

# A Ten-Year Strategy for a Safe, Credible and Financially Sustainable Prison and Punishment System

## Policy proposal for England and Wales, 2026–2036

### Executive summary

The prison crisis in England and Wales is usually presented as a shortage of cells. That is too narrow a diagnosis. The real shortage is of **certified, staffed and usable criminal-justice capacity**. Physical accommodation matters, but a cell is of no operational value if it is unfit for occupation, cannot be certified, cannot be staffed, or sits within a prison whose regime cannot safely operate. Equally, an apparently cheaper community sentence is not a genuine alternative to imprisonment unless probation can supervise it, electronic monitoring works, compulsory activity can be delivered and breaches produce prompt consequences.

The immediate pressure remains acute. The prison population stood at 87,342 at 31 March 2026 and was still around 86,000 in June. The latest long-term official projection expects the population to rise to between 98,000 and 103,600 by March 2030, with a central estimate of 100,600. The latest published usable operational capacity before that projection was 89,334. The Government is investing £7 billion between 2024–25 and 2029–30 to provide around 14,000 additional prison places by 2031, but the Ministry of Justice's own projections show why construction alone cannot be relied upon to solve the problem.

The existing estate compounds the problem. HMPPS has indefinitely closed 4,151 cells because of dilapidation since 2010. Its maintenance backlog doubled from £0.9 billion in 2020 to £1.8 billion by September 2024, and the Ministry of Justice estimated that £2.8 billion would be required to return the estate to a fair condition. The Public Accounts Committee recorded the Ministry's acknowledgement that maintaining an existing cell is generally cheaper than building a replacement, but also its warning that extensive maintenance cannot be undertaken without sufficient headroom to empty accommodation.

This creates the central operational paradox. The system needs spare capacity in order to repair itself, but because it has almost no spare capacity it cannot release enough accommodation for systematic repair. Temporary headroom is therefore not wasted capacity; it is the enabling resource without which estate renewal becomes impossible.

The workforce is equally fundamental. At 31 March 2026 there were 21,984 full-time-equivalent Band 3–5 prison officers, 732 fewer than a year previously. Departures have improved substantially, but HMPPS itself identifies continuing geographical recruitment and retention difficulties and an experience problem within the officer workforce. Prison officers were assaulted 10,142 times in the twelve months to December 2025, including 908 serious assaults. A future prison strategy that builds accommodation without rebuilding the professional workforce will create nominal capacity rather than usable capacity.

Probation has the same strategic importance. The Sentencing Act 2026 has already moved policy towards greater reliance on suspended sentences, community restrictions, intensive supervision, electronic monitoring and earned progression through custody. The Government has committed up to £700 million of additional annual probation funding by 2028–29 compared with 2025–26. But expanded community punishment cannot simply be loaded onto an already stretched service. It must be accompanied by the recruitment, training, technology, work placements and breach infrastructure necessary to make it credible.

Electronic monitoring illustrates the danger. HMPPS estimates direct monitoring cost at about £4,900 per person per year, dramatically below the £56,618 overall annual resource cost per prisoner in 2024–25. Yet the National Audit Office's July 2026 investigation found major weaknesses in electronic monitoring, including thousands of cases under review where people required to be monitored might not actually have been monitored. The lesson is not that tagging cannot work. It is that a tag is merely a sensor. Punishment depends on the institutional system that receives, verifies and acts upon the information it provides.

The policy therefore proposes a ten-year transformation built around five mutually dependent programmes. Immediate operational headroom must first be created by recovering economically repairable cells, adding modular and other rapidly deliverable accommodation particularly at suitable Category C and D sites, rebuilding staffing and using that lower-security capacity to cascade suitable prisoners down through the estate. The Prison Service workforce must simultaneously be professionalised through better targeted pay, longer training, mentoring, stronger career structures, improved conditions and a much more rigorous approach to corruption and organised-crime penetration. The long-term estate should then be progressively rebuilt around modern mainstream prisons and specialist secure campuses while obsolete and expensive prisons are retired. The Sentencing Act 2026 should be supported by an intensive community-punishment system that is visibly demanding and reliably enforced, rather than by assuming that electronic monitoring alone provides punishment. The international evidence indicates that the most reliable route to a lower population runs through capping the flow of offenders recalled or returned to

custody for breach, so that mechanism is treated as central rather than incidental. Finally, prisons, probation, court-generated demand, estate capacity, staffing and enforcement must be managed as a single system with named responsibility for the result.

This reform should not promise that every year of the transition will be cost-neutral. That is implausible because the state will temporarily have to finance old prisons, new construction, staffing growth, training, probation expansion and enforcement simultaneously. The credible fiscal objective is different: **the transition should be designed so that the mature system requires no greater real recurrent expenditure than continuation of the present system and should ultimately become cheaper.** Savings must be recognised only when they are genuinely cash-releasing. A reduction in prisoner numbers does not count as a saving until wings, staffing establishments, contracts or whole prisons can actually be reduced or closed.

The governing doctrine is consequently straightforward. Capacity does not exist until it is certified, staffed and usable. A sentence does not exist operationally unless the state can enforce it. A saving does not exist until expenditure actually disappears. A programme does not scale until independent evidence demonstrates that it works. Dangerous offenders should remain securely imprisoned; offenders who can safely remain outside prison should nevertheless experience a punishment that taxpayers, victims and offenders themselves recognise as real.

## The strategic problem

The present system has accumulated several different problems and treats them as though they were separate. Prison construction is managed as an estate problem, staff recruitment as an HR problem, remand as a courts problem, electronic monitoring as a contracting problem and probation caseloads as a community-service problem. Yet each affects the same underlying equation: whether the state possesses sufficient capacity to execute the sentences imposed by the courts safely, lawfully and credibly.

The original comparative analysis underpinning this proposal showed that prison expenditure is generated not simply by prisoner numbers but by staffing intensity, physical infrastructure, utilisation and a substantial amount of expenditure incurred above individual establishment level. It also warned against assuming that apparently cheaper foreign systems can simply be copied because wage levels, legal standards, occupancy and accounting differ substantially. The same analysis identified the difference between direct establishment expenditure and overall prison expenditure as a significant area requiring transparency, while correctly cautioning that the published accounts do not allow the whole difference to be treated as discretionary overhead.

In 2024–25 direct prison resource expenditure was £3.293 billion, equivalent to £37,845 per prisoner, while overall resource expenditure was £4.926 billion, equivalent to £56,618 per prisoner. The published Ministry of Justice figures make clear that these measures have different scopes and that public and privately operated prisons cannot simply be compared on a like-for-like basis. The policy response should therefore not begin with an arbitrary percentage cut to headquarters. It should require every national and regional function to identify its cost, purpose, output and responsible owner, after which functions can be judged on value rather than organisational location.

