



Elisabeth Davies
National Chair, Independent Monitoring Boards
3rd Floor
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11 November 2025

Dear Elisabeth,

Use of Force in Prisons and YOIs

Thank you for providing your detailed letter outlining concerns regarding developments in how force is used across the prison estate. It was helpful to discuss this at our recent meeting, and I hope my response provides assurance that I take the matters raised very seriously.

We fully recognise the complexity and challenges staff are navigating daily, particularly in environments where violence and unrest are increasingly prevalent. Safety in prisons is a key priority, and we are working hard to make prisons as safe as possible for those who live and work in them and whilst it is not possible to eliminate all risks of harm, we continue our efforts on a range of measures to address the levels of violence in prison. This includes enhanced security measures to prevent the ingress of contraband and the removal of wet shave razors that can be used as weapons.

Your concerns about the cultural impact of expanded use of tools such as PAVA (an incapacitant spray), particularly in the youth estate, and Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs – commonly known as Tasers) are recognised, as are the issues around disproportionality and the treatment of vulnerable groups. I strongly agree that force must be used proportionately, with clear oversight, and only when necessary. I also recognise that PAVA is not a tool to reduce overall violence, but rather a measure to manage extreme incidents where serious harm is imminent. Its introduction is intended to reduce the risk of a serious or life-threatening injury from an assault during an active incident, allowing staff to safely intervene to protect the victim and for the incident to be brought to a safe conclusion.

I would also like to provide assurance on the reporting of incidents involving the use of PAVA. Whilst PAVA reporting ceased to be a telephone reportable incident to National Incident Management Unit (NIMU) as of 1st April 2025, any usage of PAVA, whether discharged or not, remains reportable via Digital Prison Services (DPS), which allows national data and statistics to be available to HMPPS Senior Leaders and monitoring bodies.

Our brave frontline staff now have a greater means of intervention and control in the youth estate where levels of violence have been too high. We also have a duty to protect the rights of the child, and this includes children as victims of violent assaults. The decision to introduce PAVA was not taken lightly and does not replace lots of proactive and positive work to improve outcomes for children and young people in custody, including reducing violence and improving the delivery of education and other activities. The Youth Custody Service (YCS) is focused on both improving the current estate as well as making changes

to adopt a future estate that is more suitable for a children's service. However, we must respond to the risk that is present now. I would like to assure you that we also have very close scrutiny of any use of force in the youth estate. Any use of PAVA being drawn or deployed will be reviewed by governors, ministers and our independent review panel, and reported to the local authority safeguarding lead. The Independent Restraint Review Panel will also be reviewing these cases. We will formally review the tactic in 12 months from the Summer of 2025 to consider whether to continue, change or stop this use of PAVA.

Regarding the introduction of the use of CEDs, deployment will only occur in circumstances where the use of a CED is proportionate to the seriousness of the circumstances and to reduce the risk of harm to both staff and prisoners. The use of CEDs is governed by the same laws as the Use of Force. Specially trained officers must consider the use of force policy and, where possible, write a clear intervention plan and defensible decision log before recommending the use to a silver commander. In cases of spontaneous use, staff must ensure that the rationale is clearly documented post-incident, demonstrating adherence to the use of force policy and operational necessity.

We are determined to ensure that leaders have a long-term commitment to address disparities in use of force. To ensure operational leaders are equipped with the tools and knowledge to improve outcomes, in May 2025 the Use of Force Intervention Development Group (IDG) was introduced. This group will develop interventions and directly support prisons to evaluate and address disproportionality in the Use of Force. This will include assessing current best practice approaches and the feasibility of upscaling existing interventions.

HMPPS is also taking considerable steps towards improving support for Neurodivergent prisoners and adapting environments to make them more supportive of neurodivergent needs. In 2024, HMP Brixton identified an overrepresentation of neurodiverse prisoners involved in incidents where force was required to be used. We are currently supporting a collaborative pilot at HMP Brixton (along with HMP Hull) aimed at equipping staff to better support neurodiverse prisoners and identify opportunities to encourage positive behaviour—an approach we hope to expand where possible.

Equally, we share your view that investment in staff training is essential to long-term safety and stability. The Enable Programme is a psychologically and operationally informed work-force transformation programme for prisons. A key part of this transformation is the Foundation Training Reform, a long-term review of the initial training offer for Prison Officers. Whilst the new foundation offer is being scoped, built and tested, The Enable Programme has nationally launched the first core capability packages available to all public sector prisons. These are a set of training packages which aim to support staff with varying topics such as relational practice, which will hopefully equip staff with the necessary communication techniques required for interacting with prisoners, particularly in challenging situations.

I remain hugely appreciative of the dedication, experience and valuable role played by all Independent Monitoring Boards across the estate and am enormously thankful for their continued hard work, especially in areas of focus as critical as the Use of Force.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending