



**Ministry
of Justice**

**The Right Honourable
Chris Grayling MP**

**Lord Chancellor and
Secretary of State for Justice**
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

T 020 3334 3555

F 020 3334 3669

E general.queries@justice.gsi.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/moj

Carol Ann Duffy

29 March 2014

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE TO THE POET LAUREATE

Dear Ms Duffy

As you know, I wrote to the authors who have raised concerns about books in prisons earlier this week giving some background about the current rules. Having seen your comments yesterday, I thought it might be helpful to write to you again setting out in a bit more detail what the reality of the situation is, given the misinformation that has been in circulation this week.

Firstly, neither I nor any other Minister have made any policy changes specifically about the availability of books in prisons. Despite some reports, we have not sought to include them in a list of privilege items that have to be earned by offenders – to do so would be wholly wrong. The only discussion about prison books that I have been involved in as Secretary of State was to agree to make available the novel *50 Shades of Grey* in the libraries in women's prisons because I judged that it might help encourage some women offenders to read more, something I regard as highly desirable.

The purpose of the changes we introduced last November was two fold. Firstly, we wanted to see consistent rules right across the prison estate. As you will know, prisoners can be moved around the prison estate for operational reasons, something I am working to limit, and it seemed both wrong and potentially disruptive for prisoners to experience a situation where on one day they were allowed to do something in one prison, only for them to find that on the next day, after being moved to another prison, that they are no longer allowed to do so.

In addition, we wanted to ensure that access to privileges in prison, such as wearing non-prison clothes, the level of prison earnings and extra access to the gym, was linked to how well a prisoner engages in rehabilitative activity, such as active participation in education and training. The detail of the new regime was designed in close consultation with prison governors and not by Ministers.

As part of that change it was agreed that there should be consistent rules for the

receipt of parcels in prisons. Again, it seemed wrong that you could be allowed a parcel in one prison one day, and not in another one on the next day.

There have always been pretty tight rules about the receipt of parcels in prisons, under both this Government and the last one. There is good reason for this. Our prison staff fight a constant battle to prevent illicit items, such as drugs, extremist materials, mobile phones, SIM cards and pornography getting into our prisons. The routes used to try to do so are wide-ranging and ingenious. We see drugs and weapons sown into the lining of shoes, concealed in clothes, and hidden in essential household items. We have even seen drugs concealed inside a hollowed out Weetabix. Only a few days ago a crude knife was found concealed inside a toothbrush in one of our prisons.

We are working hard to make progress in the battle against drugs in our prisons. We carry out regular random drug tests in prisons, and the proportion which are positive is well under 10%, when historically the rate has been much higher. But it remains a tough challenge keeping drugs out. Huge efforts are made by drug dealers, and those trying to get mobile phones in particular into prisons, to get round the security measures we take.

The arrival of thousands of unknown parcels in our prisons each day, whether containing books, essential items or anything else, would completely undermine these efforts. It would be a logistical impossibility to check them all in the level of detail that is needed, to properly explore whether apparently innocuous items contain drugs or other illegal items. There are other difficulties too. Only this week one of our prison librarians wrote to one of the national papers pointing out the risk of paedophiles in our prisons accessing illegal written pornographic material through print materials coming into prison which are not properly checked for their content.

So I'm afraid that it is inconceivable that we could impose the additional operational burden on our staff of carrying out detailed assessments of an unlimited number of parcels coming into prisons. This is something that has never happened before and could not happen now. That is why we now have simple rules that allow everyone one parcel of items from home when they first arrive in prison, and then only further parcels at the Governor's discretion in exceptional circumstances.

That does not mean that we do not believe it is important to encourage learning, and reading in prisons. As we have indicated on more than one occasions this week, prisoners have full access to the same public library service in prisons as every other citizen, as well as the ability to order books from Amazon via the prison shop using their prison earnings or money sent in by relatives. There is a professionally run library service in every prison, and every prisoner has the right to order any available title and can have up to twelve books at any one time. If prisoners are reading a fraction of this total I would be delighted.

Given your concerns, can I extend an invitation to you to visit one of our prison libraries next week, and talk to the staff who run them? As you may have seen from some letters written by prison librarians to the national papers this week, many of them have been dismayed by the suggestion that the good service and professionalism that they provide is inadequate. I would also like to extend to you the

opportunity to talk to staff involved in prison security so that you can see in more detail the scale of the smuggling challenge that they face, and the extraordinary ways in which attempts are made to circumvent the rules.

I believe that you and I share the same goals of seeing better standards of educational support for offenders to ensure that they have a better chance of sorting their lives out when they leave prison. This is why, among a raft of reforms to improve the rehabilitation of offenders, we are making changes to more than double the level of education available in our youth offender institutions from the current average of 12 hours a week. As you will know, the most profound reading challenge in our prisons is not whether prisoners have access to enough literature, but how we help people who in all too many cases lack the literacy skills they need. That is why we work closely with the Shannon Trust to support schemes such as 'Toe by Toe', which includes peer mentoring to improve reading levels.

I hope you will accept my invitation to see the work done with books in our prisons, but I hope you will also understand that I could not possibly allow prisoners to receive regular parcels from home and in doing so put in jeopardy the efforts of prison staff to Keep drugs and other illicit materials out of prisons.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Grayling', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

CHRIS GRAYLING