The longer-term demand trajectory makes this urgent. The official central projection of around 100,600 prisoners by March 2030 is driven by increased flows through police, prosecution and courts as well as recalls. That means a building programme can be overtaken by demand even if construction proceeds successfully. The Government's current 14,000-place programme is necessary, but it should be treated as the capital bridge into a redesigned system rather than as sufficient policy in itself.

## The strategic objective

The objective should not be expressed as reducing the prison population. Nor should it be expressed simply as increasing the prison estate. It should be to guarantee secure custody for those from whom the public requires physical protection while delivering punishment to other offenders in forms that are cheaper, demanding, enforceable and demonstrably effective.

A mature system should deliberately retain an operational reserve rather than attempting to drive occupancy permanently towards 100 per cent. A precise percentage should ultimately be determined through operational modelling, but a planning assumption around 90–92 per cent of usable capacity is reasonable as a strategic target because the remaining margin permits refurbishment, temporary closures, prisoner separation, regional imbalance, security reclassification and emergency response. The Public Accounts Committee's evidence that HMPPS cannot undertake sufficient maintenance without greater prison headroom demonstrates why reserve capacity has economic as well as operational value.

The strategic metric should therefore become **certified, staffed, usable capacity**. Published operational capacity already attempts to reflect control, security and the proper operation of a prison regime. The reform should make staffing explicit within that concept. If a 400-place houseblock has been physically completed but cannot be staffed safely, Ministers should not claim 400 additional operational places.

## Creating immediate transition capacity

The policy must begin with headroom because the long-term estate cannot be rationalised while virtually every usable place is needed.

The first source should be recovery of what already exists. HMPPS should complete a cell-by-cell National Prison Capacity Recovery Survey covering the 4,151 places indefinitely lost to dilapidation and any additional accommodation temporarily unavailable. Each unit should be assessed against restoration cost, time to service, remaining structural life, staffing requirement, security category and expected operational value. The result should be a national queue ranked by cost per recovered usable place and time to delivery.

This would not mean preserving every Victorian or otherwise obsolete prison. Some accommodation will be economically irrecoverable and should ultimately disappear. The point is that a wing capable of providing five or eight useful transitional years can still be a sound investment if it creates the headroom needed to refurbish or close worse accommodation elsewhere. The relevant comparison is not between a restored cell and an ideal new cell expected to last several generations. It is between the cost of restoring temporary useful capacity and the cost of continuing to operate the entire system at crisis occupancy while waiting for permanent construction.

The second source should be a capacity cascade. Rapidly deployable accommodation should be concentrated first where it is easiest and cheapest to operate safely, particularly on suitable Category C and D estates. Creating an additional lower-security place can release an existing conventional place occupied by a prisoner whose current security allocation is no longer necessary. That in turn can release capacity further up the system. The purpose is not to place dangerous offenders in lower security. It is the opposite: to move appropriate prisoners downwards and preserve the strongest and most expensive accommodation for prisoners who genuinely require it.

The existing expansion programme demonstrates both the value and limitations of modular approaches. The National Audit Office found that Rapid Deployment Cells intended to deliver 1,000 places were forecast to arrive at least three years later than originally planned, while wider prison construction costs had risen sharply. Modular construction should therefore be treated as a potentially faster production method, not as a magic exemption from planning, foundations, utilities, fire safety, security integration, certification, contractors and workforce requirements.

The transition programme should consequently operate as a portfolio. Recovered cells, modular accommodation, conventional houseblocks, permanent prisons, staffing increases and reductions in avoidable demand should proceed simultaneously. Each project should publish separate dates for physical completion, certification and staffed operational opening, together with confidence ranges rather than a single politically convenient date. National planning should be based on conservative delivery assumptions rather than announced capacity.

No material expansion project should proceed without a parallel workforce plan. Prison-officer recruitment currently takes approximately six to seven months from application to first day on the job, before the organisation then has to develop operational competence. Staffing therefore has to lead construction rather than follow it. Labour-market assessment should begin several years before opening, recruitment should begin early enough to create a trained cadre, experienced officers should be identified for transfer, and new establishments should open in phases if necessary rather than counting unstaffed cells as capacity.

## The Prison Service workforce as the critical enabling programme

The success of the entire strategy depends on rebuilding the Prison Service as a professional uniformed organisation with sufficient numbers, experience and integrity.

At March 2026 there were 21,984 FTE Band 3–5 prison officers. This was 732 fewer than in March 2025. The number leaving during the year fell by 24.3 per cent to 2,312, showing that retention has improved, but HMPPS explicitly acknowledges both continuing regional recruitment and retention problems and a national challenge concerning staff experience. This is important because headcount alone can conceal capability. A prison staffed by a very high proportion of officers with limited service is not operationally equivalent to one containing a deep cadre of officers with five, ten or fifteen years of accumulated judgement.

Working conditions help explain why this matters. There were 10,142 assaults on staff during the twelve months to December 2025, including 908 classified as serious. HMPPS sickness absence also remains high: the agency reported 11.9 working days lost per employee in 2024–25, compared with 11.1 in the preceding year. The workforce strategy should therefore address pay, professional status, conditions, training and career development together rather than treating recruitment as an advertising problem.

Current advertised starting remuneration is not trivial. Band 3 prison officers start at around £34,928 on a 37-hour contract outside higher-paying locations, with higher earnings available through longer contracted hours and London weighting. Band 4 officer salaries start around £41,328 and Band 5 custodial-manager salaries around £44,900. The correct policy conclusion is therefore not simply that prison officers are underpaid. It is that **the overall employment proposition is not consistently producing the numbers, experience distribution and professional resilience required by the future estate.**

Pay reform should be targeted. The national baseline should recognise the responsibility, danger and integrity expectations inherent in the role, but

substantial additional money should be directed to labour markets and establishments where vacancies demonstrably remove usable capacity. Local or regional supplements should be formula-driven, transparent and reviewed periodically so that they correct genuine market failure without encouraging destructive leapfrogging between neighbouring prisons. Where supplements are required, the policy should monitor whether vacancies are actually reduced rather than allowing temporary allowances to become permanent unexamined expenditure.

Experience should attract a clearer financial premium. HMPPS already provides a Band 4 specialist route alongside supervising-officer progression, with roles including security intelligence, offender management, dog handling and physical education. The principle should be expanded into a genuine operational professional career. An excellent officer should be able to develop through senior specialist, training, intelligence, tactical, mentoring or security roles without being forced into general management merely to improve salary and status. A service that removes its most capable operational practitioners from operational work because promotion is the only route to reward is structurally weakening itself.

