



The long-term prison population in Northern Ireland: a scoping document

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The Prison Reform Trust (PRT)

PRT is an independent UK charity working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. It was founded in 1981 to inform and influence public debate on prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners, amidst concerns about a projected prison population of 48,000 by 1984. With the prison population in England and Wales approaching 88,000 and projected to rise to at least 95,700 by 2029, PRT remains as important to civic society today as it was over 40 years ago.

PRT is one of the few organisations willing and equipped to hold the state to account for its treatment of vulnerable people in prison. PRT's reputation, built over four decades of knowledgeable, reliable analysis and presentation of the facts, gives the organisation influence behind the scenes that few organisations can match. PRT'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 justice system.

PRT does 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. Whilst often working alongside the prison service and maintaining close links with government departments including the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Treasury (HMT), and the Home Office, to retain its independence, PRT does not seek or accept government funding. The structure and rigour of programmes are agreed with the trusts and foundations that fund PRT's work.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund which supports the Building Futures programme, PRT staff, and the Building Futures team. Particular thanks to Dr David Maguire, Claudia Vince, Vicki Kerr, Emily Evison, and Alex Hewson for their support and input throughout. Thanks too, to Emma Roche for her work on earlier drafts, and Dr Russell Orr, Jessica Ritchie and Emily Dunham for their helpful comments.

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Section 1: Introduction

The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) Building Futures programme

The [Building Futures programme](#) is PRT's National Lottery funded programme exploring the experiences of people serving long prison sentences. It gives a voice to those serving long-term prison sentences, the programme has defined its long-term cohort to include those men that will spend 10 or more years in prison and eight years or more for women, providing them with the space to advocate for themselves, bringing about change from within the system and shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment. Through consultation, advocacy and research, Building Futures works alongside those with direct experience of long-term imprisonment to demonstrate the true impact of ever-increasing sentence lengths.

A fundamental component of this work is the development of a network of prisoners and former prisoners with direct experience of long-term imprisonment, to allow for impactful collaboration with those the programme represents. The Building Futures Network is made up of over 900 people, including those who are serving or have served long prison sentences. These voices enrich our understanding, and our work provides a platform for people to contribute their thinking and expertise on the policies that affect their lives. It is their priorities that drive the strategic direction of Building Futures.

This scoping document

This scoping document was commissioned by the Building Futures programme to establish the impact of long-term imprisonment in Northern Ireland. It highlights some of the challenges faced by long-term prisoners in Northern Ireland and considers the differences and parallels with England, Wales, and Scotland.

Northern Ireland prisons in context

To contextualise Northern Ireland's prisons, it is necessary to acknowledge the legacy of its past. In 1921, the Government of Ireland Act 1920 partitioned Ireland and created two distinct states: Northern Ireland (NI) comprising six counties (Antrim, Armagh, Derry, Down, Fermanagh and Tyrone), and Southern Ireland, or the Irish Free State, containing the remaining twenty-six.¹ What resulted was a "dominant unionist majority who identified religiously as Protestant in NI and an Irish nationalist minority that identified as Catholic".² Though partition was intended to circumvent civil war between communities, a culmination of cultural tensions³ and the initiation of the Civil Rights Movement⁴ led to 'the Troubles', which has now been accepted as the "longest-running violent conflict in contemporary European History".⁵ The resulting death toll from the conflict is in excess of 3,500 people.⁶ The Troubles led to the creation of "a unique prison system" where "between fifty percent and seventy percent of prisoners" in 1998 were imprisoned for politically motivated, serious crimes.⁷ At this point, there were five institutions designed to separate politically motivated long-term prisoners, who accounted for over two-thirds of the daily average population, from "ordinary decent criminals (ODCs)".^{8 9}

1 The Irish Free State was created in 1922 following the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. It was later replaced by the 1937 Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann), which officially renamed the state Éire. The subsequent Republic of Ireland Act 1948 declared that Ireland was a republic and formally ended its membership of the British Commonwealth. For a comprehensive account of land partition in Northern Ireland and its relationship to conflict and violence, see Moffett, L., Lawther, C., Hearty, K., Godden, A. & Hickey, R. (2020). 'No longer neighbours': *The impact of violence on land, housing and redress in the Northern Ireland conflict*. Reparations, Responsibility and Victimhood in Transitional Societies. https://pure.qub.ac.uk/files/213711196/Land_Report_ENG_Red.pdf

2 Ashe, F. (2023). A gender history of the Northern Ireland peace process. *Socialist History*, 63, 71-88.

3 Ibid, p. 73.

4 See McEvoy, J. (2008). *Politics of Northern Ireland*. Edinburgh University Press.

5 Murray, C. (2023). *Young men, masculinities and imprisonment: An ethnographic study in Northern Ireland*. Palgrave Macmillan. p. 6.

6 Murray, C. (2023). *Young men, masculinities and imprisonment: An ethnographic study in Northern Ireland*. Palgrave Macmillan; see also, McEvoy, K. (1998). Prisoners, the agreement, and the political character of the Northern Ireland conflict. *Fordham International Law Journal*, 22(4), 1539-1576.

7 McEvoy, K. (1998). Prisoners, the agreement, and the political character of the Northern Ireland conflict. *Fordham International Law Journal*, 22(4), 1539-1576. p. 1539.

8 Ibid, p. 1540.

9 At the height of the conflict, political prisoners who had been interned were imprisoned within eight H-Blocks in the Maze Prison (HMP Maze/the Maze), formerly the Long Kesh Detention Centre. 95% of the prisoners interned in the Maze were from the catholic community. For a history of the Maze, see, Graham, Brian, and Sara McDowell. "Meaning in the Maze: The Heritage of Long Kesh." *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2007, pp.343-68. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44251152>

The Good Friday Agreement 1998 (GFA/the Agreement/the Belfast Agreement) reached on 10 April 1998, was a fundamental step in ending the civil conflict in Northern Ireland. It steered “violent ethno-nationalism into a peaceful institutional framework, grounded in bi-nationalism”.¹⁰ The Agreement established a framework for power-sharing between unionists and nationalists and a new political structure with a devolved government. It includes cross-community consent mechanisms and commitments to uphold human rights and promote equality.¹¹ Under the Agreement, prisoners convicted of scheduled offences were released early, and participants agreed to work for the disarmament of paramilitary organisations and the decommissioning of their weapons.¹² A ‘community’ still in transition, Northern Ireland continues to be shaped by the legacy of the past.¹³ Legacy and reconciliation issues are still at the fore of domestic governance.¹⁴ This was demonstrated through controversy over the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the current Labour Party’s pre- and post-election comments on repealing it.¹⁵ While criminal justice matters are rigorously examined and evaluated, considerable changes are still needed to adequately care for the long-term prisoner population in Northern Ireland. Focusing on the present day, this scoping review draws out the meaning of the most recent government statistics in Northern Ireland and considers the significant and serious challenges faced by the long-term prisoner population.

10 McAuley, J.W., & Tonge, J. (2010). Britishness (and Irishness) in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63(2), 266-285. p. 267.

11 Notably, the GFA established the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) to promote and protect human rights in Northern Ireland and build a peaceful and democratic society based on respect for rights and equality. For a discussion on experiences and perceptions of the Good Friday Agreement see, Byrne, S., Mallon, B., & Yavuz, M. (2023). Civil society organizations, the Good Friday Agreement, and the Northern Ireland peace process. *Razprave in Gradivo: Revija za Narodnostna Vprasanja*, 90, 161-176.

12 Importantly, a decade on, it was argued that the processes of disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration remained incomplete – see, McAuley, W.J., Tonge, J., & Shirlow, P. (2009) Conflict, transformation, and former loyalist paramilitary prisoners in Northern Ireland. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22(1), 22-40. Further agreement in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement was also needed to resolve other issues such as Sinn Fein’s recognition of the PSNI’s jurisdiction/authority.

13 For a discussion of understandings of justice and transition in Northern Ireland see McEvoy, K., & Eriksson, A. (2013). Who owns justice? Community, state and the Northern Ireland transition. In *Justice, community and civil society* (pp. 157-189). Willan.

14 For further commentary, see McEvoy, K. (2024). ‘Abject and true remorse’: Loyalism and the politics of regret in Northern Ireland. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 35(2), 56-79.

