

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON PENAL AFFAIRS

Chair: Pam Cox MP

Officers: Tessa Munt MP, Lord Garnier KC, Baroness Prashar CBE

**Minutes of the Meeting of the All-Party Group on Penal Affairs,
held on 15 July 2025**

**Presentation of the Annual Robin Corbett Award for Prisoner
Reintegration Followed by**

What does the sentencing review mean for probation?

**Guest Speaker: Martin Jones CBE
HM Chief Inspector of Probation**

Present

Lord Bradley
Lord Carter of Haslemere
Pam Cox MP (*Chair*)
Lord Dubs
Linsey Farnsworth MP
Lord Garnier KC (*Officer*)
Viscount Hailsham
Baroness Levitt
Usha Prashar CBE (*Officer*)
Andy Slaughter MP

Apologies

Lord Carlile of Berriew CBE KC
The Lord Bishop of Gloucester
Marie Goldman MP
Tessa Munt MP (*Officer*)

Attendees

Lucy Binns
Phil Bowen
Helen Churcher
Sam Cload
Chris Collinson
Polly Corbett
Lady Val Corbett
Charlotte Curness
Mark Day (*Clerk*)
Albert Dear
Sophie Ellis
Emily Evison (*Assistant to Clerk*)
Adam Fox
Will Fraser
Richard Garside
Davina Jones
Martin Jones CBE
Annmarie Lewis OBE
Tanya Lightfoot-Taylor
Chantelle Moore
Becky Plummer
Pia Sinha

Pam Cox MP welcomed everyone to the APPG on Penal Affairs. Pam explained that there had recently been a formal meeting held to reconstitute the APPG and Pam was elected as chair. Pam provided an introduction as to why she is interested in this group, including that she is the new MP for Colchester and was previously a professor of criminology. Pam expressed her gratitude to be working with PRT and welcomed other officers of the group to the meeting.

Pam explained there were two items of business for the meeting. She was pleased to welcome as speaker Martin Jones CBE, chief inspector of probation. Pam explained that Martin will address the group on the implications of the sentencing review for the probation service. Pam remarked that it is an interesting moment for criminal justice, with various stars aligning, and so a good moment to make something of it.

The second item of business was the Robin Corbett award for prisoner reintegration. Pam explained this would happen before Martin spoken. Pam provided information about the awards including that the award was set up in memory of the former chair of the group Lord Corbett. The award is run by Lord Corbett's wife Lady Val Corbett. The APPG is honoured to host the annual presentation of the award. Pam then handed over to Lady Corbett to present the award.

Lady Val Corbett: My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am very used to this group as my husband Robin Corbett was the chair for 10 years until he died in 2012. I set up two networks in his name all because of golf, a game I don't play and have no interest in.

Let me explain. A few weeks after Robin's death, I saw on television the winning captain of a golf tournament dedicate the win to Seve Ballesteros the Spanish golfer who'd recently died, and he said these words: "All men die but some men live on". That was my Eureka moment! I contacted the Prison Reform Trust with whom he had worked – and which I have continued this partnership to this day – and together we created this annual award in 2013.

Then I kept on meeting people in the prison reform sector working in their own pond and thought we could crusade for change in the system in a sea. So, in 2017 *The Corbett Network for Prisoner Reintegration* was established.

By the way, when a bus runs me down, I have successors to continue this award. She is going to kill me but will my daughter Polly please stand up. And when a bus runs down her and her husband Nick, there is another waiting in the wings will my grandson Albert please stand up.

Now we come the pleasurable part, the winners. We had a high number of excellent applications from which to choose so it was a tough decision but, in the end, we decided on three brilliant organisations supporting people involved in the criminal justice system. All with different targets of help but all absolutely vital.

The commended winner is Spurgeons, who support families affected by imprisonment, both inside and outside of prison and offer support for children and families, help with prison visits, and work to reduce the risk of reoffending.

