



Lord Sheikh
House of Lords
London
SW1A 0PW

25 February 2010

Dear Lord Sheikh,

During the debate on the Howard League's Commission on English Prisons Today on Monday 22 February you raised the issues of ethnic minority prisoners feeling unsafe whilst in custody and faith-based projects (Official Report, col. GC211).

Prisoners Feeling Unsafe

We are committed to ensuring that violence in prisons is not tolerated in any form, whether religion or race is a factor, and Governors have a responsibility to keep prisoners and staff safe. The management and reduction of violence is central to successful prison management, fundamental to the objectives of the Prison Service and vital to achieving the broad aims of Safer Custody.

Every public sector prison has had, since 2004, to have a local violence reduction strategy in place, a requirement which now applies equally to the contracted estate. Under the strategy each prison must undertake regular analysis of the problem areas, which will include religious factors, consider solutions and provide an action plan to improve personal safety and reduce violence for all those who live and work in the prison.

In January 2009 a wide ranging review of the national violence reduction strategy began and will be completed in July 2010. The review is examining locally developed approaches to violence management and will ensure that good practice is shared and built upon. It will incorporate evidence from audit procedures, Prison and Probation Ombudsman reports, H.M. Chief Inspectorate of Prisons reports (including the one to which you made reference) and feedback from violence reduction co-ordinators in establishments to deliver a stronger understanding of the various drivers of violence in prisons.

In addition, the Use of Force training manual guides staff towards de-escalation and conflict resolution using interpersonal skills with the aim of reducing reliance on Control and Restraint when managing confrontation.

Faith-Based projects

Faith-based organisations have been working with offenders in the community and prison for many years, recognising that there are some needs that can only be met or are best met by faith-based organisations. It is entirely right, for example, that offenders of faith have access to spiritual care and support in custody and in the community. We recognise and strongly value the role of faith communities and organisations working within and across these areas. 'Believing We Can', 2008's consultation on faith, and the subsequent third sector paper 'Working with the Third Sector to Reduce Re-offending 2008-2011' highlighted our commitment to promoting the role of faith-based organisations in supporting our objectives of reducing re-offending and protecting the public.

The Department for Communities and Local Government ("CLG") leads on many of the faith based initiatives and has brought together a consortium of faith communities to look at religious literacy training with a view to improving the knowledge and skills of public agencies when working with faith communities. MoJ's Third Sector Team is working with colleagues in CLG and the Office for the Third Sector to support and promote faith-based organisations working with offenders and to strengthen the engagement of faith organisations across our (MoJ's) services.

I am copying this letter to those who spoke in the debate and placing a copy in the Library of the House.

Yours sincerely,
Willy Bach

WILLY BACH