

Too many prisoners or too few prisons?

The prison population has soared this century in the UK. Some of that is the result of longer sentences for serious offenders. Some of it is currently too many remand prisoners awaiting trial, where queues have lengthened in courts. Some of it is more foreign prisoners.

Yesterday the Justice secretary told Parliament of his plans to bring supply and demand for prison places into better balance. There is a large building programme underway. He is going to speed up expelling foreign prisoners. He proposes different punishments to prison for non violent offenders. He has been taken by the fact that 55% of all those convicted of a lesser offence who spend a short time in jail reoffend after the experience, whereas only 22% of those who are given a non custodial sentence for lesser offences reoffend.

Prison loses prisoners their jobs, maybe loses them their families and their homes. Prison can put them under the influence of hardened serious criminals who groom them for a life of crime, telling them of the problems for ex offenders once released. It is difficult we were told getting bank accounts, insurance and credit fresh from prison.

With electronic tags, probation, community work, curfews and requirements to attend interviews, classes or work the offender can be punished and given the chance of rehabilitation. I think there is much in this, and added the importance of getting thieves and fraudsters to pay some compensation to victims out of what legal earnings they can achieve.

Of course the government was right to require longer custodial sentences for those who are a physical threat to the rest of us. It needs to help the courts get over their backlogs. It needs to be ambitious to say good bye to foreign criminals and make sure through Border Force they cannot return.