



Justice Committee

Oral evidence: [Work of the Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, HC 369](#)

Tuesday 19 November 2024

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Members present: Andy Slaughter (Chair); Josh Babarinde; Alex Barros-Curtis; Pam Cox; Linsey Farnsworth; Sir Ashley Fox; Warinder Juss; Tessa Munt; Sarah Russell; Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst; Mike Tapp.

Questions 1 - 86

Witnesses

I: Lord Timpson, Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Ministry of Justice; Amy Rees, Chief Executive, His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Service; and Ross Gribbin, Director, General Policy Group, Ministry of Justice.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Timpson, Amy Rees and Ross Gribbin.

Chair: I welcome everybody to the first meeting of the Justice Select Committee to be held in public session in this Parliament. We are delighted to have the Prisons Minister and his officials to be interrogated by us today. Before I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, do the members of the Committee have any declarations of interest? I will begin by saying that I am a non-practising barrister, a member of Unite the union and the GMB, and a patron of two organisations in my constituency—the Hammersmith law centre and the Upper Room.

Tessa Munt: My declaration of interest shows that I am involved with an organisation called Whistleblowers UK, as a director. It is a not-for-profit company. I am also involved with the APPG on whistleblowing, as an officer.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst: I am a registered barrister with an associate tenancy at No5 Chambers and am on the APPG on access to justice.

Sir Ashley Fox: As declared on the register.

Mrs Sarah Russell: As declared on the register, I am a solicitor. I have various other declarations on there. In addition, I am a member of USDAW and the Community Trade Union, a member of the Industrial Law Society and a member of the Employment Lawyers Association.

Josh Babarinde: I was once on the Employers' Forum for Reducing Reoffending, which Lord Timpson used to chair, so we collaborated in that respect.

Linsey Farnsworth: I am a former Crown prosecutor. I am a member of the APPG on access to justice and of a number of trade unions, including the FDA, as declared.

Warinder Juss: I am a member of the executive council of the GMB. I am also a solicitor, although I have not practised since being elected. I am a member of a number of APPGs.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis: I hold a practising certificate from the Solicitors Regulation Authority. I am a member of Unite the union and the GMB, and an ordinary member of the APPG on whistleblowing.

Pam Cox: Good afternoon. I am Pam Cox. My interests are declared on the register. I am a former professor of criminology at the University of Essex.

Mike Tapp: Good afternoon. I am Mike Tapp. I had previous employment with the National Crime Agency, including some work in prisons against gangs.



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- Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to welcome Lord Timpson and his officials to the first public session. It is perhaps no coincidence that we are beginning our deliberations by looking at prisons. Will you and your officials introduce yourselves, briefly?
- Amy Rees:** I am Amy Rees. I am the chief executive officer of His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.
- Ross Gribbin:** I am Ross Gribbin. I am director general of policy for prisons, offenders and analysis at the MOJ.
- Chair:** I think we know who you are.
- Lord Timpson:** I am Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending.
- Q2 **Chair:** That is helpful. I think we fully understand what two of the roles are, but could you, Mr Gribbin, explain what you do?
- Ross Gribbin:** Yes, I manage the policy group. We advise Ministers on decisions relating to this area, on prisons and offenders—by which we mean sentencing policy; and in addition to that I manage the Department's legislation programme.
- Q3 **Chair:** Thank you very much. We will go straight into questions. We may, sadly, be interrupted by votes quite shortly, in which case we will have to adjourn for a period of time. Let me begin by asking you, Lord Timpson, a couple of general questions. Earlier this year you said, "we are addicted to sentencing... so many people who are in prison shouldn't be there". Is that still your view?
- Lord Timpson:** I am very clear that prison has a very important purpose—to lock up dangerous people: terrorists, rapists, murderers and people who commit very serious crimes. I am also aware that there are many people in prison who reoffend continually: 80% of offending is reoffending. I have been going round prisons for 25 years and I have seen too many people going in and out, in and out. I feel passionately that we have a real duty to help a number of people who go into prison—so we have fewer victims—not to come round and round again. I am very clear that we have a really important job to do, to reduce reoffending and to protect the public.
- Q4 **Chair:** We have seen some very authoritative reports recently on sentence inflation, and the Government commissioned a review of sentencing policy. Is this because you regard those issues as the primary driver of the current prison population crisis—so you set out with the presumption that there will be a reduction in the use of custody or the length of custody?
- Lord Timpson:** The independent sentencing review that David Gauke is leading is really important, because we cannot have more prisoners than prison places. It is dangerous, and when we came into government 136 days ago it was clear from the word go that we were approaching a very



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serious problem, where the police and courts could not do their job. It is very important, with sentencing, to make sure that we follow the evidence, but that we have enough prison places for the people who need to go to prison.

