

Titan Prisons

Lord Carter's *Review of the Prison System in England and Wales*, published in December 2007, contained a key recommendation, among others, that "larger state of the art prisons should be planned and developed". Subsequently, in June 2008, the Ministry of Justice issued a Consultation Paper, seeking responses to its proposal to implement this recommendation through the construction of up to three "Titan" prisons, each providing up to 2,500 places, typically comprising five units of approximately 500 offenders.

The Probation Association was represented at a round table discussion of the issues, and submitted a written response to the MOJ. This document draws on that response, and places it within the context of the PA's determination to achieve a reduction in offending and reoffending through the efforts of the 42 probation boards and trusts.

The PA has not expressed a view on the findings of the Carter report, nor on whether Titan prisons should be built. It shares concerns expressed by individuals and organisations, through the consultation process, about the potential for the Titan prisons to become large, warehouse, depersonalised institutions. It asserts that the need to refurbish the prison estate should not diminish the pressing need to expand the use of community sentences; it has, though, responded to the opportunity provided to influence the development and implementation of Titans, and has expressed its views accepting the reality that a decision has already been made that Titans will be built.

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Principal observations

- Whilst the dangers inherent in creating large prison sites are more likely to occur in a Titan setting, there are opportunities to utilise savings and build excellent regimes across the units within each site.
- These will be best realised, and offending behaviour confronted more successfully, if a high proportion of the prisoners are those located close to home, and if many of the prisoners remain within the cluster through their sentence. The sites should be within, not close to the region being served.
- Staff with specialist functions can work across sites, resulting in increased efficiency and expertise, but reductions in resources can, equally, have a greater, detrimental, impact in such arrangements.
- New (Service Level Agreements) and governance arrangements may be required as regards work by probation service staff based within these prisons, and those visiting to deliver a service. The size of these clusters will present a challenge to probation areas to find sufficient qualified staff, both on commission and over time, and a risk to areas if the present National Through care Framework with its relatively short notice periods is retained.
- Probation staff should be fully involved at area and regional level in the design process for each of the three regimes.
- The use of the label “Titan” may have an appeal to some, but aiming to provide a “cluster” of adjacent prisons more clearly reflects both the model suggested within the Consultation document, and a framework now being successfully developed in existing groups of prisons.

In response to specific questions raised in the consultation paper, the PA has also noted:

The real test of success will be how well aims are achieved and aspirations realised. It will be vital that “close to home” does not mean 60 miles away and a 2 or 3 hour trip on public transport for many visitors. There is a danger that Lord Carter’s enthusiasm for a Court plus Remand facility could lead to a setting which saves money for the prison service but creates real and psychological distance between offender and home. A form of ring fencing should be introduced so that a guarantee exists that savings will be utilised to “free up resources for involvement in better public protection and interventions”.

New cluster-prisons should be built within the region they will serve: the DOM will then have a real opportunity to commission end to end offender management, with the same agencies providing “through the gate” services. Whilst specialist provision may have a place in these prisons, the main thrust of development should be to house adult male prisoners close to home.

The majority of short and medium length sentenced prisoners should serve all their sentence within the cluster, moving through units, and long term prisoners should start and end their sentences within the cluster. There is a strong case for these prisons to contain lead provision on mental health.

Apart from bringing together “back office” services, as is already happening with many prisons, the Sheppey experience suggests that (a) specialist tasks such as security and public protection can be best provided by a cluster approach, with the same staff able to track offender progress through the sentence, across units, but (b) landing officers need, though, to be wing and unit based, providing a key sense of identity and ensuring the quality of everyday, consistent, personal contact which can be best achieved in small units. Experience already shows that specialist staff (prison service, probation and from other agencies) respond well and work effectively as part of a cluster based team, with individuals having a “home” base in specific units.

Overview

Clustering of services has become more common across the prison estate, and appears to provide the optimum model to achieve best practice in the Titan prisons. When services are provided across several units this has a potential to provide a more consistent and coherent regime through a prisoner’s sentence, but resource problems have a greater impact upon such arrangements.

A strong feature of the Sheppey model is the 4 strand arrangement, with offender management being one governor’s responsibility, alongside three residential managers; this should be considered as a template.

Larger sites will present challenges to probation areas as regards providing a relatively high number of staff, especially qualified probation officers, on commission of the prisons, continuing difficulty in maintaining establishments, and an organisational risk through the shadow of potential re-role with request to change staff numbers at short notice. Implementing Titans will present a clear opportunity to reconsider formal prison/probation contracts and agreements, and an opportunity for NOMS to focus on prison based probation work as a key aspect of probation service delivery.

Conclusion

The PA echoes the views of organisations and individuals who fear the adverse affects of “super prisons”. It welcomes the potential for clustered units to achieve greater “closeness to home” and to facilitate improvement across the prison estate, especially in the treatment and location of women prisoners. It believes the success of this bold reconfiguration of the prison estate will be more easily achieved if similar effort and resources are devoted to the continuing and pressing need to rehabilitate the majority of offenders within the community.

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