience, and different backgrounds. It seems to be often that we are having conversations within the same structures. If we are going to change public discourse and public narrative, we know the data is there, we are not doing it by policy, so we are doing it by Daily Mail headlines. How do we get these experiences of your members which are so valuable. How do we get those outside these structures into the public discourse. I don't have the answer, but it seems to me there is something there, that we need to be thinking outside the box, to go back to boxes, to change public discourse and public narrative.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I think it is a really important question and I don't know the answer. Let me be very clear I don't believe in no prisons, but I do believe in things that stop people going back and stop people going in in the first place. The work that the Prison Reform Trust does, the work that the Howard League does and the work of lots of other organisations, community organisations and professional groups do, is all pointing to the same thing, it is all pointing to that need to invest in outside prison. I just think we need to carry on the conversation.

**Paul Maynard MP:** The challenge for these groups is how do you get it into the Daily Mail, what you see at Pentonville?

**Camila Poulton:** Well, we did have some limited success before Covid, we were getting a variety of regional and national newspapers interested, BBC London TV news and the Vanessa Feltz radio breakfast show but it has tailed off. Pentonville is quite a notorious prison, that helps. Some of the issues we talk about are very specific to it, but many are relevant across the estate. There are many Victorian prisons that are underinvested in up and down England and Wales.

**Dame Anne Owers:** It is about people being prepared to put themselves out there, to have these awkward media experiences and feeling it is a real part of their duty as an independent monitor to speak up about these places which are fascinating and hidden and important. But it is true the Daily Mails and the Suns are not traditionally interested in the message that we are putting out there. And I guess for me it is that there is still the narrative 'let's lock everyone up for longer, then we will all be safe', when we know that is not true. A lot of what you are experiencing, and people with different experiences, and different backgrounds, for me it is how we get beyond the talking about safer prisons but actually we need to think outside the box for public discourse.

**Dame Anne Owers:** I think that is one of the advantages of the IMBs, we talked a lot about what the IMBs do when they are in the prisons, but you have 1100 people out there in the community and they all have friends and family and so on who are actually talking about the reality of what is going on and that is really important, they are not paid to do it, prison staff are paid to be there but our members choose to be there. And they have contacts, and they have networks. They have conversations that don't have the magic effect but help change the dialogue a bit.

**Paul Maynard MP** drew the meeting to a close, thanked the presenters and thanked everyone for coming to the meeting.