

**CLINKS'  
VOLUNTARY  
SECTOR-LED  
MANIFESTO  
TO REFORM  
THE  
CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE  
SYSTEM.**

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**STRONGER VOLUNTARY  
SECTOR**

**A FAIRER JUSTICE  
SYSTEM**

**SUPPORT THAT  
WORKS**

**PEOPLE HEARD AND  
REPRESENTED**

## 01

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This manifesto sets out a comprehensive set of recommendations for the new government, drawn from Clinks' policy work in partnership with the voluntary sector working in criminal justice. It includes input from across Clinks' membership via a range of engagement opportunities across the last few years, including the Independent Sentencing Review, annual State of the Sector research and the work of a number of Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3) Special Interest Groups (SIGs). Further, it draws upon Clinks responses to several Select Committee inquiries.

The manifesto explores each stage of the justice system and attaches recommendations relating to the entirety of the justice pathway – from prevention/diversion to resettlement support in the community. While welcoming the Sentencing Act 2026 as a positive step towards reducing reliance on custody, it argues that the Act alone will not resolve the longstanding pressures facing prisons, probation and services in the community.

Prisons remain overcrowded, with the prison population projected to grow despite the implementation of the Sentencing Act. Rising numbers of recalls to prison and a substantial remand population are major contributors to this pressure. At the same time, the Probation Service faces severe workforce shortages, increasing caseloads and concerns about its ability to manage risk effectively as more people are supervised in the community.

The overarching ambition of the manifesto is to shift from short-term demand management measures towards a long-term, whole-systems approach focused on prevention and community-based solutions that make better use of voluntary sector expertise.

## CENTRAL TO OUR VISION

### **A Community Justice Investment Fund**

Central to this vision is the establishment of a Community Justice Investment Fund, drawing on best practice in Texas, that reallocates funding from the prison building programme into a justice reinvestment programme.

## OUR 6 KEY ASKS

01

### FUNDING REALLOCATION

Establish a Community Justice Investment Fund via a justice reinvestment programme.

02

### LOCAL APPROACHES

Implement a truly local approach to probation governance, commissioning and partnership working.

03

### REDUCTION OF REMAND AND RECALL

Significantly reduce the remand population and the number of recalls to prison including through a fast-track review of Custody Time Limits (CTLs) and the introduction of a decision-making framework for recalls.

04

### COMMUNITY PROVISION

Increase investment in community provision including through an expansion of community accommodation services, diversion schemes and guaranteed universal coverage of Community Sentence Treatment Requirements.

05

### STRENGTHENED RESETTLEMENT

Establish an accessible resettlement pathway from custody into the community, including through the embedding of genuine earned progression into sentence planning.

06

### A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH FOR WOMEN

Implement a whole systems approach to women in contact within the criminal justice system.

The manifesto also identifies several priority groups requiring tailored approaches. In addition to the key ask on women, it calls for greater recognition, support and involvement in rehabilitation and release planning for children and families affected by imprisonment. It also highlights the need to tackle persistent racial disparities throughout the criminal justice system and to develop more appropriate pathways for the growing population of older people in prison.

Success will depend on coordinated action across government departments, long-term investment in community services, and a commitment to addressing the underlying social drivers of involvement in the criminal justice system.

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## 02

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# INTRODUCTION

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Criminal justice policymaking in England and Wales has reached a crucial juncture given the longstanding challenges entrenched across the wider system and the renewed public attention on them. Attempts to mitigate these challenges have come in the form of a range of reviews, chief among them [the Sentencing Act 2026](#), which was developed following a set of recommendations from [the Independent Sentencing Review](#) with the overarching principle of reducing prison overcrowding and improving community sentences.

The full impact of the Sentencing Act will not be felt immediately. Additionally, its provisions will only slow, not halt, population growth. The Act's impact assessment highlights that '[there will be around 3,500 more people in prison by May 2029](#).' This will have a continued and significant impact on the ability of each prison to deliver truly rehabilitative regimes that contribute to public safety and an overall reduction in reoffending. Any headroom that will be created in the estate as a result of the Act is also now likely to be limited due to the [changes to the progression model](#) announced in recent weeks.

Inevitably, even though shifting demand away from prisons and into the community is the correct approach, it risks overburdening an under-funded voluntary sector and already overstretched Probation. The funding constraints on the sector are significant, as illustrated in our annual [State of the Sector](#) research – only 25% of respondents achieved full cost recovery on all the services they delivered under contract. And as a result, 67% of respondents were subsidising the shortfall using their own reserves.

The Probation Service remains as susceptible as the prison system to the current capacity crisis. Staffing shortages, coupled with increased demand on its resources, have led to serious consequences. In a February 2026 report published by the Public Accounts Committee on the [efficiency and resilience of the Probation Service](#), it was highlighted that, in 2024, Probation staff were 'only adequately assessing risk of harm in 28% of cases.' With the prison population still projected to grow, and a greater number of people being released into the community, there remains the need for an approach to policymaking that develops and implements sustainable solutions to the crisis in our prisons and in probation.