The highly commended winner is 100andfirst, a charity which helps those inside and after release as well as marginalised young people by equipping them with the skills needed to thrive and the mindset to make positive choices. They do this through intensive courses, mentoring, and talks from inspirational speakers, aimed at providing advice and assistance with employment and skills development.

The winner is One Small Thing whose innovative project Hope Street developed a new approach to working with justice involved women. From within a healing, trauma-informed, residential environment, women and their children have access to a range of on-going specialist support.

This concludes the presentation – so I will see you here next year, dependent on runaway busses!

Pam Cox MP thanked Lady Val Corbett and expressed her pleasure to meet her and all the winners. Pam also encouraged the winners to contribute to questions to Martin Jones, so the group could hear more about the work they do.

Pam Cox MP then introduced Martin Jones CBE, chief inspector of probation. Pam explained that Martin would speak on *What does the sentencing review mean for the probation service?* Martin would speak for 10 minutes and there would be an opportunity for attendees to put questions to Martin after his presentation.

Martin Jones CBE: Thank you so much for the invite to speak. Thank you, Pam, for the introduction. I want to pay tribute to Lady Val and huge congratulations to the award winners, your work is inspirational. Richly deserved.

It has been almost 18 months now since my appointment as chief inspector early in 2024. Since then, it has been a frenetically busy period for criminal justice and probation with the SDS40 scheme and the publication of the sentencing review.

As a former head of sentencing policy at the Ministry of Justice and former CEO of the Parole Board I am hugely interested and engaged in the sentencing review. Having spent over thirty years working in the justice system – I do not think I exaggerate to say it represents a once in a generation opportunity to fix a system that is clearly at breaking point. I think we owe it to future generations to do all we can to get things right.

My reports and those of Charle Taylor paint a bleak picture of the state of our prisons and probation service. You cannot operate a prison system at or above 99% capacity. At that level of pressure, it is almost impossible to do very much more than lock people up. Impossible to rehabilitate people and meet the underlying causes of offending. We need to ensure we have the capacity we need to imprison those who commit serious offenders and are a risk to the public.

However, whilst we understand the pressures facing our prisons, I cannot understate how much pressure is on probation. There are nearly three times as many people being managed by the probation service as there are in our prisons. They have around 240,000 cases to manage. And of course, the sentencing review inevitably will increase the range of cases they deal with in the community. So how well placed is the probation service to deal with more people serving community sentences and more people being supervised following early release?

As a great believer in the power of probation - I would love to say that the probation service is standing in poised readiness to play that vital role. Philosophically, I one hundred percent support David Gauke's thinking that we should be able to safely move more people from prisons into the community. But my honest assessment is that the probation service currently has too few staff, with too little experience, managing too many cases. It is a service in desperate need of investment, new technology, and stability, to provide a platform for improvement.

I will provide some context of where we are.

Since my appointment as Chief Inspector of Probation one hundred percent of probation units and regions have been rated as "inadequate" or "requires

improvement". That represents over 30 reports. I have also published a report on the national arrangements for probation and rated it as requires improvement.

Commendable efforts have been made to increase the number of probation officers with ministers in 2024 announcing an extra 1,000 new PQIP (Professional Qualification in Probation) probation officers and this year an extra 1,300. However as fast as you fill that bucket, we are losing staff. 9.3% of staff left probation last year so as fast as we are recruiting, many are leaving.

In our national inspection we found that there was a mismatch between local need and central contracting for the services needed to tackle the underlying causes of crime.

There are also issues with capability. Concerningly, two-thirds of the cases we have inspected so far are judged insufficient, and in some areas fewer than one in five cases we inspected met our standards. We need to be clear that risk cannot be eliminated. But in too many cases, probation staff do not understand enough about the risk that the people on probation pose; and are not taking reasonable steps to mitigate those risks. This means missed opportunities to break circles of offending and reduce harm to victims.

From our front-line inspections we see committed staff who do not have the time and resources to do the job they, and we, would want them to do.

