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Urgent action required to stop Scotland's prisons spiralling out of control.

Those of us who have watched as Scotland's prisons fill up will not be surprised to hear the system is on the verge of meltdown.

Last week's courageous and necessary revelation by Mike Ewart, Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service that the country's overcrowded prisons are in a "state of emergency" is shocking. However, it is not just shocking because it places prison officers, prisoners and the public at increased risk of harm – it is shocking because it could have been avoided.

As the Scottish Prisons Commission recently noted, "high prison populations do not reduce crime; they are more likely to create pressures that drive re-offending rather than reduce it". This is especially true for those on remand or on short-term sentences.

Sacro knows that short custodial sentences are next to useless and there is a wealth of evidence to support this view. In 2005/2006, sentences of six months or less accounted for 83% of all those handed down and the average time served was 24.2 days. This is not long enough to help prisoners address their offending behaviour but it is long enough for them to break ties with their families and communities and build new, less positive ties within prison.

Minor offences can be dealt with much more effectively by using community sentences and this should be the default position. Sacro's Chief Executive, Susan Matheson said: "Robust community sentences begin immediately – as do prison sentences – and include an element of reparation or "payback" to the victim or community they have harmed. They also take into account the underlying factors that cause the offender to behave in this manner and can provide access to suitable treatment or rehabilitation programmes. Far from being the easy option, community sentences demand offenders face up to what they have done, make amends for it and work on changing their future behaviour".

The use of bail supervision provides an effective means of reducing the large number of prisoners on remand. Proper investment to increase the provision of bail supervision services would go a long way in addressing the problem of overcrowding in our prisons. Bail supervision also provides a robust way for offenders to begin to address the underlying reasons why they offend at an early stage, return to court on the due date and usually with a report which says they have demonstrated an ability to work constructively in the community. In 2006/2007 there were 23,181 remand receptions in Scotland at a cost of £51.2m. A significant proportion, from one third to one half will not have been given a custodial sentence, are not a danger to the public. If the daily bail supervision capacity were increased to cope with about half the remand population this would cost about £2m and immediately free up about 700 prison beds (roughly a whole prison), which could be used for sentenced prisoners.

On 1 July this year, the Rt. Hon. Henry McLeish, Chair of the Scottish Prison Commission introduced their proposed package of reforms by stating that "doing nothing was not an option". Now, more than ever we need to see these reforms implemented.

Background

Sacro

Sacro is a national community justice voluntary organisation working across Scotland to make communities safer by reducing conflict and offending. Sacro operates in the community in partnership with others who share its values. It works with communities, those in conflict, victims and offenders. It does this in four key ways:

- > by being a leading provider of direct, innovative services in community mediation (CM), including schools work, restorative justice (RJ) and criminal justice (CJ)
- > through consultancy and training services, which equip Sacro and other organisations to deliver best practice, to extend the impact of Sacro's specialist expertise across Scotland
- > through research which monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of Sacro's services and keeps it abreast of research in the field, and
- > by seeking to influence policy and legislation, on the basis of research evidence, so that: the use of restorative justice and of constructive conflict resolution are extended; and the use of imprisonment is restricted to those who have committed serious crimes or are a danger to the public.

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