

**Opening speech by Michèle Blom, Director-General for Sanctions and Prevention Policy, at the 21st Council of Europe Conference of Directors of Prison and Probation Services: '*Community Involvement in Prison and Probation Work*' at the Inntel Hotel in Zaandam on 14 June 2016**

- Ladies and gentlemen,
- Welcome to Zaandam – a town at the heart of one of the world's oldest industrial areas.
- And I'm not talking about a bleak, grey expanse of smoking chimneys. No: this was 'clean industry', powered by over a thousand windmills.
- Zaandam inspired great international interest in those days. Even famous European rulers, like Czar Peter the Great of Russia and the French emperor Napoleon, came here to behold this miracle of modern technology.
- As a native of Zaandam, I'm proud that this week my town is once again welcoming important international guests as part of this CDPPS conference organised by the Council of Europe.
- We are meeting here today and tomorrow to discuss a crucial issue: how to involve the community more in prison and probation work.
- And I'm pleased to say that, in this field too, the landscape around Zaandam provides a source of inspiration.

- As I'm sure you know, most of this part of the Netherlands lies below sea level.
- To keep their feet dry, government authorities, citizens and private businesses have long had to work together: building and maintaining dykes, designing windmills to pump water out of polders, and so on.
- Our age-old battle against the water was tough, and could only be won if *everyone* played their part.
- It would be great if we could set up a similar collaborative model for the enforcement of criminal sanctions.
- Because in my view there are still plenty of opportunities out there. Opportunities that we aren't yet making full use of.
- In the Netherlands we're trying to change that – inspired by our tradition of collaboration and consultation – which we call the 'polder model'.
- I'll explain the basics of our approach.
- Imagine someone has committed an offence and been sentenced by the court to a prison sentence.
- Of course, a major element of that sentence is about retribution: the individual is excluded from society for several weeks, months or even years.
- But there comes a time when the prisoner is released back into society. If their return isn't prepared carefully, there's a big chance that it will fail. This may result in reoffending, new victims and costs to society.

- An important extra challenge faced by Dutch prisons is the great shift in their populations over the past few years.
- In the past, many prisoners were sitting out long sentences, and staff could work with them for five to seven years. That created scope to prepare for prisoners' social rehabilitation within the prison walls.
- But in recent years fewer people have been sent to prison and a relatively large proportion of new inmates have received much shorter sentences.
- Of course, we still have serious criminals who spend long periods in prison and follow a strict regime. But the *majority* of inmates spend less than six months behind bars.
- The number of prisoners with psychological problems has also grown. Around one-third is estimated to have a minor intellectual disability. For half of prisoners, addiction plays a role and roughly the same number have a psychiatric disorder.
- What's more, over 70 per cent have debts, and an even higher number – around 80 per cent – are dependent on benefits.
- In short: these people have more issues to work on and less time to do it in. Three to six months isn't long enough to get their lives back on track.
- We're realising more and more that a prison sentence is often only *a small part* of someone's overall life path.

- As the figures make clear, the prison system can't take sole responsibility for preparing prisoners for social rehabilitation and preventing them from reoffending. Municipalities, the healthcare sector, the probation service and the community at large need to get involved to fulfil this ambition.
- And that's quite a change for the prison system.
- Prisons were traditionally institutions that were cut off from the outside world and did things their own way. I'm exaggerating a little of course.
- But in recent years the focus has shifted to *collaborating with all parties in the chain*.
- For example, we've made clear agreements on reintegration and aftercare at national, regional and local level. We're also now working well with municipalities and mental health services. Prisons can provide access to people who are otherwise not easily reached.
- All this means prisons have to evolve into institutions that are rooted in society. Institutions that work together closely with partners like municipalities and healthcare services.
- The care, treatment and support someone receives **in** prison should build, as much as possible, on the help they were receiving **before** they were locked up.
- And once they've served their sentence prisoners should be returned to society in such a way that they can continue this process beyond the prison gates.

- What does this mean for the prison system?
- It means we have to invite the outside world in: municipalities, healthcare and educational institutions, employers and so on. Far more than we do today. In other words: we need to involve the community more in the way that sentences and orders are enforced.
- We will continue to develop our current methods: in all our prisons we already take an individualised approach. One that stresses the prisoner's *personal responsibility* and *self-reliance*.
- During their stay a daily assessment is made of prisoners' *behaviour*.
- And their behaviour has consequences.
- We've recently introduced a system whereby good behaviour earns prisoners promotion to a programme with more freedoms. Conversely, undesirable behaviour can result in fewer freedoms.
- This system reinforces itself. Well-behaved prisoners set an example for others, who in turn learn that good behaviour really does pay.
- As you can imagine, prison staff play a major role in this system. The staff of our custodial institutions do a great deal more than simply walk around with a bunch of keys, locking and unlocking doors.
- Their involvement, sensitivity and experience mean they are able to motivate and empower prisoners, and guide

them towards responsible behaviour – both in their daily prison lives and as they prepare to return to society.

- As you will know from your own experience: this is a difficult process. Like most people, prisoners often find it hard to control or break old habits.
- That's why the theme of this conference – community involvement – is so important. The care and support provided to people leaving prison has to be continued, as much as possible, outside in society.
- Municipalities take the lead in this, but the probation service, volunteers, family members and others also play a significant role.
- Keeping people on the straight and narrow for good takes time. But in the Netherlands we believe in this approach.
- And I'm pleased to say that the facts back us up: between 2002 and 2010 the number of reoffenders among adult prisoners went down by 10 per cent in this country.
- I believe that if we ensure better continuity in care and support, for example through the 'life path' approach I've described, these results could improve even more.
- This would be an improvement for prisoners, who are better prepared for their return to society and have a better chance of building a 'normal' life after serving their sentence.
- And of course it would be an improvement for society, in more than one respect:

- - Society will be *safer*. Former prisoners will more often reintegrate successfully, reducing the risk of reoffending.
  - The costs for society will also be lower: there will be less social harm and less taxpayers' money flowing into the judicial system.
- That second point has already proven true here in the Netherlands: we are one of the few countries in Europe with a *surplus* of cells.
- That might be an ironic point to make at an international conference with *overcrowding* as one of its main themes.
- But that makes it all the more interesting. It's great to inspire each other, take a look behind the scenes and exchange best practices.
- This conference will give you plenty of opportunities to do just that.
- On Thursday, for example, you can take a look inside the brand-new Zaanstad prison complex not far from here.
- You may be wondering why a country with a surplus of cells has just built a *new prison*.
- Well, the plans for the new building were made when we thought *more* cells would be needed.
- But we've built it in a smart way: almost all the cells are suitable for use by two prisoners.
- So in quiet periods, each prisoner has a cell to themselves. And if there's an increase in the number of inmates, cells can easily be converted for use by two people.

- This allows us to house 1,040 prisoners in only 667 cells.
- This new design makes it possible to cater to the prison system's changing capacity needs quickly and flexibly.
- Another good example of modern prison policy.
- If you are interested, please do join the tour on Thursday.
- And now, it only remains for me to wish you all an enjoyable and inspiring conference.
- Thank you.