

Welsh Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Prisons in Wales, HC 101

Wednesday 15 May 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 15 May 2024.

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Members present: Stephen Crabb (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi; Ben Lake; Beth Winter.

Questions 251 - 293

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Edward Argar MP, Minister for Prisons, Parole and Probation, Ministry of Justice; and Ian Barrow, Executive Director, HMPPS Wales.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Ministry of Justice](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon. Edward Argar MP and Ian Barrow.

Q251 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Welsh Affairs Committee. We are continuing our short inquiry into prisons in Wales, and for this afternoon's session we are joined by the right hon. Edward Argar MP, who is the Minister for Prisons, Parole and Probation at the Ministry of Justice. Welcome, Minister. We are grateful also to Mr Ian Barrow, who is executive director for HMPPS Wales and is alongside you to help with the evidence this afternoon.

Before we begin properly, I would like to make a statement with regards to the recent deaths at HMP Parc and the House's sub judice resolution. A coroner's inquest has been opened into some of the deaths of men at HMP Parc and those proceedings are now sub judice. In the same way as the Speaker did on Monday in the Chamber, and with his permission this afternoon, I am waiving the sub judice resolution for today's evidence session, given the interest and importance of the issues. Members are not intending to inquire into the specific circumstances of any individual's death. I am sure all Members and witnesses will exercise caution in their questions and answers, given the possibility of future criminal or civil proceedings in relation to those deaths.

With that out the way, perhaps I can start the discussion, Minister, just by asking you and Mr Barrow to very briefly—we do need to be concise in our questions and answers this afternoon, because we have a lot of ground to cover—outline your sense of how well the prison estate in Wales is performing, specifically on the issues of safety of inmates and staff.

Edward Argar: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for inviting us before your Committee today. Were safety and assaults the key elements you wanted?

Chair: Safety of inmates and staff working inside the prison.

Edward Argar: Overall, in terms of the prison estate—as you will be aware, that is six prisons over five sites at the moment—when last inspected, all of the prisons were either at a three or a four, which is either “reasonably good” or “good” in respect of safety; one of the four indicators.

Compared with the overall prison estate, the Welsh prison estate performs well. However, in terms of the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults—one good indicator of where we are with things—although from a very high level in 2016-17, the number of assaults has come down. At Parc, they had gone up over the past two or three years following the end of the Covid restrictions and the return to a normal regime.



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If it is helpful, I can give Committee members some example statistics so they can compare. I am happy subsequently to share the table rather than running through multiple numbers of stats. Take, for example, Parc: in 2017, there were 688 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults. That dropped down to 262 last year, and was back up to over 400 this year. So, it is still not at those high levels but higher than it has been. Similarly, in terms of prisoner-on-staff assault—I suspect we may cover this in more detail—if you take Parc as an example, in 2017 there was a high figure of 260. It dropped down to below 100 in 2022-23, but is back up to almost 200.

I would say that every one of those assaults is one too many. We want to drive down the numbers of assaults. I pay tribute to the staff in the prison, but what we have seen is a downward trend in violence and assault, but a concerning—I will be honest with the Committee—uptick in the 2023 figures.

Q252 Chair: Thank you very much. That is very helpful. Could we move on specifically to HMP Parc? Do you think that members of the community in the Bridgend area and family members of inmates at Parc are right to be alarmed at recent reports of deaths at Parc?

Edward Argar: Perhaps I can put on record at the beginning my condolences and sympathies to the families and friends of all those who have lost their lives.

There is a challenge, both for the prison and for the community, in terms of the deaths we have seen, both in the community and in the prison, as a result of substance misuse and drugs in recent months. In terms of those nine deaths in Parc—I am conscious of your admonition at the beginning—without going into individual cases, what I can do is talk about the numbers. We are fairly confident that four of those deaths were substance misuse-related, and one potentially so, but we are awaiting toxicology and police investigations into that. The other four are not substance misuse-related. I think it is important we just set that context.

As I set out in addressing the House a couple of days ago when there was an urgent question about this, there is a shared challenge for both the community and the prison. What is going to be essential going forward—it is in place, but I think there is more we can do—is close working between the prison authorities, the police, Bridgend Council, Public Health Wales and the local health board, because a lot of the solutions to this are also rooted in devolved areas of policy, so it is a shared problem, and it is going to require joint working to solve that challenge.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to start bringing in colleagues now. Beth Winter will go first.

Q253 Beth Winter: Thank you for your time today. There have been nine deaths of prisoners in just 10 weeks at HMP Parc. Is it a safe prison?



Edward Argar: On the basis of the assessment by the Chief Inspector of Prisons, yes, we consider it is a safe prison. That does not mean to say that there isn't clearly a concern about this. As I say, we have seen deaths in the community as well related to substance misuse. There is a shared challenge there, particularly at the moment, and that is why—although overall, when last inspected in 2022, the prison received very good inspection ratings—we have issued an improvement notice specifically around security to focus attention on this particular issue.

Q254 **Beth Winter:** I do not know if you heard, but in Justice questions yesterday, in response to a question that I raised, the Minister referred to the inspection report that you have just mentioned yourself. That was in 2022. He quoted that report measured HMP Parc as “good” with three measures of “reasonably good”. However, I have the report here. It also recorded that self-harm remained too high and overall rates of violence were too high. It expressed concern about mental health and learning disability services, the shortage of staff and offender management and resettlement roles.

Around that time, G4S was awarded a 10-year contract to run the prison. It was in the same year. The data shows there has been an increase in violence since that inspection, including in 2023. According to the Ministry of Justice, there has been the highest ever recorded number of assaults, which are up by around 20% on previous years. Assaults on staff in 2023 were up from 40% to 45%.

How satisfied are you with HMP Parc's response to the recent deaths, and can I also ask what metrics are currently being used? That inspection report is almost two years old, so I have serious concerns about referring to a prison as “good” based on metrics from two years ago, given the number of deaths that have happened.

Edward Argar: There are a number of questions there. First, as I made clear, we do not want to see any deaths in our custody. Sadly, we will see deaths in our custody on occasion from natural causes—I have to say some of these deaths were from natural causes—with the nature of the population at Parc and at other prisons, given underlying health conditions, or old age. That does sometimes happen, so we cannot completely eliminate deaths in our custody from natural causes. As I made very clear, what does give cause for concern are those that are due to factors that it should be within our control to a much greater degree, such as substance misuse or self-inflicted deaths.

In terms of the specific points you picked out from that report in 2022 and the concerns, I have already spoken about the assaults—we can talk about some of what is being done in the prison subsequently, depending on the questions you or the Chair wish to ask. On people with learning disabilities and neurodiversity, I was actually in Parc last month and its neurodiverse wing is one of the most impressive in the prison system, with training and support in place.