Initial training should also be strengthened. Current foundation training lasts seven weeks after the initial induction period. That can provide the foundations required to begin work, but the future Service should treat qualification as a longer period of professional formation. A longer initial programme should cover law and powers, prison rules, use of force, search, first aid, suicide prevention, mental health, neurodiversity, drugs, intelligence, organised crime, corruption, manipulation, evidence handling, communication and professional ethics. Recruits should then serve a structured probationary operational year with a named experienced mentor before full professional confirmation.

Mentoring should be paid and recognised as specialist work. Prison craft includes tacit knowledge that cannot be reproduced by classroom instruction: understanding the atmosphere on a landing, distinguishing distress from manipulation, recognising conditioning, knowing when a minor change in behaviour is significant and judging when intervention will calm rather than inflame a situation. The workforce loses this capability when experienced staff depart even if raw headcount is subsequently restored.

Continuing professional development should become routine. Officers should periodically requalify or refresh in use of force, first aid, security, safeguarding, drugs, corruption, suicide prevention and relevant legal changes. Specialist officers should hold recognised competencies. Promotion and specialist advancement should depend on demonstrated professional capability rather than simply vacancy and tenure.

Working conditions must improve alongside remuneration. Better pay cannot indefinitely compensate for overcrowding, chronic understaffing,

unpredictable rostering, cancelled activities, drugs, violence and poor buildings. The estate programme is therefore partly a workforce policy. Modern sight lines, better control rooms, electronic locking, improved movement and lower occupancy should reduce the amount of officer time consumed compensating for architecture and disorder. The objective is not simply fewer officers per prisoner; it is fewer wasted officer-hours and a more capable workforce.

Establishments should publish forced overtime, cancelled rest days, sickness absence, first-year attrition, three-year retention, vacancy rates, assault rates and the proportion of operational staff with less than one year, less than three years and more than ten years' service. Morale can then be treated as an operational variable rather than anecdote. Where one prison consistently outperforms comparable establishments, leadership and management practice should be examined and transferred.

## Integrity, criminality and organised crime

Workforce reform must include a much stronger conception of integrity because prisons are unusual workplaces in which criminal organisations have direct financial incentives to corrupt employees.

The Government's 2025 Anti-Corruption Strategy explicitly identifies corrupt insiders in prisons as a security vulnerability, while the Serious and Organised Crime Strategy recognises that offenders can continue organised criminal activity from prison and that HMPPS requires dedicated intelligence and disruption capacity. The Government has already committed additional resources to HMPPS serious and organised-crime capability, including investment in intelligence and illicit communications countermeasures.

This is not simply a disciplinary issue. Drugs, mobile phones, information, access, assistance with movements or searches and communication with outside networks can become highly valuable inside prison. Organised criminals will therefore search continuously for vulnerable insiders. Some employees may enter with criminal intent; others may be conditioned progressively through favours, relationships, debt, intimidation, gifts or blackmail.

Improved pay should form part of the resilience strategy but should not be oversold as an anti-corruption cure. Well-paid individuals can also be corrupted. The more important relationship is between employment quality and organisational selectivity. If the Service offers an attractive professional career, it can demand higher entry standards, maintain more intrusive vetting for sensitive roles and reject marginal candidates without being paralysed by vacancies.

Vetting should therefore become risk-based and recurrent rather than a one-off gateway. Pre-employment checks should be strengthened where



necessary, and periodic re-vetting should be normal for sensitive roles. Relevant criminal associations and conflicts of interest should be declared. Unusual access to prisoner or security systems should be auditable. Random and intelligence-led staff searching should be proportionate but routine enough that corruption carries a meaningful probability of detection.

The system should also be designed so that one compromised employee can achieve less. Separation of duties, dual authorisation for particularly sensitive activities, electronic access logging, secure tool and key management, cashless processes and strong contractor controls reduce dependence on personal integrity alone. New prisons should incorporate these safeguards architecturally rather than retrofit them later.

Honest officers also require protection. An employee approached or threatened by organised criminals should be able to report the incident confidentially and rapidly access intelligence support, police liaison, transfer where necessary and support for threats against family members. The institutional message should distinguish clearly between being targeted and becoming compromised. Reporting an approach should demonstrate professional integrity; concealing it should become the disciplinary concern.

A permanent security adaptation capability should continuously test new systems. The Government's current independent prison-system review itself identifies corruption, drones, illicit communications, cyber threats and continuing serious organised crime from within prisons as evolving security threats. A permanent red-team function should therefore attempt to defeat electronic monitoring, staff access controls, drone defences, communications restrictions and contractor procedures before organised criminals discover vulnerabilities in practice.

## The long-term custodial estate

Once temporary headroom and staffing permit systematic restructuring, the estate should evolve into two principal custodial tiers rather than continue accumulating prisons of every age and design.

The highest-risk cohort should remain expensive because the state is purchasing genuine incapacitation. These prisoners include those whose violence, escape risk, terrorism, organised-crime involvement or predatory behaviour requires exceptional physical security and specialist management. Cost reduction should come from sharing high-cost infrastructure, not from compromising internal control.

The preferred model should therefore be secure campuses with one substantial outer security system containing several operationally separate prisons or units. Perimeter security, gates, specialist healthcare, intelligence infrastructure, video court facilities, tactical response, utilities and logistics can be shared, while accommodation, association, exercise and movement

remain separable. This distinction is essential because economic consolidation must not create concentrations of rival organised-crime groups, terrorists or highly disruptive prisoners who cannot safely coexist.

The mainstream custodial estate should progressively move towards modern establishments designed around good sight lines, electronic locking, central control, more efficient internal movement, modern workshops, digital education and communication, telemedicine and improved anti-drone and communications security. HMP Millsike and other recent builds illustrate the Government's existing direction towards technologically enabled and lower-energy prisons. The wider strategy should exploit those design advantages primarily to improve safety, control and purposeful activity, with lower recurrent costs as a consequence rather than the sole design objective. The existing capital programme, however, demonstrates the need for disciplined procurement: the NAO estimated the previous expansion programme would cost between £9.4 billion and £10.1 billion, at least £4.2 billion more than earlier estimates.

The prison day should increasingly resemble a structured working day for prisoners capable of participating. Work, education, vocational training, treatment where evidence supports it, exercise and domestic responsibility should replace prolonged unproductive confinement. Current prisoner employment already generates a levy for Victim Support, though the scale is small relative to the prison system: £3.9 million was raised in 2024-25. The objective should not be to claim that prison labour can finance prisons. It cannot. The objective is to convert otherwise dead time into productive activity, develop employability, provide structure and create a visible reparative component to punishment.

