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COMMUNITY SENTENCING MUST BE STRENGTHENED TO MAKE A TOUGH ALTERNATIVE TO PRISON

Community or Custody, a National Enquiry commissioned by Make Justice Work, will today (Monday) publish its Final Report.

The Enquiry, led by a panel of leading criminal justice experts, and chaired by Peter Osborne, the Chief Political Commentator at the Daily Telegraph, finds that intensive community sentences can provide a tough and much more effective alternative to prison for persistent, low-level offenders. The Enquiry also revealed that offenders themselves find intensive community sentences much more demanding than a short spell in prison.

Community or Custody was commissioned by Make Justice Work. The panel members are **Lord Ian Blair** (former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police), **Roma Hooper** (Director of Make Justice Work), **Paul McDowell** (Chief Executive of Nacro), **Dame Anne Owers** (former Chief Inspector of Prisons), **Javed Khan** (Chief Executive of Victim Support), **John Thornhill** (Chair of the Magistrates' Association).

Over the last 12 months, the Enquiry panel has visited four different intensive 'alternatives to custody' and taken evidence from victims, ex-offenders, magistrates, prison governors and others involved with the delivery of the community sentences.

The report makes a series of recommendations which it argues the Government must adopt if community sentences are to take their proper place as effective alternatives to short prison sentences. The Enquiry panel firmly believes that adopting the recommendations will also encourage greater public confidence in community sentences.

The *Community or Custody* Final Report says:

"We have been astonished and impressed by the rigour and impact of much of the work we have seen. It is clear that community sentences are demanding, and that many offenders find them much tougher than prison.

"Community sentences do have an important role to play in meeting the expectations of the public and, crucially, victim's, expectations of effective justice while providing far better value for money than prison. But this will only be possible if intensive community sentences meet the necessary standards of rigour and effectiveness we have set out in this Report (see below) – and if the public understand clearly what they are and can have confidence in them.

"Quite apart from the substantial savings that would result from putting fewer people in prison, there are huge gains to be made from making the penal system more effective."

"If the Government is serious about starting a rehabilitation revolution, corners cannot be cut."

Peter Osborne, Chair of the National Enquiry, said:

"I have always been uneasily aware that political correspondents such as myself report law and order issues in a false and often misleading way.

"I hoped that by taking part in this National Enquiry, I might gain a deeper understanding of the truth about the deep and troubling issues that underlay the public debate on crime and punishment.

“It soon became shatteringly clear that alternatives to prison are not the soft option so often portrayed.

“Nobody is arguing that criminals should not go to prison, or that some of the worst offenders should not be locked up for many years. But consulting opinion pollsters is surely one of the worst imaginable methods of devising a criminal justice policy.”

Roma Hooper, Director of Make Justice Work, which commissioned the National Enquiry said:

“It is remarkable that such a varied panel of experts have reached a unanimous conclusion. What we learned was that intensive community sentences are not just tough and challenging. They are also far more effective than short prison sentences in turning round the lives of low-level offenders – thereby making life better for victims and the wider community.

“It is a national disgrace that so much public money is still being wasted on ineffective short prison sentences. We are calling on the Government to bring this to an end by adopting our recommendations.”

ENDS

For more information or interview requests, please contact Sam Cannicott (07771 780 946)

The Final Report will be presented to 10 Downing Street at 12pm on 12 September.

Notes to editors

The report’s specific recommendations are:

Giving victims confidence in the punishment. Community sentences must not be a soft option.

- ❖ While rehabilitation is integral, victims and the wider public must be confident that community sentences are tough and effective.
- ❖ Reparation must be a central part of an intensive community sentence. Offenders should understand the impact of their crimes on their communities and victims and work to restore damage caused.
- ❖ Victim-awareness activities should be included in all community orders and the option of Restorative Justice conferencing should be available to all courts.
- ❖ Offenders who breach the conditions of their order must face a firm and swift response. Schemes should be encouraged to explore proactive and positive ways of ensuring compliance. Offenders, their victims and the wider public need to understand that an alternative to custody is not a soft-option and that it makes tough demands.

Confronting the causes of crime. During community sentences time should be spent addressing the key drivers of low-level crime in order to help offenders move towards a stable, productive and crime-free life.

- ❖ The focus of all community-based programmes must be the underlying causes of criminal activity, with each programme being tailored to the individual’s own behaviour, needs and circumstances.
- ❖ Further funding needs to be made available to widen the availability of mental health liaison services operating at the earliest possible stage in the criminal justice process
- ❖ All offenders should be screened and assessed for low-level mental health needs that may not qualify for serious psychiatric intervention, but if properly addressed would reduce the likelihood of reoffending.
- ❖ Alcohol and drug misuse must be awarded equal status and alcohol rehabilitation provision must be increased.
- ❖ Every programme should provide wider family and community support to help offenders resolve problems in their lives and break away from bad influences.

- ❖ Providers of community sentences must work to reduce the barriers to a productive, crime-free lifestyle, such as lack of stable accommodation, low educational attainment and limited employment opportunities.

No passing the buck. Alternatives to custody depend on effective partnerships between multiple agencies.

- ❖ The offender, not the individual agencies delivering a community sentence, must be the focus of all interventions. Agencies must operate together on the basis of an integrated offender management plan, sharing information and pooling budgets wherever possible.
- ❖ The government should encourage the voluntary and private sectors to provide innovative approaches to community sentences and give them the freedom to build programmes that are tailored to the individual needs of each offender.
- ❖ Providers delivering community sentences must cooperate closely with local police forces and wherever possible a police officer should be seconded to work with the delivery team.
- ❖ Every programme should function as a one-stop-shop and host representatives from a range of providers, including housing organisations, and local health services.

Holding community sentences to account. Magistrates must be fully informed about intensive community sentences in their area and the public must be helped to understand the role such sentences can play in combating crime.

- ❖ A statutory requirement and framework for magistrates and judges to familiarise themselves with all community sentences available in their area by visiting on a regular basis.
- ❖ Judicial oversight during the sentence must be maintained and where appropriate offenders should attend court for regular progress reviews.
- ❖ Those in charge of each programme must ensure that the local judiciary is informed about its outcomes and effectiveness.
- ❖ All programmes must develop initiatives such as the 'Local Crime: Community Sentence' to educate and inform the wider community about the work they do to punish and rehabilitate offenders.