

Prison Reform Trust response to the independent review of the prison system in England and Wales – August 2026

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. We do this by inquiring into the workings of the system; informing prisoners, staff and the wider public; and by influencing Parliament, government and officials towards reform. The Prison Reform Trust provides the secretariat to the All Party Parliamentary Penal Affairs Group and has an advice and information service for people in prison.

The Prison Reform Trust's main objectives are:

- reducing unnecessary imprisonment and promoting community solutions to crime
- improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families
- promoting equality and human rights in the criminal justice system.

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Question 1

What do you think are the three most important outcomes that the prison system should deliver?

- Delivering justice for victims.
- Protecting the public.
- Reducing reoffending and rehabilitating offenders.

Why do you think these outcomes are the most important?

The five statutory purposes of sentencing, under section 57 of the Sentencing Act 2020, are:

- punishment;
- public protection;
- making reparation;
- reducing crime, including through deterrence; and
- reform and rehabilitation.

Although prison has no separate statutory purpose, it is expected to contribute to all five purposes. These can conflict, and in practice punishment and public protection often take priority for more serious offences.

Prison provides public protection through physical removal from the community, while deprivation of liberty also fulfils the purpose of punishment.

However, longer sentences are often treated as proxies for justice and effectiveness, based on the assumption that the public can only be protected through lengthy imprisonment. This has contributed to the inflation of sentence lengths identified by the Independent Sentencing Review¹, without increasing public confidence² or providing an effective deterrent³.

The deprivation of liberty and the severity of the sentence should be the punishment. Treatment and conditions in prison should not constitute an additional punishment.

The Woolf Report provides a strong statement of the purpose of imprisonment: the prison service should keep people in custody, treat them humanely and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives both in custody and after release.⁴

Recognising prisoners as citizens is fundamental to effective rehabilitation. The principle established in *Raymond v Honey* (1982) is that prisoners retain all civil rights not expressly or implicitly removed by imprisonment. Prison should help people develop the motivation, skills and opportunities to make better choices, take responsibility and desist from offending, rather than relying primarily on coercion or threat.

Prison cannot “cure” crime or resolve the social problems experienced by many prisoners. However, it can provide the motivation, opportunity and support needed to help people desist from offending and live productive lives after release.

Justice for victims requires clear and timely communication. Both victims and prisoners should be able to understand how a sentence will be delivered from the point of sentence through to release, including progression, temporary release, release points, licence conditions and supervision.

¹ Gauke, D. (2025). *Independent Sentencing Review: Final report*.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-sentencing-review-final-report>

² Roberts, J., et al. (2022). *Public Knowledge of Sentencing Practice & Trends*. Sentencing Academy. <https://www.sentencingacademy.org.uk/research-articles/public-knowledge-of-sentencing-practice-and-trends/>

³ Gormley, J., Hamilton, M., Belton, I. (2022). *The Effectiveness of Sentencing Options on Reoffending*. Sentencing Council. <https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/publications/research-reports/the-effectiveness-of-sentencing-options-on-reoffending/>

⁴ Woolf, H. and Tumim, S. (1991). *Prison disturbances April 1990, Report of an inquiry*.

The Independent Commission into the Experience of Victims and Long-term Prisoners found that victims and families can feel overlooked, disregarded, neglected and further traumatised by the criminal justice system.⁵ Longer sentences alone cannot address victims' concerns about how the justice system treats them, and offer neither redress nor resolution for these experiences.

The Prison Reform Trust's 2025 Citizens' Panel on sentencing provides a broader public perspective. Panel members consistently emphasised that enabling people to desist from crime would reduce reoffending and create the safer society they want.⁶

Panel members considered rehabilitation currently ineffective and under-resourced, with too much emphasis placed on punishment. They called for people in prison to receive, as a matter of course:

- education and training;
- support to find meaningful employment after release; and
- a safe place to live on leaving prison.

The central message is that punishment and rehabilitation are separate but not competing objectives. A prison system that treats people humanely and supports them to desist from crime is more likely to protect the public, reduce reoffending and deliver lasting justice for victims.

Question 2

Looking over the next five to 15 years, what do you think are the three biggest risks that need to be addressed to support the future of the prison system?

- Demand for prison places against available capacity.
- Risks to the ability of prisons to rehabilitate prisoners and reduce reoffending.
- The size, capability, wellbeing and retention of the prison workforce.

Why do you think these risks are the most important?

Capacity, rehabilitation and workforce risks are mutually re-enforcing: failing to mitigate one makes the others harder to resolve:

⁵ Independent Commission into the Experience of Victims and Long-Term Prisoners. (2002). *Making sense of sentencing: Doing justice to both victim and prisoner*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/making-sense-of-sentencing-doing-justice-to-both-victim-and-prisoner/>

⁶ Hopkins Van Mil. (2025). *Citizens' Panel on sentencing*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/citizens-panel-on-sentencing/>

- Demand for prison places continues to outstrip available capacity, leaving prisons in a permanent state of crisis management.
- Overcrowding diverts leaders and staff from their core task of running safe, decent and purposeful establishments.
- The ability of prisons to rehabilitate prisoners is at risk because regimes, staffing and progression opportunities are increasingly constrained.
- Workforce instability — including recruitment, retention, wellbeing and capability — threatens every other objective of the prison system.

Question 3

Thinking about the next five to 15 years, what are the biggest opportunities to address the risks facing the system and improve outcomes?

Opportunity one:

A reduced prison population should provide breathing space to enable investment in capacity and reduce endemic overcrowding and improve conditions.

Opportunity two:

Revitalised and resourced probation service that delivers effective support and supervision in the community, reducing the need for custody.

Opportunity three:

A more stable prison population with well-trained, confident, staff and leaders to deliver effective rehabilitation.

Why do you think these are the biggest opportunities?

The central opportunity is to move from reactive crisis management to a planned, whole-system approach:

- Reducing the prison population would create the breathing space needed to tackle overcrowding, improve conditions and restore purposeful regimes.
- A properly resourced probation service could strengthen confidence in community supervision and reduce unnecessary reliance on custody.
- A more stable prison population would allow staff and leaders to focus on rehabilitation, safety and long-term improvement rather than constant crisis management.
- Investing in confident, skilled and well-supported staff is central to creating prisons that are safe, legitimate and purposeful.

Question 4

What are the main current and future risks relating to prison capacity in England and Wales?

The greatest long-term risk is the absence of a credible mechanism linking criminal justice policy to prison and probation capacity.

Successive governments have increased demand without ensuring that sufficient resources exist to deliver imprisonment safely and effectively.

The prison capacity crisis is not simply a shortage of prison places. It reflects a long-term failure to align sentencing policy, prison capacity and the resources required to provide safe, decent and effective conditions. The 2025 Independent Review of Prison Capacity found that chronic and acute pressures were driven by “irresistible pressure for more and longer prison sentences”, without sufficient regard to future demand.⁷

Demand continues to outstrip supply. Despite emergency measures and recent sentencing reforms, projections indicate that the prison population will continue to rise. There is considerable uncertainty about whether current reforms will be sufficient, particularly if the high levels of recall continue unabated.⁸

Future demand remains vulnerable to pressures elsewhere in the criminal justice system. Crime detection, prosecution rates, time to trial, and recall practice can all impact the prison population. The growth in the recall population is a particular concern, while the remand population is at a 50-year high. People held on remand are spending so long awaiting the conclusion of their trial that they leave custody immediately after sentencing, often without access to the interventions and support that might have reduced their risk of reoffending.

