

Prison population and estate capacity

Written evidence submitted by Centre
Think Tank to the Justice Committee



Written evidence

By Jasneet Samrai, October 20th, 2023

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Jasneet coordinates our team and helps to set the policy direction for Centre. They work at Breast Cancer Now, previously worked at Oxfam and has also been a campaign organiser helping to elect 3 MEP's.

About Centre

We are an independent non-profit foundation and cross-party think tank. Our mission is to rebuild the centre ground and to create a more centrist and moderate politics. We support better public services and a strong economy inspired by policies from the Nordic countries.

To achieve these goals, we work with people from across the UK and party politics. This includes engaging with politicians and our networks, which include academia, politics, and law.

Our work includes creating new conversations by hosting events and conducting interviews. We also produce new policy ideas to better inform debate, publish papers, and release articles. We aim to build consensus, shape public opinion, and work with policymakers to change policy.

The logo for Centre, featuring a stylized pink 'C' with a dot in the center, followed by the word 'entre' in a bold, pink, sans-serif font.

Our evidence was a submission to the “Future prison population and estate capacity” inquiry to the Justice Committee. The inquiry focused on: “This inquiry will examine the projected changes to the size and composition of the prison population. It will explore the implications on the capacity of the prison estate and the deliverability of the Government’s current prison expansion programme. The inquiry will also examine the efficacy of the Government’s strategy to safely and effectively manage the prison population”.

Our response to this inquiry, unedited and in full, can be found below:

Centre is both a think tank and a pressure group. Our role as a pressure group involves focusing on certain issues that we feel need attention and promoting different causes. We also act as a think tank and publish papers exploring different subjects in more depth. By doing this we hope to inform the public more on the different options available and to generate new policy ideas.

What is the impact of an ageing infrastructure and are our current prisons fit for purpose?

As an organisation, we have decided that we are best placed to answer the last question of this consultation- which is written out above. This is because we have previously done a large amount of work on, and have published research, on reforming our prisons. However, a lot of our work has focused on why the Norwegian prison model is one that we should aspire to implement in the UK, as well as the larger and more existential question about whether our current prison system is fit for purpose. This shows that whilst we are aware of the issues that the prison system is facing in a broad sense, being a small organisation, we have not been keeping up-to-date on the situations in specific prisons or similarly, on the exact details of every recent policy passed.

We believe that the Norwegian model is important to learn from as looking towards Norway will help to solve many of the problems that our prison system faces today, thus helping to make our prisons more fit for purpose. We can learn from them on solving issues such as overcrowding and a lack of prison staff. We can also learn a lot about how our current approach to justice needs reform and about whether our infrastructure will ever be able to meet its purpose- which is ultimately to reduce reoffending, cut crime and make society safer.

Overcrowding

As part of our previous work in this area, we previously interviewed with Ben Crewe, who is a Professor of Penology and Criminal Justice and the Deputy Director of the Prisons Research Centre, and is based at the University of Cambridge. One problem that he identified at the time, that this consultation also does, is the impact of overcrowding.

At the moment, the UK has more people in prison than the sentencing system can cope with- meaning that the prison population is currently growing. This means that prisoners are being kept in unfit conditions, for example, inmates have to share rooms that were originally designed for one. Moreover, conditions for prisoners vary between crowded and uncrowded prisons- with more crowded prisons being allowed to have worse conditions for the prisoners to stay in.

To ensure our prison system is fit for purpose, and that prisoners can have the best conditions possible for rehabilitation, easing capacity is important. Doing so will mean that prisoners will have the space to study and gain qualifications, and maintain their dignity when doing basic things, like using the toilet. These conditions are made worse by ageing infrastructure, with the prisons watchdog stating that 1 in 10 prisons should be shut down, with there also being problems including rat infestations.

Ben, in his interview, notes that one reason that re-offending rates in Norway are so low is due to prisoners have high trust in the state- and that when they go to prison the state will look after their needs. Ben also suggests that one way to decrease the demand on prisons could be to introduce a sentencing queue, as they do in Norway.

A sentencing queue is where people turn up to a prison at a later date than they were sentenced, to ease the capacity of the prison system. This could be a better system than our current one, which imprisons people immediately, even if they are not a threat to wider society.

Staff capacity problems

At the moment, there are many capacity problems within the prison system, with there being a lack of staff available. The Prison Reform Trust, in their 2022 report, found that 26% of frontline prison staff were cut between 2010 and 2017. This is a problem as it restricts the activities that prisoners can do safely. For example, they may not be able to get access to the outdoors, or even have a shower. In our paper, entitled 'Lessons from Norway', we also wrote about how the role of prison officers is very different between Norway and the UK, with Norway's prison officers often socialising with inmates and participating in activities like sports. This is compared to the UK where 44% of prison officers said that they had witnessed colleagues treating inmates inappropriately, with these two countries showing the importance of a good relationship between inmates and staff as it leads to higher trust in the system.

Moreover, in the UK we only train our prison officers for 8 weeks, compared to Norway's two years. This is important as it is indicative of the amount of emphasis that we put towards rehabilitation. If the purpose of prison is to rehabilitate, then we need well-trained staff who can balance prison management with an environment suitable for rehabilitation. Ultimately, having staff that are better trained and who can form better relationships in the prison estate are ones that will like their job better, leading to a higher retention of officers.

The economic cost of ageing infrastructure

In 2020, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee stated that the prison repair backlog will cost over £900 million and that as many prisons are unfit for use due to decay, this is also contributing to overcrowding. Moreover, whilst taxpayers in Norway spend more per prison place, as reoffending rates are lower, our calculations within our Norwegian Prisons paper suggest that overall they save money. In the long-term, this money could help us pay towards upgrading our prisons, and refurbishing them in a way that helps to rehabilitate and provide dignity, not just to ensure that they meet the bare minimum.

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Company details

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Centre