This is the wider justice context facing the new Prime Minister. As he, alongside the Lord Chancellor, looks to develop his positioning on the criminal justice system, Clinks has developed a 'manifesto' for the new government, one which has drawn on a wide range of voluntary sector input, drawing upon key publications over the last few years, and which sets out practical policy recommendations designed to support a more effective justice system. Although these are not new ideas and the recommendations within it do not cover every challenge across the justice system, this manifesto brings together voluntary sector expertise over a number of years, setting out evidence-based, stress-tested ideas in an attempt to bring some coherence to an everchanging policy landscape.

## 03

# THE POLICY LANDSCAPE

## MANAGING OVERCROWDING IN PRISONS

Both Conservative and Labour governments of recent times have grappled with a system, from courts to probation, struggling to cope with increasing demand and diminished resources. Much of the focus has been on how to reduce prison overcrowding via a range of early release mechanisms. These include:

- In 2023, the Conservative Government implemented the End of Custody Supervised Licence Scheme that incrementally increased the number of days that reduced the time spent in custody.
- Under the new Labour Government, in September 2024, SDS40 changed the automatic release point for specific standard determinate sentences from 50% to 40%.
- The proposed progression model, as part of the Sentencing Act 2026, due to become operational in October 2026, and which would see a large proportion of people serving standard determinate sentences released after serving 33% of their sentence

To illustrate the scale of the issue, there were 85,858 people in prison as of 30 June 2026. This can be measured against the Ministry of Justice's measure of certified normal accommodation (CNA), which currently sits at approximately 82,000. This CNA baseline is important as there is a clear distinction between operational capacity and having the capacity to provide safe and decent accommodation that enables the provision of effective rehabilitative interventions to a manageable number of people. Operational capacity is the physical number of prison spaces available, whereas Certified Normal Accommodation, otherwise referred to as uncrowded capacity 'represents the good, decent standard of accommodation that the Service aspires to provide all prisoners.'

Overcrowding is hugely exacerbated by recalls to prison. For the first time since this data was recorded, the number of licence recalls over the course of a quarter (January to March 2026) was greater than the number of people released in that same period – 13,193 licence recalls compared to 12,977 releases. There also remains a large remand population of 15,386, which makes up almost 18% of the prison population. Policies designed to reduce numbers in both of these areas are therefore critical to tackling the capacity crisis.

## 04

# WOMEN IN PRISON

## A DIFFERENT CONTEXT

Women represent a small minority in the criminal justice system (CJS), comprising approximately 4% of the prison population and 17% of those serving a community sentence. In a system designed primarily for the large male population, women's needs are often overlooked.



### WOMEN IN THE CJS OFTEN HAVE DIFFERENT AND MORE COMPLEX NEEDS THAN MEN

Higher numbers of women (53%) than men (27%) experienced abuse as children. Far more women than men are primary carers for children, with significant consequences for the children of those who go to prison, as well as for the mothers themselves. 49% of women in prison suffer from both anxiety and depression, as compared to 23% of men. The latest Safety in Custody Statistics also illustrate the disparities between the men and the women's estates – the rate of self-harm in women's prisons is over nine times higher than in men's prisons.

The Corston Report (2007) called for a radical shift in how the CJS treats women, and the then-government's response confirmed the intention to create 'a system that is properly responsive to the needs and characteristics of women.' The response also reaffirmed the commitment to improved community support for women based on gender-specific approaches provided by women's community centres and committed to building the capacity of these services.

However, despite some policy changes, many of the issues highlighted by Corston, such as the harmful impact of prison on women and the ineffectiveness of short sentences, persist. The Ministry of Justice's 2018 Female Offender Strategy acknowledged these issues and aimed to reduce the use of short sentences. This ambition has yet to be achieved, despite the publication in January 2023 of a Delivery Plan intended to implement the strategy over the 2022-2025 period.

The Sentencing Act should result in fewer women being sentenced to short, damaging prison sentences but we need to ensure that remand in custody is also reduced, and fewer women are recalled to prison. One solution is to scale up existing diversion schemes for women such as the London Women's Diversion Scheme led by [Advance](#) that has been in place since 2019.

In its [March 2026 report](#), the independent Women's Justice Board (WJB) proposed a Women's Justice Reform Programme and set out a list of recommendations for achieving a reduction in the use of imprisonment for women. They recommended the creation of a programme team, comprised of MoJ and Welsh Government officials, working closely with the MoJ Female Offender policy team, HMPPS Women's Group and external stakeholders to provide oversight for delivery of all the recommendations in their report. A jointly agreed ministerial governance model between UK Government departments and Welsh Government portfolios would ensure cross-departmental accountability. This plan could be implemented to drive the essential longer-term changes required to free up prison capacity currently occupied unnecessarily by women.

The WJB also recommended reducing women's imprisonment by implementing a Whole System Approach (WSA) which they defined as 'taking every opportunity to refer women in, or at risk of, contact with the CJS into community-based, women-specific support.' We have included more details on the practical application of a WSA in the recommendations section, at the end of this manifesto.

## 05

# JUSTICE IN WALES

Clinks has consistently argued that decision making must be as close as possible to local communities in order to achieve better outcomes. This principle has informed our support for distinct approaches to justice, including the Greater Manchester model, as well as our proposal for a more locally based Probation Service.

In Wales, this has informed our support for the devolution of justice responsibilities in their entirety to the Welsh Government. A fragmented approach to justice and related public services can restrict the ability to provide the holistic, coordinated support that people in the justice system need. This is particularly evident in Wales, where key areas such as housing are already devolved. The Welsh Government has made progress towards a more preventative approach to homelessness, with the potential to provide better support for people leaving prison, yet people still have to navigate a complex range of services across different systems and responsibilities.

Devolving justice would bring these responsibilities together within a single system of government, creating greater opportunities for joined-up decision-making, more effective prevention and earlier intervention, and ultimately better outcomes for people, communities and the justice system.

## 06

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# HEALTH AND WELLBEING

## IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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Health inequalities across the prison estate are particularly prevalent, which bolsters the need for a holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing, recognising that the wider prison environment has a significant impact on people's health.

Health in prisons should therefore not be framed purely in terms of access to healthcare, but within the context of the range of interventions, beyond solely clinical ones, that can improve outcomes. We recommend that further consideration is given to expanding social prescribing initiatives, referencing our previous work done in this area through the publication of a voluntary sector-led framework on social prescribing in criminal justice. These initiatives can be understood as enabling professionals to refer people to a range of local, non-clinical services to support their health and wellbeing.

Responsibility should not sit simply with prison healthcare teams, but be incorporated into the provision of effective regimes, including utilising social prescribing, time out of cell and purposeful activity, physical activity, social connections and access to voluntary sector support alongside clinical healthcare. Such an approach should aim for the creation of prison environments that promote health and wellbeing, instead of only responding once people reach crisis point. The ongoing, independent review of the prison system offers an opportunity for recommendations that would implement this approach.

The overarching framework for addressing health inequalities should be underpinned by a focus on prevention and early intervention, supported by effective treatment in custody, enabling continuity of support through the gate, into holistic provision in the community.

07

# AN OVERSTRETCHED PROBATION SERVICE

## AND THE ROLE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

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The prisons crisis cannot be viewed in isolation, given that the courts system and the Probation Service are also under significant strain. Probation's current caseload (as of 30 June 2026) is 258,332, yet there is a current shortfall of almost 2,000 probation officers against the target staffing level. Several of the measures within the Sentencing Act will contribute to increased demand on the Probation Service, including the approximately 4,500 releases under the progression model and the sentencing changes, including the presumption to suspend short custodial sentences.

Clearly, these factors combined will necessitate increased investment in the Probation Service – which the government has committed to via an additional £700m by 2028/29. This investment will fund more probation officers, an expansion in electronic monitoring, the rollout of proximity monitoring and additional technology to reduce demands on probation, as well as wider investment in accommodation.

There is an opportunity to utilise this increase to foster more effective partnership working between probation and the voluntary sector, including through ensuring that a proportion of this funding is allocated to voluntary organisations supporting people in the community. In addition to this funding, there is a need for fresh policy solutions that can reduce demand on the Probation Service, including a more 'local' approach to probation governance, commissioning and partnership working and more effectively utilising the expertise of the voluntary sector, whilst maintaining public confidence and safety.

08

# CHILDREN IMPACTED

## BY PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT/FAMILIES

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Too often, the families and children of people in prison are treated as the invisible casualties of the justice system, serving a hidden sentence of social isolation and financial hardship. The result is families being penalised for crimes that they did not commit. The role of families in supporting their loved ones in prison cannot be overestimated and is underpinned by evidence attesting to the impact of family ties in reducing reoffending. Further, children and families should receive support in their own right and not just as part of a reducing reoffending agenda.

Children impacted by parental imprisonment (CAPI) is a specific policy area in which there has been welcome focus recently, through the announcement of a pilot to better connect these children to support from education, health and social services. Clinks, alongside our Family Network members, has long championed the needs of children with a parent in prison, of whom there are currently around 193,000. We therefore welcome this focus on CAPI and look forward to developing the recently announced pilot to ensure more of these children can access the support they need.

As part of this agenda, we have been focusing attention on the impact of stigma for children impacted by parental imprisonment and recently published a memorandum of understanding on the subject in an attempt to improve the discourse and the policy around the issue. There is much more that can be done to improve how families impacted by the justice system are better supported, so that systems and processes work more effectively to address the support needs of families. In our recommendations section, we have highlighted our key asks in this area.

## 09

# ADDRESSING RACIAL DISPARITIES

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Issues facing minoritised communities have been comprehensively laid bare, not least of which through the Lammy and Young reviews and revisited in [the Young Review: Ten Years On](#), co-authored by Clinks. As such, this briefing does not intend to cover the issue of racial disparities in the criminal justice system in extensive detail.

As many key recommendations from those reviews have yet to be implemented, this briefing reiterates the ask that government focus and resources must be directed at tackling entrenched racial disparities at every stage of the criminal justice system and ensuring that those who are already disadvantaged do not experience further, compounding disadvantage in light of upcoming measures, namely, the progression model. This should include exploring the recommendations set out in the [RR3's Special Interest Group on tackling racial disparities in the criminal justice system](#). In addition, we urge government engagement in the ongoing work amongst a collective of organisations led by and for racially minoritised people to make progress on this agenda, on which further information will be provided in due course.

# 10

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT



Further to what has been discussed above, the following recommendations have been developed following extensive consultation across the sector.



This has included, but is not limited to, a series of roundtables informing Clinks' submissions to the Independent Sentencing Review and the Independent Review into Prison Capacity. In addition, it draws upon the evidence base developed via the Reducing Reoffending Third Sector Advisory Group (RR3), and its Special Interest Groups (SIGs), which are time-limited policy sub-groups designed to explore policy areas in greater detail. Further, it utilises the recommendations contained within Clinks' annual State of the Sector report.



We have broken down the recommendations so that they fall under specific components within the justice system, with additional detail for bespoke cohorts, including women and older people in contact with the criminal justice system.



To note, we have provided links to additional information in the further reading section at the end of this manifesto.

## SYSTEMIC REFORMS

### ***Establishing a Community Justice Investment Fund through a justice reinvestment programme:***

Drawing on international best practice, there are evidence-based approaches that, if implemented, could transform our existing justice system by addressing the root drivers of crime and delivering more sustainable long-term outcomes.

This includes a 'justice reinvestment' approach that is particularly prevalent in the United States. Sentencing Review panel members expressed an interest in the approach being taken in Texas, whereby \$200m was diverted from the prison building budget to create thousands of treatment spaces for mental health treatment and for drug and alcohol recovery, and to expand diversion options. The reinvestment programme resulted in \$1.6 billion in savings related to proposed prison building costs and, since 2007, Texas's prison population has fallen by more than 34,000 people with 16 state prison facilities being closed as a result.

This is an innovative approach to tackling demand for prison places and would not require additional funding. Instead, it would necessitate diverting existing capital spending commitments on new prisons into a justice reinvestment programme focused on community services.

Currently, £4.7 billion has been allocated in capital spending for additional prison places, funding that is committed between 2026-27 and 2029-30. This forms part of the £7bn committed, overall, from 2024-25, with the intention of adding 14,000 prison places by 2031 – with 3,200 added, to date. It is expected that the actual cost of the prison building programme will be £10 billion, which equates to approximately 40 times the amount proposed for the new, Community Support contracts. Instead of committing the entirety of the remainder of this funding to the prison building programme, the government should re-allocate a proportion into a new Community Justice Investment Fund, modelled on the initiative that was successfully implemented in Texas. This funding would provide much-needed, additional investment into community support services, enabling an expansion in community accommodation services, drug and alcohol treatment, and criminal justice-specific mental health support. This would thereby focus resources on addressing the underlying drivers increasing demand for prison places. If implemented alongside the Sentencing Act reforms, prison population growth could be significantly restricted thereby mitigating against the need to build more prison places.

### ***Devolving justice responsibilities to the Welsh Government:***

We recommend that the UK Government work with the Welsh Government to explore how justice responsibilities can be devolved, taking inspiration from the approach used in the Greater Manchester model.

## **ALTERNATIVES TO CUSTODY – SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY**

### ***Out of Court Disposals (OOCs):***

Addressing need in the community - before any escalation that can lead to a custodial sentence - is an important policy lever that can reduce demand for prison places. This requires improved collaboration and partnership working between a range of justice agencies, both statutory and non-statutory. Recommendations to ensure appropriate support at first contact with the CJS are therefore to:

- Set a minimum level of intervention for Out of Court Disposals (OOCs) that is available regardless of locality; this should incorporate the development of a consistent, nationally available offer that can build confidence amongst police forces regarding the availability of effective support in the community
- Increase police confidence in the support available, for which we recommend increased coordination and partnership building between local police forces and voluntary sector organisations that would help to spotlight existing best practice in terms of effective diversion; one example of best practice was highlighted in our [2025 State of the Sector report](#), which was the specialist diversion programme for women across the West Midlands, led by Anawim in partnership with West Midlands Police, and bringing together Black Country Women's Aid, Kairos, Changing Lives, and Green Square Accord.

### ***Community Sentence Treatment Requirements (CSTRs):***

Treatment requirements are a critical component of community sentences that, as with OOCs, address need in the community. There has been an increase in their use since 2020, but more focus is required to ensure greater availability. Through the [2024-25 RR3 Special Interest Group on Community Provision](#), 28 voluntary organisations supporting people in the community developed the following recommendations:

- Guaranteed universal coverage of CSTRs (including an update on current coverage); in addition to providing a tiered offer, allowing the provision of primary and secondary Mental Health Treatment Requirements (MHTRs)
- Increase the use of CSTRs through the funding of Treatment Requirement Link Workers, available to start working with people ahead of sentencing in order to support in navigating and accessing support services

## SENTENCING

Given that measures within the Sentencing Act are designed to sentence more people to community orders, there is a need to focus on building sentencer confidence on what is available in the community. This should:

- Focus on ensuring that sentencers can be confident that sentences are appropriate and beneficial, and that the system is sufficiently resourced for them to be carried out; this could be achieved by fully-funded 2-3 year pilots on the efficacy of specific community orders, with in-built evaluation
- Include training for Magistrates on changes to community sentences, highlighting what the changes can achieve, using evidence to make the case

Amending the existing early release measure/progression model to incorporate a genuine 'earned release' element is vital in ensuring rehabilitative activities are central to sentence progression. We therefore recommend:

- Reforming the Progression Model by creating meaningful incentives – including progress to open conditions, temporary release and earning time off a sentence – for engagement in rehabilitative activities (including engagement in treatment)
- This relies upon the availability of rehabilitative activities, including suitable education and training opportunities and arts-based activities, which should be incorporated from the outset of a custodial sentence, as well as suitable provision, particularly accommodation, in the community; we urge government engagement with voluntary organisations working across prisons in England and Wales in order to better understand the effectiveness of voluntary sector-led, rehabilitative interventions
- Monitoring the implementation and use of the Progression Model, to ensure that it does not further entrench existing disadvantages experienced by vulnerable and minoritised groups

## PRISONS

### *Remand:*

Tackling the record number of people in prison who are either on remand or have been recalled would have the effect of significantly reducing the prison population. There are a range of measures that could be implemented to tackle the problem, including:

- An immediate, fast-tracked review of the legal framework for Custody Time Limits (CTLs) – which dictate how long a person can be held on remand – to ensure that people are not being held beyond time limits set out in legislation
- Following the amendment to the Bail Act 1976 given effect by the Sentencing Act, ensure that the ‘no real prospect of custody’ test is applied consistently and monitored transparently to ensure its effectiveness

The Mental Health Act 2025 removes the option of using prisons as a designated place of safety and prevents adults from being remanded to custody for their own protection where the sole reason is concern about their mental health. Effective implementation of the Act will depend on sufficient health-based alternatives, appropriate places of safety and clear pathways between courts, Liaison and Diversion services, NHS mental health services and community provision. To ensure the Act’s success in relation to reducing the number of people being remanded to custody, we recommend that:

- Government should monitor and publicly report on implementation and impact of the Mental Health Act reforms relating to remand for own protection and the removal of prisons as places of safety, including whether people experiencing acute mental health need continue to be remanded to prison and the reasons for this.
- DHSC, MoJ and NHS England should ensure that the health infrastructure, capacity and pathways necessary to implement the reforms are in place, including sufficient appropriate health-based alternatives and places of safety, so that prison is not used to compensate for gaps in mental health provision.
- Implementation should be informed by disaggregated data and lived experience, including scrutiny of the impact on women and other groups who may be disproportionately affected.

**Recall:**

Alongside the remand population, the recall population provides a further opportunity to significantly reduce the numbers of people in prison. Over the last couple of years, we have been a part of the Recall Reform Coalition – a collection of voluntary sector organisations developing proposals to tackle the problems with recall. Led by Switchback, the Coalition’s core recommendation is that:

- MoJ and HMPPS should develop a clear structure for decision-making with escalation routes to ensure recall is only used as a last resort – thereby increasing the threshold for recall – and to significantly reduce prison recalls for non-compliance breaches

As the majority of licence recalls are for administrative breaches, we recommend – echoing work previously published by the Howard League that:

- Abolish recall for administrative breaches

We also recommend that particular consideration is given to Nacro’s [recent report](#) and accompanying recommendations on recall.

**Health:**

To reflect an approach that looks beyond solely health-based interventions as means of improving general health and wellbeing in prisons, we recommend:

- Establishing additional routes for social prescribing within prisons in order to address the wider determinants of health; this should include investment in voluntary sector-led social prescribing approaches across the criminal justice pathway

**Voluntary sector coordination in prisons:**

To ensure effective support in prisons, there is an urgent need for better coordination between prison staff and voluntary organisations based in prisons to achieve better outcomes. Therefore, we recommend:

- Exploring the viability of scaling-up existing models for collaborative working and coordinating the work of the sector, including Clinks’ voluntary sector coordinator role in HMP/YOI Isis and Bullingdon Community Connections in HMP Bullingdon

## POST-RELEASE RESETTLEMENT SUPPORT

### *A 'local' probation model:*

We would recommend:

- Utilising the government's commitment to a strategic review of probation governance to develop a more localised Probation Service, devolving responsibility to the lowest appropriate regional or local level.

Such a model would retain a national framework establishing minimum standards, professional requirements, risk-management frameworks and public protection responsibilities, while transferring greater responsibility for regional strategy, budgets, commissioning and delivery away from central government.

The proposal should build on, rather than replace, existing regional structures across HMPPS areas. Significant responsibility is already exercised at a regional level, however these responsibilities sit within the national HMPPS governance and financial framework. Indeed, HM Inspectorate of Probation has identified the need for greater delegated authority to regions in relation to spending, while regional probation teams already undertake commissioning and contract management based on local priorities.

The objective should therefore be to move beyond the existing administrative regionalisation of probation towards genuine local autonomy.

Localised probation should also be more closely integrated with local public services, particularly housing, health, employment and substance misuse services, reflecting the range of interventions that people on probation may require to reduce their risk of reoffending. This would enable regional Probation Services to develop rehabilitation strategies around local patterns of offending and the needs of their communities, rather than relying primarily on nationally determined priorities.

The abolition of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in 2028 provides a further opportunity to establish a more integrated model of local criminal justice governance, creating the potential for new arrangements to improve coordination between policing and services such as health, employment and housing.

The proposal is therefore not simply to regionalise probation: probation is already substantially regionalised. Rather, it is to genuinely devolve responsibility away from HMPPS, nationally, to an empowered, regional probation structure. This would retain the benefits of a coherent national probation framework while giving local areas greater control over how rehabilitation and resettlement are delivered according to local needs.

### ***Through-the-gate:***

The RR3 SIG on the effective implementation of the Sentencing Act 2026 will be publishing a report in Autumn 2026 that contains specific recommendations designed to support the provision of effective through-the-gate (TTG) support. As a preview to the work, it will focus explicitly on the importance of intensive support on the day of release and for the first 24-48 hours following release. Models to replicate include the through-the-gate support provided by voluntary organisations such as Release Mates.