So, am I optimistic? I am hopeful, but realistic. Change is possible – but there will be challenges. There is I think now a recognition, by ministers, that we are asking too much of the probation service. It needs better resourcing; it needs better tools. We need to use evidence of what works to focus our finite resource on what matters the most. I would rather the probation service focuses its attention on doing 75% of its job well than spreading itself too thinly and having less impact.

So, what do we need as the government responds to the sentencing review? I am looking for three things:

One. What is the plan, including resources to ensure that the probation service is properly resourced to deal with its new caseload. Funding needs to follow those decisions. This needs full scrutiny.

Two. Whilst new legislation will inevitably move work to probation – we also need to look at what we can take away. Some people on probation spend disproportionate time on licence. Can this change? As pointed out in the sentencing review the number of people serving community sentences has halved over the last decade. Can that be reversed?

Finally, how will the money set aside be spent? What is the split between technology, people and services? It would be easy to spend all the money on technology – our reports say you also need more people to do the essential work of probation. Are there reasons to be more hopeful? I think there are.

Last year we published a report on women offenders that showed some good work was happening in some areas where the right partnerships are in place. There have been improvements in housing following release from prison – that matters as reoffending rates double if an offender is homeless at the point they leave custody.

Our report on unpaid work showed the value of unpaid work in the community; but also the impact it can have on people on probation. I have seen excellent work taking place in some areas to join up local services via integrated offender management East of England; and some excellent imaginative links with local agencies in Manchester and Wales. Our probation service performed heroics on SDS40. We owe them an enormous debt of gratitude for that, and it exemplifies the opportunity if we resource them properly. Despite the challenges probation has faced, the outcomes for those serving community sentences are significantly better than for those serving short custodial sentences. Whilst public protection work needs to improve, we have now seen some stronger and improving performance in desistance and engagement.

To end, if we can free it up to do the job we need it to do, our probation service has the potential to be truly transformative, breaking the destructive cycles of reoffending and - crucially - preventing future victims. I would particularly align myself with this quote from David Gauke:

“Practitioners must be empowered to use their own initiative, professional judgement and skills when delivering sentences and managing offenders in the community, rather than following onerous administrative processes.”

To succeed the reforms will need to make significant sustained investment and there needs to be an equal focus on the work of probation. For too long the work of probation has been in the shadows – mopping up for the crises in our prisons – and sometimes, a political football. We need it to step out of those shadows.

Pam Cox MP opened to the floor for questions.

Charlotte Curness explained that prior to working at Hope Street, she spent 14 years working across prisons and probation and she has seen lots of changes. Charlotte said that one of the biggest things she hears from women she is working with is how important lived experience within a team is. How far along is HMPPS in terms of lived experience inclusion?

Martin Jones CBE responded that lived experience is hugely important but sometimes systems are resistant to change. He added that lived experience is something his team are actively looking for on inspections. It allows for much more in depth relationships. Integrated Offender Management (IOM) is key here and would allow you to pull people with lived expertise in. Martin reflected that in society we are far too quick to write off lived experience but all the data show that if you get them in, they want to give back.

Pam Cox MP asked whether there is a barrier to hiring people with criminal records.

Martin Jones CBE said that there is more to do in probation. There is a scheme available which enables it, but the system is concerned with reputational risk. This is a challenge given all published evidence by the Ministry of Justice is that they are

asking employers to employ people with records, so you have to ask why there is a barrier?

Will Fraser added that in 100 & First one of the biggest challenges in employing people with criminal records is public perception, even when courses in prison and outside of prison are excellent. Then all the good work goes to waste. Will asked in terms of the probation service and through the gate work is there any line of sight in changing the views of 'Jo Public' and employers?

