

PRESS RELEASE

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Sacro Calls For Credible Alternatives To Prison

Today, Wednesday 5 March 2008 Kenny MacAskill, MSP Cabinet Secretary for Justice, opens Sacro's Annual Conference, 'Community Safety – Making Scotland Safer,' taking place at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in Queen Street.

The conference will raise the profile of the effective work that can be done in the community with offenders. It will highlight the benefits to society of enabling offenders to repay their debt to the local community and tackle the underlying causes that led them to commit crimes.

The second keynote speaker is Julius Lang, Director of Technical Assistance at the Center for Court Innovation in New York. He will give examples of how SMART community based solutions gained the support of a sceptical US public and his experience of this approach in practice.

The afternoon programme includes a workshop on the Rights of Prisoners' Children by Professor Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Sacro, Scotland's leading community justice charity, has long championed the benefits of robust community sentences for those who are not a danger to the public. The organisation runs group work services such as the Alcohol Education Probation Service; Community Sexual Offending Group Work Programme; and Domestic Abuse Programme - attendance of which can be given as part of a community sentence. Outcome evaluation proves their successful impact on reconviction rates. Sacro also runs the unique Community Based Reparation Service in Aberdeen.

Kenny MacAskill, MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Justice, said

“The theme of this conference is absolutely key to the Scottish Government's agenda . I recently visited Barlinnie and Cornton Vale and witnessed the impact that overcrowding is having on our hard-working prison staff as they try to rehabilitate serious and dangerous offenders.

"This conference takes place against the backdrop of a prison population which is breaking records on a near daily basis. Although crime has fallen we are locking up more people than ever before.

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"I strongly believe less serious offenders should be paying back their debts to society - not adding to society's bill for their bed and board. Tough community punishments will protect the public, help offenders turn their lives around, and involve some pay back to communities they have harmed.

"We are already working to strengthen and revitalise alternatives to locking up people who have no place in prison. These need to be viable alternatives, workable alternatives, but above all, credible alternatives. They need to be credible to the public, to victims and to sentencers and they need to be properly enforced.

"Those who commit less serious crimes should pay back the harm they have caused to our communities through the sweat of their brow. It is not tough to send someone to prison to lie in bed and watch television for most of the day at huge expense to the public. I would rather see more minor offenders facing up to what they have done in the community and to make good on the damage they have caused."

Susan Matheson, Chief Executive, Sacro said

"Sacro has long years experience in criminal and youth justice. Our outcome evaluation and monitoring capability can demonstrate that making people take responsibility for their actions is a critical part of any rehabilitation process. Sacro supports the Cabinet Secretary's statement and agrees that for those who are not a danger to the public, a community sentence with appropriate restrictions, which keeps them working constructively in the community with access to employment and family, is more effective than a prison sentence at making Scotland safer".

Workshops at the event are: The Rights of Prisoners' Children; Fines, Punishments and Justice; Community Service Orders - the City of Edinburgh Experience; Community Links Centre – a model for Scotland; Bail Supervision; and Meaningful Reparation – A Community Based Approach.

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