I am also aware that there is a lot of evidence out there that community sentencing can be very powerful for the right people at the right time.

Q5 **Chair:** You mentioned community sentencing. What are the specific alternatives to custody that you think we should make greater use of to reduce the demand for prison places?

Lord Timpson: I have been fortunate to have been around this arena for some time and have seen some really good examples of community sentencing. As I said previously, there is evidence that if you pick the right offender with the right offence, at the right time, community sentencing can be very powerful. I will give you two examples, one of which is electronic monitoring. That has significant success rates. It can reduce reoffending by half from what happens without electronic monitoring. I am going to Spain in three weeks' time to see what they do there, because apparently they do some interesting stuff that supports victims, as well.

As to the other example, probably the most interesting day I have had in this job since I took it on was spent in Birmingham at the intensive supervision court for female offenders. Most of these women would automatically have gone into custody. The nature of the intensive supervision court meant that a lot of the women we saw in the morning, who were coming up from the cells, were beaten and broken, and looked very ill. The judge, who works with them all the way through their intensive supervision, was working alongside mental health, addiction and housing experts, and diverting a number of them—not all—away from custody.

In the afternoon I spent time seeing women who had been going through this process for six months-plus. They looked completely different. They came bouncing in with smiles on their faces. They were engaging with their sentence. They had worked really hard, and the professionals who worked with them were also working really hard.

There are really good examples of what works here in the UK, but I think there are overseas examples that we should look at, as well.

Q6 **Chair:** Thank you. One more general question. You are the 13th Minister to hold the prisons portfolio in the last 10 years. Does your appointment signal an end to the revolving door of Prisons Ministers, and what do you hope to have delivered by the end of your time as Prisons Minister?

Lord Timpson: It is obviously not up to me to decide how long I am going to keep this job, but I have been very clear with colleagues that I am here to do one job, and one job only, and I want to be here for some time. I am passionately interested in this area and have been a bit of a



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geek for many years. It is a privilege to have this job but also to be here today. I have watched these Committees on many occasions. In fact, I was at one in a very minor role a number of years ago.

When I walked into the office on the first day it was clear that this is a service under real pressure. I do not say this because I am sitting next to two of my colleagues, whom I work with very closely. The staff have been amazing—not just at Petty France, but the staff across the Prison and Probation Service that I have been meeting since I took on the job—but it is bursting at the seams. SDS40 was a necessary start, but there is an awful lot to fix. That is why I believe you need someone in this job for years, not months.

A lot of the decisions are complex. We are dealing with very complex people in a very complex system. If the purpose of my job was to get one or two things done, I do not think I would do the job justice. A lot of the things that need fixing are long-term fixes. That is why the independent sentencing review is going to be really important, as is the 10-year capacity strategy, which we hope to announce by the end of this year.

We may come on later in the session to prisons and probation units that are not working, but I want to point out that I have seen examples of fantastic prisons that I am really proud of. HMP Hatfield and HMP Drake Hall are outstanding places that I could show anybody; you would be proud of what you would see.

I have been out and about a lot since I have done this job, but also before. I have read everything I could possibly read and spoken to everybody I could possibly speak to in 136 days. It is fixable—it really is fixable; but it is going to take a long time. My focus at the moment, until Christmas—I know it is only a few weeks, but I have been working on this and trying to be clear about what I have been trying to do, because when you look around there are so many things you could focus on, but I want to focus on things that will make a long-term difference: I am finalising my plan, and there are still some things I am going to do before Christmas.