Prison work should be tied where possible to real demand in public-sector procurement, refurbishment, recycling, modular construction, textiles, horticulture, food production and other suitable sectors. A proportion of earnings above ordinary prison allowances could contribute to victim compensation, child maintenance where relevant and release savings. Any such scheme would require safeguards against exploitation and displacement of ordinary employment.

## Estate rationalisation and sites

The transition programme should use existing Ministry of Justice land wherever practicable because co-location reduces acquisition risk and can permit shared infrastructure. The 2024-25 State of the Estate report confirms that the current capacity strategy already combines new prisons, houseblocks, Rapid Deployment Cells and targeted refurbishment. The future programme should impose a consistent hierarchy favouring suitable land adjoining existing establishments, wider government-owned land and brownfield sites before expensive or contentious greenfield acquisition.

Planning and local legitimacy cannot be ignored. New prisons create employment and investment but also face local objections concerning infrastructure, traffic, environmental impact and community identity. A national capacity plan should therefore publish regional requirements early, provide infrastructure funding where developments impose genuine local costs and avoid repeatedly pretending that each new site is an isolated planning application.

As new permanent capacity becomes available, each old establishment should undergo a rebuild-or-close assessment based on operating cost, staffing requirement, maintenance burden, energy performance, security, violence, purposeful activity, remaining structural life and realistic redevelopment value. Valuable urban sites should not be sold merely because their land value is attractive if replacement capacity has not already been secured.

Disposal receipts should flow into a ring-fenced Prison Estate Renewal Fund. The cycle should be deliberately sequential: replacement capacity opens, prisoners transfer, the obsolete prison closes, the land is disposed of or redeveloped and realised proceeds contribute to later phases. Forecast sale proceeds should never finance permanent commitments before transactions occur.

## Community punishment and the Sentencing Act 2026

The policy should work with the Sentencing Act 2026 rather than invent a parallel statutory structure. The Act establishes a presumption in favour of suspending custodial sentences of twelve months or less, subject to important exceptions, and expands the range of community restrictions available to courts. The wider sentencing reforms also create a progression model in which many standard determinate sentences move through custody, intensive supervision and a later licence stage, with release timing affected by behaviour.

Those reforms can relieve prison demand, but only if the community element works. The political danger is considerable. If fewer offenders serve short immediate custodial sentences while monitoring remains unreliable, compulsory activity is unavailable and breaches disappear into administrative backlogs, the public may reasonably interpret the policy as another capacity-driven early-release mechanism.

The community tier should therefore be designed as **intensive community punishment** rather than as mere supervision. For appropriately assessed offenders, a suspended or community sentence can combine GPS monitoring, substantial curfew, exclusion zones, compulsory work or structured activity, treatment where relevant, drug or alcohol requirements where lawful and enforceable, and restrictions related to victims or locations. The design must be disciplined by England and Wales's own recent history.

When the Criminal Justice Act 2003 introduced a reformed suspended sentence order, the volume of such orders rose from 9,666 in 2005 to 33,509 in 2006 while the rate of immediate custody remained broadly unchanged, because courts applied the new sanction to offenders who would previously have received an ordinary community order. That is the default failure mode of any new intensive option introduced without a binding mechanism to reserve it for offenders genuinely bound for custody, and it is examined further below.

An unemployed, able-bodied offender receiving a community sentence explicitly as an alternative to custody should ordinarily be subject to a demanding programme approaching a working week when sentence length and proportionality permit. Public work could include environmental maintenance, rights-of-way work, public-estate refurbishment, supervised recycling, drainage and flood-related maintenance and similar activity. The purpose is partly practical but also penal. A community sanction will retain legitimacy only if it imposes meaningful demands on the offender's time and freedom.

The public should be able to see aggregate results. Government should publish ordered hours, completed hours, work projects, compliance, breach rates, response times, new offending and victim-related outcomes. Community punishment should not rely on the claim that it is tough; it should produce evidence from which the public can judge that claim.

## Electronic monitoring and breach

Electronic monitoring is potentially one of the system's most important enabling technologies because its direct unit cost is far below imprisonment. HMPPS estimates an average annual cost of around £4,900 per monitored individual, including probation costs within the electronic-monitoring service but excluding wider police and court costs. That means it is misleading to compare £4,900 directly with the £56,618 overall prison cost and declare a saving of more than £50,000. A credible intensive order must also fund supervision, work placements, treatment where necessary, policing, breach hearings and short-term custody.

The 2026 NAO report is particularly important because it demonstrates that monitoring technology is only one component of the system. The operational performance measure should therefore be the complete chain from breach to consequence. Priority breaches involving violence, victim approach, absconding, deliberate tag removal or serious exclusion-zone violations should be detected, verified and referred for intervention within hours, not days.

Dedicated short-stay breach capacity should form part of the transitional prison estate. A conservative regional provision, of the order of 2,000 places as a lower-bound planning figure pending operational modelling, could

supply both emergency surge capacity and the infrastructure for rapid custodial sanctions where legislation and due process permit. The precise sanctions should be designed with the judiciary. The principle is that a relatively small breach should be capable of producing a small but swift and predictable consequence, while persistent or serious breach escalates towards activation of the underlying custodial sentence. The evidence on swift and certain sanctions requires care, because it is narrower than its popularity suggests. The Hawaii HOPE probation model, once widely promoted, was rated as having no effect by the United States National Institute of Justice after a four-site randomised replication reported in 2016 found null or adverse results outside the original site. The programme that did survive rigorous evaluation, the South Dakota 24/7 Sobriety scheme, works precisely because its target behaviour, alcohol consumption, is cheaply and objectively testable twice a day. The transferable lesson is that swift-certain enforcement earns its cost where compliance can be objectively verified, such as sobriety and location, and should not be generalised across the full range of subjective supervision conditions.

The policy should not adopt continuous body-worn audiovisual monitoring of offenders as a general solution. It would record employers, partners, children and bystanders, create major privacy and data-processing burdens, remain vulnerable to obstruction or power failure and risk undermining employment. GPS, attendance, exclusion-zone and other targeted data are more proportionate. AI could be used to prioritise anomalous patterns for human review, but decisions imposing punishment must remain accountable to human authorities.

## Preventing net-widening

An intensive community system could accidentally increase rather than reduce criminal-justice costs if courts use it for offenders who previously would have received ordinary community sentences. More intrusive supervision would then be imposed on a larger population without substituting for custody.

