

Unlock's response to the independent review of the prison system

Introduction

Unlock is an independent national charity supporting and advocating for people with criminal records across England and Wales. Rooted in lived experience, we combine specialist information and advice with research, employer engagement, campaigning and systemic reform.

Unlock exists to address the enduring impact of criminal records, which continue to shape people's lives long after a sentence has been served. The organisation recognises that current systems; particularly disclosure regimes, employer practices and public stigma, create ongoing barriers to opportunity, dignity and belonging.

Unlock's vision is of a society where individuals are not permanently defined by past mistakes, and where growth, rehabilitation and change are recognised in practice. Central to this vision is fairness, inclusion and the belief that people should be able to move forward into work, education, family life and civic participation.

With the prison system facing significant and long-standing pressures, the government are seeking expert views on the long-term future of the prison system. With population growth, an ageing estate, violence, self-harm, evolving security threats and workforce challenges, the prison system's problems require ambitious, long-term thinking.

Drawing from some of Unlock's reports, we outline why rehabilitation has to be treated as a whole-system responsibility rather than a siloed programme, the importance of holistic defence, and the additional barriers faced by women, especially in the digital age.

This document is a submission to the Ministry of Justice's independent review of the prison system in England and Wales. Full details can be found [here](#).

Theme 1: Key outcomes, risks and opportunities

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

- Protecting the public.
- Reducing reoffending by supporting people's wellbeing, rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Ensuring safety, dignity and decency for everyone living and working in prison.

These outcomes reinforce one another. Lasting public protection is achieved not only through temporary containment but through rehabilitation and successful reintegration after release. Rehabilitation requires safe, decent conditions: overcrowding, fear and institutional instability undermine trust, learning and change. Success measures should therefore extend beyond escapes and incidents to include stable accommodation after release; continuity of health care; family connection; qualifications; lawful employment and volunteering, including through release

on temporary licence (ROTL); financial inclusion; clear licence conditions; and accurate disclosure advice that enables effective career planning and job search.

Question: Looking ahead over the next five to 15 years, what are the three greatest risks to the future of the prison system, and why are they the most important?

- Reduced capacity for rehabilitation: overcrowding and rapid population turnover erode purposeful regimes, restrict access to education, health care and progression, and diminish hope.
- Declining safety and wellbeing: unstable conditions increase violence, self-harm and workforce burnout, and risk leaving people more traumatised and less prepared for release.
- Short-term, reactive policymaking: populist decisions prevent coherent long-term planning and discourage evidence-led reform.

These risks reinforce one another. Overcrowding and churn weakens regimes and intensify despair. Capacity policy should address demand rather than rely on an endless cycle of prison building. A further cross-cutting concern is the long shadow of a criminal record: disclosure rules, employer practices, online search results, insurance barriers and financial exclusion can all undermine investment in rehabilitation. Unlock's [The Right to be Forgotten](#) briefing shows how searchable online information can bypass formal safeguards and prevent people from moving on long after a sentence.

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

- Rebalance investment towards prevention, holistic defence, community sentences, problem-solving courts, accessible mental-health and drug services, women's centres and stronger place-based resettlement.
- Create a transparent, trauma-responsive operating model grounded in hope, with peer-led initiatives, fair pay for prison work and access to real work through ROTL.
- Create a through-the-gate rehabilitation and reintegration guarantee, supported by digital access and reform of criminal-record barriers.

Holistic defence connects legal representation with early advice on housing, health, welfare, family, immigration and employment consequences before they become crises. Peer-led community building can improve legitimacy and problem solving while developing responsibility and a positive identity. A statutory rehabilitation and reintegration guarantee would replace fragmented, postcode-dependent preparation with accountable support from reception to release, covering housing, continuity of health care, accurate work and disclosure advice, clear licence conditions and access to 24-hour support when urgent problems threaten compliance or stability.

Theme 2: The prison estate and its capacity

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

The principal risk is treating capacity as a supply problem rather than as the product of sentencing, recall, remand, court delay and weak provision before court and after prison. Capacity pressures encourage short-term release decisions without adequate preparation, increasing the risk of homelessness, breach and recall.

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

Reduce avoidable demand through diversion, holistic defence, community sentences, residential alternatives, restrained use of remand and recall, and earlier resolution of immigration status. Commission independent 24-hour advice and support so that uncertainty or short-term crises do not become breach or recall. Invest in advice at reception and before release to resolve identification, benefits, housing, debt, banking and criminal-record issues. Provide proposed licence conditions early, explain them accessibly and offer a prompt route to seek variation. Use open conditions and ROTL consistently to support staged reintegration.

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

The estate should consist of smaller, safer and more relational environments located closer to the communities people will return to. Accommodation must meet enforceable standards for space, temperature, ventilation, sanitation, accessibility and privacy. Design should support family contact, health and social care, education, therapeutic activity, confidential advice and real work. Secure digital access is essential for learning, maintaining relationships, making applications, preparing for employment and resolving practical matters before release. Accessibility and reasonable adjustments should be designed in from the outset and should transfer with the person between establishments.