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What is important to remember, though, is that broader mental health provision. Of course, support is the responsibility of the Welsh Government and the health boards in Wales, so that is devolved. Partnership working is important, but it is also about recognising that the responsibility for that also sits with the health boards and the Welsh Government.

The other point that you raised was about staff and your concerns about staffing numbers. I may be out, but only by literally a few—as in single figures—but my understanding is that in terms of vacancies at the moment for prison officers and so on, it is around a dozen and that is it. Staffing has increased significantly. You are right to highlight that that was flagged in the report at that time, but action has been taken and G4S has recruited more staff.

Q255 Beth Winter: Do you accept that the Chief Inspector of Prisons' report—it was two years ago now—raised some serious concerns? It mentioned rates of violence, self-harm and mental health services at that point in time, but that was two years ago. Now we have experienced nine deaths in just the last 10 weeks, so what has been done between that inspection and now to address those serious concerns?

Edward Argar: There are a number of points. It is important that I come back again to the fact that while, quite rightly, you reference nine deaths, we believe that two of those were natural causes deaths, so that is important. That is not diminishing it in any way, but I think it is important to understand the context.

The second point, again, is to highlight that, in terms of deaths where it is believed drugs were involved, we are seeing a similar number of deaths in the community as well—a similar number of deaths related to drugs in the broader community.

Beth Winter: In south Wales?

Edward Argar: Yes. I think we have to be a little bit careful about this and, ever aware of what the Chair has said, I do not want to draw any hard and fast conclusions before the ombudsman, or the coroners' inquests, have reported. However, I understand there has been a broader problem, particularly with nitazenes as a drug in the broader area. That is not in any way to diminish talking about what is within our power, which is within the prison.

In terms of mental health, yes, there was a challenge there. I think there is still a challenge and there is more to do by the health board, and there is more for us to do in working with them. In terms of one of the single biggest factors that can improve safety in the prison, G4S has increased the number of staff. We have seen those vacancies being filled. There are still a few to go, but we have seen that and that makes a big difference in a prison.



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Equally in terms of safety, and more broadly in security, is the link with drugs and the link also with weapons or contraband that could cause this. The prison has put in place a new strategy in the case of drugs, which is about restricting supply, promoting recovery and reducing demand. We have a bid for enhanced gate security, which if I recall is currently going through HMPPS, which will enable the prison to have a second scanner at the entrance. We have the Rapiscan, which is a scanner that detects drugs. We also have handheld detectors now, which makes it a lot easier to go cell to cell, so there is a lot of work already being done and I think staffing is a key element.

Is that me saying the job is done? It most certainly isn't, but I think we have a clear direction of travel from G4S in what it is seeking to do to tackle this, but the most important thing is—to come back to this point—that I think this is a shared challenge and we have to work together with our partners in the devolved Administration and those devolved areas, as well as in G4S and HMPPS.

Beth Winter: I still have a couple of points.

Chair: Very briefly then, Beth, please.

Q256 **Beth Winter:** In terms of the staffing issue, we have all heard from constituents and staff who work in the prison of a crisis that has taken place in terms of staff and a lack of experienced management. I would be interested to follow that up with you. Who do you say is accountable? Who would you hold accountable for the situation in Parc? You awarded a contract to G4S around the same time as this inspection report, which did raise serious concerns.

Are you going to consider reviewing the decision to award the contract, or to take the prison back, as you have done elsewhere, such as in Birmingham? Because operationally there are actions that are going to be taken, but there are clearly systemic issues here and G4S, as a private provider, has a track record of failings in the provision of—

Edward Argar: There are a number of questions there. I will take one very briefly. Although the numbers of staff have improved, you are right to highlight that lack of experience always remains a challenge, and it does more broadly across the Prison Service. We are recruiting a lot more people in. That is a good thing but of course those new officers, with great potential, do not have the experience, so I think that is a fair point to highlight.

In terms of talking about the prison more broadly, I will answer your question directly. No, we have no intention or plan to take the contract back. Recognising the challenges there, we consider that Parc is a well-run and effective prison. There are challenges in this specific case around security and around these issues, which is why a notice has been issued about further urgent action and there is focused support to address that, but overall we consider that Parc is a well-run prison.



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To your point: hypothetically, were that not to be the case, what would be the approach? The prison is accountable to the inspector in the same way as any other prison. It also has a Ministry of Justice HMPPS controller in there who will work to Ian in that context, who manages the contract and manages performance against it. I am not saying there isn't in this case, but if there were grounds—we saw it recently with another prison elsewhere in the country where there were grounds—where it goes through various layers and it gets to a point where we think there is a challenge, there is an option. What we did there was to put in a public sector governor or to go further, but we do not think that that is appropriate in this case.

Q257 **Beth Winter:** Would you welcome another inspection because it is two years since the last one?

Edward Argar: It may have been in answer to you in the Chamber that I made the point that it is entirely up to the chief inspector.

Chair: Thank you very much. Tonia.

Q258 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Do you think the problem, Minister, may be around equivalence of pay between those who are employed by G4S and those who are employed, say, in other prisons, maybe like Swansea and Cardiff? There is a difference in pay and that is why you do not get the experience, because there are different scales. Does that not attract the right people and, if there is no equivalence, make people want to go somewhere else?

Edward Argar: You quite rightly pick up on a key point. What we have done in recent years, which is a good thing, is significantly to increase the pay to frontline public sector prison officers. It was the right thing to do, and we are seeing the benefits from retention and recruitment. I think what you are getting at—it is a fair point—is if that moves things out of kilter with pay rates in other institutions, when you are fishing in a broader public pool, someone who wants to do that job says, "Well, I will go there because the pay is higher," or you might even attract people from the private sector, who go across saying, "Well, I am doing the same job, but I can do it there."

If I am being honest, that has been a challenge historically. I think we are now getting to a point where we are looking at those staffing levels. When I spoke to the director there, she was saying that she was able to recruit and able to retain, so I think we are seeing that balance out again now, but historically—by which I mean recently historically—I think you are right to highlight that there was a challenge there. In recent years when we quite dramatically increased prison officer pay people did shift, so I think that is a fair point.

Q259 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** We had this conversation earlier, but if I was a prison officer and it was my integrity and my job that was being questioned, I would want to prove to the public and to my employer that I am a



trustworthy person, but prison officers are not currently searched by the X-ray body scanners. HMPPS does not have the legal permission to do so. You have talked about the Rapiscans and the new handheld equipment, but will you be seeking to change the law in order to allow prison staff entering a prison to be searched using these body scanners?

