

DR. CAROLINE LUCAS

Green Party
for the South East of England

Right Honorable Jack Straw MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
Ministry of Justice
Selborne House
54 Victoria Street
London
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October 9th 2007

Dear Secretary of State

On October 10th, Medway Council Planning Committee meets to discuss the proposed expansion of HMP Rochester. I would like to take this opportunity to object to the proposals and am addressing my concerns to you as the Secretary of State for Justice because they raise matters beyond the remit of the local authority or planners.

The Green Party advocates extensive use of restorative justice (RJ), which while denouncing the crime, deals constructively with both the victim and the offender. Inherent to this concept is the idea that, if an offender has to be detained, the purpose of detention is not to punish, humiliate or degrade, but to protect society and/or the offender, while maintaining his/her dignity and human rights.

Whilst the government does promote RJ, this is only in a small number of cases, primarily those involving youth crime, and efforts do not adequately reflect the gains that can be made in other areas. Its own research, including the Cambridge University report 'Restorative Justice, The Evidence', illustrates the benefits of RJ, both for victims and in terms of re-offending rates. In June of this year the Home Office's 3rd Evaluation Report *Restorative Justice: the views of victims and offenders* provided further evidence, and concluding that around 80% of offenders who took part in an RJ conference thought it would lessen their likelihood of re-offending, and 78% of victims who took part in RJ conferences said they would recommend it to other victims. Studies carried out in Canada, Australia and elsewhere show similar results.

Despite all this evidence, the government's approach to justice remains fixated on detention. The expansion of HMP Rochester is just one strand of a nationwide programme to increase the capacity to lock people up - even though we know it doesn't work.

According to The Prison Reform Trust, theft and handling stolen goods account for the largest number of immediate custodial receptions; recalled prisoners now make up nearly 11% of the population of local prisons; the majority of women in prison are held for non-violent offences; and the number of prisoners in England and Wales has increased by 25,000 in the last ten years. So, not only is detention being used in situations that are ideally placed to benefit from RJ, it is failing to cut re-offending rates and failing to reduce crime. Again, the government's own information highlights that need for change - according to the British Crime Survey of 2004-5 just 33% of victims think the current system meets their needs and 41% of victims think it brings offenders to justice.

Wholly unacceptable levels of men, women and children are currently imprisoned at great cost to their future rehabilitation, as well as to their families, the taxpayer and society in general. The Green Party is, therefore, committed to significantly reducing the prison population and to measures that include changes to sentencing policy and practice. The planned expansion of HMP Rochester and several others facilities in the South East is a regressive step. My concerned constituents are, therefore, entitled to know why these schemes are being pursued in the face of evidence that detaining offenders does not reduce crime or deliver justice.

I have a further concern about HMP Rochester, namely that extra capacity here, and indeed elsewhere, is required because of the government's ongoing policy of detaining asylum seekers. The UNHCR have condemned this practice, yet the British government continues to breach the human rights of frightened and vulnerable individuals. Again, this approach is undermined by the facts - according to the Refugee Council, evidence shows that very few asylum seekers try to abscond, even those who face removal.

In light of this concern, I am seeking reassurance that any projected increases in the prison population, which presumably have informed the case in support of an expansion of prison capacity both at Rochester and in the South East more widely, do not include asylum seekers or refugees.

I trust you will give these matters your full attention and urge that the plans to develop HMP Rochester are withdrawn.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caroline Lucas". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Caroline Lucas - Green Party MEP for South East England.

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