Political pressure. Governments may continue the trend of short-term decision making by responding to public concern through increasing sentence lengths, restricting release or creating new custodial offences. The last-minute introduction of exemptions to the Sentencing Act 2026 release reforms demonstrates how measures designed to reduce demand can be weakened when they are perceived as politically difficult.

The system's reliance on short-term measures to manage capacity. This has included the use of emergency release schemes, police cells, retaining ageing accommodation and the construction of temporary accommodation. The government's 10-year prison capacity strategy is welcome, but its

⁷ Owers, A. (2025). *Independent review of prison capacity*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-prison-capacity-review-final-report>

⁸ Nacro. (2026). *A proportionate recall system*. <https://www.nacro.org.uk/resource/a-proportionate-recall-system/>

success will depend on whether criminal justice policy becomes less reactive and more closely linked to realistic capacity planning.⁹

Transparency alone will not change decision-making. Annual prison capacity reporting is a welcome step, but it will have limited impact unless policymakers are required to consider the operational and financial consequences of decisions that increase demand. Without this, the system risks remaining trapped in a cycle of recurring capacity crises.

Capacity continues to be measured primarily by the number of people the estate can physically contain. Recent suggestions to increase security at category C and women's prisons, to make up for the capacity shortfall created by the new exclusions to release reforms are just the latest example of this approach.¹⁰ The test should not be how many people the estate can hold, but whether suitable places are available in the right settings, for the right people, and capable of delivering security, safety, decency, rehabilitation and resettlement.

Chronic overcrowding undermines the effective operation of prisons. Governors are forced to prioritise accommodation over safety, violence reduction, staff support and rehabilitation. Prisoners may be moved according to where space is available rather than where they can maintain family ties, access interventions or make progress through their sentence.

The condition and resilience of the estate present a further capacity risk. New prison places can be offset by accommodation lost through maintenance, refurbishment, fire safety requirements or the closure of ageing facilities. Operating with minimal spare capacity leaves the system vulnerable to sudden losses caused by disorder, fire, structural defects, flooding, extreme weather or health emergencies, as demonstrated by the recent experience of HMP Dartmoor.¹¹

⁹ Ministry of Justice. (2025). *10-year prison Capacity strategy*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/10-year-prison-capacity-strategy>

¹⁰ Syal, R. (2026, August 13). Category C and women's prisons could be upgraded to ease overcrowding. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2026/aug/13/category-c-and-womens-prisons-could-be-upgraded>

¹¹ Syal, R. (2026, January 12). 'Catastrophic' MoJ leasing of jail with toxic gas set to cost more than £100m. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2026/jan/07/catastrophic-moj-leasing-dartmoor-jail-toxic-gas-cost>

Question 5

What are the biggest opportunities to address these risks in the next five to 15 years, and ensure there is space to best accommodate the current and future projected prison population?

The greatest opportunity is to move from reactive capacity management to a system that balances demand against the state's ability to provide safe, decent and effective custody. Overcrowding has repeatedly been identified as a major obstacle to safety, decency and rehabilitation, yet governments have too often treated it as an operational problem rather than a strategic failure. Prison building alone cannot solve overcrowding. The next decade should bring a different approach: prison capacity managed against clear standards; criminal justice policy informed by its resource implications; stronger probation and community provision; and imprisonment reserved for cases where it is genuinely necessary. Without this shift, any additional capacity risks simply being absorbed by continuing growth in demand, leaving the system vulnerable to another cycle of overcrowding and emergency measures.

Criminal justice policy should be more closely linked to prison and probation capacity. Too often government reforms are developed in isolation, without adequate consideration of their cumulative operational impact. Legislation, sentencing reforms and other initiatives should be subject to rigorous assessment of their cumulative impact on prisons, probation and wider public services. We would urge the review to endorse the Independent Sentencing Review's recommendation for an independent advisory body to scrutinise the resource implications of policy and legislative change.

A clear statutory framework for prison capacity and overcrowding should be a priority. It should establish a target and timetable for eliminating overcrowding, supported by measurable milestones and a requirement for ministers to explain to Parliament when prison populations exceed agreed capacity thresholds. This would build on recommendations first made by Lord Woolf following the Strangeways disturbances and help ensure that sentencing and prison policy decisions take proper account of their consequences. The Sentencing Act 2026 requirement for annual capacity reporting is a welcome foundation, but reporting alone will not prevent future crises.

The recent drivers of population growth should be tackled through stronger probation and community services. Remand numbers remain historically high, including people subsequently acquitted, given non-custodial sentences or released after effectively serving their sentence before trial or sentencing. We are particularly concerned by the growth in recalls for administrative breaches of licence conditions. The government does not yet appear to have a clear understanding of what is driving this increase, or a coherent plan to respond to it. A comprehensive review of recall should therefore be undertaken. We also support the recommendation of the Independent Review of Prison Capacity for a 10-year strategy to restore capacity in probation and community services, ensuring that people can be

safely managed in the community without unnecessary reliance on recall or custody.

A long-term investment strategy for the prison estate. The National Audit Office's recommendations remain relevant: the government should define clear standards for prison accommodation, establish the capital investment needed to maintain them, integrate estate planning with workforce, rehabilitation and probation strategies, and assess how policy decisions affect future demand and operational capacity.

Question 6

What are the biggest changes that need to be made to the design, configuration and condition of the prison estate in the next five to 15 years to improve outcomes?

The greatest opportunity is to develop a coherent long-term estate strategy that aligns prison condition, capacity, location and function. Yet the history of prison building and closures suggests there has never been a coherent long-term estate strategy. Governments have repeatedly built when resources allowed and closed when they were constrained, leaving the system in near-permanent crisis management.

There is an opportunity to rethink the prison estate. Much of it is old, overcrowded and expensive to maintain. The Prison Estate Condition Survey Programme provides a clearer picture of its condition, but accommodation that has passed its structural and functional life cannot provide a sustainable foundation for modern security, safety and rehabilitation.

Victorian local prisons are particularly problematic. Many are among the most overcrowded and poorly performing establishments, including HMPs Birmingham, Liverpool, Exeter and Bristol. In 2023, the Chief Inspector suggested that 14 prisons—around 10% of the estate—should be closed.¹²

The future of the prison estate cannot be defined solely by newer buildings. A long-term strategy should combine the planned closure of prisons no longer fit for purpose with investment in safe, modern and well-maintained establishments. The goal should be to create a prison estate that supports progression and rehabilitation, maintains community ties and prepares people for release.

Prison should be treated primarily as a local service, and future estate planning should prioritise proximity to home and community services. Large, remote prison clusters can weaken family relationships and disrupt

¹² Syal, R. (2023, September 25). One in 10 prisons in England and Wales should be shut down, watchdog says. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/sep/25/one-in-10-prisons-in-england-and-wales-should-be-shut-down-watchdog-says>

access to accommodation, employment, healthcare and other support essential to rehabilitation and resettlement. Devolution presents opportunities for the closer integration and coordination of local services needed to support the rehabilitation and resettlement of prisoners. The review can learn from whole system approaches, such as that adopted in Greater Manchester. Recent changes to planning arrangements, including the designation of prisons as Nationally Important Crown Developments, provide an opportunity to modernise the estate while locating prisons closer to the communities and courts they serve. This is particularly important for women and communities currently poorly served by the existing prison estate.