In order to boost TTG provision, we recommend:

- Support tailored to the individual so that TTG provision is provided based on need, and is underpinned by early planning and clear communication to each person leaving prison to ensure they have a robust and accessible plan in place
- Effective information sharing between the relevant stakeholders – both statutory and non-statutory

To effectively coordinate support, through-the-gate, we recommend:

- Commissioning a national network of Departure Lounges, providing a 'one-stop-shop' model of access to a range of services on the day of release from prison

## **GENERAL RESETTLEMENT**

To improve current pre-release practice, and whilst acknowledging ongoing reforms to the existing Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model:

- Establish a transparent engagement mechanism for the voluntary sector to inform the long-term development of a sustainable approach to pre-release planning, including from the point of induction where appropriate

The support available on release relies on the services that are available in any given locality. Therefore, we recommend:

- Establishing minimum standards of resettlement support to ensure that there are no gaps in provision for people coming out of prison

As part of broader pre-release/resettlement planning:

- Embed health considerations within resettlement planning, starting well before release
- Establish a clear minimum standard for continuity of healthcare on release, including appropriate arrangements for medication, primary care, mental health support, substance use treatment and social care.
- Ensure referrals and handovers to relevant community services take place before release, with responsibility for continuity shared across custody and community services rather than placed solely on the individual leaving prison.

To prepare people in prison ahead of release, there are numerous examples of innovative practice led by voluntary organisations, including Recycling Lives' enhanced prison pay scheme. This has informed the recommendation to build on that work to:

- Establish enhanced prison pay schemes to enable people in prison to save money for their resettlement

### ***Drug and alcohol support:***

The Justice Committee's 2025 report on tackling the drugs crisis in prison highlighted that 49% of people in prison in England and Wales enter prison with an identified drug need. This is in addition to those who develop issues with drug use while in prison. Ensuring that the right support is in place to continue with treatment, following release from prison, is therefore another essential component for effective resettlement.

Key recommendations from the RR3 SIG on Community Provision – with a focus on drug and alcohol services, include:

- Ensuring effective in-reach teams and link workers are operating across the entire prison estate in order to avoid a postcode lottery, meeting with people in prison before their release to support continuity of care
- Providing greater funding for drug and alcohol services that specifically support people with convictions in the community, including gender-specific services for women
- Providing further specific training to practitioners providing drug and alcohol support to people in contact with the criminal justice system that reflects the unique needs of this cohort

### **Employment:**

There is a wealth of evidence testifying to the impact of voluntary organisations in translating job opportunities for people in prison into job starts and sustained employment in the community. There are a range of voluntary organisations already delivering employment support in the community, notably, Beating Time and their Inside Job programme in London and Birmingham, as well as Recruitment Junction in the Northeast. This informed the recommendation to:

- Fund voluntary sector 'community employment brokers', supporting people – from prison into the community – to both find and sustain work

### **Accommodation:**

Access to accommodation following release from prison continues to present one of the greatest challenges to effective resettlement. The government has acknowledged this within its new [National Plan to End Homelessness](#), committing to halving the number of people who become homeless on their first night out of prison.

In HM Inspector of Prisons' latest annual report, he noted that many prisons were reporting up to 30% of people having no settled address. Recent analysis by Nacro found that nearly one in six people released last year were released into homelessness.

We have previously explored these issues through the work of [the RR3 Special Interest Group \(SIG\) on Accommodation \(2023-24\)](#), and developed a range of recommendations, drawn from expertise across the sector, designed to mitigate some of the barriers. Highlights include:

- Rolling out pre-release boards in every resettlement prison (on which progress had been made), building on the commitment in the National Plan to End Homelessness to embed as standard practice local partnerships, co-location and pre-release planning
- Expanding and ensuring continuity of Community Accommodation Service (CAS), with increased availability of CAS2 accommodation to support in the reduction of the use of remand; any increased provision must include the availability of appropriate, women-only accommodation options
- A more targeted approach to the work of Homelessness Prevention Teams by ensuring that there is HPT representation in every resettlement prison, as opposed to the existing regional model

Previous support specifically designed for people leaving prison – such as the accommodation for ex-offenders' scheme (AfEO) – has been ended, with the funding moved into general funding distributed by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. This runs the risk of de-prioritising the particularly high needs of people leaving prison. Subsequently, we are repeating the RR3 SIG's recommendation for:

- The development of a cross-departmental strategy that involves the relevant departments including, but not limited to, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Health and Social Care; this strategy should be underpinned by a ministerial board, focused on mitigating the barriers to accommodation faced by people leaving prison.
- Allocating and ringfencing a proportion of the Homelessness Prevention Grant for people leaving prison, thereby reinstating a specific funding pot designed to support people leaving prison into settled accommodation

Despite ongoing efforts to increase the pool of social housing, the private rented sector (PRS) will continue to play an essential part in providing the accommodation needed by people leaving prison. Subsequently, there are a range of practical measures related to the PRS that can support more people into the PRS:

- Establishing a mechanism whereby people can access rent/deposit guarantees
- Landlord incentive payments to encourage more private landlords to rent to people coming out of prison
- The provision of tenancy sustainment workers to support people to maintain their tenancies once they have been secured