Edward Argar: I take the point and I think it was a point made in parallel by the Chair in the Chamber recently. We have no current plans to routinely scan or take the powers to scan prison officers. I might bring Ian in in a second in case he wants to correct anything I have said thus far that I may have got wrong.

We do conduct random searches of things like bags and similar. Equally, when you have prison officers who you have put through vetting and have employed in positions of trust, there is an element of recognising and respecting that, but you occasionally do random checks. I do not think it would be practical or appropriate to insist that everyone coming to work gets scanned each day, so we do not have plans to do that.

Equally, what I would say is that where there is intelligence about someone—an officer; a member of staff—who is bringing contraband in, or breaking the rules or breaking the law, it will be handled appropriately by the police and others. I have to say that thankfully it is rare. The vast majority of Prison Service staff are dedicated professionals who go to work wanting to do the right thing. However, it does happen and, therefore, it is right when it does that the police and others investigate fully, but I do not know if there is anything I need to have corrected by Ian on this.

Ian Barrow: There is nothing to correct. I would just reiterate that I think prison staff are subject to searches. The X-ray searches obviously look for items that have been secreted internally. We get very little information that that is a route for prison officers bringing issues into custody. There is also the use of sniffer dogs, random bag searches and intelligent searches, so there is a range of things in addition to potential X-ray searches.

The other point I was going to make—just going back to your last question—although I cannot speak on behalf of G4S, I am aware that G4S has looked at the pay award remuneration over the last 12 months. It is probably worth saying that we do see movement of staff between G4S and public sector prisons and vice versa. I don't think it is as straightforward as G4S staff are not necessarily being paid as well as the public sector.

Q260 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Yes, I get that. Ian, you may be able to answer this: what support is available to prison staff who may be at risk from being blackmailed, bribed, or otherwise coerced, and does that support vary between the private and public sector?



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Ian Barrow: No, it is quite similar. A range of anti-corruption measures are in place. We have anti-corruption teams as part of that and confidential helplines for staff to contact. There are specific inputs when people qualify as prison officers, or when they start as prison officers, to look at anti-corruption measures, what they may be switched to and what to look out for in those sorts of situations. It is something that is very well focused on in the Prison Service. It is a live conversation, so I think managers will look out and have specific conversations with staff if there is any indication of vulnerability or any suggestion that staff may be subject to coercion.

Q261 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Minister, I think you said that the instances of staff bringing drugs into prisons were rare.

Edward Argar: In the context of our overall staff workforce, the point I was making is that we believe the overwhelming majority of our staff are honest, dedicated public servants, so it was in that context.

Q262 **Chair:** I would concur with that. In the visits that I have done as a member of this Committee, and previously as a Minister, to prisons in Wales, I have always been struck by the professionalism of the staff I have met. Some of us were in Cardiff prison recently. Not only were we impressed by what we saw of the staff but, sitting down with prisoners at the end of the visit, the prisoners themselves told us how much respect they felt they had from staff, and that was a very healthy and positive thing.

However, all of that can be true while there is still a problem of drugs coming into prisons where staff are involved. On Monday in the Chamber, I read out a piece of written evidence that had been sent to this Committee by a prisoner serving in HMP Parc who said—I am going to slightly paraphrase—essentially that drugs are everywhere. He listed the types of drugs that he claimed are in circulation within Parc.

He said—I think he used this phrase—that dribs and drabs may come in through other means, but he said, “Let’s be clear, the vast majority are coming in through staff.” When I read out that statement, Mr Barrow, would your reaction to that be, “Well, that just isn’t true. That claim by that prisoner is incorrect,” or is there a ring of truth to it?

Ian Barrow: I don’t think we have a concern that the vast majority of drugs are necessarily being brought in by staff. Reiterating what I just said, anybody entering the prison, including staff, may be searched on entry. There is routine searching of staff. There is intelligence-led searching of staff.

Q263 **Chair:** Sorry, Mr Barrow, I have just been told by the technical staff that you need to speak up a little bit just so we can get the recording.

Ian Barrow: Sorry; I have a very low voice. What I was saying was that everybody who enters a prison, including staff, can be subject to searching. In three of the prisons in Wales—Berwyn, Cardiff and



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Swansea—we already have enhanced gate security. There are dedicated search teams, especially trained members of staff who will search either visitors or staff when they enter the prisons.

We obviously take appropriate action if staff are found to be involved in any sort of conveyance or suspicion, and even though, as we said, we don't have the legal authority in terms of using X-ray machines, if there is any suspicion that staff are conveying any items into the prison, they can be excluded from the prison while investigations are undertaken.

Q264 **Chair:** Are there any staff at Parc currently under investigation for trafficking drugs?

Edward Argar: Chair, I do not think it would be appropriate to answer that in this context. If I may, I will take advice subsequently and write to the Committee in terms such as I am able to so that that would then be on the record. I want to be a little bit cautious because I am conscious there may well be things going on that even I do not know about because they will be operational, so I don't want to risk misleading the Committee or to say something that would be either inaccurate or cause operational problems. With your permission I will seek advice and write to you subsequently, Chair.

Q265 **Chair:** Okay. Then can I ask the question—you may choose to answer in similar terms, but I will ask it anyway—of whether you have data to hand with respect to numbers of staff dismissed from prisons in Wales as a result of investigations into bringing in of drugs or other contraband?

Edward Argar: I do not. Mr Barrow might, but if not, I can add that to my response to your Committee, Chair.

Ian Barrow: We do have some numbers. That information is not published. Some of it is not published because the numbers are so low that they could potentially identify people, but as the Minister said we will get advice on that.

Edward Argar: Can I also just add, Chair, very briefly in terms of reassurance, about how seriously it is taken when there are genuine allegations. As part of our security investment programme we have recruited over 140 new staff to the counter corruption unit, who do a number of things. They investigate, so we have 20 police investigators dedicated to investigating corruption within HMPPS who bring their expertise to bear on that.

Those 140 staff and their colleagues, as well as investigating, also train staff in how to spot risks. There is always a risk that an experienced officer does something they think is minor. Then suddenly they are entrapped and suddenly they have a challenge, and they get more caught up in it. When you were a Secretary of State, I suspect that you probably saw cases in different contexts where someone did something silly—not much more—but in seeking to avoid having to explain that or to get out of it, they got more drawn in. I am not saying that that happens often



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but, again, those officers are also there to give advice and help people to avoid getting caught in that way.

Chair: Thank you very much. Ben Lake, please.

Q266 **Ben Lake:** In terms of the evidence we have received as a Committee from serving prisoners and former staff members from Parc, much has been said about the intelligence-based and risk-based approach to searches. Has there been a change in the regime of searching staff and other visitors to Parc in light of some of these concerns?

