

31st Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services
Valletta, Malta — 3 June 2026

OPENING KEYNOTE SPEECH

**The Maltese Penitentiary System and Persons with
Specific Needs and Vulnerabilities**

Delivered by Mr Christopher Siegersma

Chief Executive Officer, Correctional Services Agency, Malta
Grand Hotel Excelsior, Valletta — 3 June 2026

*Permanent Secretary, Mr Chetwynd, Mr Monteiro, Mr Mitchell,
Ms Riondel, distinguished Directors, colleagues and friends,*

The Permanent Secretary has welcomed you to Malta on behalf of the Government. I want to welcome you on behalf of the people inside: the officers, the healthcare professionals, the educators, the psychologists, the social workers, the probation officers working to support people through and beyond their sentences, and yes, the people in our care. Because this conference is ultimately about them, and it matters that their world is represented in this room from the outset.

STARTING WITH MALTA

The Corradino Correctional Facility has stood on the same ground since 1850. It was designed by a Victorian architect and modelled on Pentonville Prison in London. Its radial panopticon layout was built so that a single officer could survey an entire wing from one fixed point. Its thick limestone walls were designed to impose order and silence. It was never built for rehabilitation. It was never built with vulnerability in mind.

We run a twenty-first-century correctional mission inside a nineteenth-century building. That tension is not incidental to what I want to say today. It is the starting point.

In recent years, Malta has been on a deliberate journey of reform. We became the Correctional Services Agency in 2019. We have invested in healthcare integration, in trauma-informed practice, in staff training and wellbeing, in structured case management, and in a digital platform: our Person in Prison Management System, designed to place the individual, not the institution, at the centre of every intervention. We have received recognition for our workplace mental health framework. And we are increasingly conscious that the correctional journey does not end at the prison gate, that the work of supporting safe reintegration into the community is as much a part of our mission as what happens inside. These are real steps forward, said by someone who walks those Victorian Divisions every week and knows precisely how far there is still to go.

OUR POPULATION — AND THIS YEAR'S THEME

This year's theme — **Persons with Specific Needs and Vulnerabilities** — is not an abstract category for us. It is the description of the people we manage every day.

Malta is a small island. Our prison population reflects a small island's particular complexities. We have, at times, held more than 850 people in a facility not designed for that number. Over forty per cent of those people, in recent years, have been on remand; not yet convicted, not yet sentenced, yet experiencing the full weight of incarceration. Nearly half of our prison population is foreign nationals, many of whom face language barriers, legal uncertainty, and a geographical distance from family support that no translation service can fully resolve.

Our female division serves women who, in the vast majority of cases, carry histories of trauma, abuse, and social marginalisation that predate their offences by years, sometimes by decades. Our forensic unit operates at the intersection of criminal justice and mental healthcare, managing some of the most complex individuals in our system. Our young people's centre, CoRRS, serves those under twenty-one, many of whom entered the criminal justice system after having already experienced repeated institutional failure elsewhere.

When we talk about persons with specific needs and vulnerabilities, we are not talking about a marginal population. We are talking about the majority of the people in our care — and, it must be said, of the people supervised by probation services in the community, where many of the same vulnerabilities persist, often with fewer structured supports around them.

WHAT VULNERABILITY DEMANDS OF US

Understanding vulnerability in the correctional context requires us to resist a particular temptation: the temptation to treat it as a classification problem. Our instinct as systems is often to categorise: foreign national, woman, elderly, mentally ill. And then, having categorised, to allocate a standard response. But vulnerability does not present itself neatly.

It layers.

It compounds.

The older foreign national with limited language and early-stage dementia does not fit cleanly into any single workshop category. Neither does the young woman in our care who is also a foreign national, who is pregnant, who carries a

significant trauma history, and who does not speak Maltese or English.

Person-centred corrections, which is the philosophy that guides our work, begins precisely where categorisation ends. It begins with the question:

Who is this person? What has shaped them, what do they need and what can we build together?

That question demands something of our systems. It demands keyworkers trained not only in security but in human relationships. It demands regimes flexible enough to respond to the individual, and structured enough to provide the safety that vulnerability requires.

FOUR WORKSHOPS, FOUR URGENT CONVERSATIONS

The four workshops you will engage with over these two days address what I consider the most pressing population-specific challenges in European corrections today.

On foreign nationals: we hold, at times, more than fifty per cent of foreign nationals in our facility. We know first-hand what language barriers, cultural distance, and legal complexity look like in daily practice. We also know that these challenges respond to investment: in interpreting services, in cultural competence, in the determination not to allow legal status to diminish the entitlement to dignity and care.

On women: the story of women in prison is, in large part, the story of what happens when the mainstream criminal justice system is designed by and for men. Women's pathways into offending are different. Their health needs are different. Their family roles create different kinds of harm when custody is imposed. Designing genuinely gender-responsive correctional

practice is not a luxury. For the women in our care, it is a matter of basic justice.

On older persons: the ageing of our prison populations is a trend accelerating across Europe. We have individuals in our care whose health needs are more appropriately addressed in nursing or palliative care settings than on a Victorian prison wing. We must ask ourselves, honestly and without softening the reality, what dignity means for an eighty-year-old person in prison, and whether our systems are genuinely capable of delivering it.

On the interface between prison and probation: the most critical moment in any correctional journey is not the sentence. It is the gate. The day of release remains, statistically, one of the highest-risk points in any person's trajectory. Continuity of care — in healthcare, in mental health support, in housing, in social connection — must survive that transition. Where it does not, much of the correctional work done inside is undone very quickly outside. Probation services are not the final chapter of that story; they are an active part of it, and the quality of the relationship between prison and probation determines, in no small measure, whether reintegration succeeds or fails.

AN INVITATION

I want to close by saying something that may seem simple but that I believe is fundamental. The people we are discussing in this conference are not the sum of their risk scores, their diagnoses, or their offence categories. They are people whose lives have been shaped by experiences many of them did not choose, whose resilience is frequently extraordinary, and

whose capacity for change, even when buried under years of trauma, exclusion, and failed systems, remains real.

That conviction is not sentimental.

It is operational.

It is what drives person-centred practice.

It is what sustains the correctional officer through a difficult shift, the psychologist through a difficult session, and the educator who shows up for the same student for the third time in a week.

The question this conference asks is whether our systems are genuinely built around that conviction, whether we have designed our regimes, our staffing models, our legislation, and our transition planning around the full complexity of the human beings we serve, **or** whether we have built them for an idealised, generic prisoner who, in truth, has never existed.

I look forward to two days of honest, informed, and challenging conversation.

You are among the most experienced practitioners and policymakers in this field anywhere in Europe.

This conversation matters. The people it is about deserve nothing less.

Thank you.