I mentioned technology and that I am going to Spain. I think there are some big wins on technology, but it needs to be thoughtful. I am very interested in the standards of our prisons and probation units. I have been to Manchester to have a look, and maybe we will come on to that later, if we have the time. I am very interested in leadership and culture, which I spent a lot of time on in my previous role running the Timpson business.

We need to focus on our priorities and on the evidence of what works, but we must not lose sight of the fact that we have so many thousands of amazing staff, who have done incredible work over the last few years to try to support a system that has been on the edge.



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To answer your question very specifically, it needs someone who wants to be here, and it needs someone who wants to be here for some time, and I would like to think that I am the person to do that.

Chair: Thank you very much. I will hand over, if I may, to Josh Babarinde.

Q7 Josh Babarinde: Thank you, Chair. Welcome and thank you for joining us. It is good to see you again. I wanted to ask about the early release scheme SDS40, which saw a number of ex-offenders released 40% into their sentence as opposed to 50%. Are you able to share with us how many available places there were in prisons before that scheme came into force in September, and how many places it unlocked in the prison estate?

Lord Timpson: Clearly this was not the first thing we wanted to do when we came into government. The first day, when I got appointed, I thought I was going to go home, but I was put in a car to go straight to the MOJ and was presented with the capacity problems that we have had to deal with.

One of the things that was clear was that the early release scheme of the previous Government was not helpful. There were no exclusions for domestic abusers. Speaking to prison governors and probation staff, they did not like it, because they did not feel that offenders were being released in a controlled way. There were projections that we were looking at; then things changed when we had the civil disobedience in August, which made the situation even worse. We got to the point where we had less than 100 places in the whole of the prison estate, which, to reiterate a point I have mentioned before, is not the place we want to be in. So SDS is certainly a better measure for easing the capacity than ECSL was. We think when this has come through it will have created about 5,500 spaces.

Q8 Josh Babarinde: I think it was the Prison Governors Association that said shortly after the first tranche of releases that within a year we were going to be back to square one. Are you able to share with us when you would expect prisons to reach capacity again?

Lord Timpson: If we had not done SDS40 we would not be in the position we are in now, where we have some capacity. We do not know the exact timescales, because there are a number of fluctuations. Maybe I can turn to Amy to give her reading of more of the details.

Amy Rees: It is worth a bit of detail on the number of releases: there were two tranches, of 1,800 and then 1,200. The 5,500 figure will be what is generated in an entire year, of course, but those are the two retrospective releases that happened on those dates. It is certainly fair to say that that has bought us a really decent chunk of time; so 5,500 is what it is expected to yield in steady state. We expect the incoming demand to be about 4,500; but you will know that the Government also



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announced two interim measures—the extension of HTC and the RA changes to try to buy us time so that we can get to the sentencing review, decide what needs to be done, and take the legislation and so on.

Q9 **Josh Babarinde:** So do you have a ballpark? You mentioned the phrase “decent amount of time”. What is that?

Amy Rees: It is a couple of things, as you will appreciate. One is that we have really good supply coming on next year. A brand-new prison, Millsike, with 1,500 places will open in April. We have some house blocks coming on line. We have the demand coming in, but, as you know, we are downstream so it is very difficult to predict with accuracy that this amount of demand will come to us. We obviously have to deal with what comes through the courts. Obviously, as we have discussed, if there are events like those in the summer that very much changes the picture and there is a speeding up. We definitely have enough time to get to the outcomes of the sentencing review, implement our two interim measures, which are in April and then June, respectively, for RA and HTC, and to get well through the autumn to decide what the Government want to do in response to the sentencing review. So we are not, now, staring down the barrel of immediate crisis as we were in the summer.

Q10 **Josh Babarinde:** And next autumn, all other things being equal, is the time you expect this reprieve to last until, before prisons reach capacity?

Amy Rees: We may get further than the autumn because we also have a natural cycle of change in what comes to us in demand. There is a known thing called the Christmas dip. You tend to get a reduction in the prison population over Christmas, so you may get quite a bit further; but, as I say, it is genuinely impossible to know what comes at you from a demand-answering perspective, with unforeseen events etc. It is impossible to give an exact date.