Every pilot should therefore estimate the counterfactual sentence. The key analytical distinction is between offenders genuinely diverted from immediate custody and offenders whose existing community sentence has merely become more intensive. Only the first group generates the principal prison-capacity benefit.

Independent evaluators should track whether the new sentencing architecture substitutes for custody, increases supervision of lower-risk offenders, generates additional breach proceedings or increases recalls. The relevant outcome is the effect on total public protection, reoffending and whole-system cost, rather than the prison headcount alone. The programme should also state plainly what happens if substitution fails its evaluation

gate. In that event the fiscal case cannot rest on emptying prisons through community sentencing, and the recoverable saving lies instead in reducing the flow of offenders recalled or returned to custody for technical breach. The Texas reforms after 2007 are instructive: the population there was stabilised, and sixteen prisons were eventually closed, principally by reducing parole revocations by around a quarter rather than by any single substitution of community sentences for custody. Recall and breach flows should therefore be managed as a primary lever in their own right, and not solely as a risk to be monitored.

## Probation as the second workforce programme

The Prison Service workforce cannot be rebuilt while assuming probation will effortlessly absorb thousands of additional monitored offenders.

Government has already committed substantial additional funding to probation, rising by up to £700 million a year by 2028–29 compared with 2025–26. That investment should be explicitly incorporated into the ten-year programme. Qualified probation officers undertake a role requiring professional risk assessment and offender management; current recruitment arrangements involve a funded professional qualification lasting generally between fifteen and twenty-seven months depending on prior qualifications and route. Capacity therefore cannot be increased instantaneously.

The probation workforce should have a compact parallel to that proposed for prisons. Pay, manageable caseloads, training, administrative support, specialist careers, supervision, digital systems and protection from violence or intimidation should be treated as capacity issues.

Qualified probation officers should concentrate on work requiring professional judgement, including risk assessment, safeguarding, sentence planning, escalation and behaviour change. Routine appointment administration, attendance recording, straightforward monitoring liaison and some work-site administration can be undertaken by appropriately trained support staff or technology. The aim is not simply to reduce probation staffing but to prevent expensive professional time from being consumed by tasks that do not require professional judgement.

Before any major expansion in intensive orders, government should publish regional **community sentence operational capacity** showing available probation resource, electronic-monitoring capacity, unpaid-work places, treatment availability and breach capacity. Courts cannot be expected to impose indefinitely expandable requirements onto finite operational services.

## Remand and the courts

Prison demand cannot be controlled entirely by prison policy because a significant share is generated upstream.



The remand population reached around 18,000 in mid-2025 before falling back towards 15,000 by June 2026. The Crown Court backlog remains an important structural driver of prison demand, and government has committed up to £450 million additional annual investment in the courts system by 2028–29 compared with 2025–26.

Remand reduction must not become indiscriminate bail. Courts must retain custody where there is a material risk to victims, witnesses, public safety or justice. The objective should instead be to remove avoidable time from cases already destined for trial.

Performance should therefore be measured in remand bed-days, not merely numbers of remand prisoners. Long-remand cases should be actively identified and prioritised, prosecution and defence readiness improved, avoidable adjournments scrutinised and monitored bail used where risk permits. Additional Crown Court sitting capacity matters, but courtrooms alone are insufficient if judges, advocates, prosecutors, probation staff or case preparation remain limiting factors.

The key principle is that a month removed from an unnecessary remand period releases a prison bed-month without constructing anything. That makes court throughput a component of national prison-capacity policy even though responsibility for the solution sits partly outside HMPPS.

## Public legitimacy

A punishment system ultimately depends on democratic consent. Community sentences cannot become a large-scale alternative to short imprisonment if voters believe they are nominal sanctions imposed because prisons are full.

The public proposition should therefore be clear. Dangerous offenders will be imprisoned. Offenders who can safely remain in the community will not simply be left alone wearing a tag; their liberty, movement and time will be controlled, they will be required to undertake work or other ordered activity, and breaches will produce predictable consequences.

Public confidence should be independently measured annually alongside operational data. The relevant questions are whether people believe dangerous offenders are securely held, community sentences are actually enforced, victims are protected and the state is reserving expensive prison capacity according to risk rather than desperation.

Where confidence falls, government should investigate operational performance rather than assume the solution is communications. If tags are not fitted or work requirements are not completed, the public may have identified a real failure.

The offender's perception also matters. A community sentence will have little deterrent weight if offenders regard non-compliance as likely to produce nothing. The system should create the opposite expectation. Missing compulsory work, deliberately breaching curfew or removing a tag should predictably generate a response. This is why enforcement capacity is more important than ever more elaborate surveillance.

## Legal and ethical limits

The policy can operate within the existing human-rights framework, but legality and proportionality should constrain its design.

Prison work can lawfully be required as an ordinary incident of lawful detention, but conditions must remain safe and regulated. Community work and restrictions already form part of sentencing law, and the Sentencing Act 2026 expands available requirements. More intensive regimes nevertheless require safeguards for disability, health, employment, caring responsibilities and proportionality.

Swift breach enforcement must retain due process. Administrative systems may verify facts and trigger procedures, but serious disputed breaches or substantial deprivation of liberty require appropriate judicial safeguards. The objective is certain enforcement, not arbitrary enforcement.

Article 8 privacy considerations support targeted monitoring rather than indiscriminate audiovisual surveillance. The state has a legitimate basis for restricting and monitoring a sentenced offender, but that does not automatically justify continuous recording of innocent third parties.

Cost reduction must never depend on degrading custodial standards. Overcrowding should be reduced, not normalised as an efficiency measure. The purpose of the operational reserve is partly to ensure that prisons can maintain lawful, decent and safe accommodation rather than run permanently beyond the level their infrastructure can sustain.

## Evaluation and mandatory stop/go gates

The policy should make evaluation a control mechanism rather than a retrospective academic exercise.

Every major innovation should begin with a pre-registered evaluation framework and explicit stop/go thresholds. Intensive community punishment, for example, should not expand nationally until independent evaluation demonstrates reliable monitoring, high completion rates, acceptable serious-offending outcomes, effective breach enforcement, genuine substitution for custody and a whole-system cost materially below the custodial alternative.

The exact thresholds should be set during programme design rather than invented after results are known. Monitoring reliability might reasonably



need to exceed 98 per cent before the state depends on electronic monitoring at very large scale, while priority breach processing should achieve similarly demanding standards. The precise figures require operational testing, but the principle is non-negotiable: safety and reliability thresholds must exist before rollout.

