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The Probation Chiefs Association (PCA) response to call for scrapping of short jail terms by the Prisoner Governors' Association (6 October).

Steve Collett, joint Vice-Chair of the PCA writes:

The Probation Chiefs Association recognises that punishment is one of the primary purposes of sentencing and that there are serious offences for which imprisonment will remain the most appropriate punishment. In the case of those who pose a risk of serious harm to the public, prison is and should be the only place where their long-term rehabilitation can begin.

We also accept that short-term custody protects against regular and repeat offenders who disrupt businesses and undermine the quality of life for our communities.

But the facts are that jail sentences of less than a year neither effectively reduce reoffending nor act as a general or individual deterrent. Sentences of six months or less can mean that the offender spends less than half that period behind bars and is then released without any form of statutory supervision.

Community sentences, far from being the soft option, afford protection across the longer term. Supervision can last up to three years and requirements such as exclusion orders and curfews can add protection to specific victims or vulnerable individuals and businesses.

Moreover, they actually reduce the number of victims. The reconviction rate for offenders who receive prison sentences of a year or less is 60%. For those who serve community sentences the figure is 38%. Community sentences are seen as onerous by offenders who have to deal constructively with their problems.

Short-term custody exacerbates the difficulties offenders face on release by fracturing community ties, undermining protective relationships, jeopardising jobs and housing – all of which help offenders to desist from offending. Often courts are faced with little option because these supports are not available within the community, particularly the lack of alcohol programmes, housing and mental health services.

We need local authorities to work with us to provide the services that will cut re-offending. The most recent figures show the average annual cost of custody £37.5K per prisoner. For those who serve community sentences the figure is £3.2K.

We are already demonstrating that prolific offender schemes, based on the carrot and stick approach, are highly successful in reducing the level of re-offending. If these could be extended to cover all persistent offenders, it would, in our view, better serve local communities than short-term custody.

All enquiries to Donna Leigh: donna.leigh@cps.gsi.gov.uk
Telephone: 07777 667 607