Ian Barrow: Yes. A range of actions has been taken in relation to Parc, including searches within the prison. We are also ensuring that, as you said, intelligence-led searches are prevalent at Parc when visitors are attending.

Ben Lake: That has increased in light of recent—

Ian Barrow: I believe so.

Edward Argar: I should put on record our gratitude to South Wales Police for their engagement with us, particularly around this, but more broadly.

Chair: Beth, very briefly.

Q267 **Beth Winter:** Sorry, I just want to go back to staffing. In the inspector's report, there was an expression of concern around the shortage of staff for offender management and resettlement roles. You have alluded to the fact that that has changed and improved, but I would be interested to see the data on that. However, we have all received evidence, and today I have received further evidence from staff and inmates who have expressed serious concerns about insufficient staff, a lack of experienced staff, management cutting corners to try to save money, and staff not feeling that they have the competence or the resources. Do you recognise those comments that are being made?

Edward Argar: There is one point I will pick out there that, as I have alluded to, I think is a challenge. It is being worked on, but it is a challenge. That is the point that Ms Antoniazzi made: it is not just about the numbers that support the experience. There is a large number there who I think are able. They are keen. They are good officers, but they are new officers. Therefore, it is important—I believe this is happening—that more experienced officers and the G4S management team work directly with them to give them that support. In any job you do, you can learn only so much from your training manuals. Even in this place, we learn a lot more from our colleagues and from actually seeing it done and doing the job.

There is more support going in to help to do that, but that is the point you raised in that list that I would recognise.



Q268 **Beth Winter:** This is really important, and I will finish on this—sorry, Chair. In terms of the action that G4S is taking to address what I feel are systemic issues, it is easy to look at the symptoms, but there are systemic problems when you have nine deaths. Are they reporting directly to you? Is there an action plan looking at staff training as well as free housing of offenders? The action plan from this inspection report was very detailed. Are they reporting directly so that you know that those actions have been taken?

Edward Argar: They report up through their controller to Mr Barrow, who will then escalate to me as appropriate, via the leadership of HMPPS.

Beth Winter: Is that in place?

Ian Barrow: There are a number of fronts to this. Directly from the inspections, G4S completes an action plan that is submitted to the inspectorate, and the controller in the team will do work to look at that. Whenever there is a death in custody, the prison and probation ombudsman will also undertake an investigation. If there is a need for an action plan, it will be drawn up in relation to that. Again, that is reported back to the ombudsman, obviously answered by us.

As part of the improvement notice that we have issued, we are currently working with G4S to get an action plan in relation to the specific issues.

Q269 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We are going to broaden the issues somewhat. Can I ask about the prison population? I think the Government have projected a prison population of 96,200 by March 2025. How ready is the Welsh prison estate to play its role in housing such a number of prisoners?

Edward Argar: As you will be aware, even at this moment, we see significant capacity challenges within the closed custodial estate; I should make that distinction. It is interesting that at the moment, with Welsh prisons operating at a very high level, Parc is pretty much near its operational capacity—it may be a few dozen below that it is operating at—and other prisons, such as Cardiff and Swansea.

I have to say that, in my opinion, overall the prisons in Wales are managing that increased pressure well. You will possibly see, when you are in Cardiff, it is a well-run prison. They are working hard. They are managing that. However, it is undoubtedly the case that when you have less headroom it is harder because you cannot create space and you cannot move people around in the same way. I suspect that—we may come on to this—where that may create a pressure is if people being placed further away from family. We may talk about female offenders and the challenges that already exist given the nature of the estate in Wales, so it does create further challenges.

At the moment—I will be frank with the Committee—I have no plans to increase the custodial estate in Wales in terms of the closed estate or to build more prisons. It will continue to play a key part in our custodial



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system. Plans for building are rooted in the six new prisons: two are completed; one is being built; two are just through planning; and one is being considered in a planning appeal in England. I do not have plans at this moment to build new closed prisons in Wales.

Q270 **Chair:** In terms the Government's ambition of 20,000 new prison places, we are some way off that. Is that fair?

Edward Argar: Yes, I think in terms of where we are now, it was around that by the mid-2020s. I know that some will fixate on 2025, but it is the plural mid-2020s. We are being frank with the Committee. At the moment, I think we are just shy of 6,000 new places or additional places. This is where I will be corrected by Mr Barrow, but I think we are aiming for, or we are expecting to have hit, the 10,000 mark a couple of years after that.

One of the challenges, which I will be completely frank about, is that three of those prisons at least—the big new prisons—took a lot longer in planning than I suspect was envisaged when the timeline was first set. We have five of them through planning now and there is one still going through it, so I will be a little cautious about what I say about that one.

Q271 **Chair:** Understood. Therefore can I ask you about how the Welsh prison estate is being affected by Operation Early Dawn?

Edward Argar: Operation Early Dawn is more focused around operations with magistrates court holding cells, who can be moved, and movements of people. One occasion where there is a challenge is if you have prisoner movements via the prisoner escort and custodial service at hours that that would not normally happen—so earlier in the morning or sometimes into the evenings and beyond—because that is when a cell is freed up, so you then get someone back. That will increase the pressure.

If I am being honest, I think the real pressure on the prison estate in Wales will come from the overall capacity challenges because it limits the headroom for governors and others to move people around to other prisons or to create space to do maintenance work.

We will always make sure that essential life-preserving maintenance work, such as fire works, will continue to be done according to the timetable we have set. However, those additional maintenance works that are beneficial, but not essential to protecting life may sometimes be harder to do because you cannot create an empty wing to do them, so there is a challenge there. Of course it adds pressure on staff.

Q272 **Chair:** Will prisoners in Wales be released early under current measures?

Edward Argar: To the best of my knowledge, the ECSL measures apply to England and Wales. It is a single justice system.

Q273 **Chair:** Are you confident that public safety is being looked after in those instances?



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Edward Argar: The point I would make about that is that, compared with the scheme that ran between 2007 and 2010, this is a scheme with a considerable number of exemptions and carve-outs of who is not able to be released. I can run through examples: prisoners serving an imprisonment for a sentence of over four years for a violent offence; prisoners serving a sentence for a terrorist offence; and prisoners serving a sentence for any sexual offence or subject to the Sexual Offences Act 2003—the sex offenders register notification. There are many other exemptions.

The other key exemption that exists as a safeguard is that if there is any doubt or there is a concern about a release, the governor has what is colloquially known as the “governor lock”. They can block that release because they will know that prisoner, and if they have those concerns, they can stop the release on safety grounds. There are safeguards built into this in a way that was not previously there under previous schemes.

Ian Barrow: The only point I was going to add to that is it is also worth noting that when people are released under the end of custody supervised licence, they are still subject to the licence conditions that they would have had at the end.