The concept of the prison boundary should be reconsidered. Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) demonstrates that prisoners can safely access employment, education and services in the community while returning to custody. Around 998 in every 1,000 releases are completed without incident, yet ROTL use has fallen substantially since 2013 and is now concentrated largely in open prisons.¹³ Greater use of ROTL across the resettlement estate could transform rehabilitation, allowing more prisoners to maintain employment, access services and strengthen community links before release, while providing an incentive for positive behaviour in custody.

Access to open conditions should also be expanded where safely appropriate. Open prisons consistently perform well on a range of measures, while distinctions between categories B, C and open prisons have become increasingly blurred by capacity pressures.¹⁴ Government should examine whether more prisoners could benefit from earlier progression to open conditions earlier as part of structured preparation for release.

The principles of open prisons should not be confined to the open estate. Every closed prison outside the high-security estate should have a substantial resettlement unit, with greater responsibility, access to work and education, stronger links with employers and community services, and wider use of ROTL. This would create a more gradual transition from custody to the community and embed a stronger rehabilitative culture across the prison estate, while making better use of existing capacity.

¹³ Ministry of Justice (2025). Table 3.A.20 and 3.A.23, Releases: 2024 [Dataset]. In *Offender management statistics quarterly: October–December 2024*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/offender-management-statistics-quarterly>

¹⁴ Rowland, C., & Pope, T. (2025). *Inside England and Wales's prisons crisis*. Institute for Government. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-local/england-and-wales-prisons>

Question 7

What are the main current and future risks to prison security and the management of high-risk offenders in England and Wales?

Below we briefly summarise the main current and future risks to prison security:

- Drugs, illicit phones, corruption and organised crime remain major security risks.
- Demand for illicit technology and contraband continues to drive debt, violence and coercion inside prisons.
- Capacity pressures risk distracting leaders from security threats that require sustained attention.
- Overcrowded, unstable prisons make it harder to manage intelligence, build relationships and identify risk.
- Security is weakened when staffing is inexperienced, relationships are poor and daily regimes lack legitimacy.
- Future security risks will increasingly include drones, cyber threats and technologically enabled offending.

Question 8

What are the biggest opportunities in the next five to 15 years to address these risks and improve the security of the prison estate?

- Security should be strengthened through better intelligence, stronger staff-prisoner relationships and greater legitimacy, rather than relying primarily on physical controls.
- Reducing overcrowding would improve leaders' ability to manage security risks strategically.
- Investment in staff experience, training and confidence is essential to identifying and disrupting risks early.
- Technology should be used intelligently to detect contraband, disrupt drones and manage digital threats.
- Anti-corruption work must be properly resourced and embedded in prison culture.
- Security measures should be proportionate and should not unnecessarily undermine rehabilitation, decency, legitimacy or trust.

Question 9

What are the main current and future risks relating to the prison workforce in England and Wales?

The prison workforce faces four interconnected risks over the coming decade: recruitment and retention; loss of experience and professional capability; workforce wellbeing and organisational culture; and the erosion of relationship-based prison management. The key question is whether the prison service can develop the skilled, experienced workforce needed to run safe, decent and rehabilitative prisons.

Recruiting sufficient staff remains a major challenge. Frontline operational staff numbers fell by 26% between 2010 and 2017,¹⁵ and although they have since recovered somewhat, high turnover means they remain below pre-austerity levels.¹⁶ The prison service will need a sustainable pipeline of recruits to fill existing vacancies and safely staff new prison capacity,¹⁷ while the recent reliance on overseas recruitment may become less viable following changes to skilled worker visa arrangements.¹⁸

Poor retention and high turnover are contributing to a loss of institutional knowledge and professional capability. Nearly half (49%) of officers leaving the service in the last year had less than three years' experience, including 16% who left within their first year; three in ten serving prison officers also have less than three years' experience.¹⁹ This continual cycle of recruitment and departure limits the development of an experienced workforce. Pressure to recruit at scale has also created concerns about vetting and training. Only around one in five officers surveyed by the House of Commons Justice Committee rated their training as good or better, while a third rated it poor.²⁰ We frequently hear from prisoners that some new officers begin work with only a limited understanding of the realities of prison life,

¹⁵ Ministry of Justice. (2018). Table 3. *HM Prison and Probation Service workforce quarterly: September 2018* [Dataset]. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-statistics>

¹⁶ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *HM Prison & Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2026* [Dataset]. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-statistics> and previous editions.

¹⁷ Prison Service Pay Review Body. (2026). *Prison Service Pay Review Body: Twenty-Fifth Report on England and Wales 2026* (CP 1550). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/psprb-twenty-fifth-report-on-england-and-wales-2026>

¹⁸ Prison Service Pay Review Body. (2026). *Prison Service Pay Review Body: Twenty-Fifth Report on England and Wales 2026* (CP 1550). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/psprb-twenty-fifth-report-on-england-and-wales-2026>

¹⁹ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 4 and 13. *HM Prison & Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2026* [Dataset]. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-statistics>

²⁰ House of Commons Justice Committee. (2023). *Prison operational workforce survey: Survey results* (PRI 0066). <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/122073/default/>

leaving them ill-prepared for the demands of the role and making them vulnerable to leaving for opportunities elsewhere.

Workforce wellbeing is another significant risk. Staff have faced sustained pressure from violence, self-harm, disorder, overcrowding and staffing shortages. Frontline operational staff lose an average of 13.5 working days to sickness each year.²¹ The PSPRB found that mental ill health accounted for over a third (36.5%) of known sickness absence among band 3–5 officers.²²

Workplace culture is affecting morale and retention. Bullying, harassment and other unacceptable behaviours contribute to sickness absence and staff turnover.²³ The HMPPS Professional Standards Review identified significant weaknesses in the response to bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct and discrimination. Its recommendations need to be fully implemented.²⁴

The most fundamental risk is the erosion of relationship-based prison management. Prison officers are the people who most directly influence prisoners' experience of custody. Positive relationships underpin safety, legitimacy, sentence progression and rehabilitation. High turnover, limited experience and sustained operational pressure have weakened these relationships.

Increasing centralisation of decision-making risks weakening local leadership and limiting governors' ability to shape workforce, culture and operations. Governors should be accountable for outcomes, but must also have sufficient authority and resources to influence them.

Question 10

What are the biggest opportunities in the next five to 15 years to address these risks and improve outcomes for staff and the wider prison system?