Ross Gribbin: To add to what my colleague has said, as you are probably aware, there is quite a lot of natural variation in the system, so the demand numbers we are talking about can vary by several hundred, month to month. That is why, when we raise projections, we always give a central case. We tend to give an upper and lower estimate. That is partly why we would not try to give you a pinpoint estimate. Obviously, the system is still very busy and full, but there will not be a single moment that we can give you as a precise answer to the question.

Q11 **Chair:** You can say, surely, at what percentage of capacity you are now.

Amy Rees: It is 97% today.

Ross Gribbin: Indeed.

Q12 **Chair:** And you told my colleague that you will be okay until next autumn. Is that realistic?

Amy Rees: Well, I suppose there is a hidden question in there, which is at what level we would like to operate. As colleagues will know, we have



been operating at over 99% capacity for the best part of two years. It is possible, but very inadvisable, to run the system at that level. As I explained, we will get a Christmas dip coming shortly. Then we will also get big supply. We have got good supply coming on. We have got a house block in Rye Hill and a brand-new prison, and the two interim measures. So there are lots of ins and outs, if you like. There are lots of pluses and minuses happening in the system in the next 12 months.

Q13 Mrs Sarah Russell: You mentioned being downstream—and therefore demand arises. My question is to what extent you liaise with HMCTS about court capacity and how many sitting hours there are going to be. Do you have a full statistical understanding of the relationship between the number of sitting hours of judges, the number of people who go through the system, and the number of people who are likely then to enter the prison population? How does that get co-ordinated, if at all?

Ross Gribbin: Yes, we do have a full understanding. We have a quite comprehensive modelling process that looks at not just the court system but the police and other system partners. We essentially test the assumptions in the modelling with our colleagues in other Departments—with our partners—and then we run scenarios to test what the different impacts would be. Of course, the process by which sitting days are governed in the court system is constitutionally governed. That is not something that is purely a policy decision in MOJ, but we look end to end and make sure that we plan for whatever capacity is required.

Amy Rees: Can I just add a couple of operational bits?

Q14 Chair: Probably not. I am afraid we are going to have to vote. We may have more than one Division so I am not going to give a time. I will just ask that we come back as quickly as possible after the last vote. We will try to keep you informed as to when that will be. I do apologise.

The Committee suspended for Divisions in the House—

On resuming—

Q15 Chair: The Committee will now resume after the adjournment for votes in the House. Before we were interrupted, I think, Ms Rees, you were just about to answer a question from Sarah Russell.

Amy Rees: I was. Thanks. You were asking about the relationship between court sitting days and what happens in prisons. I was just going to add a bit of operational flavour. Obviously, we have been focused on the total number of prison places, but two things add a layer of operational complexity for us. One is the category of prisoner. We have different prisons, from category A to category D. We have found that most pressure happens in the reception prisons, where they come in from court, and that is particularly important to us. The other thing is regional variation. We have found that there has been more pressure in some parts of the country than others. Obviously, when we get very tight on places and are running at over 99% capacity, sometimes even if we have



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a few places left it is very difficult to get someone from the place where they arrive from court to the spaces that we might have, which might be hundreds of miles away.

Mrs Sarah Russell: Thank you.

Chair: Back to you.

Q16 **Josh Babarinde:** Thank you so much, Chair. Thanks for bearing with us. I would like to ask a bit more about the risk assessment process that you went through to ascertain which offenders to release early, and which not. Can you tell us about how extensive that was, what tests you undertook and so on?

Amy Rees: I guess there are two answers to that question. Ross may want to come in. The first is how the policy is written and therefore who is excluded by policy. I think most of the Committee will be aware that for SDS40: no sex offenders, no terrorist offenders, no serious violence—that is over four years. Everyone must be on a standard determinate sentence—meaning not released by the Parole Board, and not released at the two-thirds point, which applies to some very serious offenders. So there is a bunch of people who are just excluded by policy.

We then went through a process of ensuring that people were ready for release. That is the kind of operational process that we did: that is licence conditions, checking on safeguarding, checking on any domestic abuse flags, making sure we have got preparation for accommodation etc. I don't know whether you wanted to pick up anything on policy.