Q274 **Beth Winter:** On that point, because I have been contacted by prison staff who are extremely concerned about the early release scheme, it comes into force on 23 May—I am quoting now—which is just before a bank holiday. As well as looking at public protection, for the vast majority of prisoners who were rehabilitated, there is clearly a shortage of move-on housing support, which has come out in the survey that we have done. What is your response to the staff who are very concerned about the implications of releasing prisoners early?

Ian Barrow: It is worth reiterating that the end of custody supervising scheme is already in operation. What is happening at the end of May is it is extended to 70 days prior to finish. Housing is clearly an issue. Wales is doing well in terms of Welsh prisoners.

The percentage of prisoners released from custody in Wales who are accommodated on release is higher than England and Wales together. We are working very closely with the Welsh Government. We work with local authorities, and we have identified specific accommodation pathway coordinators who are employed in probation delivery units to look at smoothing the path as far as they can in terms of accommodation. It is fair to say that, without a doubt, it is a difficult area.

Q275 **Beth Winter:** Have you shared these concerns about the early release scheme?

Ian Barrow: I don’t think that that necessarily has a significant impact on the issues about housing and homelessness. What it means is that it is bringing forward work that would have needed to be done anyway. Work done within the offender management units in custody, within probation



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delivery units, and so on, will have been focused on accommodation, and will have been focused on looking at what to do in terms of sentence planning and release planning for people that are coming out.

Beth Winter: It is adding pressure on staff who are already under-resourced and overstretched.

Ian Barrow: It is bringing work forward.

Edward Argar: The only point I would make very briefly, if I may, Chair, is that I would recognise that the relationships between our prisons in Wales and the Welsh authorities providing housing are pretty good. I know that there is a pressure—I think I read this in one of your transcripts—that there is something like 11,000 people who are in temporary accommodation, but the challenge is getting people into permanent accommodation. Getting people into temporary accommodation on the ground and operationally is a devolved matter, but I think Ian and his team have a good relationship with those devolved services.

Q276 **Chair:** With the pressures on the prison population, do you envisage an increase in the number of prisoners sharing cells in Wales, Mr Barrow?

Ian Barrow: As the Minister said, at the moment we are slightly under our operational capacity. If we look at increasing any cell sharing, it will be a decision that will be undertaken by the prison group director, who is somebody who works as part of my team. That will only be done while looking at safety and decency considerations in terms of the size of the cells, ventilation, lighting, sanitation, and so on.

At the moment we are not in a position where we are considering looking to increase cell sharing but, as I said, if that does happen, it is an operational decision that is taken by the prison group director.

Q277 **Chair:** How significant a factor is prison cell sharing for violence within prisons? Are they correlated?

Ian Barrow: Not particularly, I don't think. It can be a protective factor. Sometimes having somebody sharing a cell with somebody who understands how the prison is working and has experience with it, certainly in terms of self-harm, can be seen as a protective factor.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Is it okay if I talk about the female estate, Chair?

Chair: Yes, absolutely.

Q278 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** The Committee has heard evidence regarding the disproportionate way in which short custodial sentences impact on the lives of female offenders. Given that there is already a move towards expanding community sentence options for female offenders, why did the Department not pilot this policy of suspending short sentences—as included within the Sentencing Bill 2023—on a female prison population first?



Edward Argar: It is undoubtedly the case that, subject to the will of Parliament and the passage of that legislation, that measure—although it will benefit adult males and adult females—when you look at the proportion of those in custody in the female estate and the nature of their sentences, would disproportionately benefit them because often women are still being given short sentences.

I wrote the female offender strategy back in, I think, 2018-19. The direction of travel we wanted to see there, and working with the Women's Justice Blueprint for Wales, was fewer women being sentenced to short custodial terms.

There will always be some for whom a custodial term will be necessary, given the severity of the offence or other factors, and I think we are seeing progress in fewer women being sentenced to shorter custodial terms. However, if I can be frank with the Committee, I think the number is still too high. I would like to see more progress. Often what you see is that a lot of those women have not committed offences that are dangerous to others or to the community. If I can put it this way, a lot of those women, as well as being perpetrators, are often also victims of trauma, assault and crime themselves.

I think the direction of travel, which we may come on to shortly, is that the Residential Women's Centre model is one that I advocated back then. It is nice to see that five years later it is making progress. That offers a potential blueprint for a way forward. I know that when I—back then and now—speak to the Welsh Government they are very clear with me that they do not wish to see a closed women's prison in Wales, even acknowledging the challenges that brings when someone does have to be sentenced to a closed estate and not being able to be accommodated as close to home as necessary.

I think the direction of travel there is fewer short sentences—I should clarify, it is a matter for judges and for this House whether it passes that legislation—but the direction of travel is one that I would advocate.

Q279 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** As you have alluded to, the Residential Women's Centre in Swansea was announced in May 2022—I remember being on the call—and it was to open its doors in 2024.

At the next general election, this Residential Women's Centre will come into the constituency of Gower, so I am aware that there have been issues locally on a planning level. I believe that they have been overcome, but could you give me an update on the progress that has been made and when the doors are expected to open?

Edward Argar: Ms Antoniazzi, I fear I cannot give you a date for that, but I can give possibly a little more information about it.

As you will be aware, it will be a 12-bed centre housing around 50 local offenders a year, providing a community-based service that helps to give



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an alternative to short custodial sentences. You are absolutely right to highlight that there were planning issues, which caused a period of uncertainty in securing planning permissions and the appropriate approvals. We have a number of steps to go through now to remobilise that project—to get it moving forward again following the progress that has been made. It will be a few months before I can give specific timeframes, or until you will see spades in the ground or similar.

What I can say is that I will work closely with the Welsh Government. I have already had an initial conversation with Lesley Griffiths, and she has very kindly invited me to visit her in Cardiff, which I will seek to do. We will work closely with her, with other local partners, and of course with local Members of Parliament to try to move that forward. I am keen to see it moving forward and, if it is a matter of months, I can give a bit more clarity. I will of course write to the hon. Lady and the Committee more broadly so that Members can see it.

Q280 Tonia Antoniazzi: For the record, I am aware that there has been a bit of a relationship breakdown between the local community and the Ministry of Justice, which is disappointing. If we can have the conversation outside this room at another time, I think there is a lot of work that I could do and help with on that.

Edward Argar: Can I make an offer, Ms Antoniazzi? I am always happy to speak to you, but equally I am happy to volunteer Mr Barrow to have an official-level conversation with you about some of the details that we may not be able to go into in this session for a variety of reasons, not least time. I am happy for that engagement to take place.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Thank you.

