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Lords Demand Prison Governors Be Given Power to Fix Failing Jail System

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A new House of Lords report has urged that governors should be given greater authority to reform Britain's crumbling prison system after years of political mismanagement and bureaucratic failure.

In a scathing assessment, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee exposed the crisis in the prison estate, citing overcrowding, staff shortages, rampant gang activity, and a breakdown of discipline as central failures. The report blames successive

governments, civil servants in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) leadership.

Peers found that frontline officers are underprepared and unsupported, while education and training for prisoners are seen as afterthoughts. They called for a fundamental shift in how prisons are run, recommending that governors be given powers akin to headteachers, with greater control over staffing, budgets, and rehabilitation programmes.

Lord Foster of Bath, the committee chair, said: "Prison Governors must be given the freedom to run their prisons as they see fit. They are ultimately responsible for what goes on in their prisons, and they should have a greater say on who works in them." He warned that the current system leaves guards "set up to fail" and that poor recruitment standards mean new staff often don't understand the realities of prison work.

Broken System

The committee raised concern over what it described as "woefully inadequate" training for officers, with little preparation for handling high-risk inmates or mental health challenges. It is recommended that the role of prison officers be raised to the same professional level as police officers, Border Force agents, and Armed Forces personnel.

The peers were especially critical of HMPPS, which they described as "top-heavy, inflexible, and overly bureaucratic." The report argues that it is no longer fit for purpose and has failed to modernise or support staff effectively, contributing to spiralling rates of reoffending and prison expansion.

Britain's prison population is expected to exceed 100,000 by 2029. With reoffending rates stubbornly high, approximately 80% of crime is committed by repeat offenders. The Lords called for a renewed focus on rehabilitation. They stressed that meaningful work, education, and training are key to preparing inmates for life after release, and that such programmes should be core to the prison mission, not optional extras.

They urged the role of Prisons Minister to be elevated to the Minister of State level to bring stability and direction to the sector. They also demanded greater transparency across both public and privately run prisons, noting a persistent "culture of secrecy" that hampers accountability.

The report delivers a stark warning: without reform, taxpayers will continue to foot an unsustainable bill of over £53,000 annually per inmate, while communities remain at risk from unreformed offenders. The committee stressed that building more prisons is not a solution, branding the current path economically and socially unviable.

The Lords concluded with a call for urgent leadership and reform, warning that unless governors are empowered to act, Britain's prisons will remain in crisis and public safety will continue to suffer.