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CLiNKS

supporting voluntary organisations that
work with offenders and their families

Action
for Prisoners' Families

Response to
consultation on

TITAN PRISONS





1 Introduction

1.1 In June 2008 the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) published a consultation paper¹ seeking views from stakeholders and the general public on its plans to build up to three large 2500 unit Titan prisons. These prisons are to form the centre piece of a significant building programme which will eventually provide up to 96,000 prison places by 2014. The government plans to have the first of the Titan prisons completed by 2012. The proposed locations for the three prisons are the North West, West Midlands, and London regions, with the first likely to be situated within the boundary of the M25 motorway.

1.2 The proposed design of the Titans basically consists of 5 separate units of up to 500 places each located within a single secure perimeter. The intention is that this design would avoid the problems of 'warehousing' prisoners that a single 2,500 bed facility would create, and at the same time achieve economies of scale by having shared reception, visiting, leisure, and management facilities. The other key advantage cited in the consultation paper is the MoJ is more likely to acquire three large sites to situate these prisons than to negotiate planning permission for up to 15 individual sites for smaller 500 bed prisons.

1.3 The consultation paper focuses on the potential for Titan prisons to deliver more flexibility in relation to population management in the prison service, suggesting a number of options for using the 5 unit 'cluster' to group and 'segment' prisoners according to age, remand or convicted status, and specialist requirements regarding interventions or services. There is a strong preference for building the first Titan adjacent to a court to facilitate prisoner movement between courts and prison, and reserve about 1000 places for this purpose with the remaining 1500 places for what are referred to as 'mainstream' services (reception, health care, etc.).

1.4 There is a lack of any detailed discussion in the consultation paper about the potential advantages for effective rehabilitation provided by the Titan model. Additionally, the critical issues relating to engagement with local external stakeholders, including Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) service providers, are addressed only superficially, if at all. Therefore Clinks and Action for Prisoners Families - the umbrella bodies

for the offender-related VCS and services to children and families of offenders respectively - decided to conduct an on-line survey of members and friends of each organisation in order to identify issues raised by the consultation relating specifically to the VCS.

2 Engaging with Titan prisons

2.1 The vast majority of VCS organisations delivering services to offenders and their families are small locally based agencies. We asked whether the large scale of Titan prisons would present barriers to engagement (partnership, commissioning, etc.). Over 70% confirmed that the size of Titans would present problems and slightly less than 30% replied that it would not. When asked to comment on the what the specific barriers would be respondents identified the logistical issues for their staff in moving between individual units in a Titan as well as the difficulties of forming and maintaining the important relationships between VCS staff and HMPS personnel when engaging with such a large institution. Finally, many VCS services rely on the contribution of volunteers and there would be problems when recruiting and training them in sufficient numbers to deliver to a large prison, albeit one made up of smaller units (which the majority of respondents would prefer).

2.2 The majority of respondents stated that arrangements would need to be made for there to be identified points of contact for the VCS in each of the 5 units, while several stated that a single point of contact for the whole prison would be preferable although probably supplemented by arrangements for each of the units.

3 Commissioning

3.1 Respondents were asked whether the size of Titans would present problems for them in relation to commissioning of services. Almost 80% said there would be difficulties and several commented on the risks for them of 'scaling up' to deliver a service to up to 2,500 prisoners. If it was to be feasible the tendering process would need to be 'specific' and

carefully managed. There was also strong preference for a process that focussed on tendering services for individual units within a Titan – but this would depend on where in the Titan decision-making structure the final decisions would be taken.

4 Visiting arrangements

4.1 The large number of inmates in Titans has implications for family contact and the logistics involved in managing visiting arrangements. Almost 90% of respondents stated that visits would need to be organised around individual units rather than for an entire Titan. Nearly 95% stated that Titans would not enhance the quality of family contact for prisoners. Several respondents commented on the intimidating nature of a large prison and that it was inevitable that Titans would have a large catchment area which would entail long journeys for many families. There were also concerns about the amount of time needed to process such a large number of people regardless of whether the visits were organised around individual units or in relation to an entire Titan. Respondents also commented on the inevitably bureaucratic nature of the arrangements for family contact and the loss of any opportunity for the ‘personal touch’ which is so important for facilitating family contact.

5 Transition between young offender and adult regimes

5.1 The consultation paper suggested that the ‘cluster’ model of Titans might allow for some units to house young offenders as well as adult prisoners and that this would facilitate the transition from Young Offender Institute to Adult regime. The responses were evenly divided about this issue. Given that some prisons currently incorporate both young offenders and adult provision the proposals in the Titan consultation are not original and a carefully controlled segregation of the two populations could be facilitated. However, there were also concerns expressed that pressures on the over-all prison population could result in

some ‘mixing’ of young and adult offenders, and that this would be more difficult to control in a prison the size of a Titan. Finally, the point was also made regarding the importance of specific training for staff working in a Titan who are assigned to the young offender unit, and the cost implications.

6 Funding for Titan Prisons

6.1 Respondents were asked to comment on whether they felt that resources should be allocated to delivering Titans on the broad model proposed by the government and 100% were opposed to this. They were also asked whether an alternative approach of building smaller more local prisons should be implemented and over 70% were in favour. Finally, they were asked whether the funding allocated for Titan prisons should be re-directed to community-based provision for offenders as an alternative to expanding the prison estate, and 100% agreed with this strategy.

7 Conclusion

7.1 It is clear that VCS providers are not generally supportive of the Titan proposals, and that one of the chief concerns lies with the sheer scale of the prisons, even though they will be comprised of smaller units within a secure perimeter. There was some support, however, for arrangements which allowed for effective engagement with individual units within Titans. But even here issues relating to visits, movement of staff and prisoners, and overall decision making for investment priorities were identified as potential significant challenges.

7.2 It is perhaps useful to extrapolate from these findings to make some broader points in response to the consultation paper. Firstly, given the importance cited by several respondents of local provision, and the facilitation of contact between prisoners and their families, there is no support for the ‘national specialisation’ model for Titans. This would completely undermine the goal of keeping prisoners ‘closer to home’ at least for significant periods of their custodial experience.



7.3 Secondly, and linked to the issue of local provision, is the importance of strong local ties for effective resettlement. This approach was proposed in the government's 'A Five Year Strategy for Protecting the Public and Reducing Re-offending'²; in particular the notion of local community prisons which kept prisoners close to home and to services they would need to aid their re-integration into society. The construction of Titan prisons, with their inevitably large catchment areas, would not be able to achieve the goal of closer integration with local communities.

7.4 Thirdly, there is the over-arching question of whether or not the proposed government strategy to 'build its way' out of the current prison capacity crisis is the right approach. The recently published paper 'Rethinking Crime and Punishment: The Manifesto'³ makes some positive, evidence-based proposals which redirect the future prison building budget to resource community based provision to strengthen community penalties, improve sentencer liaison with the Probation Service, enhance resources for women offenders, and provide specialist schemes for offenders with mental health needs. The VCS can contribute significantly to the development of these services and there is evidence that it would reduce re-offending more effectively than imprisonment for the majority of offenders.

7.5 The Titan consultation paper identifies positive potential of Titan prisons in terms of greater flexibility of population management, and potential cost savings through efficiencies of scale. However, there is little evidence or discussion about the greater potential for effective regime delivery, or indeed meeting offender need and reduction of re-offending.

8 Survey Details

8.1 This response was compiled during August 2008 by Clinks and Action for Prisoners Families. 21 organisations responded to the on-line survey which consisted of 10 questions with further opportunities to comment on some of the issues addressed. The final document was submitted to the Ministry of Justice's Titan Prison Consultation committee on 28 August 2008.

References

1. Ministry of Justice (June 2008). Available at: www.justice.gov.uk/publications/cp1008.htm
2. HM Government (February 2006). Available at: www.noms.justice.gov.uk/news-publications-events/publications/strategy/noms-five-year-strategy2?view=Standard&pubID=380057
3. Esmee Fairburn (July 2008). Available at: www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk/grants_reports.html#rcp-manifesto

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