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Offering a second chance

At the end of last month, I was lucky enough to attend a rehearsed reading of the play *Penned Up*, by Danusia Iwaszko, at the iconic Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds.

The playwright, who has run script-writing groups for male prisons for many years, shares her experience and asks the question, 'Prisoners, should we lock them up and throw away the key?' It was a thought-provoking and emotional piece.

Successful rehabilitation of prisoners back into society is of particular interest to me as Police and Crime Commissioner, not simply because of the human and emotional costs but also the burden placed on our police forces from solving crimes carried out by repeat offenders. If rehabilitation was more effective all of us could benefit tremendously, I believe we need to do better.

In the play's introductory notes, the writer commented on how many film and television prison dramas are action-packed with fights and jail breaks, with many prisoners



often portrayed as violent and aggressive monsters. During my 10 years as Suffolk's PCC I have visited the three prisons in the county as well as Norwich Prison where many Suffolk offenders are housed before returning to civilian life. It certainly opened my eyes in a very positive way.

I will admit to a degree of stereotyping with my expectations. My prison visits quickly dispelled many of those preconceptions and I was amazed at how accurately the play portrayed how rehabilitation programmes can work with the right approach. For many in the audience I know the play was a real

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eye opener. The play revolves around a group of six inmates who join a 10-week playwriting course, mainly to get out of their cells for a couple of hours, and they are blown away by what they achieve. The script vividly highlights the individual difficulties of each inmate and their deep suspicion of authority, anger, frustration and severe lack of self-confidence.

Society quite rightly expects those who have committed serious crimes to be suitably sentenced and victims must feel justice has been done. But if we understood more about the inmates' circumstances we would learn many have learning

difficulties and barely able to read or write. In too many cases their childhood was chaotic and violent with a dearth of sound adult role models. Many inmates also have profound mental health challenges. That said, there are also prisoners who have committed serious crimes in spite of their good education and comfortable lifestyles. Therefore, prison populations contain a wide variety of cultures and personalities housed in very close quarters, so it is not surprising tensions do boil over – the play graphically depicted this challenge.

Sadly, a minority of inmates will never be able to turn over a new leaf and will remain a liability in society, but I really believe reform is possible and necessary for many inmates if only there was sufficient capacity and willingness to give individuals a second chance. On release prisoners must be provided with what many of us take for granted – a home, a job and an income. In too many situations this does not happen and the slippery slope back into criminality becomes a reality. Once again the play

provided us with a vivid insight into this individual challenge.

Consider how difficult life must be if you are not in this position. If you are unable to read, write or add up you may feel nothing but despair, which can lead to (but not excuse) a life of crime.

There are many examples of employers such as Timpsons who give ex-offenders a chance in life, offering them secure employment and most progress to leading fulfilling and worthwhile lives. This is something I would like to do much more of by working with other agencies and charities supported through our commissioning work. The public sector must also help through its procurement processes by maximising the social value scores when awarding contracts to ensure companies employ those needing a second chance. They have served their sentence and deserve an opportunity to become good citizens. After all it was Churchill who said: "In the heart of everyman is a jewel if only you can find it!" In Suffolk we must do exactly that!