Q281 Chair: What estimates have been made of the number of people who would have otherwise received a sentence but will not receive a custodial sentence if the legislation goes through that suspends short custodial sentences? What kind of number are we talking about?

Edward Argar: If I am being honest, the short answer is it is very difficult to tell because it is a presumption. Judges will still be able to disregard that if they so wish. It comes down to judicial behaviour. A judge can say, "I see the presumption. It is a strong presumption, but I am not doing that because—"

When my colleagues doing the Sentencing Bill were looking at this in terms of an impact analysis, it was very difficult to quantify with any sense of a hard number. To a large degree, it comes down to judicial behaviour. If judicial behaviour sees that presumption being acted on, it is a fair assumption that you would see a greater benefit—if I can put it that way—among the female offender population than you would among adult males, proportionately, but it is extremely difficult to try to give an exact number. I suspect that, as and when the Sentencing Bill reappears,



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it may be a slight frustration to colleagues in the House, but we will do our best to add some more flesh to the bones on that.

Q282 **Chair:** As a Minister, what do you think is the point of short sentences? Do they serve a useful purpose?

Edward Argar: My personal view is that there will always need to be the facility for short sentences because there will be occasions where someone is just refusing to engage with the alternatives, and is a prolific or persistent offender, and a magistrate or a judge is eventually going to say, "I have no choice. This is the Xth time you have been in my court before me. I am going to have to do this." There may be particular factors specific to the case.

There is a concern particularly in the context of female offenders, which is why I put it in the female offender strategy. At Eastwood Park, something like a month or a little over that is the average sentence. I went to Eastwood Park, and I spoke to the governor who summed it up for me: it is too short a time for us to have them in our custody and begin to make real inroads into tackling the underlying causes of the offending, underlying trauma, the underlying offences committed against them and mental health issues, among a whole range of others. It does not give them enough time to meaningfully build a relationship with that woman and start helping them, but it is a long enough time to potentially lose, in often chaotic lifestyles, the remaining bits of stability, be it the flat, the kids, or a job that may not pay a huge amount but is something and is a bit of a framework. That is the challenge with them.

In truth, we also see that reoffending rates are better for tough community sentences than they are for a very short custodial sentence. I say that particularly in the context of female offenders because that was the route through which we came to this, but more broadly that is true. That is where I approach it from.

I do not want to take away that option for sentences completely because there will be occasions when it is needed, for prolific offenders and others. What I want to see from it is, yes, people paying their debt back to society, but we also want to see effective rehabilitation that means that they do not do it again and there are no more victims. Tough community sentences with appropriate curfews, tags and a whole range of other factors, and support to tackle underlying causes of offending, in my view, is a more effective way of doing that.

Q283 **Chair:** That is helpful, thank you. My first ever Select Committee visit was as a member of this Committee in 2006 to HMP Eastwood Park, and one of the key takeaways for our group that day was the message that short custodial sentences for the girls and women in Eastwood Park were pretty pointless. Certainly, the educational staff we met at Eastwood Park were very clear with us that they just do not have the amount of time needed to do meaningful work with the prisoners there. Their view was that the vast majority should not even be there. Isn't it frustrating that 18 or 19 years on—whatever it is—we are still stuck having the same



policy discussion about this?

Edward Argar: In one sense, but I possibly view this with a little more optimism than you do, Chair, although I have not been in this place as long as you have. Even after nine years, maybe that early days' optimism or positivity might still just be lingering on. The point I make is that we put into the female offender strategy and then the delivery plan, which came a few years later—it was slightly delayed by Covid—how we can continue that drive, and we are seeing fewer women in prison. We are making progress on that. There is more to do.

If I take as a model what we have done with youth justice—it is very different, because they are children—I think we now have 70% fewer children and young people in custody than there were in 2010. Those who are there are very challenging because, basically, they have done something very violent or very dangerous. Therefore, they have custody, and it is right that that option is available for them. However, with a lot of others, we will try to divert. We will try to find alternative punishments. Shortly we will be seeing the first people going into our new secure school down in Kent, which is another route. It is a slight rabbit hole away from Wales, but hopefully it illustrates the point and the direction.

Q284 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** Going to your relationship with the Welsh Government, how would you characterise it?

Edward Argar: I know that there has been some talk, and I think—this is where I will be corrected by the Chair if I am wrong—it was the Richard commission that talked about the jagged edge in terms of devolution. I have to say that, in practice, I find the interface between devolved and reserved matters rarely problematic, particularly at an operational level. Now, at ministerial level and in the Chair's former role as Secretary of State, there will always be occasions where there is disagreement over what is reserved and what is devolved or, often, when there are elements of both, how that works in practice. That is more about a policy level when we are doing legislation.

On a practical level, I have to say that the interface works well. I have worked not just in this Department but in a range of Departments with a number of Ministers in the Welsh Government. I mentioned my recent conversation with Lesley Griffiths just a few weeks ago. I am always available to her, and very kindly she is always available should I need to speak to her. I will certainly be taking up her offer to go to Cardiff to see her, first for a meeting and secondly because it has been a little while since I was last enjoying the delights of Cardiff.

At all levels, I think we have good working relationships. There are a number of groups that help bring that together in a slightly more formalised way, be it the Interministerial Group for Justice or the Criminal Justice Board for Wales, as well as the informal relationships and then the relationships that I will be using every day with different parts of the public sector and the system in Wales.



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Q285 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** You mentioned the Criminal Justice Board for Wales, and you said that these are effective structures. Should they be more formally recognised via a memorandum of understanding?

Edward Argar: There are two I mentioned there. There is the Interministerial Group, which my colleague Lord Bellamy sits on, which meets quarterly.

I think that we have a system that works and that the relationships in practice work, and I do not at the moment see any need for any further formalising of that or putting it within a more detailed framework. We may come on to it in the context of the Thomas commission, but I do not see a case for further devolution of justice. I suspect Mr Lake, at least, may challenge me on that point, but I do think it works in practical terms.

As with so many of these things, I spent a long time before I was a Member of this House as a councillor and a cabinet member in London and, yes, you can have all the structures in the world, but what is far more effective are the working relationships you have with the people in the NHS or with the people in the police. You can create a framework, but it is actually how it works on the ground and those interpersonal relationships that make it work.

Q286 **Tonia Antoniazzi:** I appreciate that. My question would be: does it make it more difficult? Is that what we are seeing in places like Parc Prison and in the Prison Service—because these services are devolved, there are disparities between prisons in England and there are worse issues in Wales? Is that something that you recognise?