Ross Gribbin: As Amy says, the offences that are released—I presume it is SDS40 that you are asking about—are set in law when Parliament passes the SI. That is a policy decision made by Ministers and, in turn, by Parliament. That does not grant flexibility, but Amy has listed some of the safeguards that apply when we get on to the operational considerations.

Q17 **Josh Babarinde:** On the subject of risk, it has been super-clear, as I know you are also aware—whether it is the Domestic Abuse Commissioner or charities like Refuge, which I met with earlier today—that there is significant concern from survivors. Although a number of domestic abuse-aligned offences were excluded from early release, there are domestic abusers convicted of things like common assault who did qualify for release. Can you tell us a bit more about how you sought to and continue to manage the risk posed by those individuals, to reassure those survivors who are watching right now?

Ross Gribbin: The Minister may want to come in, and Amy can talk to the operational detail, but just to be clear on the legislation, it grants us the ability to change the release point only by offence, so we could not have applied some of the other factors that you are talking about. We can only grant on specific offences in the change that we can make, but I do not know, James, if you or Amy want to answer.



Amy Rees: I will cover the operational bits, quickly. In terms of what we do in the case you gave, to safeguard where someone has been released for common assault, but where there might be underlying flags, we had all the usual licence conditions. That includes, where people are registered for a victim contact scheme, that they can have exclusion zones; they can apply for certain licence conditions—so all of that licence period as usual. Also, probation are trained in those risk assessments. They look for domestic abuse flags and safeguarding checks, and deal with all the other partners. I am sure that you are also aware that there are MAPPA levels, in how we manage people from multi-agency public protection. All the usual safeguards that probation would use are available in these release cases.

Q18 **Chair:** Just to be clear—sorry to interrupt again—there is nothing you can do about the exemptions. We keep seeing cases—I can quote one that I saw on Sky News today where a man who held a knife to his ex-wife’s throat and threatened to kill her went to prison for ABH and so is not covered by the exemptions. What are we supposed to do about cases like that—just see them as collateral damage in the system?

Ross Gribbin: Well, of course, we are bound by what powers Parliament has granted in the law, as you will be aware, so the Government can select only by offence type. Obviously in the future, in primary legislation, that could conceivably be changed, but at the moment that is the nature of the secondary legislation that is open to us.

Lord Timpson: If I just touch on recall, clearly victims come first in our decision-making process and the early release scheme that we inherited from the previous Government had very high rates of recall, anecdotally. That means that we had too many victims. They were not abiding by their sentence plans. We do not have the full data yet on recalls on SDS40, but operational insight and, for me, going round speaking to governors and probation teams says that the recall rates are not significantly different from before the early release scheme.

Recalls are generally too high, and that is one of the things that I really want to focus on in my role. We have got 12,500 people in prison on recall, and that is far too high.

Q19 **Josh Babarinde:** To what extent have the Government explored what Mr Gribbin mentioned—the prospect of changing primary legislation to, I guess, close this loophole for the future?

Ross Gribbin: I think the independent sentencing review that is currently under way is looking at a range of questions. I am sure that we will need to look at what they recommend.

Amy Rees: Also we have been clear, and the Lord Chancellor has been clear, that SDS is not a permanent change. It will be reviewed after 18 months, so there will be a very good opportunity to consider some of these things you are talking about.



Q20 Josh Babarinde: I will ask one final question before wrapping up, and that is on the victim contact scheme. Ms Rees, you spoke about that in answering one of the questions I just asked. From speaking with organisations like Refuge, it is clear that there are a number of victims and survivors who would have expected to be contacted and were not, under the SDS40 scheme. There are, I understand, a number of requirements. For example, someone needs to have been incarcerated for more than 12 months for the victim or survivor to be notified. Of course, for the offence of common assault sentences are often less than 12 months. Can you tell us a little bit about how you would expect to close that loophole and ensure that the victim contact scheme is comprehensive and covers all domestic abusers and all victims and survivors of that horrific ordeal?

Lord Timpson: As I have said, victims come first in our decision-making process. I have had the privilege, as I know you have in the past, of meeting a number of victims, since I took on this role. That is a reiteration, for me, of how important it is, when we make policy, that they come first.

I am also aware that since we have come into government we have had to implement a lot of changes very quickly; but we have tried to do it thoughtfully and to engage all our colleagues across the organisation. I think they have done an amazing job in very difficult circumstances.