15 Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street & King Charles III. (2024, July 17). *The King’s Speech 2024* [Speech]. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-kings-speech-2024> See also, Northern Ireland Office & Benn, H. (2025, April 28). *Secretary of State extends timeframe for legacy investigation reports* [Press release]. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/secretary-of-state-extends-timeframe-for-legacy-investigation-reports>

Section 2: Governing sentencing laws and sentence types in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Assembly has full legislative powers on a range of matters. Excepted and reserved matters are detailed in Section 4(1) at Schedule 2 and Schedule 3 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. As such, the Sentencing Guidelines issued by England and Wales do not apply to Northern Ireland because criminal justice is a devolved matter.¹⁶

In Northern Ireland, there is no all-encompassing governing legislation for the purpose of sentencing. Custodial sentencing is governed by a variety of legislation, which considers the severity of the crime and the risk posed by an offender to the public. Governing legislation includes: the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008; the Magistrates' Court (NI) Order 1981; the Criminal Justice (No.2)(NI) Order 2004; the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 2006; the Justice Act (NI) 2011; the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007; the Justice Act (NI) 2015; the Offences Against the Person Act 1861,¹⁷ and the Police (NI) Act 1998.¹⁸ The majority of sentences passed down fall under the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008, with the exception of historical sexual abuse cases and legacy-related cases which pre-date the 2008 Act. These cases are sentenced under The Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

The Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 lists the range of serious offences under Schedule 1 for which convicted individuals can receive one of three sentences: a discretionary Life Sentence, an Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS), or an Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS). Upon receiving a life sentence, an individual will be assigned a tariff that determines when they may be considered for early release by the Department of Justice (NI).

Where the court considers a life sentence to be inappropriate, for instance due to the severity of the crime or risk to the public, an ECS can be handed down to those convicted of offences under Schedule 2 of the Order. An ECS requires a minimum of one year in custody, following which individuals will be released on licence. Alternatively, the court can impose an ICS for those convicted of offences under Schedule 1 of the Order, requiring individuals to remain in custody until such times as the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland (PCNI) are satisfied that release is both safe and appropriate. If released, ICS holders will be subject to a minimum of 10 years on licence, with the possibility of remaining on licence for the rest of their lives.¹⁹

Custodial sentences are served in one of Northern Ireland's three prison estates: HMP Maghaberry, HMP Magilligan, and HMP Hydebank Wood College and women's prison (HMP Hydebank Wood). In contrast to England and Wales which categorise adult male prisons as A-D with Category A prisons housing those perceived to be of highest risk to society,²⁰ Northern Ireland prisons are categorised as high, medium and low. HMP Maghaberry is a high-security men's prison, HMP Magilligan is a medium-security men's prison, and HMP Hydebank Wood is a medium-low security prison which houses women and young male offenders over the age of 18. Women prisoners are housed within Ash House which is part of HMP Hydebank Wood.

16 Although criminal justice is devolved, matters arising in England and Wales are taken into consideration by the Lady Chief Justice's Sentencing Group, which was established in Northern Ireland in 2010. Among its primary purposes, it seeks to advise the Chief Justice as to topics for their Programme of Action on Sentencing, consider judgments of the Court of Appeal, and advise the Judicial Studies Board for Northern Ireland on their inclusion within the Sentencing Guideline Compendium. For further reference, see <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/lady-chief-justices-sentencing-group>

17 Under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, s.42(Common Assault) on summary conviction, an offender can be sentenced to three months imprisonment and/or a Level 3 fine (£1,000) for offences committed before 4 July 2011, or six months imprisonment and/or Level 3 fine (£1,000) for offences committed on or after 4 July 2011. Under s.47 of the Act(Assault Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm) on indictment, an offender can be sentenced to a period of five years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine for offences committed before 28 September 2004, or seven years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine for offences committed on or after 28 September 2004. For application see: R v D [2002] NICA 10, see also, R v PH [2011] NICA 64.

18 Under the Police (NI) Act 1998 s.66(2) an offender can be sentenced (a) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum, or to both; (b) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to a fine, or to both. For application and developments in jurisprudence, see: See AG's Ref. (No.1 of 1991) (Gallagher) [1991] NI 218, and R v Robinson [2001] 8 BNIL 85.

19 For more information on life sentences, extended custodial sentences, and indeterminate custodial sentences, see: <https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/sentences>.

20 Grimwood, G.G. (2015). *Categorisation of prisoners in the UK*. The briefing paper, number 07437, 29 December 2015. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7437/>

Section 3: Contextualising the prison population

The most recent statistics from the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) categorise prisoners in four groups: Immediate Custody (sentenced prisoners), Remand (unsentenced prisoners), Fine Default, and Non-Criminal prisoners. During 2023/24 the average daily immediate custody population was 1,176; the average daily remand population was 686, and those categorised as Fine Default and Non-Criminal prisoners accounted for 0.3% and 0.5% of the overall average daily prison population respectively.²¹ Statistics pertaining to the Life and Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS) population in this report were grouped together, and accounted for 18% of the total average daily immediate custody population (207 prisoners) in 2023/24. Of the average daily prison population, 19% (9 prisoners) of the average daily female population and 18% (198 prisoners) of males were serving Life and ICSs.²²

Given that statistics were grouped together, an FOI request was submitted to the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) for further, more detailed, information. There are four key ways in which data from the Average Daily Population and the FOI request differ. Firstly, the ADP is the average of daily prison population snapshots taken at midnight over the entire Financial Year 2023/24, whereas the FOI provides a count of prisoners in custody on a single day (8 July 2025). Secondly, FOI data provides a more detailed view by separating Life sentences and ICS, unlike the routinely published official statistics which groups the two together. The FOI revealed that of a total population of 216 Life and ICS prisoners, 193 were serving a life sentence and 23 were serving an ICS.²³

Characteristics of the sentenced prison population

Principal offence

In 2023/24, violence against the person was the most common principal offence among sentenced prisoners, with an average daily population (ADP) of 407 people. Over the past nine years, the share of male sentenced prisoners held for such offences has stayed between 33% and 35%, while for women it has ranged from 37% to 51% (due to the volatility inherent when analysing the small number of women in prison).²⁴ In an FOI request obtained in August 2025, the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) advised that offences committed by prisoners serving indeterminate sentences include: aggravated burglary with intent to commit grievous bodily harm, false imprisonment, threats to kill, robbery, attempted hijacking, firearm offences, aggravated vehicle taking, arson, attempted murder, manslaughter, wounding with intent, sexual assault, rape of a child under 13, aggravated burglary and stealing, dangerous driving and affray.²⁵

Gender

Statistics from the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) in 2023/24 revealed the highest average daily prison population to date — 1,877 people (90 females and 1,787 males).²⁶ The average daily population of HMP Hydebank Wood's women prisoners has steadily risen from 27 in 2004²⁷ when women were transferred from Mourne House, a purpose-built, high-security unit within Maghaberry Prison.²⁸

21 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2024). Worksheet 1. *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2023-24 Report*. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-prison-population-202324-report>

22 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2024). Worksheet 7. *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2023-24 Report*. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-prison-population-202324-report>

23 Department of Justice. (2025). Freedom of Information Request, August 2025, Case No: 25:97. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-25-97-Final-reply.pdf>

24 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2024). Table 11a, 11b and 11c. *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2023-24 Report*. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-prison-population-202324-report>

25 Department of Justice. (2025). Freedom of Information Request, August 2025, Case No: 25:97. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-25-97-Final-reply.pdf>

26 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2024). Table 1f. *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2023-24 Report*. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-prison-population-202324-report>

27 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2016). Figure 3. *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2015 and 2015/16*. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/northern-ireland-prison-population-2015-2016.pdf>

28 See, O'Neill, J. (2017). Women's transitions from custody in Northern Ireland – Time after time? *Irish Probation Journal* (14), 112-132.