Edward Argar: If I am honest, I am not sure I do. There will always be occasions where there may be tensions. However, if one of Ian's colleagues, who was a prison group director for a part of England, was here, I suspect they could point to particular local authorities or particular areas where they had a tricky time and it was scratchy at times. I suspect, equally, that Ian could point to very good examples of that relationship in Wales working in practice. He may want to come in a minute.

I think in your first oral evidence session someone picked up on this, but if you were a prisoner in a Welsh prison or in an English prison, you would probably not see much difference in terms of what it was like in the prison—although, obviously, it varies from prison to prison—and what you experienced subsequently.

Where there continues to be work to do—there always has been, because I had responsibility for devolution in 2018-19 and female offenders back then, when I was in the Department—is in the relationships and the processes for those Welsh people who end up in an English prison, because the challenge then is geography and getting that link up with the services. If you are in Cardiff, Swansea or Berwyn, the services are on



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your doorstep. They can come to prison. You can do that. It is harder when you are in HMP Durham, for example, or somewhere like that. I suspect an element of that, reading the evidence, comes through a little bit in respect of female prisoners. It can be done, and it is being done, but it is just that little bit harder because of the geography. I would acknowledge that point.

Ian Barrow: I would add that it has been a bit of success story, actually. HMPPS in Wales was established as a directorate back in 2014. It was the first time in England and Wales that we had brought together management of probation and prisons, and it was deliberately done to ensure that working with a devolved Administration was as smooth as it could be.

I think it has worked incredibly well. As well as the day-to-day positive engagement that the Minister has referred to, there are good examples of us co-commissioning services together. We have good examples of forward-looking so that we understand what policy developments are coming, working with what is called the Justice in Wales Strategy Group, an official group that ensures that the engagement and working are as smooth as they can be. I would genuinely categorise it as a very positive relationship.

Chair: Beth, would you like to add something?

Q287 **Beth Winter:** All the evidence that I have been presented with up until now has shown that there is a crisis in the prison system and that what happened in Parc is a symptom of the crisis that is taking place. I am a bit taken aback by some of the comments that things are going well.

In terms of devolution, the Welsh Government Commission and the Constitutional Commission have recommended that justice be devolved. All of the signs from Wales are that that is what Wales wants and needs, and the academics from Cardiff University who gave evidence to this Committee referred to the current relationship and situation as a jagged edge because you have competing demands, different electoral mandates and different political priorities. You have said yourself that health, housing and education are devolved. Inevitably, there are going to be tensions. Why are you so opposed to justice being devolved, Minister?

Edward Argar: There are two points. I am very glad you directed that at me rather than a civil servant who would have cited it as a political question.

I think the jagged edge was cited in your first evidence session by some academics, potentially quoting the Richard commission as the original source. I am familiar with the phrase. I suppose the question—I do not want to put words in your mouth—is, essentially: has the Department's position changed since 2019, since the Thomas commission and so on, and if not, why not? I do not like to pre-empt questions, but I think that is essentially what you are asking.



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No, the short answer is that our position on the Thomas commission's recommendations has not changed since 2019. Our view is that the most effective way of administering justice is through a single jurisdiction, and that includes the courts, the professional legal services community and, therefore, flowing from that, the prison system. We think that the England and Wales justice system is a very good justice system. We think it works well across the piece. I include the courts, the legal profession and the whole bit in that sense. There are benefits for Wales in that context as well as economies of scale, of course.

It is also important to reflect on the fact that because it is a single jurisdiction, legal professionals can practice in Wales, and they can practice in England. That means that there is a much greater pool of legal expertise, who will happily travel to Cardiff to attend court sessions and so on. There is an availability of professional legal advice that might potentially be more limited if you started having different jurisdictions with barristers, lawyers, and so on being forced to choose.

The other points I would make are, first, devolving justice would effectively mean duplicating justice functions in Wales. There are no prisons in Wales that can hold category A prisoners, for example. By operating on an England and Wales basis, you get greater flexibility within the system in managing prison populations and particular prisoners. I do not think that devolution of more justice or all justice functions to Wales would actually remove the so-called jagged edge. It would just simply risk shifting the devolution boundary so there would potentially be a larger and even more complex jagged edge or interface between a devolved justice system and reserved laws. If I am being honest, I do not see the benefit for the people of Wales in revisiting that devolution settlement in that way. I appreciate the hon. Lady may take a different view.

Beth Winter: Are you familiar with the—

Chair: Beth, we are going to have to move on; sorry, time is against us. Ben Lake.

Ben Lake: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister.

Chair: In a timely fashion.

Q288 **Ben Lake:** You might be surprised that you anticipated my question in an earlier response, and it is actually to do with the placing of prisoners in prisons perhaps some distance away from their resettlement communities and their families. I appreciate that it is policy to try to house prisoners as close as possible to their resettlement communities, but of course it is not always possible.

You mentioned that there will be prisoners from Wales who are in prisons in England, and I am interested to learn a bit more about what steps could be taken to improve the way in which we deal with those prisoners that are housed in England in terms of their resettlement and making



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sure that those relationships are in place in an effective manner prior to their release? It is something that previous witnesses to the inquiry have raised as a potential problem.

Edward Argar: That is a fair question. Though we aim or seek to try to keep prisoners from Wales in prisons in Wales, as I set out, there are occasions where that cannot happen. Where a woman is sentenced to a custodial term, it will have to be in a prison in England. I recognise that the Welsh Government are very clear that, while that presents challenges, they do not want a female prison in Wales and that is a point I accept. Similarly with category A prisoners—there will always be an element of that. For example, if you take a Welsh male prisoner during their resettlement phase, we will always try to find a way to ensure their release from prison in Wales, so we transfer them back so there is at least that point. It will not work in every case, but we will always try to do that.

We have also developed an offender management-led resettlement service delivered by probation staff that is deployed in prisons in Wales and community offices to provide that service. It does allow earlier engagement in the resettlement conversations to ensure better integration in the community, and I put on record my gratitude for the joint working that happens across a whole range of Welsh public bodies in that respect.

For those in English prisons, we try to get their community offender managers to engage at the earliest possible stage so that prisoners understand at least the journey and the challenges, and it gives more time for those conversations with devolved services. There are challenges that I do recognise that are not so much on release, although we may touch on that again later, but also when prisoners are placed long distances away from family. Maintaining those family relationships is hard and expensive so we do try to support that through a prison visit scheme where hardship funding is available, with more video links where we can—those sorts of things—because it does make a real difference.

Another factor that is not so much pertaining to release but is something that actually even recently I have been looking at again is: is there more we can do in English prisons, particularly in the female estate, where there is not a choice in a sense, about Welsh language resources as well and those factors that do matter? It may cover a small number of prisoners, but it matters, and there is a question of whether there is a bit more we can do around that.

