

Dear David Liddington,

Positive Justice Gloucestershire would like to reply to your open letter of June 21. We are a small pressure group which aims to:

- encourage the use of restorative and therapeutic practices within the criminal justice system, in order to reduce crime and its impact on victims.
- To act as a pressure group: balancing negative representations in the popular press, and raising public awareness of, and support for, positive initiatives within the criminal justice system, particularly alternatives to imprisonment where appropriate. (www.pjglos.org)

Four of our committee have experience of working in four different prisons. Most have visited prisons for a variety of reasons.

Your letter is strong on platitudes, but very short on details of what you propose to do. Those who go regularly into prisons see no evidence of the work to make them 'places of reform and rehabilitation.'

You argue that those convicted of a serious crime are rightly imprisoned. But our prisons are full of those who have not committed a serious crime, and are a threat to no-one but themselves. These people frequently come out of prison far worse than when they went in: they may lose family, homes, jobs and become addicted to drugs. Our prisons are consequently overcrowded, which makes reform and rehabilitation nearly impossible. When will you reduce the prison population? Prison is not an 'easy way out' for magistrates and judges, it needs to be reserved for those who really need to be incarcerated. Much more use must be made of non-custodial sentences, particularly restorative justice, and measures to prevent crime, for example Gloucestershire's 'Great Expectations.' (<http://www.thepeakacademy.org/community/introducing-pcso-joshua-griffiths-2>)

You write of the organisations that work with prisons. But many of these fail. I believe that those who agreed to take on the 'through the gate' initiative whereby even those leaving prison after a short sentence would be met by a mentor, has come to nothing?

You say you aim to make prison 'places of safety and reform'. We would like to know how? Report after report by prison inspection teams tell us that neither staff nor inmates now feel safe. You write of increasing the number of prison officers, but this will only go 1/3 of the way to replacing those who lost their jobs through the cuts imposed by your government.

Positive Justice Gloucestershire are in despair at the waste of life our penal system involves. We see no evidence of real commitment to reform in your letter. Rehabilitation does not come cheap. Without real determination and adequate funding the crisis will continue, lives will continue to be lost.

(On behalf of PJG committee) Mary Brown.