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Prison Services in the North East of Scotland

I refer to Tom Fox's letter of 7 September 2005 inviting comments on the above consultation paper. I am pleased to take this opportunity to respond.

Sacro offered views on this subject during the Prison Estates Consultation in 2002. We said then that the difficulties of re-settling prisoners from Peterhead to the central belt were well known and that there was therefore an argument for relocation. To facilitate effective settlement it is better for prisoners to be located near the area to which they will be released, so that social workers and others who will assist them with the process can link with prisoners effectively and plan their throughcare.

From our perspective as a major provider of supported accommodation, throughcare and sex offender services, we think that the criterion described in paragraph 8.2 of the paper is of particular importance. Prison regimes should contribute to the aim of reducing re-offending by providing community placements and throughcare services and by supporting the maintenance of family links. It is difficult to see how placing half of Scotland's prison sex-offender population in Peterhead is compatible with that aim.

Our experience in providing travel service for families makes us acutely aware of how the distance from the central belt is a major obstacle for families and workers striving to provide effective throughcare.

As far as is practicable, prisoners of all kinds should be housed in prisons as close as possible to their home areas. This would make planning for release and post-release supervision and support much more effective.

In 2002 we indicated our support for the stand-alone prison option. However, we have since modified our views to some extent. Learning from the Reducing Re-offending Consultation process, we are increasingly convinced that we should have, as far as is practicable, "community facing" prisons that would facilitate continuity of programme work between the prisons and programmes to be planned by the new Community Justice Authorities.

It follows that sex offenders should be provided for in units located in the main area prisons. Sex offender units in local establishments should be managed so as to provide personal safety for prisoners, programmes and at the same time allow staff rotation to avoid burnout.

We believe that this is a national issue rather than one that concerns the North East only. We certainly appreciate that Peterhead Prison is a major player in the local economy but that should not be allowed to become an obstacle to rational long-term planning of the Scottish prison estate.

Susan Matheson
Chief Executive