The greatest opportunity is to build a professional, stable and supported workforce that attracts talented people, enables them to develop long-term careers, and equips them to deliver safe, decent and rehabilitative

²¹ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 19. *HM Prison & Probation Service workforce quarterly: March 2026* [Dataset]. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/hm-prison-probation-service-workforce-statistics>

²² Prison Service Pay Review Body. (2026). *Prison Service Pay Review Body: Twenty-Fifth Report on England and Wales 2026* (CP 1550). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/psprb-twenty-fifth-report-on-england-and-wales-2026>

²³ Prison Service Pay Review Body. (2026). *Prison Service Pay Review Body: Twenty-Fifth Report on England and Wales 2026* (CP 1550). <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/psprb-twenty-fifth-report-on-england-and-wales-2026>

²⁴ Rademaker, J. (2025). *HMPPS Professional Standards Review*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hmpps-professional-standards-review>

prisons. Achieving this requires a shift away from measuring success primarily by staff numbers. Retention and development must become as important as recruitment, supported by high-quality training, improved wellbeing, stronger professional standards and effective local leadership.

The quality of the prison workforce ultimately determines the quality of prison life. Skilled officers who understand their role, exercise professional judgement, treat people with dignity and support them through custody can mitigate some of the harmful effects of poor conditions and operational pressures. A sustainable workforce strategy must therefore place relationships, experience, professional capability and staff wellbeing at the heart of prison reform.

Professionalisation should be a central part of this approach. The Prison Reform Trust's report *Potential Unlocked* proposes professional registration for prison officers, similar to arrangements in nursing and other public services, supported by continuing professional development.²⁵ This would recognise prison officers as skilled professionals and promote consistent standards across the service.

Training and supervision also need significant improvement. Initial training is too brief for such a complex role, while operational pressures can prevent continuing development. Officers need structured learning throughout their careers, supported by effective supervision. A maximum ratio of one manager to ten officers could enable more regular observation, coaching and support.

The service should learn from successful approaches to staff development. Although the Unlocked Graduates programme is being wound down, elements of its model—including mentoring by experienced officers, dedicated learning time, development projects and placements—could be adopted more widely. Experienced prisoners can also contribute to induction by explaining the realities of prison life and the importance of fairness, communication and respect. This should complement professional training while helping new officers understand the environment and build positive relationships.

Investment in prison leadership is equally important. Governors and deputy governors shape the culture in which staff and prisoners live and work. Excessive centralisation of decision-making, recruitment, commissioning and financial controls has sometimes reduced local discretion and weakened leaders' ability to respond to the needs of individual establishments.

The Prison Reform Trust's Next Gen project demonstrates the value of investing in future leaders. Led by our CEO and former governor Pia Sinha, it brings together senior prison staff, primarily deputy governors, to develop

²⁵ Dawson, P. (2024). *Potential Unlocked: Building a sustainable prison workforce*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/potential-unlocked-building-a-sustainable-prison-workforce/>

practical, prisoner-focused improvement projects. By combining peer learning, engagement with lived experience and partnerships with voluntary-sector organisations, the project strengthens both individual leaders and the wider leadership culture of the prison service.

Together, professional staff and strong local leadership provide the foundations for wider prison reform. Properly trained, supported and valued officers can build the relationships that keep prisons safe and purposeful, while trusted and empowered governors can create positive institutional cultures in which staff develop and remain.

Question 11

What are the main current and future risks relating to safety and decency in prisons in England and Wales?

The greatest concern is not a lack of understanding about what undermines safety and decency, but a failure to respond consistently to the evidence. Independent scrutiny bodies have repeatedly identified the same underlying problems, yet many remain unresolved. These failures are most clearly visible in overcrowding and poor physical conditions, restricted and unpredictable regimes, rising violence and challenges to legitimacy, and failures to identify, protect and support vulnerable prisoners.

Overcrowding and poor physical conditions remain the most significant risks. Chronic overcrowding places pressure on every aspect of prison life. Recent analysis by the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody found evidence of a relationship between overcrowding, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths.²⁶ Overcrowding also reduces access to activities, increases frustration and conflict, and makes it harder for staff to identify and respond to emerging risks.

Restricted and unpredictable regimes continue to undermine safety, wellbeing and rehabilitation. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) continues to find prisoners spending excessive periods locked in cells, with insufficient access to education, work, training and rehabilitation. Staffing shortages and overcrowding frequently result in cancelled activities and restricted movement. Boredom, frustration, substance misuse, debt and loss of hope all contribute to violence, self-harm and disorder.

Violence against staff continues to present a significant risk. Assaults on prison staff have risen substantially over the past decade and remain at

²⁶ Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody. (2025). *Prison overcrowding and deaths in England and Wales: Findings from a predictive analysis and modelling study*. <https://iapdeathsincustody.independent.gov.uk/document/prison-overcrowding-and-deaths-in-england-and-wales-findings-from-a-predictive-analysis-and-modelling-study/>

historically high levels.²⁷ A failure to address the causes of violence, rather than simply its consequences, risks further deterioration. Research consistently shows that safety depends not only on physical security but also on legitimacy, trust and procedural fairness. Where complaints systems are ineffective, communication breaks down, or authority is perceived as unfair or disproportionate, frustration and conflict can escalate.²⁸ Continuing concerns about complaints handling,²⁹ together with ongoing scrutiny of the use of force,³⁰ including the expansion of PAVA spray and Tasers in some prisons, underline the importance of ensuring that authority is exercised proportionately, transparently and fairly.

The most acute risk concerns the prison system's ability to identify, protect and support vulnerable prisoners. Violence, self-harm and self-inflicted deaths remain unacceptably high. PPO investigations repeatedly identify poor information sharing, inadequate risk assessment, failures to respond to warning signs, weaknesses in segregation and insufficient support for people experiencing mental distress.

Prisons are also increasingly accommodating people with complex mental health needs despite longstanding difficulties securing timely transfers to appropriate therapeutic settings. HMIP has found serious delays in transferring mentally unwell prisoners to hospital, with subsequent inspections indicating further deterioration. Prisons cannot substitute for specialist mental health services. They are not hospitals and cannot provide the specialist treatment required by people experiencing acute mental distress.

Despite an extensive framework of inspection, monitoring and accountability, warnings about deteriorating conditions have too often failed to produce meaningful change. HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Independent Monitoring Boards, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman and other oversight bodies have repeatedly highlighted concerns relating to overcrowding, regimes, safety and vulnerability. Effective scrutiny must be matched by action. A safe and decent prison system requires ministers and prison leaders to respond to evidence before systemic problems become crises.

²⁷ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Assaults in prison custody 2000 to 2025 [Dataset]. In *Safety in custody: quarterly update to March 2026*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2026>

²⁸ Edgar, K. (2018). *Ensuring a safe environment: A conflict centred strategy*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/ensuring-a-safe-environment-a-conflict-centred-strategy/>

²⁹ Prisons and Probation Ombudsman. (2026). *Annual Report 2025 to 2026*. https://ppo.gov.uk/corporate_document/annual-report-2025-to-2026/

³⁰ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2025). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual Report 2024-25*. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/annual-report-2024-25/

Question 12

What are the biggest opportunities in the next five to 15 years to address these risks and improve prison safety and decency?

The greatest opportunity is to recognise that safety and decency are foundations of rehabilitation, not alternatives to it. Well-run prisons are not simply free from violence and disorder; they are places where people experience fairness, legitimacy, purposeful activity and constructive relationships. The aim should be to create environments that actively promote safety, wellbeing and personal responsibility.