### ***Mental health:***

To ensure that mental health support in the community is sufficient, we recommend:

- A commitment to maintain the Mental Health Investment Standard (ringfencing spending on mental health by ICBs to ensure that mental health spending at a local level rises alongside spending on physical health)
- Coordinated public health commissioning targeting dual diagnosis, and breaking down barriers between existing service delivery

## THE ROLE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

Throughout our engagement with the sector, there has been a consistent theme – the importance of lived experience in designing the policies impacting people in the criminal justice system. We were consistently told of the importance of having someone who has ‘walked in the same shoes’ as people going through the justice system. This has therefore informed the following recommendation, one that is systemic and one related to the delivery of services:

- A commitment to meaningfully involve people with lived experience of the justice system in the design, commissioning, implementation and evaluation of reform

## WOMEN

In 2025, Clinks carried out work through an RR3 Special Interest Group (SIG) on a ‘Whole Systems Approach’ for women in contact with the criminal justice system. The WSA was defined using the 2018 Female Offender Strategy, which sets out a WSA for women as meaning the delivery of gender-responsive, holistic support through joined-up local service provision, which is:

- Locally led
- Partnership-focused
- Evidence-based

In our approach, we also drew on a model of a WSA that Clinks uses to represent each of the points in a woman’s journey across the various parts of the criminal justice system and highlights all interventions and policies to be informed by research and evaluation.



The Women's Justice Board described a similar model in their 2026 report and highlights opportunities for diversion and de-escalation at every point in the woman's journey through the justice system. The whole system approach, with women's specialist services at its heart, offers holistic, trauma-informed, gender-specific support through 1:1 keyworker support and a 'one-stop shop' of co-located services, enabling cross-cutting areas of need to be addressed at each stage listed in the table below:

## STAGE

## OPPORTUNITY FOR DIVERSION

Before contact with the CJS

Ensuring access to women-specific support for women at risk of contact with the CJS – including distinct support for Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women, and for young women – allows for early intervention and prevention before contact with the CJS

Point of arrest

Decision to divert from prosecution where possible, with referral into support – through non-arrest/outcome 22/conditional caution/other out of court disposal or deferred prosecution or Decision to prosecute where necessary, with referral into support, providing opportunity to demonstrate capacity for rehabilitation before trial and sentencing.

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|                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Court hearing on bail/remand | Decision to bail with referral into support instead of remanding into prison – focus on accommodation needed                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Trial process                | Women defendants with specialist support will be better placed to participate in proceedings and provide contextual information to help prosecutors, defence lawyers and the court take proper account of the context for their alleged offence.                                         |
| Sentencing                   | Decision to defer sentencing or impose Community Order or Suspended Sentence Order where possible, with attached support. ISCs key here. Where imprisonment cannot be avoided, planning for release can begin at the start of the sentence, with knowledge of the woman's support needs. |
| Post-release                 | Effective referral into support as part of pre-release planning, through the gate and post-release, reduces risk of recall and/or reoffending                                                                                                                                            |

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Below, we set out a range of recommendations designed to reform the women's justice system. Underpinning all of these recommendations is the need to embed trauma-informed and gender-specific practice in all interventions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN

01

### TO ADOPT A WHOLE SYSTEM APPROACH FOR WOMEN THAT:

- Embeds gender-responsive, holistic and joined-up support across every stage of the criminal justice system.
- Ensures local systems are locally led, partnership-focused and evidence-based.

02

### AS PART OF A WIDER PROGRAMME OF REFORM FOR WOMEN IN CONTACT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, WE RECOMMEND THAT:

- The Ministry of Justice works closely with the voluntary sector to develop plans for the implementation of the Women's Justice Reform Programme, as recommended by the Women's Justice Board

03

### TO MEET EXISTING COMMITMENTS TO REDUCING WOMEN'S IMPRISONMENT:

- Utilise the Sentencing Act to ensure that fewer women receive short custodial sentences and track progress as soon as initial data is available
- Increase the use of deferred sentences, suspended sentence orders and community orders and attach meaningful, women-specific support to community disposals, including support through Intensive Supervision Courts, where available

04

### FOR WOMEN ALREADY IN PRISON, WE RECOMMEND:

- Where imprisonment cannot be avoided, identify women's needs early and begin planning for release immediately.
- Ensuring continuity of support from custody into the community.
- Commissioning an in-house Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) service for each women's prison

## 05

**ON REMAND, WE RECOMMEND:**

- Reducing its use by expanding community-based alternatives, with particular attention given to accommodation and wider support needs
- Prioritising bail with support over remand, wherever possible, by ensuring courts have access to robust, bail support options for women

## 06

**TO REDUCE RECALLS TO PRISON AND TO INCREASE DIVERSION AT THE FIRST POINT OF CONTACT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM, WE RECOMMEND:**

- Ensuring women are referred into specialist support at the earliest possible stage, such as that provided by [Lancashire Women](#) to reduce the risk of breach, recall and reoffending.
- Using conditional cautions, out-of-court disposals and deferred prosecution where appropriate.

## 07

**IN THE COMMUNITY, WE RECOMMEND:**

- Providing sustainable funding for women's centres and women-specific community support, underpinned by one-to-one key worker and co-located, 'one-stop shop' models
- Ensuring tailored support is available for Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women, and for young women.