Data on transgender prisoners is not published, but surveys from Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI NI) suggest 1–3% of surveyed prisoners identify as transgender.²⁹ The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) states that it will “consider their specific needs on a case by case basis”.³⁰ In contrast, between 2022 and 2023, there were a total of 281 reported transgender prisoners in England and Wales.³¹ These figures include those with a Gender Recognition Certificate and those without. In Scotland, the transgender prison population accounted for 0.3% of the total prison population.³² Statistics pertaining to the proportion of female and male prisoners are similar to England and Wales, and Scotland.³³

Age

As in previous years, prisoners aged between 30 and 39 comprised the largest proportion of the immediate custody population, increasing from 36% in 2022/23 to 38% in 2023/24. Prisoners aged 50–59 accounted for 11% of the sentenced population in 2023/24, and those aged 60 years or over accounted for 9%, both increasing slightly on the previous year.³⁴ The global rise in the ageing prison population is acknowledged to be due to a broad range of factors. These include, but are not limited to, tougher sentences, increasing life expectancy, advances in investigatory forensic processes, and the criminalisation of historical sexual abuse.³⁵

In relation to the Life and ICS population, the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland), provided the following detailed breakdown in response to an FOI request. It added the caveat that, due to low numbers, some figures were recorded as less than or equal to five so as not to identify individuals.³⁶

Number of prisoners in custody on 8 July 2025 serving an Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS) or a Life sentence by age band

Age band	ICS	Life
18 to 20	0	0
21 to 29	0	12
30 to 39	10	59
40 to 49	7	55
50 to 59	<=5	41
60 and over	<=5	26
Total	23	193

²⁹ See the following inspection reports:

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2023). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Maghaberry Prison. 20 September–6 October 2022.*

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2022). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Magilligan Prison. 21 May–10 June 2021.*

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Hydebank Wood Secure College. 21 May–6 June 2024.*

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Hydebank Wood Women’s Prison. 21 May–6 June 2024.*

³⁰ Department of Justice. (2015). Freedom of Information Request, December 2024, Case No. 15:350.

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/FOI%2015%20350%20%20Number%20of%20transgender%20%26%20transsexual%20prisoners%20from%2011%20Nov%202011-%20Nov%202015.PDF>

³¹ HMPPS Offender Equalities. (2023). Table 2.1, Chapter 2 tables: Transgender prisoners. *Annual Report 2022/23.*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hmpps-offender-equalities-annual-report-2022-to-2023>

³² Scottish Prison Service Quarterly Public Information Page (2023). *Prison by Numbers Quarter 4* (January - March 2023), 1-32. p.11 [https://www.sps.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/Public Information Page %28PIP%29 Quarter 4 20229133_3962.pdf](https://www.sps.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/Public%20Information%20Page%20PIP%29%20Quarter%204%20229133_3962.pdf)

³³ House of Commons Library. (2023). *UK prison population statistics.* Research Briefing SN04334. UK Parliament.

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04334/SN04334.pdf>

³⁴ Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2024). Table 2c. *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2023-24 Report.*

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-prison-population-202324-report>

³⁵ See Maschi, T., Morgen, K., Hintenach, A., & Kaye, A. (2021). Aging in prison and correction policy in global perspectives. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice.*

³⁶ Department of Justice. (2025). Freedom of Information Request, August 2025, Case No: 25:97. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-25-97-Final-reply.pdf>

Characteristics of the overall prison population

Religion and ethnicity

The demographic composition of prisoners is predominantly divided between Catholics and Protestants. During 2023/24, Catholic-identifying individuals represented the largest proportion of the average daily prison population at 52%. Protestant and other Christian-identifying individuals accounted for 32%.³⁷

There is no current data on the ethnic composition of Northern Ireland prisons. However, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency states that the region's ethnic composition is predominantly White (97%).³⁸ There is also limited current information in relation to nationality. However, an FOI in 2025 revealed that those serving indeterminate sentences in Northern Ireland fall into one of four nationalities: British, Irish, Lithuanian and Northern Irish (N.B. citizens of Northern Ireland are entitled to dual nationality, and may choose to identify as British, Irish or Northern Irish).³⁹

Disability

Though disability was not contained in the recent Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) figures, a report from the World Health Organisation in 2023 on prison health revealed that there were 511 disabled prisoners in Northern Ireland (including physical and/or mental impairment).⁴⁰

Deaths in custody

In response to a freedom of information request the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland), noted that 26 deaths in custody had occurred since 2019, two of whom were serving a Life sentence.⁴¹

Long-term prisoner progression

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) reported in 2019 that there were “limited options for prisoner progression in Northern Ireland”.⁴² In its 2023 inspection of HMP Maghaberry, CJINI reiterated concerns about prisoner progression, noting that while some improvements had been made since its previous inspection in 2022, challenges remained.⁴³

The report identified “reasonable progress” in three areas between its 2022 and 2023 inspections:

1. The immediate investigation of deaths in custody;
2. Plans to reduce the demand for and supply of drugs, and assessment of the effectiveness of actions taken; and
3. More consistent access to high-quality education, skills and work activities to meet rehabilitation and resettlement needs.

However, CJINI found “insufficient progress” in the remaining two priority areas of concern:

1. The investigation of safeguarding incidents; and
2. Providing prisoners with effective support throughout their sentence.

While the third area of progress—regular and consistent access to high-quality education, skills and work activities—showed signs of improvement, the report cautioned that “individual prisoner learning and progression planning were still not co-ordinated well enough across the prison function”.⁴⁴ Despite more consistent access to education, skills and work activities, significant shortcomings persisted in rehabilitation and release planning.

37 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2024). *The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2023-24 Report*. p.13.

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-prison-population-202324-report>

38 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. (2021). MS-B01, Census 2021 main statistics ethnicity tables. *Census 2021*.
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/census-2021-main-statistics-ethnicity-tables>

39 Department of Justice. (2025). Freedom of Information Request, August 2025, Case No: 25:97. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-25-97-Final-reply.pdf>

40 World Health Organization. (2023). *Status report on prison health in the WHO European Region 2022*. p.437.
<https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/9789289058674>

41 Department of Justice. (2024). Freedom of Information Request, October 2024, Case No. 24:96. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-24-96-Final-reply.pdf>

42 *Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland*. (2019). An inspection of pre-release testing arrangements within the Northern Ireland Prison Service. p.35.
<https://www.cjini.org/reports/an-inspection-of-pre-release-testing-arrangements-within-the-northern-ireland-prison-service/>

43 *Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland*. (2024). Report of an independent review of progress at Maghaberry Prison.
<https://www.cjini.org/report-category/maghaberry-prison/>

44 Ibid.

In its follow-up inspection of HMP Magilligan, published in 2024, CJINI noted that while “referrals for psychology risk assessments and one-to-one interventions were managed more effectively by [Prisoner Development Unit] leaders...no offending behaviour programmes were offered, which affected the progress that prisoners made during their sentence”.⁴⁵

Women prisoners are housed in five residential units within HMP Hydebank Wood—Ash House, Beech House, the Fern landing, the Primrose Mother and Baby Unit, and Murray House.⁴⁶

An inspection in 2019 of HMP Hydebank Wood found that women were able, and expected, to engage in activity that was likely to benefit them, were prepared for their release into the community, and effectively helped to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.⁴⁷ Inspectors also found that time out of cell was better than in many similar establishments; leaders had successfully established and embedded a culture of mutually respectful and supportive relationships with women; all women participated fully in a broader range of education skills and work activities; and women had good opportunities to develop and apply employability skills.⁴⁸ In relation to indeterminate sentence holders, it was noted:

*At the time of the inspection, there were six life-sentenced prisoners in Ash House, and each had an annual lifer review. Women serving long sentences who had reached their tariff could apply to live at Murray House, a low-supervision unit for prisoners qualified to work outside on ROTL and prepare for independent living. There were limited opportunities for progression for those not eligible.*⁴⁹

Since the 2019 inspection, a strategy for women and girls in or at risk of contact with the justice system has been developed to “provide tailored support in, and beyond custody”.⁵⁰ The strategy acknowledges some of the challenges specific to women in the criminal justice system and contains three priority areas for women in custody and on release, all of which have the ability to impact progression. These include:

- bespoke rehabilitative support and pathways from offending for women within and beyond custody
- a gender and trauma-informed environment and workforce focused on the holistic needs of women
- a collective ethos that women in custody are a part of the community, not apart from the community.⁵¹

In 2024, CJINI returned for an inspection of HMP Hydebank Wood and remarkably, for the first time in Northern Ireland, outcomes for prisoners were rated at the highest achievable level. It scored the top rating of ‘good’ in each of the four healthy prison tests of safety, respect, purposeful activity and preparation for release.⁵² The report made further recommendations for improvements in six areas, including adult safeguarding arrangements and co-ordinating education, skills and work activities and other rehabilitative interventions to optimise engagement.⁵³