Where public-protection outcomes deteriorate materially, expansion should stop automatically pending review. Where operational outcomes fail, the programme should be repaired and retested. Where a programme costs more than its alternative without compensating improvements in public safety or reoffending, it should not survive merely because it has political sponsorship.

This approach responds directly to the earlier comparative analysis, which highlighted the danger of maintaining interventions because they are rehabilitative in intention rather than because they have demonstrated beneficial outcomes.

## The 2036 end-state

A strategy of this length should be willing to describe the system it intends to leave behind, even where the figures can only be approximate. The numbers that follow are planning ranges rather than commitments, and each rests on assumptions stated openly so that a reader can vary them. They are built from published baselines: an outturn population of 87,465 at the end of September 2025, a most recent usable operational capacity of around 89,300 places, an overall resource cost of £56,618 per prisoner in 2024–25, and the spending review provision of £7 billion between 2024–25 and 2029–30 for around 14,000 additional places by 2031.

The starting assumption is deliberately unheroic. The mature system is modelled to hold a population near its present level, of the order of 87,000, rather than a dramatically reduced one. This choice avoids the charge that the strategy depends on emptying prisons, and it reflects the demand pressure documented in the official projections, where continued growth in police charging and court throughput pushes the underlying population upward even as recent suppression measures hold it below earlier forecasts. The most recent bulletin places the population somewhat below the previous year's projection, which indicates that the sentencing and release changes now in force are already restraining growth. The purpose of the reform is therefore to accommodate demand at a stable population without recurrent emergency release, not to promise a smaller prison system.

On that basis the estate target is a usable operational capacity of approximately 95,000 to 97,000 certified, staffed places, carrying a normal population of around 87,000. That equates to an operational reserve of roughly 8,000 to 10,000 places, consistent with the 90 to 92 per cent planning hypothesis set out earlier. The reserve is the enabling resource for

refurbishment, separation and emergency response, and it is the single largest respect in which the mature estate differs from the present one, which operates with almost none.

Within that estate, the high-security requirement is small and should be planned as such. The eight high-security dispersal prisons hold the entire Category A population, which numbers in the low thousands and is frequently estimated at around 1,000 to 1,300 individuals, dispersed among Category B prisoners rather than concentrated. The mature design should reserve of the order of 8,000 to 9,000 places for genuine high-security and specialist function, delivered through shared-perimeter secure campuses, with the remaining bulk of the estate as modern mainstream custody. The high-security tier is the most expensive place in the system and should not grow beyond the cohort that genuinely requires it.

The community-substitution assumption is presented as a range rather than a point, because the evidence on net-widening makes any single figure unsafe. Three scenarios are modelled. In the conservative scenario, intensive community punishment genuinely substitutes for 5,000 custodial places. In the central scenario it substitutes for 10,000. In the optimistic scenario it substitutes for 15,000. The word substitutes carries the whole weight of the estimate: a place counts only where the offender would otherwise have been in custody, and not where an existing community sentence has merely been intensified. The 2005 to 2006 suspended-sentence experience, in which such orders more than trebled in a year while immediate custody held steady, is the reason the lower end of the range is treated as the prudent planning basis until independent evaluation demonstrates genuine substitution.

The fiscal consequence of that range should be stated on a marginal rather than an average basis, for the reasons given in the costing discussion below. If the cash-releasing cost of a closed place, once fixed perimeter, management and residual staffing costs are stripped out, is of the order of £25,000 to £30,000 a year, and if a mature intensive community sentence costs £15,000 to £20,000 a year once probation, work, monitoring and enforcement are included, then the net saving per genuinely substituted place lies in the region of £5,000 to £15,000 a year. Applied to the three scenarios, the mature-state annual saving is therefore of the order of £25 million to £75 million in the conservative case, £50 million to £150 million in the central case, and £75 million to £225 million in the optimistic case. These figures are materially smaller than a naive average-cost calculation would suggest, and they arrive only as whole wings and establishments close and their staffing establishments reduce. The New York experience, where per-prisoner spending rose despite substantial closures because staff were relocated rather than released, is the warning that governs the lower bound.

The workforce end-state follows from the population and estate assumptions. A stable population of around 87,000, held in a modern estate designed for

supervision rather than staffed against obsolete architecture, should require a prison-officer establishment broadly comparable to the present Band 3 to 5 strength of around 22,000 full-time equivalents, but with a materially deeper experience profile and a larger specialist cadre. The reform's workforce cost is therefore driven less by raw headcount than by the professional premium, the longer initial formation, paid mentoring and targeted supplements described earlier. A firm figure cannot be given here, and a dedicated workforce costing model is the necessary next analytical step; the honest position is that the workforce investment is real, recurrent and currently unquantified.

The probation end-state is the one most likely to be underestimated. The committed investment of up to £700 million a year by 2028 to 2029, described by the government as a 45 per cent increase on current funding, is substantial, and the associated commitment to recruit at least 1,300 additional trainee probation officers in 2026 to 2027 continues a multi-year expansion. The independent warning is nonetheless on the record: a parliamentary committee has cautioned that the service risks being overwhelmed and being set up to fail, and an independent legal-reform body has warned that the reforms risk trading prison overcrowding for a probation crisis. The mature system therefore depends on probation capacity expanding in step with intensive-order volumes, and on the separation of professional judgement from routine compliance administration, without which the substitution modelled above simply relocates the overcrowding.

Estate rationalisation over the period should be expressed as a closure programme rather than a net reduction. Because the mature population is held near its present level, closures of obsolete Victorian and otherwise expensive establishments are matched by new modern capacity rather than by a shrinking estate. A realistic ten-year ambition is the identification and assessment of perhaps ten to fifteen candidate establishments for closure, each subjected to the rebuild-or-close test described earlier, with disposal receipts flowing into the ring-fenced renewal fund and no closure preceding operational replacement. The cashable saving from this programme comes from lower maintenance and energy costs and reduced staffing in modern buildings, and it is realised slowly.

Taken together, the end-state is a system of around 95,000 to 97,000 usable places holding a stable population near 87,000, with a deliberate reserve of 8,000 to 10,000 places, a high-security tier of 8,000 to 9,000 places consolidated onto shared-perimeter campuses, a professionalised officer workforce of broadly current size but greater depth, a probation service expanded and operationally redesigned, and an estate progressively renewed through matched closure and replacement. The whole-system saving is modest, contingent on genuine substitution and actual closure, and expressed here as a range precisely because the evidence does not support

a single confident figure. That is a less striking claim than an unqualified promise of a cheaper system, and it is the claim the evidence will bear.

