

Prisons under pressure

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) has warned The Scottish Government they are being forced to operate under “unsustainable” pressure.

Chief Executive of SPS, Teresa Medhurst, who has been firefighting a series of crises and controversies engulfing the organisation, raised concerns over the situation with “Scottish Government colleagues”.

She is being backed by Ann McKechin, chair of the SPS Advisory Board, who has expressed “profound concern” for the “wellbeing of the Chief Executive and Directors”.

Ms McKechin wrote to Justice Secretary Angela Constance calling for an urgent meeting as critics warn of a tinderbox environment within prisons.

A minute from an SPS advisory board meeting says: “The non executive directors (NEDs) expressed their concern for the wellbeing of the Chief Executive and Directors, and for establishment teams, agreeing that the current position was unsustainable.

“Ms Medhurst advised that she had raised the same concerns with Scottish Government colleagues and had discussed this with Directors at a recent Executive Management Group (EMG) meeting.

“The NEDs were keen to offer their assistance and the Chief Executive agreed to advise them of any actions they could take to bolster SPS’ position.

“Meantime, it was agreed that the Chair would write to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to suggest a meeting to highlight the NEDs’ profound concerns regarding pressures on SPS.”

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr MSP claimed the SNP had “completely failed” to manage Scotland’s justice system “through a combination of incompetence, weakness and arrogance”.

He said: “After more than 17 years in power, the SNP has failed to come up with any comprehensive or effective strategy for dealing with what is an increasingly desperate situation.

“We have repeatedly demanded a coherent plan which would improve rehabilitation, ensure public protection, and ease the pressure on overstretched prison staff.”

The service is being forced to battle on several fronts, including “unprecedented levels of threats” and violence from jailed organised crime members, prisons awash with drugs and rising numbers of officers being assaulted.

Prison populations are also becoming increasingly complex as more older prisoners and groups need to be separated, with overcrowding and double cell occupancy said to be negatively impacting inmates’ mental health.

The SPS is also hit by rising sickness rates with stress being a major factor, while operating under challenging financial constraints with some crumbling prisons no longer fit for purpose.

Despite 477 prisoners having been released early under the SNP scheme the prison population has risen sharply, piling more pressure on stressed-out staff.

The Scottish Government said Justice Secretary Angela Constance holds regular meetings with the SPS Advisory Board

chair with the issues raised “part of a continued dialogue”.

They say they are investing £881.1million in prisons to support frontline staff and progress improvements in the prison estate in 2025-2026 and say this will help to meet costs linked to the rising prison population and enable the SPS to continue to “deliver a safe and secure prison system”.

To support the SPS, they say they are committing an additional £45million of resource funding taking the 2025-26 budget to £481.5million “which will support frontline staff and operating costs”.

According to the SNP Government, the budget also provides £355million of capital funding to help deliver progress on replacing the Victorian era Barlinnie in Glasgow, as well as the new HMP Highland.

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: “We must ensure the safety and wellbeing of Scottish Prison Service staff and those people in their care, and that our prisons continue to function effectively to accommodate those who pose the greatest risk of harm.

“The Scottish Government is working hard with the Scottish Prison Service and the wider justice sector to manage the prison population, which is complex and changing, in a safe and sustainable way.

“This includes measures in the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Bill – passed last month –which could result in a sustained reduction of around 5% in the sentenced prison population.”

An SPS spokesperson said: “Working with the Scottish Government, and our partners, we delivered an Emergency Early Release (EER) programme, which prioritised the safety and wellbeing of those in our care, victims, and the communities we serve.

“While this provided much needed respite to our establishments, staff, and those in our care, it was always recognised that this was a temporary measure. In recent months, our population has risen sharply once more, and remains extremely complex.

“This continues to have a significant impact on our staff and the time available to them to do the important work in supporting people, building relationships, turning lives around, reducing the risk of reoffending, and creating a safer Scotland for all.”