Martin Jones CBE responded by reflecting on his time as CEO of the Parole Board. When he started at the Parole Board there was an inherent view that the public couldn't understand the work of the board. So, they took the brave decision to do a documentary. When you spoke to people after the documentary aired, the programme put the public in the shoes of the Parole Board and gave them an insight. There was an element of sympathy, most people you saw lived a broken life but were not beyond redemption. They could be rehabilitated. The level of debate was heartening. Martin added that he was sure this would be the same in probation if you did it in a careful way.

Lady Val Corbett added that she was not sure if these statistics were up to date, but around 45% of all employers said they would not consider hiring someone from prisons. This goes against an example of the RNF Group where 75% of the workforce was from prison. It is successful because of their work ethic, commitment, loyalty and lack of absenteeism. They judge on their abilities not on the past.

Andy Slaughter MP said he would be interested in Martin's view about recall and how it is working, especially reflections around fixed term recalls and the overall increase. What is working, what isn't.

Martin Jones CBE responded that in 1993 when he took his first job in the public service there were fewer than 100 recalls a year, now there are over 13,500. This is an area that needs focus and is not being given the attention it deserves. Martin added that we need to scrutinise to ensure the correct protocols are in place. For example, 75% of recalls or something similar are due to non-compliance. In these cases, was it always necessary to send them back to custody? The reality is that if you go to prison with a drug problem, prison is unlikely to fix it, you may even go in without one but come out of prison with one. We need to work out why and how we better support people in the community. Martin said that his view is that the Sentencing Review suggestion on fixed term recalls is a reasonable attempt to reduce numbers, however he has concerns. First the pressure on probation, he knows from work on the Parole Board that there are some genuinely risky people so how do you delineate between people who aren't compliant and those who will cause serious harm to the community – that puts pressure on the service. Where do you draw the line on this? Martin added that IPP recalls is an interesting area. Some of the changes made by the last government were well judged in giving them second chances but still allowing the Parole Board scrutiny.

Pam Cox MP asked what part Martin thought probation plays in driving up the numbers of people recalled, for example in their decision making linked to risk aversion.

Martin Jones CBE responded that when he goes out to speak to probation officers, sometimes the most experienced officer in an office has two years, and they are terrified of things going wrong. Martin noted that the numbers of serious further offences has remained fairly consistent over the years, but we now recall significantly

more people, so the reality is that there is some risk aversion. He added there should be training around supporting probation to make the right decision. Probation officers often tell Martin and his team that they joined the service because they want to support people to turn their lives around, but they leave because the job isn't what they signed up for.

Richard Garside said that over the last decade the service has shifted from mainly supervision of community sentences to largely supervising people leaving prison. Richard asked what time frame is needed to shift the balance back the other way, given how slowly but significantly it happened?

Martin Jones CBE agreed that Richard was spot on. The majority of the work of probation in the 1990s was supervision of those on community sentences. The Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 introduced supervision for those on short sentences, and this was a fundamental shift. Martin added that if there was a decision around where to spend the finite amount of probation capacity he would argue, lets offer a package of support but why have the threat of recall hanging over individuals on short sentences. The length of licence period is a reason why recall has spiralled. How many recalls are about compliance with licence conditions? Martin spoke about a case of a women residing in a female AP (approved premise) after SDS40, she did not want to be there so deliberately played up and got recalled back to custody.

Pam Cox MP added that Lord Timpson had also spoken recently of alarming tales of people being deliberately recalled.

Sophie Ellis asked about the use of technology in probation. She said that she has been hearing a lot about increased use of technology, and it is easy to understand why it is an appealing solution but asked if Martin could talk a bit about any examples of application and the benefits and risks.