Relationships between staff and prisoners are central to safety and decency. Prison officers have the greatest influence over prisoners' daily experience. Their professionalism, values and attitudes determine whether concerns are heard, conflict is resolved constructively and prisoners are encouraged to take responsibility for their futures. Measures which address physical security alone are insufficient. Safe and decent prisons depend on trust, legitimacy and procedural fairness as well as physical security. Investing in the professionalisation, training and retention of officers is therefore one of the most significant opportunities to improve safety and decency.

Predictable and purposeful regimes are equally important. The reduction in some recorded incidents during periods of extreme confinement should not be taken as evidence that keeping people locked behind their doors makes prisons safer. Prior to the workforce reductions and instability of the past decade, the prison system recognised that safety and rehabilitation depended on activity, engagement and supervision rather than isolation. Boredom, poor relationships, unreliable processes and a lack of hope all contribute to violence, self-harm and disorder. These problems are not solved by locking people up for longer. Prisons should instead maximise time out of cell, access to education, work and rehabilitation, and meaningful interaction between staff and prisoners.

Rehabilitative culture should be embedded consistently across the estate. The prison service's own work demonstrates how safety, decency and rehabilitation reinforce one another.³¹ In the best prisons, staff and prisoners work together to create communities based on respect, legitimacy, safety and opportunity. Such cultures are created through thousands of daily interactions and decisions, supported by clear values, professional discretion and a sense of moral purpose.

A further opportunity is to strengthen accountability through clear minimum standards. More than three decades after the Woolf Report recommended a code of minimum standards, there is still no statutory definition of the basic conditions every prison should provide. HM Inspectorate

³¹ Mann, R., Fitzalan Howard, F., & Tew, J. (2018). *What is a rehabilitative prison culture?* Prison Service Journal, 235, 3–9.

<https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/PSJ%20235%2C%20Rehabilitative%20prison%20culture.pdf>

of Prisons' Expectations provide the closest existing framework. Government should build on this by defining clear minimum standards and ensuring prisons have the resources and accountability needed to meet them. This should include standards for safety, decency, time out of cell, purposeful activity, healthcare, relationships and access to rehabilitation. Standards should be measurable and linked to meaningful accountability when they are not met.

No prison can be genuinely rehabilitative unless it is first safe and decent. Over the next 15 years, safety, decency, legitimacy and rehabilitation should therefore be treated not as competing objectives, but as mutually reinforcing requirements of an effective prison system. The challenge is to move beyond managing failure towards preventing it, by reducing overcrowding, providing predictable and purposeful regimes, investing in staff-prisoner relationships and ensuring timely support for vulnerable people.

Question 13

What are the main current and future risks which might prevent prisons from effectively rehabilitating prisoners and reducing reoffending?

The greatest risk is that prisons become increasingly focused on containment rather than progression. Rehabilitation requires safe environments, purposeful activity, stable relationships, opportunities for personal development and effective preparation for release. Current pressures undermine each of these foundations.

Overcrowding remains the most significant risk. The prison system has been overcrowded in every year since 1994.³² In 2024–25, 72% of prisons were overcrowded, with more than 21,600 people—around a quarter of the prison population—held in overcrowded accommodation.³³ The impact of overcrowding extends well beyond physical conditions. It restricts access to education, work, offending behaviour programmes and progression opportunities, while increasing pressure on staff and governors. Prisoners are increasingly held where space is available rather than where they can access the interventions and support needed to prepare for release.

³² Home Office (1999). Digest 4: Information on the criminal justice system in England and Wales. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20011217142406/http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk:80/rds/digest41.html>; and

Ministry of Justice. (2025). Table 2.2, Chapter 2 tables: Prison crowding [Dataset]. In *HMPPS Annual digest: April 2024 to March 2025*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hmpps-annual-digest-april-2024-to-march-2025>

³³ Ministry of Justice. (2025). Table 2.2 and 2.3, Chapter 2 tables: Prison crowding [Dataset]. In *HMPPS Annual digest: April 2024 to March 2025*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hmpps-annual-digest-april-2024-to-march-2025>

Restricted regimes and limited access to purposeful activity present a second major risk. HM Inspectorate of Prisons continues to find prisoners spending excessive periods locked in cells, while access to education, training and work remains poor across much of the estate.³⁴ When staffing shortages and operational pressures lead to activities being cancelled or curtailed, prisoners lose opportunities to develop skills, address offending-related needs and establish constructive routines.

Poor sentence progression presents a further risk, particularly for people serving long and indeterminate sentences. Our *'Making progress?'* found that many prisoners experience years of "nothing time", unable to access the interventions needed to reduce risk, demonstrate progress or move through the prison estate.³⁵ Capacity pressures make it harder to transfer people to establishments appropriate to their stage of sentence, creating frustration, hopelessness and a loss of confidence in the legitimacy of the system.

Workforce pressures directly undermine rehabilitation. Staff shortages, high turnover and reduced experience weaken the ability of officers to support, motivate and challenge prisoners. Violence, self-harm, substance misuse and other safety problems further reduce the capacity of prisons to provide consistent rehabilitative environments.

Imprisonment can also weaken the protective factors that reduce reoffending. Family relationships, employment, housing and community ties are often disrupted by custody, despite being among the most important foundations for successful resettlement on release. Unless prisons actively support people to maintain these connections throughout their sentence and prepare for release, there is a risk that custody deepens rather than addresses the factors associated with future offending.

Question 14

What specific activities and interventions in prison would be most effective in supporting prisoner rehabilitation and reducing reoffending?

For almost everyone, imprisonment is a temporary interruption to life in the community. The most effective rehabilitation therefore helps people maintain and strengthen the relationships, responsibilities and opportunities that support a law-abiding life after release. Prison should not unnecessarily sever family, employment and community ties, but should help people return safely to them.

³⁴ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2026). *HM Chief Inspector of Prisons: Annual Report 2025-26*. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/annual-report-2025-26/

³⁵ Jarman, B., & Vince, C. (2022). *Making progress?: What progression means for people serving the longest sentences*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/making-progress/>

The first priority is purposeful use of time in custody. There is no single regime suitable for everyone. Provision should reflect individual needs, sentence status, sentence stage and sentence plans. Yet prisoners repeatedly describe years of “nothing time”, unable to access interventions, progress through their sentence or demonstrate reduced risk.³⁶ This is particularly acute for people serving long and indeterminate sentences.

Prisons should provide meaningful opportunities for responsibility, trust and progression. Research on desistance highlights the importance of motivation³⁷, trust³⁸ and positive relationships³⁹. Prisoners should be encouraged to take responsibility, contribute to prison communities and prepare for life beyond custody.

Active citizenship should be central to this approach. Peer support, mentoring and programmes such as the Listener scheme demonstrate the value of prisoners’ skills and experience. Such opportunities foster agency, responsibility and personal investment, which are important to successful desistance.⁴⁰

Progression regimes, open conditions and Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) should be used much more ambitiously. ROTL enables prisoners to rebuild family relationships, access employment and reconnect with their communities while still in custody. Its use remains well below historic levels and is concentrated largely in open prisons. Existing Category C progression regimes could provide a basis for extending these opportunities.

Education and employment are essential but should form part of broader preparation for citizenship. The New Futures Network and Employment Advisory Boards have helped improve employment outcomes, but their potential depends on prisoners being able to access education, training and work consistently. HMIP has found that many prisoners remain

³⁶ Jarman, B., & Vince, C. (2022). *Making progress?: What progression means for people serving the longest sentences*. Prison Reform Trust.
<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/making-progress/>

³⁷ Villman, E. (2021). Work, support and solitude: prisoners’ desistance expectations and self-regulating strategies. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 60(2), 95–116.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2020.1863299>

³⁸ Ugelvik, T. (2021). The Transformative Power of Trust: Exploring tertiary desistance in reinventive prisons. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(3), 623–638.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab076>

³⁹ HM Inspectorate of Probation. (2020). *Desistance – general practice principles*.
<https://hmiprobation.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/our-research/evidence-base-probation-service/models-and-principles/desistance-general-practice-principles/>

⁴⁰ Edgar, K., Jacobson, J., & Biggar, K. (2012). *Time Well Spent: A practical guide to active citizenship and volunteering in prison*. Prison Reform Trust.
<https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/time-well-spent/>

locked in cells for most of the day, severely limiting participation in purposeful activity.⁴¹

A properly funded minimum regime is therefore needed, with clear expectations about time out of cell, education, training, work and rehabilitation. Targets alone are insufficient unless prisons have the staffing and resources to deliver them.⁴²

Family relationships should be treated as a core rehabilitative and safety intervention. Strong family ties support desistance and resettlement, while contact through visits and telephone calls can reduce isolation, despair, self-harm and reoffending. We are concerned that new powers to restrict social and family visits could create further barriers to maintaining these relationships.⁴³ Telephone contact also remains unnecessarily expensive. As the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman has highlighted, prisoners pay per minute in a way that few people now do in the community, despite the marginal cost of calls being negligible.⁴⁴ High charges risk undermining Article 8 family-life rights, transferring financial pressure and debt to families, and fuelling coercion and demand for illicit phones in prisons. Affordable, reliable telephone access should complement visits, not become another barrier to family contact.

Preparation for release should begin at the start of the sentence. Stable accommodation, employment, education, healthcare and family support are all associated with lower rates of reoffending. Resettlement planning should therefore be a continuous process rather than a last-minute intervention. Digital tools, including in-cell technology, offer a significant opportunity to support this transition by helping people maintain the skills necessary for an increasingly digital society.

The central principle should be that prison prepares people for release from the moment they enter custody. Progression should become the organising principle of imprisonment. People should be held in conditions and establishments appropriate to their risks and needs, have consistent access to purposeful activity and rehabilitation, and be supported to build the relationships, skills and stability required for a successful return to the community. Without this shift, there is a risk that imprisonment simply contains people rather than reducing the likelihood that they will offend again.

⁴¹ HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. (2024). *Purposeful prisons: time out of cell*. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. https://hmiprison.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/purposeful-prisons-time-out-of-cell

⁴² *Revealed: The prisons keeping children locked in their cells for hours on end*. (2025, April 7). The Howard League. <https://howardleague.org/news/revealed-the-prisons-keeping-children-locked-in-their-cells-for-hours-on-end/>

⁴³ The Prison (Governor's and Adjudicators' Punishments) (Amendment) Rules 2026

⁴⁴ Usher, A. (2024, August 5). Connections. *Prisons and Probation Ombudsman*. <https://ppo.gov.uk/news/connections-by-ombudsman-adrian-usher/>

Question 15

What are the biggest risks facing women's prisons within the English and Welsh justice system, including risks that may affect outcomes for women during custody and following release?

A principal risk facing the women's estate is that prisons are increasingly required to respond to failures elsewhere in public services, particularly mental health and housing. Women represent around 4% of the prison population but often present with some of the most complex and acute needs in the criminal justice system. The challenge is to meet these needs while maintaining safe, decent custody and preparing women for release.

High levels of remand remain a significant concern. Almost a quarter (23%) of women in prison are held on remand.⁴⁵ In 2024, more than two-thirds (68%) of women remanded and tried by the magistrates' court didn't receive a custodial sentence. In the Crown Court this figure was almost half (45%).⁴⁶ Even short periods in custody can lead to loss of accommodation or employment, disruption to treatment and support, and reduced contact with children. High levels of churn also limit opportunities for assessment, intervention and resettlement planning.

Women's prisons are increasingly managing women with severe mental ill health and trauma-related needs. Women accounted for 28% of all self-harm incidents in 2025 despite comprising only 4% of the prison population.⁴⁷ This concentration of need places significant pressure on staff, healthcare and safeguarding services.⁴⁸ The Mental Health Act 2025 provides for prison to cease being a place of safety, removes 'remand for own protection' based solely on mental health grounds, and aims to improve transfers to hospital. However, these provisions are not yet in force. Their effectiveness will ultimately depend on sufficient healthcare capacity, including appropriate hospital beds.

Violence is a growing concern in the women's estate. Both the rate and number of assaults in women's prisons reached record highs in the year to

⁴⁵ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 1.Q.1. Prison population: 30 June 2026 [Dataset]. In *Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/offender-management-statistics-quarterly>

⁴⁶ Ministry of Justice (2025). Remands data tool [Dataset]. In *Criminal justice system statistics quarterly: update to December 2024*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/criminal-justice-statistics-quarterly>

⁴⁷ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 2.1. Self-harm in prison custody 2004 to 2025 [Dataset]. In *Safety in custody: quarterly update to March 2026*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/safety-in-custody-statistics>

⁴⁸ HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2025). *Time to care: what helps women cope in prison?* https://hmiiprisoninspectorates.gov.uk/hmiipris_reports/time-to-care-what-helps-women-cope-in-prison/

March 2026.⁴⁹ Increasingly complex needs, combined with restricted regimes, specialist staff shortages and workforce pressures, may be contributing to rising violence. Physical intervention must therefore be proportionate, trauma-informed and focused on de-escalation, particularly given women experience higher rates of force than men.⁵⁰ The revised HMPPS Use of Force Training Curriculum is welcome, but its impact will depend on effective implementation and continuing staff development.

The small size and geographical distribution of the women's estate create distinct operational and rehabilitative risks. While this allows some specialist services to be concentrated, the limited number and geographical distribution mean many women are held a considerable distance from home and loved ones.⁵¹ This can undermine wellbeing and weaken relationships that are crucial to successful resettlement. The limited number of prisons can also restrict progression and access to specialist interventions, creating a choice between proximity to family and access to appropriate support.

Too many women leave prison without the foundations needed for a stable life. In the year to March 2026, only 37% were released to settled accommodation.⁵² For women with multiple needs, effective through-the-gate support is essential. Repeated assessments, interrupted treatment, delays in benefits and housing uncertainty can undermine progress made in custody.

The growth in recalls is another concern. Women were recalled to prison on 4,318 occasions in the year to March 2026, 37% more than the previous year.⁵³ Only 15% of recalls involved a further charge, compared with 22% for men.⁵⁴ This risks unnecessarily returning women to custody, disrupting progress in the community and increasing pressure on the women's prison estate.