45 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). Report of an independent review of progress at Magilligan Prison. p. 20. <https://www.cjini.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Independent-Review-Magilligan-Report-FINAL-Tagged.pdf>

46 Ash House comprises five self-contained sections which facilitate progression. Ash 5 is an enhanced long-term landing without lock-up periods; Ash 3 and Ash 4 house all progressive regimes and earned privileges scheme levels; Ash 2 is an enhanced low-supervision landing where residents remain locked up until 11:00pm; and Ash 1 houses women with mobility issues and women on progressive regimes and earned privileges scheme levels. Beech House, formerly used for the accommodation of young men was redeveloped in 2022 for women. It now contains a women’s Care and Supervision Unit (CSU) and the Lavender Unit, a specialised area to accommodate women with registered disabilities and social care needs. Separated women are housed on the Fern landing, and the Primrose Mother and Baby Unit supports new mothers and expectant mothers in custody. Murray House is a low-supervision unit situated outside of HMP Hydebank Wood containing six bedrooms for women nearing the end of their sentence and working in the community. See, CJINI. (2024c). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Hydebank Wood Women’s Prison*. p.9–10. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-of-hydebank-wood-womens-prison/>

47 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2020). *Report on an Unannounced Inspection Ash House Women’s Prison Hydebank Wood*. p.16. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-ash-house-womens-prison-hydebank-wood/>

48 Ibid.

49 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2020). *Report on an Unannounced Inspection Ash House Women’s Prison Hydebank Wood*. p.54. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-ash-house-womens-prison-hydebank-wood/>

50 Northern Ireland Audit Office. (2023). *Report on reducing adult reoffending in Northern Ireland*. p.41. <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/reducing-adult-reoffending-northern-ireland>

51 Department of Justice Northern Ireland. (2022). *Supporting Change: A strategy for women and girls in or at risk of contact with the justice system*. p.3. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/supporting-change-strategy-women-and-girls-or-risk-contact-justice-system>

52 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Hydebank Wood Secure College*. p.4. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-of-hydebank-wood-secure-college/>

53 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Hydebank Wood Secure College*. p.7. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-of-hydebank-wood-secure-college/>

Overall, while improvements have been made in all three estates, especially for women, systemic issues impacting prisoner progression remain. Risk is a key barrier to prisoner progression, and recent inspections by CJINI have identified staffing shortages and overcrowding as significant contributing factors. These issues prevent prisoners from attending key programmes and activities that demonstrate their engagement, build responsibility, and support efforts to reduce their assessed risk.

Section 4: Parole and recall processes

The Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland (Parole Commissioners NI) are quasi-judicial decision-makers, governed by The Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 and the Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009.⁵⁴ The body is instrumental in prisoners' parole and recall processes in Northern Ireland.

The stages of the parole process

The parole process begins with a referral from the prison service to the Commissioners for consideration approximately six months before a prisoner's tariff expiry date or the parole eligibility date (see Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009). A Notice of Referral is then issued to the prisoner advising of the referral and containing an action plan with key dates to be adhered to before the tariff expiry or parole eligibility date. Within eight weeks of the Notice of Referral, the prison service will provide the prisoner, their representative, and the Commissioners with a copy of a "dossier" that includes all relevant information regarding the prisoner's suitability for release.⁵⁵

The parole process has two stages: the single Commissioner stage, and the paper or oral hearing by a panel of three Commissioners. At the single Commissioner preliminary stage, one Commissioner will consider the case, and provide one of three outcomes: that the individual should be released; that the individual should remain in custody; or, that a panel of three Commissioners should consider the case. When the single Commissioner has considered the case, the applicant will receive a copy of the decision and rationale.

In cases involving lifers, Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS) cases, and Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS) cases, the panel is made up of three Commissioners, one of which is usually a psychologist or psychiatrist.⁵⁶ In cases involving Determinate Custodial Sentences the panel is usually made up of two Commissioners. If Commissioners determine that the level of risk the prisoner poses is no more than minimal, it must direct that the prisoner is released, and the prison service must comply with this direction. However, where the panel is not satisfied that the level of risk the prisoner poses is minimal, it must direct that no release should be granted. Reasons for either decision are required to be produced in writing and cannot be challenged on appeal. However, the prisoner or the prison service can initiate judicial review.⁵⁷

Parole outcomes

In October 2024, CJINI published its inspection of the Governance and Operation of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland, within which case management, risk management and operational support were examined. The inspection found that:

*There was no strategic vision, ownership and accountability for the parole system including of the Parole Commissioners of Northern Ireland. The role and function of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland was not fully understood within the Department of Justice's sponsoring division. Risk management arrangements were confusing and not effective.*⁵⁸

The inspection praised the lack of backlog in cases despite the fact that in the 10 years since the last inspection, the number of referrals had increased significantly - "well beyond the numbers projected when the new sentencing framework was first introduced."⁵⁹ However, it was highlighted that available data mainly reported on case progression rather than outcomes and that, upon analysis of release outcomes, the proportion of decisions for release in Northern Ireland had reduced and was lower than in other jurisdictions in the UK. Further, it deemed the persistent levels of recalls and proportion of work and prison

54 Parole Commissioner for Northern Ireland. (2024). *Annual report 2023-24*. https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/files/parolecomni/2024-07/Parole%20Commissioners%20Annual%20Report%202023-24%20-%20Final_0.PDF

55 See For a detailed breakdown of each stage of the parole process, see *Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009*, Part Four.

56 See, The Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland. (2018). *The Parole Review Process, A step-by-step guide for prisoners serving a Life or Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS)*. <https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/publications/indeterminate-custodial-sentence-guides> see also, The Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland. (2018). *The Parole Review Process, A step-by-step guide for prisoners serving an Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS)*. <https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/publications/extended-custodial-sentence-guides>

57 See for further detail Parole Commissioner for Northern Ireland. (2024). *Annual report 2023-24*. https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/files/parolecomni/2024-07/Parole%20Commissioners%20Annual%20Report%202023-24%20-%20Final_0.PDF

58 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *An inspection of the governance and operation of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland*. p.7. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/the-governance-and-operation-of-the-parole-commissioners-for-northern-ireland/>

59 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *An inspection of the governance and operation of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland*. p.8. <https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Inspection-Reports/2024/Oct-Dec/The-Governance-and-Operation-of-the-Parole-Commiss>

places this accounted for to be “concerning”.⁶⁰ It highlighted that “the low prospect of re-release was reflected in conversations with prisoners who expressed a sense of hopelessness about the outcome of the recall process and single Commissioner stage more generally”.⁶¹ Statistical findings from the inspection are discussed below.

Statistics on parole

CJINI found that a snapshot of the prison population on 1 April 2024 showed “40% of sentenced prisoners were currently subject to or had been subject to a parole review; one-third of those serving life, an ICS or ECS sentence were post tariff or parole eligibility date; just under one-fifth of sentenced prisoners (18%) had been or were subject to recall proceedings; and those serving DCS sentences made up the greatest proportion of prisoners who had been recalled to custody (79%)”.⁶²

It noted the difficulty in comparing current and former data due to the change in classification from recalls and revocation of licence offences as ‘Other Offences’ in the official prison population statistics to ‘Public Order Offences’.⁶³ In the five years from 2019-20 to 2023-24 it reported that the overall number and proportion of release decisions had decreased from 61 (27%) to 51 (19%); that the reduction in the number and proportion of release decisions was evident for the main case types that is the release of life, ICS and ECS cases; and was most pronounced over that period for the re-release of DCS cases following recall – from 39% in 2019-20 to 25% in 2023-24.⁶⁴

Recall process

The recall process begins with the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland), which can submit a request to the Commissioner for a recommendation on the revocation of a licence where there is evidence of an increase in the risk of serious harm to the public. The Commissioner can then recommend whether an individual is recalled. This decision is subsequently submitted to the Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) for ruling. Following recall, the Parole Commissioners may consider re-release.⁶⁵ The rate of release following recall was a concern raised in CJINI’s 2016 report on the impact of prisoner recalls on the criminal justice system and was again raised in CJINI’s most recent report.⁶⁶

