I am writing to you with regard to treatment programmes for men with sexual convictions.

We are absolutely committed to reducing reoffending and addressing the needs of men with sexual convictions. This is a complex area of work. Changing any human behaviour is difficult; facilitating change with this particular client group poses unique challenges and although the interventions aim to reduce reoffending they should never be thought of as a cure.

HM Prison and Probation Service and the Ministry of Justice have been at the forefront of this area of work internationally for some 25 years under successive governments. The programmes have evolved with the developing evidence base since the accreditation of the initial version of the Core programme in 1992. All the work on them has been overseen by the Correctional Services Accreditation and Advice Panel, a panel of international experts, who have confirmed at each iteration that that the approach has been in line with the latest thinking about what works with this client group.

An evaluation of the Core programme in 2003 suggested that medium-risk offenders reoffended less after Core SOTP when both sex and violence reconvictions were taken into account. Nevertheless, it was clear that Core was not sufficient for some men. The ‘Extended’ programme was therefore developed for men at high and very high risk of reoffending, while low risk men were redirected to the ‘Rolling’ programme.

More recently, there have been significant changes to the programmes provided for this group that reflect the developing international evidence base. In particular, HMPPS began delivering the new Horizon programme in April 2016, and Kaizen (for high-risk offenders) from last month. All the most up to date research was considered in developing these new programmes, and they are built on the firmest possible foundations.

**Evaluation of Core SOTP**

In parallel with the development of these new programmes, the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS have also been keen to evaluate the impact of programmes in delivery. In 2010, MoJ commissioned an external
organisation to carry out an evaluation of the Core programme. When this first reported in 2012, there were concerns over the robustness of the methodology and hence the results. Further work was undertaken, in consultation with a number of external experts, with the aim of addressing the methodological concerns. In the event, this did not prove possible.

A further evaluation was therefore begun in spring 2015. As the previous attempt had demonstrated, this is a complex area so an advisory panel of external experts was established from the outset to advise on the methodology and also on the interpretation of the emerging findings. Once complete, the draft evaluation report was then submitted for peer review, in accordance with the standard MoJ research protocols.

As you will be aware, we have now published this evaluation. The full research report can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/impact-evaluation-of-the-prison-based-core-sex-offender-treatment-programme.

In summary, the report shows that, of 2,551 sex offenders who started the Core SOTP in prison between 2000 and 2012, reconviction rates for sexual reoffending were two percentage points’ higher (10% vs 8%) than matched sex offenders who had not undertaken the Core programme. There were 51 more reoffenders in the treated group than in the comparison group.

The headline 25% increase in sexual reoffending for Core participants cited in some recent press reports is potentially misleading. The research found a 2 percentage point difference in the sexual reoffending rates of the programme and control groups after eight years: 10% vs 8%. The low base rates for sexual reoffending means a small absolute difference can be described as a much larger relative difference.

There is a larger adverse outcome for those who undertook both Core and Extended SOTP compared to controls (17.5% vs. 10%). This may be because the matching was done on suitability for Core, not suitability for Extended, which is designed for men who have greater problems with self-regulation. This means that the comparison with the control group takes no account of some issues known to determine eligibility for Extended SOTP and is unlikely therefore to be a fair test of impact.

There are limitations to the research which include the fact that it was not possible to match the groups on deviant sexual interest, which we know to be critical feature of reoffending. Further, the impact of other rehabilitative activity that might have been received is not known. This includes whether or not the participants attended another programme in prison or in the community, differences in offender management and supervision, and other reintegration factors such as employment.

**Operational implications**

Once the evaluation report had completed its peer review early in the New Year, urgent advice was sought from CSAAP on the implications for programme delivery. Acting on that advice, the HMPPS Executive Committee took the operational decision to cease delivery of core and extended SOTP and to accelerate the transition to Horizon and Kaizen. Ministers were also informed of the outcomes of the evaluation and the planned operational response.

Now that the evaluation has been published, we are working closely with sentencers and the Parole Board to ensure that delivery partners understand the implications of these findings. These are relatively contained, in that programme participation is only one of a number of factors that the Parole Board, for instance, considers in its decision-making, focusing on whether the offender has demonstrated a reduced level of risk. We are also ensuring that offenders who participated in Core and/or Extended SOTP are
appropriately briefed and supported. This includes reassuring them that the tools that they have learned from participating on these programmes can help them avoid reoffending and live a crime-free life. These findings are disappointing. The report sets out some potential explanations for the outcomes. Some of these are factors that have already been addressed in designing Horizon and Kaizen, and we will continue to scrutinise them as delivery beds down and evaluate their longer term impact.

There will always be room for improvement and further changes to be made as we carry on learning from the latest research findings, and we will continue to work to ensure that our approach remains world leading.

Yours ever

[Signature]

RT HON DAVID LIDINGTON CBE MP