⁴⁹ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Safety in custody quarterly bulletin: March 2026*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/safety-in-custody-statistics>

⁵⁰ Watkinson, C., Bosworth, G., Thorpe, G., & Noble, S. (2026). An early review of HMPPS' revised Use of Force training curriculum. Ministry of Justice.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/an-early-review-of-hmpps-revised-use-of-force-training-curriculum>

⁵¹ Lord Farmer. (2019). *The importance of strengthening female offenders' family and other relationships to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. Ministry of Justice.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/farmer-review-for-women>

⁵² Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 4. Housed on release from custody data tables - England and Wales [Dataset]. In *Offender accommodation outcomes, update to March 2026*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/offender-accommodation-outcome-statistics>

⁵³ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 5.Q.2. Prison recalls: January to March 2026 [Dataset]. In *Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026*. And previous editions.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/offender-management-statistics-quarterly>

⁵⁴ Ministry of Justice. (2026). Table 5.Q.10. Prison recalls: January to March 2026 [Dataset]. In *Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026*. And previous editions.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/offender-management-statistics-quarterly>

Question 16

What changes to the custodial estate and targeted interventions would have the greatest impact on improving outcomes for women over the next five to 15 years?

The greatest opportunity to improve outcomes for women lies in implementing the recommendations of the Women's Justice Board and maintaining the long-term ambition to substantially reduce the number of women in prison. The board's recommendations should provide a the foundation for reform.⁵⁵ Many factors associated with women's offending are better addressed through health, social care and community-based interventions than imprisonment. A smaller prison population would improve outcomes for women diverted from custody and enable safer, more tailored, therapeutic and rehabilitative regimes for those who remain in prison.

Recent sentencing reforms create an opportunity to support this objective. The Sentencing Act 2026 presumption to suspend short prison sentences of 12 months or less is likely to have a disproportionately positive impact on women, who are more likely than men to receive short custodial sentences. In the year to March 2026, 80% of custodial sentences given to women were for 12 months or less.⁵⁶ Success will, however, depend on sufficient investment in probation and community services to support a more community-based system.

Women's centres are central to this approach. They can support diversion, bail, community sentences, probation supervision and resettlement through coordinated, "one stop shop" services. Provision should be consistent and supported by stable, long-term funding.⁵⁷

A substantially smaller women's prison population would create an opportunity to reshape the custodial estate. This could include smaller, community-connected forms of custody, such as Scotland's Community Custody Units⁵⁸ and Hope Street⁵⁹, which offer useful examples of alternatives to traditional prison environments.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Independent report: Women's Justice Board recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/womens-justice-board-report/womens-justice-board-recommendations-for-reducing-womens-imprisonment>

⁵⁶ Ministry of Justice. (2026c). Outcomes by Offence data tool: March 2026 [Dataset]. In *Criminal Justice Statistics Quarterly: March 2026*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/criminal-justice-statistics-quarterly>

⁵⁷ See Evison, E. & Talbot, J. (2026). *Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/resetting-the-approach-to-womens-imprisonment-a-case-for-change-evidence-barriers-and-solutions/>

⁵⁸ See Scottish Prison Service. (n.d.). *Lilias Centre*. <https://www.sps.gov.uk/prisons/lilias-centre> and Scottish Prison Service. (n.d.). *Bella Centre*. <https://www.sps.gov.uk/prisons/bella-centre>

⁵⁹ One Small Thing. (n.d.). *Hope Street*. <https://onesmallthing.org.uk/hopestreet>

Reform of the estate must follow successful reductions in imprisonment, not precede them. Proposals to close, repurpose or re-roll women's prisons in response to capacity pressures must consider their impact on women already held in a small and geographically dispersed estate. Any reduction in custodial provision should be accompanied by sufficient community capacity to support more women safely outside prison.

Targeted interventions that bridge custody and the community should be expanded. Promising examples include the specialist remand hub at HMP Eastwood Park, prison-based social workers at HMPs Eastwood Park and Send,⁶⁰ and the Lancashire Women's Centre recall project at HMP Styal.

Together, these reforms would help create a system that is more responsive to women's needs and less reliant on imprisonment. Stronger community provision, targeted support and a smaller prison population can work together to improve outcomes for women, reduce reoffending and ease pressure on the women's estate.

Question 17

Which cohorts of prisoners have specific needs and vulnerabilities in prison?

A one-size-fits-all prison system cannot meet the needs of its diverse population. All groups with protected characteristics should be provided with a regime that meets their distinct needs. We highlight the following cohorts as requiring particular attention:

- **Disabled prisoners,⁶¹ older prisoners,⁶² young adult prisoners,⁶³ neurodivergent prisoners⁶⁴ and prisoners with care experience⁶⁵** have distinct needs that prisons are often poorly equipped to meet.

⁶⁰ Rees, A., Waits, C. & Bezecky, Z. (2024). *'Together a Chance': Evaluation of the Social Worker for Mothers in Prison pilot project, 2021-2023, Final Report*. Cardiff University. p.9. <https://cascadewales.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/03/TaC-evaluation-FINAL-REPORT-31-January-2024.pdf>

⁶¹ Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.69 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

⁶² Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.46 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

⁶³ Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.60 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

⁶⁴ Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.48 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

⁶⁵ Ministry of Justice. (2026). *Supporting prisoners with care experience policy framework*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-prisoners-with-care-experience-policy-framework>

- **People serving very long or indeterminate sentences** face risks of isolation, hopelessness and lack of progression.⁶⁶
- **Remand prisoners** are often held in overcrowded reception prisons with limited access to support, assessment and preparation for release.⁶⁷
- **Foreign national prisoners** may face additional barriers around language, immigration status, family contact and resettlement.⁶⁸
- **People with mental ill health** require timely access to treatment and, where necessary, transfer to hospital.⁶⁹

Question 18

What are the biggest changes that are needed to address the needs of different cohorts in order to improve outcomes for the prison system?

We highlight the following changes needed to improve outcomes for the cohorts above:

- The prison estate should be modernised to meet the needs of older, disabled and otherwise vulnerable prisoners.
- Accommodation should be suitable for people with mobility, health and social care needs.
- Staff should be trained and supported to work in trauma-informed, procedurally fair and person-centred ways.
- People with acute mental ill health should receive appropriate healthcare rather than imprisonment. Prisons must not be used as a substitute for hospitals or specialist care.
- The 28-day target for mental health transfers should be implemented in practice.
- Better screening, assessment and individual planning are needed from reception onwards.
- Support should be tailored to individual needs rather than the operational convenience of the prison system.

⁶⁶ Edgar, K., Vince, C., & O'Brien, R. (2025). *A Measure of Hope?: How purpose, meaning and fulfilment can ease the harms of long-term imprisonment*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/a-measure-of-hope-how-purpose-meaning-and-fulfilment-can-ease-the-harms-of-long-term-imprisonment/>

⁶⁷ Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.20 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

⁶⁸ Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.50 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

⁶⁹ Prison Reform Trust. (2026a). *Bromley briefings Prison FactFile: February 2026*. p.67 <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2026/>

Question 19

What further role should technology and digital tools play over the next five to 15 years in helping to address the risks highlighted in this Call for Evidence and improve prison outcomes?

Used appropriately, digital tools and technology have the potential to significantly improve outcomes for prisoners. PRT's 2025 report *Update and Restart*⁷⁰ highlights how digital tools such as in-cell telephony, video calls, and self-service kiosks have already positively transformed prison life. These innovations have strengthened family ties, improved access to education, and supported mental wellbeing, helping prisoners maintain autonomy and prepare for life in the community.