The Parole Commissioner NI Annual Report 2023-24 documented “an increase of 2% in new referrals (10 cases) and an increase in recall requests of 6% (12 cases)” in 2023-24. It also noted an increase in the recall reviews of 8% (14 cases). In contrast, the number of further reviews remained the same as the previous year (70 cases).⁶⁷ The Report indicated that the number of recall recommendations issued in 2023-24 increased by 7% (14 cases) and this included “three Lifer recalls, an increase of 50% (3 cases) on last year; ECS/ICS recalls increased by 6% (1 case) and DCS recalls increased by 9% (16 cases)”. There were 217 recall requests in 2023-24, showing “an increase of 6% (five cases) on the previous year’s requests”.⁶⁸

CJINI reports that the average proportion of recall referrals to the Police Commissioners of Northern Ireland over the past five years from 2019-20 to 2023-24 accounted for 68% of all referrals.⁶⁹ The Parole Commissioner for Northern Ireland reported that in Determinate Custodial Sentence recall reviews 56% of the cases completed in the year 2023-24 were completed at the single Commissioner stage without reference to a panel. This marked an increase of five percentage points on the previous year’s figure of 51%.⁷⁰

60 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *An inspection of the governance and operation of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland*. p.9.

<https://www.cjini.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/CJI-Parole-Commissioners-FINAL-Tagged.pdf>

61 Ibid, p.51.

62 Ibid, p.50.

63 Ibid, p.50.

64 Ibid, p.50.

65 For a detailed account of the recall process in NI, see <https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/recalls>

66 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *An inspection of the governance and operation of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland*. p.52.

<https://www.cjini.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/CJI-Parole-Commissioners-FINAL-Tagged.pdf>

67 Parole Commissioner for Northern Ireland. (2024). *Annual report 2023-24*. p.11. https://www.parolecomni.org.uk/files/parolecomni/2024-07/Parole%20Commissioners%20Annual%20Report%202023-24%20-%20Final_0.PDF

68 Ibid, p.11.

69 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *An inspection of the governance and operation of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland*. p.52.

<https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Inspection-Reports/2024/Oct-Dec/The-Governance-and-Operation-of-the-Parole-Commis>

70 Parole Commissioner for Northern Ireland. (2024). *Annual report 2023-24*. p.11.

Personal and social circumstances leading to recall decisions

If a life-sentence holder reoffends, breaches their licence, or poses an increased threat to the public, they can be recalled. Understanding the journey to recall and the complexities involved in any of the three outcomes requires appreciation of the nuance in personal and social circumstances. Consideration, for instance, should be given to the role of homelessness, access to healthcare, social stigma, lack of educational attainment and employment.

In 2015, The Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) published “Supporting change: a strategic approach to desistance”, which highlighted the need to do more to support individuals in custody and community settings by way of continuity of care and practical support. The report noted:

*Many individuals who have offended present with multiple and complex needs including homelessness, substance abuse, mental ill-health, unemployment and poor educational attainment. Without addressing some of these issues collectively individuals may encounter setbacks on their desistance journey.*⁷¹

Its suggested priorities included developing support in the areas of employment, families and mentoring.⁷² The report also noted that stigma and public perception remained an issue, stressing the need to challenge public perceptions of crime, desistance, resettlement and barriers to reoffending.⁷³ The following year, the CJINI published its report on the impact of prisoner recalls on the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland where it highlighted:

*A study of a small cohort of released and subsequently recalled offenders presented some evidence of the range of pressures faced by offenders released into the community such as lack of accommodation, drug/ alcohol problems, health and family issues and poor employment prospects. Although there were a range of remedies offered, pressure on resources, difficulty in entering employment, accessing medical care and getting suitable residential accommodation were seen as barriers to offenders’ efforts in resisting recall to prison.*⁷⁴

Almost a decade later, the same barriers to freedom remain. Comparatively, “entrenched patterns of behaviour underpinned by addiction and welfare problems” have been acknowledged as potential contributing factors to recall in England and Wales.⁷⁵ This view has been echoed by the Prison Reform Trust in 2020 in its research involving recalled IPP prisoners, their experiences on licence and in custody, and their high recall rate.⁷⁶

Housing and homelessness remain among the most significant contributors to the likelihood of recall in Northern Ireland. In 2023, a Protocol for the Management of the Accommodation and Related Support Needs of People in Custody in Northern Ireland was published. It acknowledged the findings in both reports, and once again emphasised the role of accommodation and “the anchor it can provide for someone who has previously led a chaotic life”.⁷⁷ The report recognised the need to:

- create a formal framework for inter-agency cooperation in the delivery of accommodation and support services to people entering or leaving custody;
- prevent homelessness by ensuring improved access to a wider range of accommodation for those leaving custody to reduce the number of people released without suitable accommodation; and
- provide an effective range of accommodation options for people leaving custody appropriate to their needs and the concerns of the public.⁷⁸

Partnering organisations include the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Probation Board Northern Ireland, Homeless Connect, Housing Rights, NIACRO, and the

71 Department of Justice. (2015). *Supporting Change: A strategic approach to desistance*. p.13. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/supporting-change-strategic-approach-desistance>

72 Ibid, p.13.

73 Ibid, p.14.

74 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2016). *The impact of prisoner recalls on the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland*. p.7. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/prisoner-recalls/>

75 Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation. (2020). *2019/2020 Annual Report: inspections of probation services*. p.18. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221201150732/https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/12/2019-2020-Annual-Report-Inspection-of-probation-services-1.pdf>

76 See: Edgar, K., Harris, M., & Webster, R. (2020). *No life, no freedom, no future: The experiences of prisoners recalled under the sentence of imprisonment for public protection*. Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/old_files/Documents/no%20freedom_final_web.pdf

77 NI Housing Executive, NI Prison Service, Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Homeless Connect, Housing Rights, NI Association for the Care & Resettlement of Offenders, Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations. (2023). *A protocol for the management of the accommodation and related support needs of people in custody in Northern Ireland*. p.6.

78 Ibid, pp. 6-7.

Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations.⁷⁹ With regard to individual post-sentence or at recall, the report stressed the need for effective intervention specifically, within 48 hours to maintain tenancy in the short term.⁸⁰ Further, it stated that at the end of a sentence, ensuring appropriate accommodation (either temporary or permanent) and associated support services are in place for individuals leaving custody, in addition to information for individuals relating to housing issues, should be prioritised. The report generated a time scale and required actions along with agencies and partnering agencies involved in each stage of the process⁸¹ and a Beyond the Gate protocol.⁸² More recently, the Simon Community found that homelessness remains one of the biggest barriers, and that released individuals are among the most vulnerable and at an increased risk because they have been rejected by family (and society). As such, while significant efforts have been made to address homelessness and associated issues, further support is necessary to support a reduction in rates of recall where the reason for recall is related to housing.⁸³

79 Ibid, p.12.

80 Ibid, p.17.

81 Ibid, p.23.

82 Ibid, p.25.

83 The Simon Community. (2024). *'Hidden' homelessness in Northern Ireland.*

<https://simoncommunity.org/homelessness/knowledge-hub/hidden-homelessness>

Section 5: Resettlement pathways for lifers

The Department of Justice (Northern Ireland) identifies nine key Resettlement Pathways designed to promote the resettlement and rehabilitation of people in custody. These include: Accommodation; Education, Training and Employment; Health – Mental and Physical; Drugs and Alcohol; Finance, Benefits and Debt; Children, Families and Communities; Attitudes, Thinking and Behaviours; Supporting offenders who have been abused, raped or who have experienced domestic violence; and, Supporting offenders who have been involved in prostitution and the Sex Industry.⁸⁴ In line with these pathways, the Prisoner Development Unit (PDU) applies the same five-stage process to all prisoners. Upon committal, each prisoner undergoes an interview and is allocated a Prisoner Development Plan (PDP) Co-ordinator. A needs profile is then completed within 30 working days which takes into consideration individual needs under the nine resettlement pathways. A Prisoner Development Plan is then completed within 40 working days, and this is subject to review every six months.⁸⁵