Martin Jones CBE responded that he could see why there is a case but is concerned about a blanket approach as conditions that are appropriate for one individual may not be for another. The heart of probation work is also the time spent with people on probation, so Martin said he could see how anything to support and free up time for probation officers to do that would be good. In terms of applications Martin added that for example when sobriety tags are used appropriately, they can make a difference. He said he comes from a council estate in Southeast London, and he sees how it would be helpful. For example, when lots of people leave prison they go straight to the pub. They go for one and end up having five, miss curfew and then are recalled to custody. So, you have to ask how you can support this? Martin added that importantly he is wary of just tagging everyone. Then, for example how do you tag someone who is homeless? You need to fix the homelessness problem. Martin suggested there are opportunities to use AI for example when looking at serious further offending, there may be a risk in the reams of information about a prisoner, but a person can't pick it up, here maybe AI can. But Martin added he would not want to take away from human judgment and the time they spend with a probation officer. The evidence shows it is the time you spend building a relationship with someone that is important. Desistance isn't about tagging it's about relationships.

Will Fraser added that 100 & First have worked with a handful of people where they have formed good relationships with their probation officer, but then the officer has gone on leave, someone else has picked the case up and then they have been recalled. The officer who picked the case up doesn't have the full context or picture. So, there's a challenge when creating these relationships about how they are

maintained. Will asked how does a new person picking up the case be as seamless as possible?

Martin Jones CBE agreed and added that there needs to be scrutiny. Martin reflected on examples from other jurisdictions, including some bad practice examples from the United States. England and Wales is an outlier compared to many other jurisdictions. In other jurisdictions the probation officer does not have the power to recall, there must be oversight from the court and parole board etc. But in England and Wales a person is recalled to custody and then six to nine months later you are in front of the Parole Board pleading the recall. Martin said we should turn the system around. That way you would also be taking some of the pressure off probation.

Lord Bradley asked a further question about recall and the use of technology. He gave an example of a group of women with lived experience of the criminal justice system he had spoken to recently. They spoke about their experience around the quality of tags, and the fear they lived in of being recalled through no fault of their own if the technology fails e.g. lying in bed and the machine goes down and so you are recalled. This goes back to the experience of probation officers, how risk averse they are, the age profile and quality of supervision. Lord Bradley expressed concern that a move to greater reliance on technology would have to come with better quality of technology.

Lord Bradley also added a second question around remand. The Sentencing Review did not include remand, and we were told that the Leveson Review would fill this gap. Now the two reports have been published, Lord Bradley asked whether the two reports fit coherently together to address remand, which is a particular issue for women.

Martin Jones CBE addressed the technology question first, stating that Lord Bradley is correct, if technology and tag is going to operate at a greater scale then we need the confidence in the technology. There are instances where it is not reliable as it should be. There are possibilities of using electronic monitoring to support victims of domestic abuse and stalking. But you have to ensure the technology works and that probation understand the difference between non-compliance due to a mishap and public protection concerns.

Martin also responded that remand is still an area which requires scrutiny. The Leveson report sets out options to speed up the system but in the short-term it is also going to take some time to work down the cases. This raises questions on the number of people remanded to custody on for reasons relating to housing, which is sometimes used more for women. Martin spoke about some good practice in the youth system, in finding them safe beds which the reduced the number of young people held on remand.

Phil Bowen added that Integrated Offender Management and Problem Solving Courts all rely on local partnerships and Phil is concerned that the way the probation service is currently structured and organised means it has lost these local partnership links. Phil asked whether that was also Martin's impression?

Martin Jones CBE compared the adult system to youth justice, which has strong leadership and legislation requiring people to be around the table. All recent inspections of the youth service have been rated as performing well, but in recent probation service inspections, all areas have been performing below standard. Martin added that probation at its best looks like good local leaders gripping local problems and making a difference. If we are paying people to be responsible for services at a

local level, we should let them figure out what they need. Martin said there was some excellent work being done around Cardiff, with a PCC working with local services, charities and the local community. Problems of reoffending cannot be fixed by probation alone; it is about building relationships. Martin added that when you look at Integrated Offender Management being done well you think this should be everywhere.

Pam Cox MP said that devolution is on the agenda, and asked Martin whether he thinks it would make a difference? Pam asked because Manchester is often an example of good practice, and they have devolved commissioning arrangements. Is this something justice could jump on?

