



Prisons Strategy, Belong Response, 2022

Do you agree that these are the right long-term ambitions for UK prisons?

Prisons must provide decent and humane standards of accommodation for people who have offended. For people who have offended to improve their outcomes after leaving prison, it is crucial that prisons are stable, secure and trauma informed environments. Those who work in prisons need wide ranging training with an emphasis on de-escalating conflict, using restorative approaches, and employing self-care. For Belong, these are the right minimum standards for our next generation of modern prisons.

We should not be building new prisons, without a committed and achievable plan to close older prisons. The long-term ambitions outlined by the government focus on creating new prisons without any plan to close prisons that do not provide decent and humane accommodation standards. This will lead to a mixed standard of accommodation for people who have offended, with individuals who are held in lower standard accommodation at a disadvantage to those who are held in appropriate standards of accommodation. An increase in our total number of prison places also provides scope for our prison population to grow. However, imprisonment does not decrease crime.

Instead of increasing our prison population, we need to focus on reducing the number of people in prison. A clear and realistic plan, including measurable targets and monitored timeframes, should be set out to achieve this. Crucially, we must address the well-evidenced inequality and discrimination that sits within our criminal justice system. There are practical measures that we can take to achieve this, such as for example, those laid out in the recommendations of the Lammy report. Taking these practical measures and reducing the prison population would reduce crime. In addition, it would provide those who are disproportionately disadvantaged by our criminal justice system, including people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds; care leavers; those in poverty and those with fewer education and training outcomes, with opportunities to more fully participate and succeed in our society.

Belong supports the government's aim of delivering digital upgrades to prisons. We believe this aim could go further than 11 prisons, and we would like to see increased digital capability in every UK prison. Further digital technology could better enable information sharing and enhance ease and efficiency for staff who are delivering day to day prison tasks. Increased digital technology in prisons would modernise education and training opportunities within prisons. This would enable people in prison to build their digital and IT skills, increase their chances of securing meaningful employment after release.

Do you agree these are the guiding principles around which the government should design future prison regime?

The white paper rightly states that prisons should be safe, orderly and decent places for both prisoners and staff. We agree that prisons should be stable, generate hope and provide opportunities for prisoners to turn their lives around. The white paper is limited in its focus on achieving this through regimes that ensure time is well spent. The government must outline specific,

evidence-based methods that will be employed alongside purposeful regimes, to create safety, stability and hope within prisons.

Belong provides evidence-based interventions that increase safety and wellbeing in prisons, and we would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the government's proposed innovation taskforce. To be effective, the innovation taskforce must include people with lived experience of serving prison sentences, representatives from the voluntary, academic, and private sectors, as well as public sector experts. The taskforce must have sufficient independence to address the root causes of suicide, self-harm, and violence in prisons. It must have established links to budget holders and commissioners which enable it to increase the use of innovative, evidence-based methods that build up safety and wellbeing in prisons. It is important that the taskforce addresses the systemic, cultural, and resourcing factors behind violence, self-harm, and suicide, as well as individual factors that are relevant to this. The white paper gives insufficient attention to the systemic, cultural, and resourcing factors that contribute to violence, self-harm and suicide in our prisons.

We support the government's commitment to deliver increased ligature-resistant cells to protect vulnerable prisoners during times of acute crisis. However, 290 ligature-resistant cells will be insufficient given the scale of the problems with suicide and self-harm in prisons. This target number of ligature-resistant cells should be significantly increased. We support the provision of improved Body Worn Video Cameras to all staff who need them and the piloting of technology that can monitor vulnerable prisoners' health at a time of crisis, supporting the care given by prison officers to prevent suicide and self-harm. In addition to these steps, we suggest that the government also takes steps to ensure that there is better CCTV throughout the prison estate.

The government proposes to strengthen cross government and local relationships to crack down on crime in prisons. We agree that there are barriers to reporting and prosecuting crime in prisons, that need to be addressed. We support the government's proposal to do this, if this is implemented alongside interventions that tackle the root causes of crime in prisons.

We support the governments ambitions to build joined-up approaches to safety across the whole prison system and to thereby offer hope, provide support, and prevent harm. We welcome the modernising of technology so that staff have a better oversight of prisoner needs; and we celebrate the government's intention to further develop psychological training for staff and peer support training for prisoners.

Do you agree with the government's long-term priorities for making prisons safer? Where can we go further?

The white paper outlines some useful methods of cracking down on the smuggling of drugs, weapons, or other illicit items into prisons. We agree that X-Ray body scanners and Enhanced Gate Security processes are a great aid in tackling these problems. However, many prison gatehouses are not designed to accommodate these measures. Significant infrastructure investment would be needed to achieve the government's targets in this area.

We welcome the government's intention to drive a cultural shift amongst staff to improve understanding of the root causes of violence and self-harm, providing staff with trauma informed training, and positioning staff-prisoner relationships as a tool for improving safety in our prisons.

Whilst we agree that it is crucial that prisons capture a thorough understanding of each prisoner, it is important that we divert individuals from prison at an earlier stage than we currently do. The white

paper usefully summarises the range of traumatic experiences and disadvantages that individuals in prison have very often encountered in their past. As well as providing tailored support that empowers people to address these barriers when they reach prison, we need to do more to relieve poverty, increase access to education and reduce abuse in childhood.

The white paper outlines plans to improve information flow through the prison system and centralise the separate information systems that provide prison staff with data about each prisoner's specific needs. We welcome this, as well as the longer-term aim of creating a single digital prisoner record. The government must also ensure there is support and training, for both prisoners and prison staff, so that each prisoner's specific needs can be addressed whilst they are in prison.

Do you agree with the government's long-term vision for cutting reoffending by prison leavers?

We agree with the government's long-term vision for cutting reoffending by prison leavers. We welcome the government's plans for achieving a transformed, improved Prisoner Education Service and ensuring that most prisoners leaving custody enter employment on release from prison. As outlined in the white paper, it is crucial that people do not leave prison at risk of homelessness without the offer of temporary accommodation, that is suitable for their offending risk level, and with a pathway to secure stable, long-term housing.

In our view, there could be a greater emphasis in the government's plans on support and intervention for prison leavers being tailored to each individual person. Evidence shows that interventions and support packages for people with complex needs and disadvantages, work best when they are flexible to the needs of individual people. We caution the government against adopting and expanding provision for prison leavers that employ one size fits all frameworks and/or timeframes.

There are significant problems with insufficient probation staffing and increasingly high caseloads for probation practitioners, that the white paper does not address. Cutting reoffending by prison leavers cannot be achieved without a larger probation workforce in which probation practitioners receive appropriate levels of support and have manageable caseloads. This will in turn enable probation professionals to deliver an effective service and give prison leavers the best opportunity to succeed after release.

Where can the government go further in turning prisoners away from crime?

The government must go further to tackle the root causes of crime, including mental health, poverty, and inequality. We need to prioritise early intervention that supports individuals to overcome these issues before they reach prison. This will involve having better funded and more accessible community services. The government should also actively plan to reduce the prison population and reduce the size of prison wings. The prison and probation workforce must be significantly increased, so that prison and probation practitioners can provide good standards of care, support, and intervention to people in prison, and leaving prison.

Whilst we support the government's detailed plans to provide rehabilitative, trauma informed support for women prisoners, we believe these plans should be extended to apply to young people in prison and to male prisoners.