The greatest remaining challenge is the "digital wall" between prison and community. Prisoners are denied access to many of the digital tools needed to plan for release, including employment, housing and welfare services that are now primarily accessed online. As a result, they are often dependent on staff to complete tasks that they will be expected to manage independently on release. In some cases, this is appropriate. However, it places a significant burden on staff, and risks leaving people ill-equipped for a society in which communication, employment, banking, housing and public services increasingly depend on digital access.

To address these gaps, the report outlines several recommendations:

- **Continued investment in digital infrastructure in prisons:** The Ministry of Justice should ensure that the pace of digital transformation in prisons is sustained, with investment to embed infrastructure for current ambitions and future resiliency.
- **Digitising resettlement services:** A pilot should be established in resettlement prisons to provide prisoners nearing release with secure internet access to arrange housing, jobs, ID, and banking.
- **Piloting internet access in open prisons:** Controlled trials of restricted internet access should be established for risk-assessed prisoners to support rehabilitation and resettlement.
- **Upskilling staff and prisoners:** Training frameworks to build digital literacy and confidence should be developed to ensure that existing technology is fully utilised.
- **Global collaboration:** An international Managing Digital Risk forum should be established to share best practices to safely widen access to technology in prisons to more closely mirror life outside.

⁷⁰ Prison Reform Trust. (2025). *Update and Restart: Post-pandemic prison digitisation in England and Wales*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/update-and-restart/>

Question 20

Are there any further examples of best practice in prisons in England and Wales that the review should consider?

- The review should consider examples of practice that strengthen relationships, responsibility and rehabilitation.⁷¹
- Butler Trust and other staff-led innovation awards may provide useful examples of practical improvement.⁷²
- Peer support, mentoring, active citizenship and prisoner-led initiatives should be examined.⁷³
- Good practice should be judged not only by innovation, but by whether it improves safety, dignity, legitimacy and outcomes.
- The review should pay attention to what works in ordinary prisons, not only specialist pilots or exceptional establishments.

Question 21

Are there any further examples of best practice in Northern Ireland, Scotland and overseas that should be applied in England and Wales?

- The review should consider international models that place dignity, normalisation and reintegration at the centre of custody.
- Approaches from smaller prison systems may offer lessons on local accountability, relationships and community connection.
- Any international learning should be adapted carefully to the context of England and Wales.
- The key test should be whether practice improves safety, legitimacy, rehabilitation and public protection.
- Comparative examples should be used to challenge assumptions about what prisons can and should be.

The following examples are not intended as models to be replicated wholesale, but illustrate approaches to imprisonment, progression and community integration from which lessons may be drawn.

⁷¹ Ellis, S., & Kersting, F. (2026). *Next Generation Leaders: The case for reform through prison leadership*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/next-generation-leaders-the-case-for-reform-through-prison-leadership/>

⁷² Shepherd, S. (2019). *The Good Book of Prisons*. The Butler Trust. <https://www.goodbookofprisons.com/the-book/>

⁷³ Prison Reform Trust. (2022). *Prisoners reforming prisons: Active citizens panels' suggestions for improving their prison*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/prisoners-reforming-prisons/>

Scotland's presumption against short sentences demonstrates how sentencing policy can support community-based responses to offending. Originally introduced in 2011 for sentences of three months or less⁷⁴ and extended in 2019 to cover sentences of 12 months or less⁷⁵, the Scottish Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission has now recommended the presumption be further extended to two years. The commission argued that extending the presumption further would support more consistent decision-making and reduce reliance on short custodial sentences.⁷⁶

Scotland's Community Custody Units illustrate the potential of smaller, community-facing forms of custody. Scotland's CCUs, the Bella and Lillas units (see answer to question 16 above) opened in 2022 are small, community-facing custodial settings for women. An early inspection from HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland was broadly positive.⁷⁷ Early research suggests that women particularly valued the privacy, respectful support and access to health and social care available within the units. However, the research cautioned about avoiding 'mini-prison' practices.⁷⁸

Murray House at Hydebank Wood provides an example of transitional accommodation that bridges custody and the community. It is a facility placed outside the prison walls to support long-sentenced women prepare for release from prison. Women are able to reside in Murray House and work in the community on temporary release to ease their transition back into the community. Murray House demonstrates the potential of community-based transitional accommodation to support progression and reintegration. However, the latest inspection found the provision to be significantly underutilised, suggesting there are lessons both in its design and in how access to such facilities is managed.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010.
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2010/13/contents>

⁷⁵ Presumption Against Short Periods of Imprisonment (Scotland) Order 2019.
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/sdsi/2019/9780111042175>

⁷⁶ The Scottish Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission. (2026). *Justice That Works: Report of the Scottish Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission*. Scottish Government.
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/justice-works-report-scottish-sentencing-penal-policy-commission/>

⁷⁷ HM Inspectorate of Prisons Scotland. (2024). Inspection of HMP & YOI Stirling and the Lillas and Bella Community Custody Units. HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland.
<https://prisonsinspectoratescotland.gov.uk/publications/report-full-inspection-hmp-yoi-stirling>

⁷⁸ The Scottish Centre for Crime & Justice Research. (2025, December 17). *Scotland's Community Custody Units for women praised but researchers warn reform needed to stop them being 'mini prisons'*. https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/news_item/scotlands-ccu-review/

⁷⁹ Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Hydebank Wood Women's Prison*. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-of-hydebank-wood-womens-prison/>

Question 22

What, if any, additional evidence should the review consider?

- The review should give significant weight to the lived experience of prisoners, families, victims and frontline staff.
- Evidence from independent scrutiny bodies, including HMIP, IMBs, the PPO and the National Preventive Mechanism, should be central.
- The review should consider PRT research on sentencing,⁸⁰ progression,⁸¹ active citizenship,⁸² digital access,⁸³ women's imprisonment⁸⁴ and workforce reform.⁸⁵
- Data on remand, recall, overcrowding, self-harm, deaths, accommodation on release and staff turnover should be considered together rather than in isolation.
- The review should assess not only what the prison system is asked to do, but whether it is properly resourced and configured to do it safely, decently and effectively. It should also consider how decisions taken elsewhere in the criminal justice system affect prisons, probation and outcomes on release.

⁸⁰ Prison Reform Trust. (2025). *Prison Reform Trust response to the Independent Sentencing Review 2024 to 2025*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/consultationresponse/independent-sentencing-review-2024-to-2025/>

⁸¹ Jarman, B., & Vince, C. (2022). *Making progress?: What progression means for people serving the longest sentences*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/making-progress/>

⁸² Prison Reform Trust. (2022). *Prisoners reforming prisons: Active citizens panels' suggestions for improving their prison*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/prisoners-reforming-prisons/>

⁸³ Prison Reform Trust. (2025b). *Update and Restart: Post-pandemic prison digitisation in England and Wales*. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/update-and-restart/>

⁸⁴ Evison, E. & Talbot, J. (2026). *Resetting the approach to women's imprisonment*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/resetting-the-approach-to-womens-imprisonment-a-case-for-change-evidence-barriers-and-solutions/>

⁸⁵ Dawson, P. (2024). *Potential Unlocked: Building a sustainable prison workforce*. Prison Reform Trust. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/potential-unlocked-building-a-sustainable-prison-workforce/>