Theme 4: Prison leadership and workforce

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

Partners and voluntary organisations often face unreliable access, short contracts and exclusion from operational planning. A further risk is a failure to value lived experience as expertise: despite the new Lived Experience pathway, Unlock continues to support people appealing vetting decisions that have not been made consistently with the new process. Prison education, employment and resettlement staff may also lack detailed knowledge of spent and unspent convictions, DBS levels, filtering and lawful disclosure. Inaccurate advice can direct people towards unsuitable training, cause unnecessary self-disclosure or lead to avoidable rejection. Staff need stronger capability in disclosure law alongside trauma, neurodiversity, mental health, race and gender.

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

Build a workforce culture centred on hope, progression and the belief that people can change. A Rehabilitation and Reintegration Guarantee should create a clear reciprocal commitment: when

people comply with the regime, engage with its demands and take up opportunities, that effort will lead to recognised progression, practical preparation for release and a fair chance to rebuild their lives. Governors should be accountable for making this promise real inside prison and for championing it with local authorities, employers, health services, housing providers and voluntary organisations in the communities to which people return. Staff should be trained and supported to explain progression routes consistently, recognise achievement and avoid arbitrary reversals that extinguish hope. People with lived experience should help design, deliver and monitor the guarantee, and specialist partners should be integrated into long-term operational planning rather than treated as temporary add-ons.

Theme 5: Safety and decency

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

Decency includes access to information and legal rights. People cannot exercise agency when they lack private telephone access, readable guidance, timely answers or controlled access to the internet. Overcrowding, ageing buildings and climate-related heat will compound risks to physical and mental health. Persistent indignity damages legitimacy, weakens relationships with staff and makes prisons less safe.

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

Adopt enforceable minimum standards for living conditions and regimes, backed by transparent data and rapid remedial action. Guarantee daily time out of cell, purposeful activity, health and social care, family contact and confidential independent advice. Expand peer support, prisoner councils and restorative approaches. Safety strategies should measure whether different groups feel safe and can obtain help, not rely only on aggregate incident data.

Theme 6: Rehabilitation and reducing reoffending

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

The greatest risk is treating rehabilitation as a programme rather than a whole-system responsibility. Not measuring or rating rehabilitation in prisons compounds this. People may receive complex licence conditions too late to understand how they affect work, housing, travel, family or digital life, with no readily available advice when a crisis arises. Many leave without accommodation, identification, income, banking, digital access, medication or disclosure advice. Criminal-record checks and unnecessary employer questions then exclude them from work. People convicted of sexual offences face especially severe barriers: labels can eclipse evidence of change, lawful employability and individual risk assessment. Online reporting, insurance, debt and confiscation orders can further frustrate stability. These failures turn prison investment into a revolving door.

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

- An individual sentence and resettlement plan co-owned by the person from reception.
- Holistic defence and advocacy connecting criminal, housing, welfare, family, immigration and employment expertise from court through release.
- Education linked to aspirations and labour-market opportunity, with fairly paid work and recognised qualifications.
- Career-planning and disclosure training covering spent convictions, DBS levels, filtering, lawful questions and constructive disclosure.
- Early, accessible explanation of proposed licence conditions; independent advice; a clear variation process; and a national 24-hour probation and resettlement support line.
- ROTL, mentoring and warm handovers to housing, health, benefits, probation and community organisations.
- Paid peer and leadership roles that build agency, responsibility and a positive identity.
- Beyond the Label employment preparation for people convicted of sexual offences, including lawful disclosure, self-employment guidance and risk-aware employer engagement.

Career planning must begin with accurate disclosure analysis so that people know which occupations require which level of check before choosing courses. Unlock's [briefing on the complexity of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974](#) explains why even practitioners can struggle to navigate rehabilitation periods, exceptions and disclosure rules. Government should test National Insurance relief for employers that recruit and retain people with convictions, conditional on fair recruitment, job quality and progression. A new Rehabilitation and Reintegration Act should strengthen protection for spent convictions and impose coordinated duties covering accommodation, identification, income, health, banking, digital access and work. Outcomes should be published at three, six and 12 months.

Theme 7: Women's prisons

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

Women's imprisonment is shaped by trauma, domestic abuse, mental ill health, substance use, poverty and caring responsibilities. [The Right to be Forgotten report](#) highlighted how women are more likely to face sensationalist media coverage and be scapegoated by the press, including post-release. A small, dispersed estate holds many women far from children, families, lawyers and community services. Separation can produce an acute collapse of identity and belonging, while short sentences cause disproportionate loss of housing, employment and care arrangements without providing time for meaningful intervention. Women from racialised communities, disabled and neurodivergent women, older women and foreign nationals experience intersecting disadvantages. Generic "trauma-informed" language is insufficient where practices remain coercive or services assume vulnerability while overlooking women's strengths,

leadership and expertise. Release without continuity of health, social care and financial support intensifies post-incarceration trauma.

