

Jonathan Aitken calls for prison 'mentors' to tackle reoffending

by **Toby Helm**
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Former cabinet minister Jonathan Aitken is drawing on his personal experience of befriending and helping a former prison inmate to quit crime and find a stable job, as he calls on ministers to establish a new national network of 15,000 mentors to slash reoffending rates.

In a report on mentoring for the Centre for Social Justice thinktank, Aitken tells how he helped Leroy Skeete, a fellow inmate in Belmarsh prison in 1999 serving an 11-year sentence for aggravated bodily harm, to end his cycle of reoffending and find full-time work a decade later.

Aitken, who says the government could cut the £11bn-a-year cost of reoffending by at least £1bn if it overcame resistance from the probation and prison services and organised mentoring properly, tells how Skeete had all the hallmarks of a serial offender when he first met him, but had the drive and will to turn his life round with the help of friends.

"We were fellow prisoners in House Block Three," Aitken writes. "We

got on well in that environment but I would not have been optimistic about his prospects for ceasing to reoffend. He came from a broken home and was poorly educated ... and his general attitude was that of a serial offender."

Skeete contacted Aitken - who was jailed for perjury and perverting the course of justice in 1999 and was released in 2000 - after he ended his sentence in 2007.

"The factors which, in my view, made the relationship succeed was that we both understood the difficulties of starting life again as an ex-prisoner ...," Aitken says in the report. "A lot of our early time together was spent listening to Leroy's problems. I taught him how to write a CV and rehearsed job interviews."

Together they found Skeete work as a driver and a wine waiter before Aitken introduced him to a charity called Blue Sky, which specialises in finding employment for ex-offenders. After 15 months he was put in touch with a company employing night maintenance workers on London Underground and soon after was given permanent employment. Two years later he was married and has not reoffended.

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