**Jonathan Aitken opened Gloucestershire’s new £12.4 million Custody Suite at the invitation of the County’s Police Commissioner**

**Martin Surl on January 14.**

Extracts from Mr Aitken’s speech follow.

See also attached Media coverage from BBC Western Daily Press, Gloucestershire Echo, Gloucester Citizen etc.

When I first received the invitation to carry out today’s Opening Ceremony I thought for a second or two that it might be a practical joke. After all, the task of opening a brand new block of cells does not usually come the way of a former cell inmate.

But having had both a bird’s eye view and a worm’s eye view of the Criminal Justice System in a roller coaster career that has ranged from Cabinet Minister to convict then perhaps I can offer one or two positive words of praise about this Custody Unit from an unusual angle.

As it is a good bet that most members of this distinguished audience have never been in a Custody Unit, let me begin by telling it like it is from the point of view of a former customer and ex offender.

Police Cells are the entry point of the Criminal Justice System for all suspects. From drink drivers, to football hooligans, to rapists, to phone hackers, to drug barons, to City of London fraudsters, to errant politicians, to murder suspects, Police Custody Cells are where the journey begins, be it a journey to innocence or a journey to prison.

Arrivals are often shell shocked, confused, or full of bellicose denials when they reach the police cells. Custody Units are not places of judgement they are places of fair and due processes. Those processes may consist of quite complex procedures. Within the Unit medical and forensic tests take place. So do interviews under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act. So do Mental Health interventions and so do the duties of defence and prosecution lawyers. At the end of a period of custody the formalities of charging and granting of police bail often take place.

The environment in which all this happens is important.

I congratulate Gloucestershire on opening what is probably the finest Police Custody environment in the whole of the country.

However, that description, that prize that has been achieved against competition which is not always formidable. Custody Suites have all too often been poor cousins, the losers in budgetary battles.

It is here that I must enter a plea of *guilty* as a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

When it comes to allocating funds out of the Law and Order budget, Police Cells have come too low in the pecking order. As a result, if you look across the country, the infrastructure of Police Cells is often in a poor state.

The overcrowding and congestion can lead to huge timewasting and inefficiency. My own first compulsory visit to a Police Cell lasted 19 hours. Over half of this time was just waiting around in the cell while information came in from other police stations on the other side of London.

But at least that gave me time to observe how difficult and overcrowded and hysterical life in a busy set of Police Cells can be.

I haven’t gone soft on crime just because I have been to prison. I recognise that there is no way that occupying a police cell is going to be a good experience. However, it should be a fair, decent and humane experience. This is just not possible when many police stations have infrastructure which is so poor, so overcrowded and so noisy.

Here in Gloucestershire you are breaking new ground with a State of the Art Facility consisting of:

50 brand new cells which are all on one site with good facilities such as CCTV, Video links, Wifi which are built to save police time and money. These provide valuable amenities for drug counsellors, lawyers, and others who support suspects. These well-structured cells provide safety for suspects, giving them a sense of decency and shielding them from the intrusion of the Paparazzi.

In financial terms this Custody Unit is already a success story. It will save hundreds of thousands of pounds a year in reducing police costs that were duplicated by custody units in poor condition in both Cheltenham and Gloucester.

Also closing those old units will release land that can now be sold and bring many extra millions of pounds into the police budget.

So financially, operationally, and for the greater good the Criminal Justice System this Custody Unit is a success story. It is also a tribute to the constructive relationship between the Police Commissioner and the Police.

I am delighted now to declare this Custody Unit open.