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Contingency for controlled release of prisoners must be looked at now.

As Scotland's prison overcrowding crisis deepens, it is becoming clear that a controlled release of prisoners is a possibility we must take seriously. Mike Ewart, Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) is responsible for housing whatever numbers of prisoners are handed down to him by the courts. However, he also has to do this safely and has chosen, quite correctly, to prioritise the safety of public, prison officers and prisoners. If, as he warns he might, he does have to ask the government to invoke emergency powers to order a controlled release, it is a situation which demands cross party support as would any national emergency.

The authorities are accused of being taken by surprise by this situation. This is not entirely true. Although the prison population had been projected to rise, current figures have suddenly and dramatically increased despite forward planning.

Adapting unused premises to be used as secure facilities is one suggestion. A prison is not the kind of facility you can knock up in a few weeks and to do this properly without compromising the safety of the public, staff and prisoners, is unlikely to be a realistic option. Professor Alec Spencer, expert commentator, former prison governor and Director of Rehabilitation and Care for the SPS commented: "Apart from not being fit for purpose and highly expensive to re-fit we would be warehousing prisoners with a fence around them. Not very secure – but the suggestion is probably made to house low risk

and short-term prisoners. These are just the offenders we need to keep out of prison in the first place because prison will not help to reduce crime, but will increase the problems they face on release”.

A more realistic solution would be to immediately increase the use of supervised bail. Supervised bail is a robust alternative to remand for those charged with offences, the majority of whom will not ultimately receive a custodial sentence and pose little or no risk to the public. By imposing strict conditions and providing effective supervision and monitoring, the custodial requirement could be reduced considerably. A service of this type would also be more appropriate for those returned to custody who have not offended but merely breached parole rules.

Similarly, the controlled release of those serving short sentences will in all probability have to be considered. To do this without effective throughcare would be unwise. Throughcare provides prisoners with proper support to help them reintegrate into their communities. It provides prisoners with the assistance they need to address some of the relationship, housing, health and addiction issues that research shows they must overcome in order to escape the cycle of offending.

Sacro has many of these services already in place. They are proven and robust measures that can ensure this situation is controlled safely and without danger to the public or prisoners.

ENDS

Background

Sacro

Sacro is a national community justice 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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