Q289 **Ben Lake:** If I can move on to a slightly different aspect of the rehabilitation, something the Committee has received quite a bit of evidence about is the important role and contribution that voluntary organisations make in helping to rehabilitate offenders. Do you think we are cognisant of just how dependent we are on voluntary organisations for many rehabilitation schemes?



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Edward Argar: I think we are. When I was in a previous portfolio as victims Minister, I had the privilege of spending a lot of time working with third sector and voluntary organisations in terms of support services for victims of crime, but they play an equally important role in supporting those who have perpetrated crimes, who are often victims as well—particularly in the female estate there is a crossover. I was recently on a visit to the Nelson Trust in Gloucester and at Eastwood Park, so I went with the bishop to see them and their work. I pay huge tribute to them, and also to the whole range of organisations.

I know that we do provide support and funding, but I also recognise from when I did the victims strategy that, even though we have increased funding for victim support services and those charities—a whole range of things—I know a lot of them would say to you, “That’s great but it is still tight.” I recognise there is often a very difficult balance to strike between—going back to our previous conversation—security and vetting when you are going to the custodial estate but, equally, not making it prohibitive for those charities and organisations to actually get in and do the work that they do.

Another challenge that they often raise is multi-year funding. It is great to get a grant for a project. They will employ people—they will do it—but the challenge is then, “How do I keep them once that is up and running?” With victim support services, we looked at doing that. We have put in place multi-year funding, although obviously, as you will all be familiar with, subject to spending review cut-off points when you go through a new spending review.

I am currently looking at, which I spoke about the context of preparing for this Committee, whether there is more we can do in the context of the custodial estate to support those services? There is a whole range of services, such as the Shannon Trust, the Duke of Edinburgh—I should put on the record my sister is a director of that, just for the declaration of interest, as I mention it—and the Nelson Trust. Each and every one of us will know groups from our constituencies who do that. They do an amazing job. However, I think going to your question, I am conscious that they do find it challenging at times in terms of the funding context, but also in terms of that forward view. I cannot match it up with a vast amount of money, but I do recognise the value they bring, and I will continue to look at that.

Q290 **Ben Lake:** In terms of perhaps individual rehabilitation schemes in specific prisons, would it be the Criminal Justice Board for Wales that would have that oversight to identify them? For example, we are familiar with The Clink in Cardiff and Swansea and the work that they do, but of course at present they are looking at 2025. Unless new funding and grants are being confirmed, that might come to an end in 2025. Which body or organisation would be keeping an eye on the various schemes? How long do they have left of their funding, perhaps to anticipate any problem issues so that we do not lose the invaluable contribution they



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make to the rehabilitation of offenders?

Ian Barrow: Clink sits as a member of the Criminal Justice Board in Wales, and we work very closely with it. It is not only HMPPS in Wales that looks at contracting and the arrangements that are in place. We have a range of commissioned rehabilitation services. Another factor that people have criticised us for in the past is that the lots are too big when we advertise those. We are very conscious of that, so we are trying to get that as local as we can in terms of going forward.

As I said earlier, we also work with other agencies, including the Welsh Government, Police and Crime Commissioners and so on, about jointly commissioning services, and that will be part of a wider conversation about what the landscape is looking like in the next couple of years.

Q291 **Ben Lake:** That is very promising. Thank you. Changing tack now, for my last question, to access to data. Minister, would you be able to provide an update on the discussions the Department has been having with the Welsh Government regarding the publishing of Wales-specific data that is collected by HMPPS? It is not currently routinely published, but it is something that some have argued would be very useful and would help inform the debate on justice policy in Wales.

Edward Argar: This came up in various of your evidence sessions, and Liz Saville Roberts raised it with me as well. We already publish a significant volume of data on the justice system that is available as disaggregated data for Wales. Nearly all publications on courts and tribunals have data disaggregated. In addition, for prisons and probation, all headline data, so on prison population, first receptions, releases, prison assaults, probation, employment, accommodation, activity, safety in custody—those sorts of things—is already available by prison or probation region, including Wales.

There are a few challenges. The Committee may be aware that I said in a recent debate in Westminster Hall that I did not consider it was an inappropriate or unreasonable request for further exploration of how we could do that. I forget the academic who has done a lot of work on this, who was before your Committee, but he often does this. He does it by FOI-ing the data, so we have the data and therefore there is a question of whether there is a way, without incurring disproportionate cost, that we could do that data crunching and publication ourselves. That is something I do want to do further work in looking at.

To the specific point, we have had conversations with the Welsh Government, and we have evinced where we have the data, without creating a huge amount of additional work and where it would not come at a disproportionate cost. We have evinced a willingness to say, "Are there particular areas or particular data sets that they would wish to see that are not currently disaggregated or published as disaggregated?" I think that those conversations are ongoing, and we await confirmation from them as to what specifically they would like to see.



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When they do, I am happy to take that away and look at it, obviously viewing it through the prism of value for money and whether we can afford it. Is the gain limited for the cost, but are there areas where actually the gain would be significant for very marginal costs? I am happy to look at it with a relatively open mind when we get that confirmation.

Q292 Chair: We are shortly drawing to a close. As a follow-up to Ben's question about the role of the charitable sector, can I ask about the site where there was The Clink restaurant just outside the gate of Cardiff Prison? What will that be used for now that the restaurant has not had its lease renewed?

Ian Barrow: The plan for that is it is going to be used as a visitors' centre.

Chair: For the prison?

Ian Barrow: Yes.

Beth Winter: Visitors.

Ian Barrow: Visitors' centre.

Chair: Oh, a visitors' centre?

Ian Barrow: Sorry, yes.

Chair: I thought you said a business centre.

Ian Barrow: A visitors' centre.

Q293 Chair: For visitors. Okay, so it will be used by the prison. I think a few of us have eaten at that restaurant over the years and had very rewarding, enjoyable experiences. They were very sad to see the closure of that restaurant. What was the factor behind not renewing the lease? Was it because the prison needed that bit of real estate to build some new capacity?

Ian Barrow: That was a decision taken before my time, to be honest. Perhaps that is something we can come back to you on.

Edward Argar: Yes, if it is helpful, I can add that to my wrap-up letter to you covering additional bits and pieces that I have volunteered today. Equally, if you believe it would be helpful—I do not want to commit to something I cannot do because there are processes for these things—I am sure Mr Barrow would be happy to have that conversation with the prison as well. As I say, just with the caveat of any legal or other reason why we could not.

Chair: Okay, thank you. Unless there are any further questions from Beth or Ben, it just remains to say thank you to you both, Minister and Mr Barrow, for giving us your time and being so frank and open with us in your answers. I appreciate it.



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Edward Argar: It is always dangerous in this business, Chair. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you, all of you.