

Break down the barriers for prisoners with learning needs

As Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, I spend every day immersed in the inner workings of the criminal justice system. After almost 2 years in the job, there is one statistic that continues to spur me on to do better.

Every year repeat offending costs society about £18 billion. That is a staggering figure and one we should never be prepared to accept. As we begin to recover from a global pandemic, it is a price we can ill afford to pay.

While I'm proud of this government's work to see offenders punished for their wrongdoing, I'm acutely aware that releasing prisoners without finding solutions to help ensure they turn their lives round will ultimately result in more crime, greater harm to victims and an increased economic cost to society.

We know that education can play a huge role in cutting crime. Figures published in 2017 showed prisoners who undertook study during their sentence were 9 per cent less likely to go on to commit further crimes compared to those who didn't. When individuals are equipped with skills needed to find jobs and contribute to society, they are better placed to accomplish this once released.

I have seen for myself how education changes lives. As a barrister, part-time judge and now as Lord Chancellor, I have too often seen people with conditions such as autism and dyslexia struggle through the criminal justice system. I know from my own family experience how difficult it is to get a proper diagnosis of these conditions. As chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Autism when I was a backbencher, I campaigned hard for better awareness and provision.

The same can be said for victims with neurodivergent conditions who may also find the justice system daunting. The new Victims' Code, which came into effect last month, outlines the minimum level of information and service victims can expect at every stage of the justice process. It also provides enhanced rights for those with impaired social functioning, including special measures to help them to give evidence in court.

I have also had the privilege to see how much those with neurodivergent conditions like these have to offer with the right help and support – which is why I'm determined to make huge strides towards improving the education on offer inside our prison system, so that it better supports those with diverse learning needs.

We need to ensure all prisoners, including those with life-long learning conditions, get the help they need to engage with their rehabilitation and reduce their chances of reoffending.

This makes even more sense when we consider the fact that at least a third of all offenders in England and Wales have a learning disability or challenge, compared with an estimated 2 per cent of the population.

Creating a system that allows every offender to get the help they need will not just make our country fairer, it will also ease the financial burden inflicted on the law-abiding majority of the public by a criminal minority.

Today (15 June 2021), I can announce plans for an overhaul of the education on offer for prisoners with learning needs, which will be led by a team of educational specialists with experience in supporting those with neurodivergent conditions.

Crucially the team will identify prisoners with learning needs such as autism and dyslexia far quicker, so that we will know where to target improved education and training, which will be delivered using new and innovative methods of teaching.

If we are serious about rehabilitating neurodivergent offenders, then it is vital that we do this, so that we can fully understand the support they may need to get their lives back on track. It will then be up to them to put in the work.

My own family experience has taught me a huge amount about what it can be like for people with neurodivergent conditions to navigate a world that too often fails to understand their needs.

We can make a huge difference by setting those with similar conditions in the criminal justice system on the right path to better lives. In the long run I believe it can help us to build back a better and fairer country – one with fewer victims and safer streets.

This will be an investment in our future and a price worth paying.

This was first published on [Redbox in the Times](#).