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

The strategic objective should be fewer women in prison, not a larger female estate. Invest in diversion, women's centres, problem-solving approaches and small residential alternatives close to home. Where custody is necessary, provide smaller relational environments with privacy, family facilities, culturally competent services and continuity with community providers. Operational models which support family connections, acknowledging the disruption of family life should be championed with overnight family visits for children either at home or in prison considered. Guarantee women-specific health care, mental-health and substance-use treatment, social-care assessment and support for mothers. Build resettlement around safe housing, protection from abusive relationships, income, banking and debt support. Unlock's ["Angels or Witches?": The impact of criminal records on women](#) report found that women face distinct and often gendered barriers after conviction, particularly in employment and roles subject to higher-level DBS checks, such as the care sector. Ultimately, prisons need to promote routes for reintegration and prisons should report and be ranked on this.

The Review should also learn from Unlock's Step Into the Lead programme with Advance, which combines women's leadership development, practical career support, wellbeing and sustained aftercare. Fund paid peer leadership, co-produce services with diverse women and evaluate trauma-informed claims against women's actual experience. Practice should be healing and strengths-based, supporting powerful identities rather than institutionalising vulnerability.

Theme 8: Different cohorts

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

Adopt universal design and early screening, followed by specialist assessment and reasonable adjustments that transfer between establishments. Provide information in plain language, Easy Read, audio, translation and accessible digital formats. End disciplinary responses to disability-related behaviour. Commission health, social care and resettlement pathways jointly and require equality-impact data by intersecting characteristics. Provide age-appropriate and culturally competent regimes, immigration advice, and distinct support for people on remand and serving long sentences. People affected must co-design, monitor and evaluate provision through paid roles and independent advocacy. A national minimum offer should prevent access depending on prison location while allowing local adaptation. For people convicted of sexual offences, provision must combine public protection and safeguarding with individualised pathways towards stable, lawful and socially constructive lives.

Theme 9: Technology and digital tools

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

Technology should expand agency through secure access to education, health, legal and resettlement services; licence information; applications; digital identity; benefits and banking preparation; and workplace tools. A 24-hour support service should offer telephone and secure digital routes, with human advisers and interpretation. Automated systems must not make unreviewable decisions about risk, discipline, release or opportunity. Systems require data minimisation, bias testing, audit trails, human oversight, notice and accessible appeal. The Ministry of Justice and Home Office should work together with the BOLD team and people with lived experience to understand how linked criminal-record data affects access to work, while ensuring that research and operational uses have strict purpose limits and privacy safeguards.

Theme 10: Best practice

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

The Review should examine well-supported prisoner councils, peer mentoring, peer health and recovery roles, restorative practice, high-quality ROTL and employer partnerships, prison-university learning and voluntary-sector advice models. HMP Five Wells, HMP Rye Hill and HMP Oakwood would be worthwhile visits to examine practices that support hope, progression and purposeful activity. Unlock's prison disclosure training brings the intricacies of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, spent and unspent convictions, DBS levels and filtering directly into career planning. This prevents people being channeled into unsuitable courses, supports confident and lawful disclosure, and opens occupations that may otherwise be wrongly ruled out. Unlock's Beyond the Label work adds a specialist pathway for people convicted of sexual offences, helping them understand restrictions, recognise transferable skills, explore realistic employment or self-employment and pursue positive work without compromising safeguarding. Our wider model links individual advice with systemic reform and fair-employer practice.

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

Scotland demonstrates that imprisonment need not automatically extinguish civic participation: some sentenced prisoners can vote. England and Wales should move towards full civic inclusion and, at minimum, ensure that all people on remand and everyone otherwise eligible can register and vote in practice. This is developed in Unlock's [Unlock the Vote campaign and Why Prisoner Voting Matters report](#). The Review should also examine Nordic normalisation and dynamic-security approaches, smaller community-integrated units, and jurisdictions that provide stronger record-sealing, expungement or review mechanisms. Transferability depends on legal context, workforce capability and resources; international models should therefore be tested with people in custody and evaluated for equity, legitimacy and long-term outcomes, rather than copied as isolated architectural features.

Additional evidence

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

- Unlock's helpline, casework, community testimony and research on disclosure, employment, financial services and digital harms.

- The Bronx Defenders holistic-defence model and independent evaluation of its effects on custody and public safety.
- The BOLD Partnership's linked-data work, extended to disclosure and employment outcomes with privacy and lived-experience safeguards.
- HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Prisons and Probation Ombudsman evidence on safety, regimes, release and deaths.
- Longitudinal data linking prison experience with housing, health, employment, recall and reoffending.

The Review should establish a paid lived-experience reference group with real influence over analysis and implementation. It should recommend a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Bill, co-designed with affected people, and pilots of holistic defence, a 24-hour support line and employer National Insurance relief. The final report should set measurable commitments, named owners and publication dates. Its test should be whether people leave custody understanding their obligations and possessing the accommodation, income, health care, practical resources and fair opportunity needed to build a life beyond punishment.

Selected Unlock evidence

- ["Angels or Witches?": The impact of criminal records on women](#)
- [The Right to be Forgotten](#)
- [Unlock the Vote: Why Prisoner Voting Matters](#)
- [The complexity of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974](#)