



In Focus

HM Government's Proposals for Prison Reform

Proposed Reforms

The 2015 Conservative Party Manifesto set out the Party's plans for reform of certain aspects of the prison system:

Despite making savings in the prison budget, there are around 3,000 more adult male prison places today than in 2010. We will make further savings by closing old, inefficient prisons, building larger, modern and fit-for-purpose ones and expanding payment-by-results. And we will introduce widespread random testing of drug use in jails, new body scanners, greater use of mobile phone blocking technology and a new strategy to tackle corruption in prisons.¹

Subsequently, the November 2015 Spending Review and Autumn Statement provided more detail about Government plans to close old prisons and build new ones, as well as other priorities for investment:

The Government will build nine new prisons, five in this Parliament and four shortly after, that are cheaper to run and better tailored to reduce reoffending, while selling old, inadequate prisons located on prime real estate to free up land for over 3,000 homes. This will reduce running costs in prisons by £80 million a year when the reforms are complete. The Government will also invest in new technology and prisoner education to support rehabilitation, and will fund new video conference centres in prisons to enable video links with courts. This will reduce transport costs by allowing up to 90,000 cases a year to be heard in prison instead of court.²

As part of the plan to replace old, centrally located prisons with other facilities, on 25 November 2015 the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) announced the closure of the Holloway women's prison. The Government stated that in the future women from London awaiting trial will be held on remand at HMP Bronzefield in Surrey, and that "newly refurbished facilities" at HMP Downview, also in Surrey, will re-open as a women's prison in 2016.³

In addition, two reviews of elements of the prison system have recently been announced by the MoJ. On 8 September 2015, a review of the education of adults in custody was announced. This review is being led by Dame Sally Coates and is expected to report in the spring of 2016.⁴ Subsequently, on 11 September 2015, the MoJ announced a review of the youth justice system, which is to include an examination of rehabilitation and prevention of reoffending. Charlie Taylor, former Chief Executive of the National College of Teaching and Leadership, has been appointed to lead this review, which is expected to report in the summer of 2016.⁵

Response

In response to the Government's announcement that old prisons would be closed and new ones opened, the Labour Party stated that it welcomed the modernising of the prison estate, but argued that "we have heard similar promises before and the Coalition Government ended up selling high performing prisons and increasing pressure on an already over-crowded system".⁶ The Labour Party also emphasised that "the right conditions also need to be in place to allow prisoners to be rehabilitated".

A statement from the Howard League for Penal Reform expressed disappointment that the first major policy announcement on prisons concerned building more jails, and argued that "the burning issue is less the state of the buildings and more the fact that we send so many people to prison in the first place".⁷ The Prison Reform Trust welcomed the commitment to better conditions and more effective rehabilitation, but also argued for more measures to reduce the prison population.⁸

Harris Review into Self-Inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18–24 Year Olds

On 6 February 2014, the then Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Chris Grayling (Conservative), announced the establishment of an independent review into the self-inflicted deaths of 18 to 24 year olds in custody. Lord Harris of Haringey (Labour) was appointed to lead the review. The Review published its report, [Changing Prisons, Saving Lives: Report of the Independent Review into Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18–24 Year Olds](#), on 1 July 2015, and the Government published its response in December 2015.⁹

The Harris Review made 108 recommendations. In addition to those aimed specifically at reducing the number of self-inflicted deaths amongst 18 to 24 year olds, the Review also made a number of more general recommendations about prisons.¹⁰ In its response, the Government fully accepted 29 of the recommendations, and listed a further 16 as 'agree—already adopted'. Lord Harris stated that this "misses the point that existing policies have been found not to be effective".¹¹ The Government also rejected 33 of the recommendations. In a written statement to Parliament on the day its response to the Review was published, the Government emphasised several policies it is implementing to tackle self-harm and self-inflicted deaths among young people in custody, including "giving greater support to those with mental health vulnerabilities who come into contact with the criminal justice system", improving the management of "Safer Cells" in prisons, and increasing the number of prison staff.¹²

¹ Conservative Party, [The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015](#), 2015, p 59.

² HM Treasury, [Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015](#), November 2015, p 69.

³ Ministry of Justice, '[Prisons Announcement](#)', 25 November 2015.

⁴ Ministry of Justice, '[Education in Prison](#)', 8 September 2015.

⁵ Ministry of Justice, '[Youth Justice](#)', 11 September 2015.

⁶ Labour Party, '[Response to Government Prisons Announcement](#)', 9 November 2015.

⁷ Howard League for Penal Reform, '[Howard League Responds to Prison-Building Proposals](#)', 9 November 2015.

⁸ Prison Reform Trust, '[Comment: Prison Building Announcement](#)', 9 November 2015.

⁹ Ministry of Justice, [Government Response to the Harris Review into Self-Inflicted Deaths in National Offender Management Service Custody of 18–24 Year Olds](#), December 2015.

¹⁰ House of Lords Library, [Harris Review on Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18–24 year olds, Changing Prisons, Saving Lives](#), 23 October 2015.

¹¹ Lord Harris of Haringey, '[Shame on You, Minister](#)', 21 December 2015.

¹² [House of Commons, Prisons: Written Statement, 17 December 2015, HCWS419](#).

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