## Whole-system costing

Fiscal credibility requires abandoning misleading comparisons between isolated departmental unit costs.

The relevant measure for custody should include imprisonment, relevant central services, post-release supervision, recalls, escorts and other significant attributable costs. The relevant measure for intensive community punishment should include probation, electronic monitoring, compulsory work, treatment, police response, courts and breach custody.

The reform should publish a **whole-system cost per successfully completed sentence** and, once longitudinal evidence permits, a **whole-system cost per reoffence-free year following sentence**.

The £56,618 average prison cost provides a useful benchmark but should not be treated as the marginal cash saving from removing one prisoner. If 500 prisoners leave a 1,000-place prison, the perimeter, management, utilities and substantial staffing remain. Cashable savings occur only when reduced demand permits a wing to close, establishment staffing to fall, a contract to end or an entire prison to be retired.

This distinction should become a formal Treasury rule for the programme: **forecast savings cannot finance permanent expenditure**. Savings can be recycled only once they are independently verified and cash-releasing.

## Can the programme be cost-neutral?

The programme cannot credibly promise cost neutrality from its first year. During the transition, expenditure must rise in some areas because the state will simultaneously finance existing prisons, capacity recovery, new construction, workforce recruitment, training, probation expansion, court measures, monitoring and breach facilities.

A protected, time-limited Justice System Transition Fund should finance that overlap. Each funded component should have an expected end date or transfer into ordinary expenditure justified by realised savings.

The longer-term arithmetic nevertheless gives the policy a plausible route to fiscal neutrality. Overall resource expenditure per prisoner was £56,618 in 2024–25. Electronic monitoring alone costs about £4,900 per person per year, although a credible intensive community sentence would cost much more once probation, work, policing and enforcement are included.

A worked illustration must avoid a trap in its own arithmetic. Applying the full £56,618 average cost as though it were the saving from removing one

prisoner overstates the case, because perimeter, management, utilities and much staffing remain when a single prisoner leaves. The honest basis is the marginal, cash-releasing cost of a closed place, which is lower and is realised only when a whole wing or establishment closes and its staffing establishment is reduced. If, purely illustratively, the marginal saving from a genuinely closed place were in the region of £25,000 to £30,000 a year once fixed costs are stripped out, and if intensive community punishment genuinely substituted for 10,000 closed-custody places, the differential against a community regime costing £15,000 to £20,000 a year would be materially smaller than a naive average-cost calculation implies, and would arrive only as establishments actually close. This is a modelling illustration rather than a forecast. The New York experience is the relevant warning: between 2011 and 2021 that state closed numerous prisons and roughly halved its population, yet spending per prisoner rose by more than 79 per cent because staff were relocated rather than released. The policy should therefore count savings only as prison wings, staffing establishments or whole sites are actually removed.

Additional savings should come from lower maintenance and energy costs in modern buildings, fewer unnecessary escorts, better allocation of officer time, estate disposal and scrutiny of central functions. Some of those savings should deliberately be reinvested in prison officers and probation staff rather than surrendered entirely to the Treasury. A cheaper prison system staffed by inadequately trained and poorly supported employees would recreate the original problem.

The fiscal proposition should therefore be stated as follows:

**The ten-year transformation requires temporary investment but should be designed to produce no permanent increase in the real recurrent cost of punishment compared with continuation of the present system, with the intention of producing a lower mature-state cost once estate closures and custody substitution generate genuine cash-releasing savings.**

That is more conservative than claiming an immediate saving, but substantially more credible.

## Governance

The transition requires a single system owner because fragmented accountability is itself part of the existing problem.

A time-limited Prison and Punishment Transformation Authority should oversee the ten-year programme. Its chief executive should be accountable for usable capacity, construction, maintenance, workforce, probation capacity, electronic monitoring, breach infrastructure, estate disposal and unit cost. A delivery authority alone cannot resolve the structural difficulty

that the largest single driver of demand, sentencing, sits properly with an independent judiciary. The most effective international answer to that difficulty is a sentencing body that sets its guidelines against available capacity. The Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission adopted prison capacity as an explicit constraint on its guidelines grid and operated within capacity for many years, while leaving judges their discretion in the individual case. England and Wales already has the institutional form in the Sentencing Council, which carries a statutory duty to assess the resource effect of its guidelines but lacks any capacity constraint, and has been associated with rising rather than restrained custodial sentence lengths. The reform lever is therefore to give the existing Council a binding capacity remit, so that aggregate demand is aligned to capacity through the guidelines parameters rather than through a new body attempting to influence judicial decisions directly. The Authority should maintain a joint capacity framework with HM Courts and Tribunals Service so that remand demand is treated as part of the same system, with the courts remaining constitutionally and operationally distinct.

During the immediate capacity phase, a National Director of Prison Capacity should have direct responsibility for **certified, staffed, usable capacity**. This individual should not be rewarded for planning approvals, construction starts or nominal cells. The output is the number of prisoners who can actually be accommodated safely and lawfully.

Government should publish a monthly dashboard showing usable prison capacity, Band 3-5 officer strength and vacancy distribution, capacity-related early releases, remand population, unavailable cells, restored cells, newly operational places, staff experience, sickness, assaults, electronic-monitoring reliability and breach-response performance.

The central functions identified in the original cost analysis should receive the same scrutiny. Every national and regional service should publish its cost, defined output and senior owner. This is not an assumption that central expenditure is waste. It is an assertion that expenditure which cannot be clearly attributed and evaluated is difficult to manage.

## The delivery sequence

The first phase, running from 2026 into 2027, should establish the machinery before depending on the outcomes. The Transformation Authority and Transition Fund should be created, the closed-cell recovery survey completed, modular and conventional expansion sites assessed, prison and probation workforce requirements modelled, recruitment and training accelerated, electronic monitoring repaired, independent evaluation commissioned and the programme risk register established.

The second phase, from approximately 2027 to 2029, should concentrate on stabilisation. Economically recoverable cells should return to service,

modular Category C and D capacity should begin opening, existing permanent construction should continue, officer recruitment should precede new accommodation, probation capacity should increase and the first short-stay breach facilities should become operational. Intensive community punishment should remain a controlled pilot rather than a nationwide assumption. Strategically valuable old prisons should not yet be closed simply because they are expensive.

The third phase, from roughly 2028 to 2031, should be a proof period. Community-punishment pilots should have generated enough evidence to judge compliance, monitoring, breach enforcement, serious offending, custody substitution and cost. The prison workforce should have begun rebuilding its experience profile. Operational headroom should allow complete wings to be emptied for proper refurbishment rather than patched while occupied. National occupancy should start falling away from permanent crisis levels.