Among the known challenges to the resettlement of prisoners are homelessness, access to healthcare, and ongoing problems with addiction. However, a challenge relatively unique to the life-sentence population is programme timing. In 2018, CJINI published its report on the resettlement of offenders where it found, “delays in addressing offending behaviour not only reduced the likelihood of prisoners being released on their tariff date, but also meant their entrenched views could remain unchallenged for many years after sentence.” The report emphasised “the timing of interventions was an area which still needed to be addressed, particularly for life and ICS prisoners”.⁸⁶ Encouragingly, more recently, CJINI reported that “indeterminate and life sentenced prisoners ... were supported both during their sentence and as they prepared for release”.⁸⁷ Further, in HMP Magilligan, CJINI reported, “development opportunities to prepare prisoners reaching the end of their sentence for work were meaningful and matched to prisoners’ individual needs and interests.”⁸⁸ However, progress made on CJINI’s recommendation for leaders to increase the number and quality of work activities for prisoners and ensure suitable access to relevant qualifications and accreditation, to improve their future opportunities for employment and/or further training was still found to be insufficient.⁸⁹ In 2024 the Probation Board for Northern Ireland published its Guide to Group Work Programmes and Individual Interventions within which it detailed timelines and criteria for entry onto each programme. It has also initiated the Through the Gate Programme which intends to improve resettlement and reduce the potential for return to custody for those transitioning from custody back into their community.⁹⁰

In relation to the unique challenges faced by the women in prison, in 2010 the Northern Ireland Prison Service published its report on life sentenced prisoners. It noted that life sentenced prisoners, due to the length of their sentence, have different overall needs to those serving shorter sentences. It also indicated that women sentenced to life imprisonment can feel isolated and different from other prisoners. The report considered that the differences in the housing of women in Northern Ireland - in comparison with the housing of women prisoners in England and Wales - could create difficulties for life-sentence prisoners in terms of their progression as they are located in the same space as the short-term prisoners. A further limitation due to the environmental concern was that close relationships can form quickly and the breakdown of those relationships can have traumatic results for all involved, including staff.⁹¹ These challenges remain. Though there are now five areas within HMP Hydebank Wood where women are accommodated, and facilities have improved, the women’s estate has not significantly changed.

A gender responsive approach has since been recommended by CJINI in its report “How the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland treats females in conflict with the law”.⁹² Recommended processes are aimed at effectively supporting women Lifers who have specific rehabilitative needs, needs related to trauma, pathways to crime, caregiving responsibilities, and health care requirements.

84 Department of Justice. (2025). Freedom of Information Request, August 2025, Case No: 25:97. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-25-97-Final-reply.pdf>

85 Department of Justice. (2025). Freedom of Information Request, August 2025, Case No: 25:97. Full details of this FOI can be found on the PRT website. <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/FOI-Case-No.-25-97-Final-reply.pdf>

86 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2018). *An Inspection of Resettlement in the Northern Ireland Prison Service*. p.49. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/an-inspection-of-resettlement-in-the-northern-ireland-prison-service/>

87 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2018). *An Inspection of Resettlement in the Northern Ireland Prison Service*. p.4. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/an-inspection-of-resettlement-in-the-northern-ireland-prison-service/>

88 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2024). *Report of an Independent Review of Progress (IRP) at Magilligan Prison*. p.17. <https://www.cjini.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Independent-Review-Magilligan-Report-FINAL-Tagged.pdf>

89 Ibid, p.17.

90 For further information see, Probation Board for Northern Ireland. (2014). *Through the Gate Programme 2024-2026 – Programme specification and application*. <https://www.pbni.org.uk/publication/through-gate-programme-2024-2026-programme-specification-and-application>

91 Northern Ireland Prison Service. (2010). *Northern Ireland Prison Service Gender-specific Standards for Working with Women Prisoners*. Belfast: NIPS.

92 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2021). *How the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland treats females in conflict with the law*. p.23. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/how-the-criminal-justice-system-in-northern-ireland-treats-females-in-conflict-with-the-law/>

Supporting prisoner needs in Northern Ireland

Mental health needs

In the broader context of the United Kingdom, it is well-established that custodial settings do not support the needs of the prison population.⁹³ The prison itself is acknowledged to be a non-safe space that increases the risk of mental ill health⁹⁴ through, for instance, the rupturing of family ties⁹⁵, lack of access to any pro-social meaningful entities in the community, long periods of isolation, and overcrowding.⁹⁶ Collectively, these factors contribute to an environment that isolates prisoners from opportunities to normalise meaningful interpersonal communication and reduces opportunities for purposeful group activity and any sense of belonging to a broader pro-social network. The prevalence of mental health disorders among the prison population is disproportionately higher than in the general population⁹⁷ and at the local level in Northern Ireland, the mental ill health of prisoners remains one of the most significant challenges.

In 2023, the NIAO reported that 45% of offenders assessed by the PBNI between 2017-21 had “some level of mental health issues which contributed to their offending”.⁹⁸ As such, the impact of long and indeterminate sentencing on individuals is of great concern, particularly where issues have been identified, and adequate support is still lacking.

The Towards Zero Suicide Initiative, the Forensic Managed Care Network, and Supporting People at Risk (SPAR) all share similar aims with regard to the preservation of mental health. The Towards Zero Suicide Initiative acknowledges that Northern Ireland has one of the highest suicide rates in the UK and that prisoners face mental health challenges, social isolation, and the stress of imprisonment, all of which can increase the risk of suicide. The organisation focuses on eliminating the gaps in the delivery of healthcare and provides information and support for prisoners.⁹⁹

Similarly, the Forensic Managed Care Network in Northern Ireland’s prisons is a specialised framework designed to provide coordinated and comprehensive mental health care for individuals within the criminal justice system, particularly those with complex mental health needs.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Supporting People at Risk (SPAR) is a protocol implemented in Northern Ireland’s prisons to identify, monitor, and support prisoners at risk of self-harm or suicide and provide necessary care and intervention. It has been viewed as a favourable addition to the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. However, it has been cautioned that further supporting mechanisms need to be in place if it is to function to its full capacity.¹⁰¹

Addiction

In an unannounced inspection in 2019, in the women’s estate within HMP Hydebank Wood (Ash House), it was reported that a “key concern was that the strategy to reduce the supply of illicit drugs and prescribed medicines in the establishment was not sufficiently robust, given that they were easily available. Too many women were testing positive for drugs, and when intelligence was acted on, finds of illicit substances were frequent”.¹⁰² More recently, in 2023, the CJI’s report on HMP Maghaberry indicated a serious drug problem, and in CJNI’s 2022 report on HMP Magilligan, a key concern was that Illicit drugs and diverted prescribed medications were easily available.^{103 104}

Supporting internal services include the Northern Ireland Prison Service’s Alcohol and Drugs: Empowering

93 Piper, M., Forrester, A., & Shaw, J. (2019). Prison healthcare services: The need for political courage. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 215(4), 579–581.

94 Goomany, A. & Dickinson, T. (2015). The influence of prison climate on the mental health of adult prisoners: a literature review. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 22(6), 413–422.

95 See Harner, H.M. & Riley, S. (2013). The impact of incarceration on women’s mental health: Responses from women in a maximum-security prison. *Qualitative Health Research*, 23(1), 26-42.

96 House of Commons Library. (2023). *UK prison population statistics*. Research Briefing SN04334. UK Parliament. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04334/SN04334.pdf>

97 Lester, Carolyn & Hamilton-Kirkwood, L. & Jones, N. (2003). Health indicators in a prison population: Asking prisoners. *Health Education Journal*, 62, 341–349.

98 Northern Ireland Audit Office. (2023). *Report on reducing adult reoffending in Northern Ireland*. NIAO. p.11. <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/reducing-adult-reoffending-northern-ireland>

99 Ibid, p.11.

100 See McCartan, C., Davidson, G., Burns, R. & Leavey, G. (2021). *Forensic Services: Rapid Review Report*. https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/293466179/Forensic_Rapid_Review_Report_November_2021.pdf

101 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. (2019). *The safety of prisoners held by the Northern Ireland Prison Service*. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/a-joint-inspection-by-criminal-justice-inspection-regulation-and-quality-improvement-authority/>

102 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2020). *Report on an unannounced inspection of Ash House Women’s Prison, Hydebank Wood*. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/report-on-an-unannounced-inspection-ash-house-womens-prison-hydebank-wood/>

103 Ibid.

104 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2022). *An unannounced inspection of Magilligan Prison*. <https://www.cjini.org/reports/an-unannounced-inspection-of-magilligan-prison/>

People through Therapy (AD:EPT) programme. While recommendations have been made in all three prisons to address drug availability, the underlying causes of addiction must be addressed, and these should not be viewed as separate issues. Understanding the nexus between addiction, mental ill health, PTSD, and the impact of the pains of imprisonment is necessary and key to improving the situation for the long-term prison population in Northern Ireland.

