



Briefing from Scottish Quaker Community Justice Working Group

Promoting Healing Not Harm

The Crisis in Three Numbers

- £436.6m** spent annually on prisons that **don't work**
- 27%** re-convicted within one year — proving punishment alone fails
- 60%** of prisons overcrowded — requiring emergency releases to prevent collapse

Who We Actually Imprison

- **47%** have no qualifications (vs 9% of general population)
- **57%** read below age 11 level (vs 15% of general population)
- **76%** have mental health history (many should be in treatment, not prison)
- **75%** of young prisoners experienced abuse and trauma

Meanwhile: White collar crime costs Scotland **£18-19 billion annually** (vs £1 billion for traditional crime), yet such people rarely see prison. **Our system imprisons the disadvantaged not the fraudsters.**

Norway Proved Change Works

In the 1990s, Norway had Scotland's problems: **60-70% reoffending, violence, overcrowding.**

| Measure | Scotland (Failed) | Norway (Reformed) |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Incarceration rate | 149 per 100,000 | 54 per 100,000 |
| Overcrowding | 60% over capacity | 73% capacity (controlled) |
| Open prisons | 3.6%; 1 underused facility | 50%; rehabilitation-focused |
| Officer training | 6 weeks | 2-3 years (ethics, psychology) |

Result: Norway spends more per prisoner but **saves money overall: 73% never return**

What Actually Works (Evidence-Based)

- ✓ **Community sentences:** 29% re-conviction vs 52% for short custody — **nearly twice as effective**
- ✓ **Restorative justice:** 14% reduction in reoffending, 85% victim satisfaction, **£9 saved per £1 spent**
- ✓ **Addressing root causes:** Poverty, Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs), addiction, mental health — crime comes from deprived communities, not randomly

Scotland already proved we can do this: Kilbrandon Report, Glasgow Violence Reduction Unit, 218 Women's Service, Barlinnie Special Unit, Drug Courts all showed success. We have the expertise. We lack the will.

The Moral and Economic Case

Moral: We closed mental hospitals in the 1980s without adequate community care — now prisons warehouse people with mental illness. We fail to educate children, then imprison them as adults for lacking skills. This is a complete failure of the system.

Economic: Emergency releases are now routine. We're spending £1 billion on a new prison (HMP Glasgow) while community alternatives get just £159 million per year to cope. **This is crisis management, not justice.**

Six Immediate Actions

1. **Learn from evidence:** Act on [2026 Sentencing Commission](#) recommendations — **deeds, not words**
2. **Address root causes:** Public health approach, early intervention, trauma treatment, addiction as health issue
3. **Reduce imprisonment:** Target European norms, expand presumption against short sentences to 18 months
4. **Expand community justice:** Increase funding beyond £159 million, mainstream restorative justice, embed in schools
5. **Transform prison conditions:** End overcrowding, expand open prisons, train officers as rehabilitation specialists
6. **Democratic engagement:** Citizens' assemblies, justice reinvestment, evaluate outcomes not just activity

"The current justice system reflects a failure of imagination and a loss of hope."

The Choice

**The question is not "tough on crime" vs "soft on crime."
It's "failed system" vs "proven alternatives."**

Norway had our problems 30 years ago. They chose evidence over ideology.
Scotland can choose **compassion without sacrificing public safety.**
Scotland can choose **hope over despair.**

The question is: Will we?

*"Bear witness to the humanity of all people, including those who break society's conventions or laws." -
Quaker Advices and Queries #33*

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Website: <https://www.quakerscotland.org/our-work/community-justice>

Full Report for reference: "A Call for Compassionate Justice" (due April 2026)