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Chris Grayling
Secretary of State for Justice
Ministry of Justice
102 Petty France
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25th April 2014

Dear Secretary of State,

REDUCING ACCESS TO BOOKS IN PRISONS

Thank you very much indeed for supporting our plea during the passage of the recent Defamation Bill 2013 that greater protection in the updated legislation be given to secondary publishers like Booksellers. My association is really pleased that the new Clause 10 has now reached the Statute Book. We are grateful for your help in this matter.

So I hope you will not now take it amiss if we write to you expressing our dismay over the new provisions your Department has introduced whereby books can no longer be sent to prisoners from outside the prisons.

The Booksellers Association jointly owns a charity, *Quick Reads*, which has done a lot of work recently in prisons to promote reading and literacy, and we and *Quick Reads* are very concerned about the new situation.

In the UK, the *Every Child A Reader* programme makes it unequivocally clear that basic literacy is essential to future success. 70% of pupils permanently excluded from school have difficulties in basic literacy skills. 25% of young offenders are said to have reading skills below those of the average seven-year-old. 60% of the prison population is said to have difficulties in basic literacy skills.

These findings built on existing results from a prison service study, which asks prisoners on reception to take a literacy test devised by the Basic Skills Agency. The test is approximately equivalent to the reading skills expected of 9 to 10-year-olds. The 1998 results showed that 60% had problems with literacy, and 40% had severe literacy problems. Similarly, the Social Exclusion Unit reported that 80% of prisoners have writing skills at or below the level expected of an 11-year-old child; the equivalent figure for reading is 50% (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002:6).

The acute shortage of literacy skills amongst prisoners is predictably reflected in qualification levels, with a 2005 DFES study revealing that 52% of male prisoners and 71% of female prisoners have no qualifications at all. A Prison Reform Trust (2008) study suggested 48% of prisoners have a reading level at or below Level 1, while an even greater proportion (65%) have a numeracy level at or below Level 1. It is perhaps unsurprising that 67% of all prisoners were unemployed at the time of imprisonment.

In all the reports I have read, all the experts seem to agree with the premise that books can play a pivotal role in preventing prisoners from re-offending. In particular, those ex-prisoners who have good literacy skills stand a much better chance of being employed after release. As Civitas say in their Education in Prisons Report [2010]: *"Prisoners who gain employment after release are far less likely to re-offend"*.

Yet the changes your Department has introduced so that books can no longer be sent to prisoners from outside the prisons will inevitably reduce considerably the access that individual prisoners have to books.

I understand that MoJ officials are maintaining that in the future prisoners will still have access to reading material because they can visit the prison library. And furthermore that every individual prisoner has the complete freedom to use his/her weekly allowance to buy books.

The Prison Library Specification 2010 and The Prison Library Service document Prisons PS1 45/2011 sets out some pretty impressive minimum service levels and standards that a prison library should offer, including the stipulation that:

- Staffing is a minimum of 16 librarian and 16 assistant hours per week in smaller prisons, rising to 37 librarian and 74 assistant hours per week in the largest prisons
- Library visits should be of a minimum of 30 minutes' duration and as often as practical at times that facilitate access by prisoners
- Access must be at least once every two weeks as an absolute minimum.

But in spite of this, local authority and prison service financial cutbacks have led to prison libraries having far fewer books and a considerably reduced service. So much so that some prisons don't, in effect, have a library at all. And those that do, access to the prison library can sometimes be restricted to as little as one visit every six weeks.

One of the prisoners from HMP Oakwood in Staffordshire wrote a letter recently to *Inside Time* magazine, saying: *"Some prisoners are saying they can only have 12 books in possession - lucky sods! Here at HMP Oakwood we do not have that luxury. There is no system in place here to purchase books from an approved supplier. We can buy games consoles or DVD players but cannot get books for love nor money. And neither can we have them sent in. The prison library is poorly stocked and trying to order an un-stocked title can lead to a three month wait, though you usually get a slip back saying the title is 'unavailable'"*.

The restrictions on sending books to prisoners, in addition to restricted access to prison libraries, make it as difficult as possible for the determined readers in any given prison population to maintain a reading habit. This further impacts on the non-reading majority as it reduces the potential for a learning culture within prisons.

In a recent Inspection Report on Wetherby Prison, young boys were spending 16 hours a day in their cells during the week and 20 hours on weekends. They could have improved their minds during much of this time by reading, and thereby reducing their chances of reoffending. But this was not happening. What an opportunity missed.

Secondly, with an allowance of around £10.00 a week, few prisoners are going to find it easy to buy books, as well as other key items. So we will end up with even fewer books being read in prison, and will find ourselves in a vicious circle.

The point about encouraging all prisoners to read is that it is, for some, the first steps in re-engaging with the education system, and is therefore a powerful tool in preventing them from re-offending. Andy McNab, a *Quick Reads* author, commented after a prison visit he made: *"It is all about giving these lads confidence to take out of prison at the end of their sentence. Confidence that they can walk into a library, bank or post office, confidence that they can fill in forms and ultimately, confidence to take control of their lives and hopefully not re-offend. It isn't about mollycoddling criminals or giving them an easy ride, it's about changing things for them so that we all, as a society, benefit when they come out."*

In summary, we believe that:

- Reading books in prisons can play a key role in reducing re-offending levels
- Encouraging more reading within prisons should be very much a part of future prison strategy.

Please will you think again about this policy, and go back to the old system of permitting books to be sent to prisoners from outside the jails? I do hope that will be possible.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Tim Godfray

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