## FAMILIES

To end the stigmatisation of children impacted by parental imprisonment, and to build on the [pilot](#) identifying those affected:

- Introduce safe self-identification protocols across local authorities, the NHS, and schools, allowing families to access targeted support without fear of triggering automatic, punitive social services investigations.

To ensure safe, effective family involvement whilst a person is in custody and in the resettlement of people leaving prison, we recommend:

- Mandating the offer of family involvement, where appropriate, in health needs processes of their family members in prison
- Mandating that the Probation Service offers designated family members, where safely identified by the person on probation, to be involved in the creation of pre-release and post-release supervision plans
- Ring-fence funding within local Probation Delivery Units (PDUs) to provide direct support to families during the critical first 12 months of release, including family mediation services and adjustment support.

## OLDER PEOPLE IN PRISON

Older people in prison (defined as those aged 50 or over) are the fastest-growing cohort within the prison population. This is a result of sentencing policy that has sent more people to prison on longer sentences, yet the prison estate is configured for a much younger demographic – specifically in terms of the types of purposeful activity that is available.

This cohort requires tailored support to meet very specific needs, often linked to increased frailty, which should include adaptations in prison design that factor in mobility needs. As part of our response to the Independent Sentencing Review, we made a number of recommendations for this cohort. These included:

- More timely and frequent assessment of age-related needs to ensure that care needs are identified and addressed
- Undertaking a fast-track review of all people in prison aged 50 and over presenting with health/age-related conditions/accelerating frailty, to inform the establishment of a dynamic risk register that can be linked to improved parole processes/appropriate release mechanisms (linked to the next bullet point)

- Implementing a geriatric parole process for people with significant health or social care needs but who do not meet the criteria for compassionate release
- Improving collaboration with local authorities and NHS to provide social care pathways that may include use of temporary release to stay in care
- Establishing a statutory-non-statutory working group to develop and explore proposals to support a greater number of older people into secure care and forensic care
- Mandatory staff training covering age-related health needs in order to better identify and address the unique support needs of this ageing cohort

# 11

## CONCLUSION

Our justice system faces systemic challenges which successive governments have attempted to fix through short-term, demand-management measures. The political will to implement the systemic reform required to build a more effective and humane justice system has been limited and impacted by frequent changes in justice leadership.

The Sentencing Act, overall, is a positive contribution to wider reform of the system, particularly the measures that rebalance sentencing away from custody towards community alternatives. However, the Act's success relies on the pursuit of a whole systems approach that doesn't just limit the numbers of people going to prison, but addresses why so many people are going in the first instance, reforms the prison estate so that prisons are designed for rehabilitation, and overhauls support in the community so that increasingly complex need can be addressed and probation supported. This requires the machinery of government to be working in sync, both within and across departments, to optimise a vision for reform and the voluntary sector's role within that.

The voluntary sector's role in a reformed system isn't simply additional delivery capacity for an overstretched statutory system. It brings specialist expertise, trusted relationships, community reach and much-needed continuity. This proposed shift away from custody and into communities therefore has to come with sustainable investment in the voluntary sector infrastructure needed to make this shift work.

We therefore urge the government to consider the recommendations in this manifesto. Taken together, we believe they would support a more cost-effective justice system, geared towards rehabilitation and better outcomes for those within the system. The end result would be fewer future victims and fewer communities having to deal with the consequences of crime.

# FURTHER READING

Explore our research, reports and resources to dive deeper into the issues and evidence behind our manifesto.

## CLINKS RESOURCES:

- 01 | [State of the Sector 2025](#)
- 02 | [Clinks response to Independent Sentencing Review's call for evidence](#)
- 03 | [Clinks response to the Justice Committee inquiry on rehabilitation and resettlement](#)
- 04 | [Sentencing Act 2026 – next stage of implementation and accompanying probation reforms](#)
- 05 | [Voluntary Sector-Led Framework on Social Prescribing in Criminal Justice](#)
- 06 | [The Young Review – 10 years on](#)

## RR3 REPORTS:

- 01 | [RR3 Special Interest Group on Accommodation 2023-24: Report 1](#)
- 02 | [RR3 Special Interest Group on Community Provision 2024-25: Report 1 - Mental health treatment in the community for people in contact with the criminal justice system](#)
- 03 | [RR3 Community Provision Special Interest Group - Drug and Alcohol Services](#)
- 04 | [RR3 Reference Group on tackling racial disparities](#)

## REPORTS/GOVERNMENT/COMMITTEE PUBLICATIONS:

- 01 | [The National Plan to End Homelessness](#)
- 02 | [Efficiency and resilience of the Probation Service](#)
- 03 | [Tackling the drugs crisis in our prisons](#)

## ADDITIONAL SOURCES:

- 01 | [The Sentencing Act 2026](#)
- 02 | [The Sentencing Act 2026 – impact assessment](#)
- 03 | [Independent Sentencing Review – final report](#)
- 04 | [The health of people in prison, on probation and in the secure NHS estate in England](#)
- 05 | [Justice Reinvestment in Texas](#)
- 06 | [Justice Reinvestment in Texas: Assessing the Impact of the 2007 Justice Reinvestment Initiative](#)
- 07 | [Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: January – March 2026](#)
- 08 | [Safety in Custody Statistics to March 2026](#)