Martin Jones CBE responded that devolution at its best is leaders working together and combining this with local authorities. He gave an example of working with women where a local PDU is building local relationships to meet the needs of those on probation.

Pia Sinha said she had been having similar conversations with Charlie Taylor, but it seems to her that many of the issues in prisons are up the chain. Pia hears that some of the bureaucracy and lack of empowerment at practitioner level is because direction is coming from the top. Pia asked if this something probation is looking at too, to free up practitioners to be more empowered?

Martin Jones CBE said that all of the inspection reports are consistently saying there is a problem with probation practice on the ground. Justin Russell (Martin's predecessor) said the same thing in his last inspection report. The picture is the same. So where is the accountability? Martin said he would be speaking to local probation leads, to free up probation officers to do what they what to do. At the moment, when things go wrong this triggers a process and then it's more form filling. However, some of the problems with recall are that people can't distinguish between when someone's life is a mess and when someone is at serious risk of further offending. Martin added that the national inspection showed that the leadership arrangements in probation is full of holes, there is blurred accountability. But there are a lot of people wanting to do good things.

Pam Cox MP asked if there were any studies or pilots where junior probation officers are assisted in decision making?

Martin Jones CBE said to watch this space. He added that if he's seeing the same things over and over again, does he keep parroting the same thing, or does he do something different? It's an area he is looking at very closely.

Linsey Farnsworth MP asked whether there was a link between probation officers being risk averse and decision making around recall and also resourcing and the amount of time officers have to do their job?

Martin Jones CBE responded that generally speaking there is always a reason for recall, and sometimes this is misjudged. But added that if a probation officer has 40 cases, do they really have the time to take with the individual to understand what is going on or do they just say, "you've breached your licence". A reduced caseload would help. Martin said he went to an Intensive Supervision Court recently and it was clear one guy was struggling, and the judge was asking what was happening. They were fixing the problems earlier. Martin added that inevitably probation officers are under huge pressure and there is concern this contributes to recall. If there was more

acceptance that the world is not always a perfect place and things will go wrong, then some of the issues around probation would be reduced.

Phil Bowen reflected that clearly the probation service is in a real state and has been there for some time, but there was a time when it wasn't. He asked whether the inspectorate has done any analysis on what happened to the service over the last decade, why, and what lessons there might be to learn?

Martin Jones CBE said he likes to use the following analogy. It feels to him like the probation service 10 to 15 years ago was like a vase on your grandparent's shelf. The vase was working perfectly well but a bit dusty. But since then, the vase has been dropped and broken, and put back together, but it is a bit leaky. It's far easier to break something than to fix it. Nobody would say Transforming Rehabilitation was a success, ripping the service apart. Martin thought renationalisation would be good, but four years down the line there are still issues running through the service. The future is about local devolution. In the short-term, as Martin said on record at the Justice Committee, there needs to be some stability. But in maybe five years it could look to more. But for now, we need to go back to the heartbeat of what the probation service should be. What would it take to bring some probation officers back who left?

Pam Cox MP asked whether we should consider changing the name to Community Justice like in Scotland, and asked how would that work?

Martin Jones CBE responded that he would be very relaxed about renaming the service, provided it was properly resourced and the ethos was right.

Phil Bowen questioned experimenting around devolved decision making. He said that in youth justice service teams there is much more devolved decision making, a greater appetite for risk and the managers have mainly stayed in the job. He added that we don't have to go across the boarded to see what good looks like, it is happening in the same communities, just with children. It is the same with the youth prison population, there are still many issues, but recall is not an issue for that population. The lessons are staring us in the face.

Martin Jones CBE said it was a good point around what the wider lessons from the system are, and the youth justice system intervening earlier is a good lesson. In the adult system, once you get it, it is quite hard to get out.

Pam Cox MP drew the meeting to a close and thanked attendees and Martin Jones CBE for taking part in an interesting discussion. She also thanked Lady Val Corbett.