

# Council to ask Justice Minister for rethink on abolition of prison visiting committees

☒ Councillors decided today to approve a motion lodged by Councillor Joanne Mowat asking the Chief Executive to write to the Justice Secretary about his recent moves to abolish prison visiting committees. The members of prison visiting committees are approved by the council, so it was right that it should be discussed in this forum, even if it is a government matter.

Much discussion followed a deputation from the Edinburgh Prison Visiting Committee, who made a very clear and measured presentation to the council, explaining that their role is as an independent scrutineer. It is important principally because it is so different from the role of the HM Inspectorate of Prisons, and one of the key points raised was that the members of the committees have unfettered access to HMP Saughton at any time to speak to any prisoner. The other main point of argument was that the replacement system had not been fully explained as yet by The Scottish Government, although some SNP councillors explained that this was not surprising as the matter was only out for consultation.

The motion read as follows:-

*“Council:*

*i. notes the recent decision of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to abolish prison visiting committees thereby removing independent monitoring of Scottish penal institutions from the landscape;*

*ii. regrets this decision and will seek to join with others to campaign to retain independent monitoring of Scottish penal institutions;*

*iii. instructs the Chief Executive to write on behalf of the Council to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice outlining our*

*concerns and asking for him to re-consider his decision.*



This same matter has also been raised at Holyrood today. Annabel Goldie, Conservative MSP raised the matter at debate. The full text of her motion [can be read here](#) . Stuart McMillan MSP has welcomed a commitment from Justice Secretary Kenny MacAskill that the Scottish Government will carry out further consultation on the reform of the system for prisoner advocacy and complaints before a final decision is made about the future role of Prison Visiting Committees.

The SNP MSP for West Scotland welcomed the clear procedure for prisoner complaints set out by the government. Mr McMillan said:

“The members of Prison Visiting Committees are passionate and dedicated volunteers who give up their own time to monitor prison conditions, and we should be grateful for the service they provide. Regardless of what might have led someone to end up in prison in the first place, it is right and essential that society has a mechanism in place to ensure that they are treated properly once they are there and their interests represented.

“That does not mean we should not review that service from time to time, however, to ensure that it remains fit for purpose, and it is certainly true that prisons and the needs of prisoners themselves have changed enormously since the Prison Visiting Committees were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“Nonetheless, like other MSPs, I am keen to ensure both that the views of prison visitors themselves are listened to and that the best aspects of the Prison Visiting Service are built on and not discarded in the reform process. I am reassured that the commitments that the Cabinet Secretary has made today mean that this will happen.

“The Scottish Government’s aim in undertaking this reform is to put in place a modern and appropriate independent advocacy service for prisoners that is fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, working

alongside a robust system of inspection. That is something that we need in our society and which all MSPs should be able to support.”