Loneliness, inclusion and belonging

Though research has sought to better understand experiences of loneliness in the long-term prison population, there is limited available information specific to the impact of loneliness in the Northern Ireland prison population.¹⁰⁵ However, recent research in Northern Ireland has determined that crime-related trauma experiences were associated with higher reports of loneliness.¹⁰⁶

The need to better understand the nuances and impact of loneliness in carceral spaces has long been stressed,¹⁰⁷ and The Prison Foundation Northern Ireland recognises this view. This organisation regularly visits prisoners in Northern Ireland across all three estates to combat loneliness, fear, and despair. In the last year, it reports that 5,616 visits were made to 1,871 individuals.¹⁰⁸ It also provides post-prison support to individuals through its Aftercare, Christmas Hope, and Sycamore Tree programmes.¹⁰⁹

Faith-based support for lifers in Northern Ireland prisons also plays a significant role in providing emotional, spiritual, and practical assistance.¹¹⁰ These services are typically offered by chaplaincy teams and faith-based organisations working within the prison system to help individuals cope with the challenges of long-term imprisonment.¹¹¹

Education and skills development

Education plays an integral role in the well-being of prisoners in Northern Ireland in terms of reintegration, peace-building, and social inclusion.¹¹² However, access to education in prison is not always guaranteed. Mental ill health, substance misuse and addiction, and delays in accessing healthcare can all impact one's ability and willingness to engage in education. Understaffing can also have a practical impact on people in prison, namely whether they can physically attend a class. In 2023, CJINI found that staffing difficulties within prison meant that the delivery of education and training was inconsistent, it noted,

“Due largely to the Northern Ireland Prison Service staffing constraints, the very good resources available in the learning and skills centre were largely underused and stop-start delivery over an extended period had affected planning, delivery and progression, particularly for practical activities.”¹¹³

CJINI also noted, that “sessions were often cancelled because Prison Officers had been deployed to other work” and this also amounted to a “lack of gym provision at the weekends and poor access to the library”.¹¹⁴ As such, staff availability can negatively impact educational progress, wellbeing and coping strategies more generally.

Though internally a diverse curriculum is offered by the Belfast Metropolitan College to prisons in Northern Ireland, there are various external organisations which contribute to improving access to education and experiential learning opportunities for prisoners, such as the prison-university partnerships run both in Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast. Further, research indicates the benefits of the

105 Hulley, S., Crewe, B. & Wright, S. (2016). Re-examining the problems of long-term imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology*, 56(4), 769-792.

106 McFadden, D., Davidson, G. & Butler, M. (2024). Social support and trauma experiences of imprisoned men in Northern Ireland. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 95, 1-13.

107 See Schliehe, A., Laursen, J. & Crewe, B. (2022). Loneliness in prison. *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(6), 1595-1614.

108 Including 2,417 visits to 806 men in HMP Maghaberry, 2,524 visits to 841 men in HMP Magilligan, 325 visits to 108 young people in HMP Hydebank Wood and 350 visits to 116 women in Ash House. For further information see, Prison Fellowship Northern Ireland. (n.d.). *Prison work*. <https://www.pfni.org/prison-work-2/>

109 For further discussion, see Payne, B., Conway, V., Bell, C., Falk, A., Flynn, H., McNeil, C. & Rice, F. (2010). *Restorative practices in Northern Ireland: a mapping exercise*. In a report commissioned by the Restorative Justice Forum (NI) and prepared by the School of Law, Queen's University, Belfast. <https://www.niacro.co.uk/sites/default/files/Mapping%20Report%20-%20Restorative%20Practices%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%2C%20Nov%202010.pdf>

110 See, Department of Justice. (NI). *Chaplaincy*. <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/chaplaincy>

111 See Orr, S. (2024). Meeting face to face: The essential role of the prison chaplain. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 113(450), 217-227.

112 Weinbren, D. (2020). Learning to live together? The Open University, student-prisoners and 'the Troubles'. *Family & Community History*, 23(1), 4-22. and Finlay, J. (2020). *Exploring the library's role in the learning experiences of people in prison: Insights from Northern Ireland and Scotland*. [Doctoral dissertation, Ulster University].

113 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2023). Report on an unannounced inspection of Maghaberry Prison. p.18. <https://www.cjini.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Maghaberry-Report-Tagged.pdf>

114 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland. (2023). Report on an unannounced inspection of Maghaberry Prison. p.4 <https://www.cjini.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Maghaberry-Report-Tagged.pdf>

arts on rehabilitation, desistance and prison learning.¹¹⁵ For instance, there is evidence that diversity in prison programmes, particularly those relating to arts, can positively impact literacy skills.¹¹⁶ This can be seen locally in Northern Ireland through internal monitoring and evaluation reports by the Prison Arts Foundation.¹¹⁷ In an evaluation of the Prison Arts Foundation's Traveller Community Project 2019, 71% of those surveyed indicated that "they felt more confident, creative, and able to express themselves, happier and more a part of Learning & Skills in HMP Maghaberry".¹¹⁸

The Prison Arts Foundation is primarily active in two key areas: within prisons and secure settings, and through community programs. The Foundation reports that participation has positively impacted not only prisoners but also their families, communities, and the staff working within the criminal justice system and other related institutions.¹¹⁹ Key highlights within the Prison Arts Network annual report 2021-22 include: awards from prisoners within HMP Magilligan in the Reading Agency and Picador Short Story writing competition;¹²⁰ awards in the Listowel Writing in Prison competition;¹²¹ artwork selected by a student in HMP Hydebank Wood by the Koestler Arts and the National Justice Museum staff for the annual review cover art of 'The Virus'; multiple awards from the Koestler Arts across all three prisons;¹²² Art and Skill programmes for high-risk female prisoners in HMP Hydebank Wood;¹²³ and, a cross border production written and illustrated anonymously by prisoners for prisoners, reflecting the prisoner experience.¹²⁴

The Prison Arts Foundation also supports the older prisoner population in HMP Maghaberry and, therefore, seeks to combat some of the challenges associated with the ageing prison population, such as a loss of purpose, role and identity. The Older Prisoner Project showcased its Tipping the Balance exhibition in March 2022. The group is also known as the TMB Club (too many birthdays), and it creates artwork for the entrance lobby of the hostels in Northern Ireland that house former prisoners post-release.¹²⁵ Research into the ageing prison population has called for the special recognition of older former politically motivated prisoners as "an 'at risk' group of older people in Northern Ireland for both social exclusion and mental ill health".¹²⁶ Though this recommendation was made in 2010, reports of the rate of mental ill health in Northern Ireland remain high.¹²⁷

The impact of the legacy of the past

It has been noted that the legacy of the past impacts offender management, specifically in the management and support of rehabilitation, which is complex.¹²⁸ The Prisons Memory Archive provided a 'multi-narrative' collection, inviting former political prisoners to share their stories, experiences, and shared trauma relating to the legacy of the past.¹²⁹ Though the Prisons Memory Archive intended to provide a platform for ex-prisoner narratives, as Anderson notes, "it developed into a technology of remembering the multiple realities within a society of contested truth, it also unintentionally became an informal tool for transitional justice".¹³⁰ As such, this organisation has helped current and former prisoners in an abstract but meaningful way.