The fourth phase, beginning around 2030 and running through 2033, should begin genuine substitution and estate replacement only where the preceding evidence permits it. Successful community punishment can scale, obsolete wings can close, modern prisons can replace high-cost legacy establishments and the first major land receipts can enter the Estate Renewal Fund. At this point savings begin becoming cashable rather than theoretical.

The final phase, from approximately 2033 to 2036, should consolidate the mature system. The estate should maintain a deliberate operational reserve, unsuccessful interventions should have been stopped, prison and probation workforce reforms should be embedded, high-security functions should be consolidated where economically sensible without sacrificing internal separation, and remaining obsolete sites should face closure where replacement capacity and economics justify it.

The dates are planning assumptions rather than promises. Each stage should proceed through formal gateways based on capacity, staffing, safety, compliance and cost. If the necessary condition has not been met, the subsequent step should not proceed simply to preserve a political timetable.

## The risk architecture

The principal execution risk is simultaneous under-delivery. Construction may slip while officer recruitment fails and community supervision expands faster than probation capacity. The solution is portfolio capacity, conservative forecasting and a prohibition on closing existing accommodation until replacement capacity is actually operational.

A second risk is that community punishment fails politically because it is experienced as non-punishment. The mitigation is not rhetoric but



demanding conditions, visible work, reliable monitoring, swift breach enforcement and transparent publication of results.

A third risk is that the Sentencing Act 2026 produces net-widening or excessive recall, which the 2003 experience shows is the standard failure mode. Independent evaluation should therefore track where offenders would otherwise have been sentenced and measure the total system population under coercive supervision alongside prison numbers. The mitigation is a binding capacity constraint on sentencing guidelines and an explicit target for reducing recall and breach returns, rather than reliance on monitoring alone.

A fourth risk is probation overload. The mitigation is explicit regional capacity modelling and a rule that intensive sentencing volumes cannot exceed the operational ability to supervise them safely.

A fifth risk is organised-crime adaptation. The mitigation is continuous rather than episodic red-teaming, recurrent vetting, intelligence sharing and security refresh.

A sixth is fiscal optimism. Land values may disappoint, prison closures may be delayed and theoretical custody savings may not convert into cash. The solution is to prohibit expenditure against unrealised savings.

A seventh is workforce distortion from local pay supplements. Supplements should therefore be regionally coordinated, evidence-based and reviewed against neighbouring establishments so that recruitment problems are not simply moved around the estate.

The final risk is political impatience. The policy will take approximately a decade because physical estates, professional workforces and court systems cannot be transformed safely in one Parliament. Its durability therefore depends on publishing objective operational measures that allow successive governments to distinguish progress from partisan claims.

## The political bargain

The policy can be explained to the public without euphemism.

Dangerous offenders will remain in prison, and prison places will be protected for those whose risk requires physical incapacitation. The state will build new permanent prisons and repair recoverable existing capacity rather than rely indefinitely on emergency release.

At the same time, the state will stop assuming that every offender requiring substantial punishment also requires an extremely expensive closed prison place. Where risk permits a community sentence, that sentence will impose significant restrictions on liberty, compulsory activity and prompt enforcement. The alternative to custody will not be absence of punishment.

Prison officers will be asked to meet higher standards of professionalism, integrity, training and accountability. In return, the state will offer a better professional career, more appropriate targeted remuneration, stronger development, safer and more predictable conditions and better protection from violence and organised-crime pressure.

Probation will not be treated as the cheap place into which prison demand can simply be displaced. It will be funded and staffed as a second operational pillar of the punishment system.

Victims should receive a system less prone to emergency changes driven by whether cells happen to be available. Courts should retain the ability to imprison where justice and public protection require it because the estate will deliberately maintain headroom.

The Treasury should receive a programme in which investments are linked to actual capacity and savings are counted only when they become real. The existing £7 billion prison investment becomes the bridge into a lower-cost future system rather than the first instalment of an endless race between construction and prison population growth.

## Conclusion

England and Wales does not have one prison problem.

It has a connected set of capacity failures across prisons, workforce, probation, courts, enforcement and the physical estate.

The present system tries to solve shortages by building cells, but cells without officers do not create capacity. It increasingly relies on electronic monitoring, but monitoring without enforcement does not create punishment. It asks probation to supervise greater numbers, but additional court requirements without professional capacity do not create meaningful sentences. It tries to maintain old prisons while operating them almost continuously at full utilisation, but an estate without headroom cannot be systematically repaired. It discusses savings from reducing custody, but fewer prisoners do not automatically remove fixed costs.

The reform must therefore proceed in the correct order.

Existing usable capacity should first be recovered. Rapid lower-security expansion should then create a cascade through the estate. Prison-officer recruitment and professional development must run ahead of physical construction. Probation must be rebuilt before intensive community sentencing is allowed to expand materially. Electronic monitoring must demonstrate reliability before the system becomes dependent upon it. Courts must reduce avoidable remand time without compromising public protection. Temporary capacity must remain available until the replacement system has proved that it can carry the load.

Only then should the state systematically retire obsolete prisons.

The long-term custodial estate should reserve expensive high security for the dangerous few and use modern mainstream prisons for those who genuinely require custody. Prison should become more purposeful and work-focused. Community punishment should be demanding enough to retain legitimacy and sufficiently enforced that offenders regard breach as likely to produce a consequence.

The Prison Service workforce is central to the entire transformation. Better architecture and technology cannot substitute for professional judgement, integrity and experience. The future Service should therefore be harder to join, better to remain in, more professionally structured and substantially harder for organised crime to penetrate.

The programme must also be intellectually disciplined. No intervention should become permanent because its intentions are good. No capacity should be counted before it is usable. No saving should be spent before it exists. No community programme should expand beyond the ability of probation and enforcement to deliver it. No old prison should close before sufficient replacement capacity is operational.

The ultimate measure of the reform is consequently not the number of new cells announced.

It is whether England and Wales possesses enough **certified, staffed and usable capacity** to execute the sentences of its courts safely, lawfully and credibly; whether dangerous offenders can always be securely held; whether other punishments are demonstrably real; whether prison and probation staff can sustain the system professionally; and whether the whole arrangement can be maintained without recurrent emergency release or ever-increasing expenditure.

That is achievable over ten years.

It will not be achieved simply by building more prisons, releasing more prisoners or reorganising HMPPS.

It requires the state to manage **punishment as one operational system** and to accept a discipline that has too often been absent from prison policy:

**build the capacity before relying on it, build the workforce before opening it, prove the alternative before scaling it, and realise the saving before spending it.**