

Press release: New search teams to disrupt and deter violence in prisons

- teams will work in prisons to combat drugs, drones and mobiles
- roll-out will cost £4.3 million and is the latest step in £70 million plan to combat gangs and organised crime in prison

Specialist search teams are being drafted into jails across the country to find contraband and disrupt the criminals fuelling violence behind bars, Justice Secretary David Gauke announced today (23 November 2018).

The units have already been successfully deployed in the 8 high security prisons, and their roll-out across over 100 prisons across the wider estate is the latest stage in the fight against organised crime in prison.

The specially trained teams will act on intelligence from existing and future mobile phone detecting technology and work with search dog units and other specialist searching equipment to combat threats such as drugs, drones and mobiles.

The dedicated search teams will be organised in regional hubs to be deployed to the prisons in their area. They will act on intelligence to prevent and deter any potential threats of disorder.

Moreover, evidence found on prisoners can be used to support disciplinary action in the prison or for criminal prosecution.

In the past, search teams have focused on high security jails, however this recruitment drive for over 100 specialist prison officers will mean the teams can cover prisons across the North and South of England, and Wales.

The search teams are the latest in a series of measures being taken to restore stability to the prison estate, including airport-security style scanners, phone-blocking technology, and a financial crime unit to target the criminal kingpins operating in prisons.

Justice Secretary David Gauke said:

We continue to tackle criminality in prison and today's announcement of new dedicated search teams will take the fight to gangs who deal drugs in prison and cause violence.

This is part of our multi-million pound security strategy to stop drugs getting in, find the drugs that do get in and disrupt the trade altogether. Measures like this, together with our unrelenting focus on rehabilitation, will help to ensure prisons are places where offenders can turn their backs on crime, and ultimately prevent future victims.

Earlier this year the government announced an additional £30 million investment in prisons. This included £16 million to improve conditions for prisoners and staff and £7 million on new security measures, such as airport-security style scanners, improved searching techniques and phone-blocking technology.

The investment included £1 million on a digital tool which assesses information from various law enforcement databases to create a central 'risk rating' for each prisoner – helping to identify and disrupt criminal kingpins.

This was followed by the creation of a Financial Crime Unit with the power to freeze suspect bank accounts linked to prisoners and as a result disrupt organised crime in prisons.

Separately, we announced another £10 million investment in 10 of the most challenging prisons to curb the flow of drugs and phones, while also improving conditions and leadership at those jails. This will tackle drug supply by enhancing physical security at the jails, with investment in drug-detection dogs, body scanners, and improved perimeter defences.

This has come against a backdrop of rising prison officer numbers, with more than 4,300 now recruited and staffing levels at their highest since 2012.

In the Budget we announced an extra £30 million to be spent on further improvements to safety, security and decency in prisons – details of how this will be spent will be announced in due course.

There has also been a significant focus on prisoner rehabilitation, with the launch of the Education and Employment strategy this year to create a system where each prisoner is set on a path to employment from the outset.

And in recognition of the vital role that strong family ties have in rehabilitation, £7 million out of the £30 million announced over the summer went towards the roll-out of in-cell telephones, meaning more private time for prisoners to talk to their families.

Notes to editors

- Recruitment into the search teams has started, and is expected to continue into the new year.
- Prison officer numbers are at their highest levels since 2012, with 22,319 prison officers in post. There has been an increase of 4,364 prison officers since the 2,500 target was announced in October 2016, with a further 1,404 offered jobs/booked on training.