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- 115 See McNeill, F., Anderson, K., Colvin, S., Overy, K., Sparks, R. & Tett, L. (2011). 'Kunstprojecten en What Works; een stimulans voor desistance?' (Trans. 'Inspiring Desistance? Arts projects and 'What works?'). *Justitiële Verkenningen*, 37(5), 80-101. And Bilby, C., Caulfield, L. & Ridley, L. (2013). *Re-imagining futures: Exploring arts interventions and the process of desistance*. Arts Alliance.
https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/13512061/0_1593_kunstprojectenenwhatworkseenstimulansvoo.pdf
- 116 Tett, L., Anderson, K., McNeill, F., Overy, K. & Sparks, R. (2012) Learning, rehabilitation and the arts in prisons: a Scottish case study. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 44(2), 171-185.
- 117 See Prison Arts Foundation. (2019). Internal Monitoring & Evaluation Report – Community Arts Mentoring Pilot. And Prison Arts Foundation. (2022). Annual Review 2021/22.
- 118 Prison Arts Foundation. (2019). *Internal Monitoring & Evaluation Report – Community Arts Mentoring Pilot*. p.3.
- 119 Prison Arts Foundation. (2022). *Annual Review 2021/22*.
- 120 Ibid, p.11.
- 121 Ibid, p.15.
- 122 Ibid, pp.15-19.
- 123 Ibid, p.22.
- 124 Ibid, pp.22-23.
- 125 Ibid, p.27.
- 126 see Jamieson, R., Shirlow, P. and Grounds, A., (2010). *Ageing and social exclusion among former politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland and the border region of Ireland*. Changing Age Partnership. p.8.
<https://irishcriminologyresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/cap-reportfinal-jamieson-et-al.pdf>
- 127 Northern Ireland Audit Office. (2019). *Mental Health in the Criminal Justice System*.
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/html-document/mental-health-criminal-justice-system>
- 128 Northern Ireland Audit Office. (2023). *Report on reducing adult reoffending in Northern Ireland*. NIAO. p.13.
<https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/reducing-adult-reoffending-northern-ireland>
- 129 See McLaughlin, C. (2016). Stories from Inside: The Prisons Memory Archive. In *Post-Conflict Literature* (pp. 69-80). Routledge.
- 130 Anderson, M. E. (2019). Community-based transitional justice via the creation and consumption of digitalized storytelling archives: A case study of Belfast's prisons memory archive. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 13(1), 30-49. p.31.

Other organisations, such as EPIC and Coiste na nIarchimí, provide support for former politically motivated prisoners. Both provide advocacy, representation, and community engagement and facilitate peacebuilding through dialogue.¹³¹ However, in this post conflict society, “where the prevalence of PTSD is the highest of all countries that have produced comparable estimates including the USA, other Western European countries and countries that have experienced civil conflict in their recent history” there is a need to acknowledge this through the provision of greater formal support for prisoners in Northern Ireland.¹³²

Conclusion

This report has emphasised that current prison conditions in Northern Ireland, parole and recall processes do not fully account for the unique political and cultural issues faced by long-term prisoners. Significant change cannot be achieved without factoring in legacy. While life-sentences may be appropriate, the settings within which individuals are expected to serve them are not conducive to supporting their complex needs, and this is particularly relevant to the long-term prison population.

Regarding progression, this report has highlighted instances of limitations to effective support; shortfalls in access to education, skills, and work activities; and difficulty in accessing behavioural programmes which can impact progression. It has also noted that while there is unequivocal evidence of good practice in HMP Maghaberry and HMP Magilligan, and remarkable developments in HMP Hydebank Wood, there is still scope to improve adult safeguarding and the coordination of activities to optimise engagement. This indicates that even in the highest performing estates, there is still space to improve and better support the prison population.

Risk remains one of the biggest inhibitors to access to education in addition to a lack of staffing and overcrowding. The report noted the relationship between attending programs aimed at reducing risk and their subsequent impact on parole processes, which also consider risk factors. It has highlighted that the low-prospect of re-release impacts prisoner morale.

In relation to recall, the report outlined nuances in personal and social circumstances – for instance, homelessness, access to healthcare, social stigma, educational attainment and employment. It reiterated findings from reports published in 2015 and 2016, which documented the complex needs of people in prison and emphasised that failure to address these issues could lead to setbacks in their journey to desistance. It further noted that CJINI in the following year commented that while supporting mechanisms had been put in place, the pressure on resources, difficulty in securing employment, difficulty accessing medical care, and difficulty finding accommodation were seen as barriers to avoiding recall. The report indicated that there has been societal and organisational awareness of the key issues released individuals face for some time.

In relation to resettlement, the report highlighted the need to ensure the quality of work activities and equitable access to relevant qualifications and accreditation in prison. Life sentence holders have different overall needs, and for women, adequate progression was not possible despite the physical changes to the prison estate.

Concerning mental ill health, the report acknowledged that further supporting measures to help intervention programmes function at full capacity are needed and, in relation to addiction, the underlying causes must be addressed. It supported the view that improved communication between services could facilitate this aim.

The report also discussed aspects of loneliness inclusion and belonging it suggested that this is connected to trauma, rates of which are known to be particularly high in Northern Ireland.

While there is much evidence of good practice as highlighted with CJINI’s independent inspections, more needs to be done to support the long-term prisoner population. As the prison population is at an all-time high, and the difficulty in meeting the needs of this rising population has already been stressed, this will be a challenge. While the Department of Justice NI’s strategic themes and the priorities outlined in the ‘Prisons 25by25’ initiative indicate a recognition of some of the challenges faced by prisoners, there remains a significant gap between policy aspirations and the current realities of the prison system. Addressing this gap requires a shift in the way long-term imprisonment is approached in a post-conflict society.

131 see Okado-Gough, D. (2020). *Coiste na n-Iarchimí (the Irish Republican Army ex-prisoners network) and the Limitations of Hybrid Peacebuilding in Ireland*. [Doctoral dissertation, Doshisha University].

132 see Robinson, M. (2020). *A quantitative investigation of complex post-traumatic stress disorder among military veterans in Northern Ireland*. [Doctoral dissertation, Queen’s University Belfast]. And Bamford Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing at the University of Ulster in partnership with the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma & Transformation and Compass. (2011). *Troubled consequences: A report on the mental health impact of the civil conflict in Northern Ireland*. <https://www.cvsni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2011-Research-Troubled-Consequences-A-Report-on-the-Mental-Health-Impact-of-the-Civil-Conflict-in-Northern-Ireland.pdf>

Glossary

AO	Adult Offenders.
CJINI	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
DoJ	Department of Justice (Northern Ireland)
ECS	Extended Custodial Sentence
GFA	The Good Friday Agreement 1998/The Belfast Agreement/ The Agreement.
GRC	Gender Recognition Certificate
H-Block	Buildings constructed on the prison estate resembling the letter 'H'
HMPS	His Majesty's Prison Service
HMP Maze/The Maze	The Maze Prison
ICS	Indeterminate Custodial Sentence
IMC	Independent Monitoring Commission
IPP	Imprisonment for Public Prosecution
Internment	Internment without trial/Operation Demetrius was introduced in Northern Ireland in 1971 by the Unionist government and the sixth and last prime minister of Northern Ireland, Brian Faulkner. It involved the mass arrest of members of the nationalist community by the British Army.
Long Kesh	The location of the Maze prison and original name
Loyalist	Loyalist is taken to mean a British-identifying individual seeking to remain a part of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, i.e. one who does not advocate for a united Ireland
Nationalist	Nationalist is taken to mean an Irish-identifying individual seeking to unite the six counties of the North and the 26 counties of the South as one 'united Ireland' peacefully and democratically (i.e. without the use of force)
NICTS	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
NIACRO	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
NIHRC	Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
NI	Northern Ireland
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIPS	Northern Ireland Prison Service
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
ODCs	Ordinary Decent Criminals
OFMDFM	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland
OLR	Order for Lifelong Restriction
PBNI	Probation Board Northern Ireland
POA	Prison Officers' Association

PONI	The Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland (formerly the Royal Ulster Constabulary/RUC)
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
Republican	Republican is taken to mean an Irish-identifying individual seeking to unite the six counties of the North and the 26 counties of the South as one 'united Ireland' if necessary by force
ROI	Republic of Ireland
SPAR	Supporting Prisoners at Risk
ROTL	Released on Temporary Licence
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary (since replaced by the PSNI)
The Troubles	Collective term for the civil war in Northern Ireland beginning in the late 1960s
Unionist	A Unionist is an individual seeking to remain a part of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, i.e. one who does not advocate for a united Ireland

References

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The Government of Ireland Act 1920
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The Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 2006
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The Legacy Act (NI) 2023
The Magistrates' Court (NI) Order 1981
The Northern Ireland Act 1998
The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023
The Offences Against the Person Act 1861
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