

Get prisoners to tidy up churchyards, says Aitken

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Inmates on day release should be given trowels and watering cans and sent to the local churchyard to reap the mental health benefits of gardening, says the former Tory minister Jonathan Aitken.

The prisoner turned priest made the suggestion after church leaders said that the green space surrounding the 16,400 Church of England churches added up to a "spiritual national park".

They called for the land to be converted into gardens for people with mental health problems.

The Bishop of Carlisle, the Right Rev James Newcome, said that studies had shown the therapeutic benefit of gardening, and churches often had the only green space in urban areas. He suggested that the homeless, those with mental health issues and the lonely could take part in gardening projects.

Professor Jim McManus, a public health professor at the University of Hertfordshire, said that church land was a "huge untapped asset for the public's health". David Shreeve, an

environmental adviser to the Archbishops' Council, said that GPs could prescribe participation in church gardening projects for those with mental health problems.

Mr Aitken, 76, who served seven months for perjury and perverting the course of justice in 1999, said he had found gardening to be therapeutic while in jail and saw that it helped to calm a number of disturbed fellow inmates.

He said that about 1,500 prisoners a day were let out on day release. "They go out to a job or civic duty. Gardening is ideal for this." He said that there was a pilot scheme planned between Christ Church, Feltham, southwest London, and HMP Feltham, describing it as a "big church with an acre of garden around it like a complete wilderness".

He called on churches near jails to set up gardens and forge links with prisons to allow inmates to tend green spaces.

Mr Aitken, who is a prison chaplain, said: "I used to see prisoners who were obviously mentally unwell and very hyper on the wing inside the prison but when they got out in the working parties they calmed down quite a bit."

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