I will come on to Amy as far as the practical details of contacting victims are concerned, but from what I have been picking up on the teams have done a really good job. There may be some examples we need to look at, but I will hand over to Amy about how it actually works.

Amy Rees: I genuinely think you raise an excellent point. We did something extraordinary with SDS so, as you might expect, we did a lessons learned exercise. I am really proud of the way the organisation managed something that was difficult to do. One of the things that came out of the lessons learned was about the victim contact scheme and the victim notification scheme. We did follow the letter of the policy when we did SDS40 and we have checked and rechecked that, but I agree with you that it gave rise to some confusion about how the scheme operates.

The victim contact scheme, as you say, is for specified offences over 12 months, including terrorism, sexual abuse and violent offences. You also need to opt in, as a victim, and sometimes that opt-in process happens when people are in a very high state of trauma and they may decide one thing then, and later decide that perhaps they would like to have been involved; or perhaps they did not foresee other circumstances that might change. The victim notification scheme is a separate scheme for harassment and stalking, and there is no 12 months to that, and the opt-in rate is much higher for that second group.

I think we have learned some lessons—that we need to have some discussions again about making sure people are clear about how these



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schemes operate, how they find out about them and whether they get a chance to re-opt-in. It is something we will definitely be picking up with the ministerial team, because we got the same feedback as you. We had really good contact with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and all the rest of it, but there clearly was some confusion about how the scheme actually operates at its heart.

Josh Babarinde: I am pleased you are looking at that. I grew up in a home where domestic violence was pretty rife, so it is particularly close to my heart. I am pleased you are serious about looking to curb some of these challenges, should there be another early release come the autumn, or beyond.

Q21 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** I want to stay on the topic of SDS40. Can you set out the impact that the scheme has had on the case loads of probation officers?

Amy Rees: There is no doubt that there are two ways in which it impacts the workload of probation. When the scheme is in normal operation people will be out for 10% longer, so they will be managed on the balance by the community for longer, but what was particularly difficult and added to the workload over the summer was the retrospective nature of the scheme. We had to prepare in eight weeks and then 12 weeks for a release that we would normally have had much longer to prepare for. Probation staff were absolutely brilliant in prepping for those groups. We had multiple things we were checking regularly. They did very well indeed in making sure the normal things were done, but it was done in a shortened period of time and it added to their workload.

As we go forward, there will be a longer balance of time, but, as the Minister mentioned earlier, it is a much better scheme operationally than ECSL was. When someone arrives in custody we will calculate their release date and everyone will know that new release date, so there will not be any bringing forward of a check, changing of dates etc. That is the thing that adds and contributes to workload when there is not proper time to plan and prepare.

Lord Timpson: I have spent quite a bit of time in my role with probation because I am aware that this is a potential point of real pressure. To give one example, I spent quite a bit of time in Preston. Because we have this eight-week lead-in and communication from the teams is strong, we galvanised the spirit of all the teams. There was a lot of overtime happening; people were really going for it to make sure that the SDS40 extra releases would work. One of my main areas of concern was accommodation. We do not want people to leave with no accommodation. If people do not have the right accommodation it is a big reason for recall. In Preston I was impressed by the detail they got into. I also went to approved premises in Ellesmere Port and looked at that. Again, it was a service going to the limits, but I think they did a really good job.

Q22 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** You have touched on the limited preparation



time that was had and some of the steps you have taken on accommodation, for example. I wonder whether you could go into a little more granular detail about what steps were undertaken specifically to reduce the risk from those being released.

Amy Rees: There were a few things. First, we held ourselves to business-as-usual standards, meaning we wanted domestic abuse and safeguarding checks done as normal; we wanted licence preparation done as normal and all of the victim contact scheme done absolutely as normal. So we held ourselves to a business-as-usual standard of release.

As for accommodation, colleagues might be aware that there are three levels provided directly from HMPPS, despite it not being obviously a housing provider. The first is CAS1, which colleagues may know as approved premises. They are our highest-risk offenders unlikely to have been in the SDS group. They go out and live in approved premises for a period of time. The second is the Vale accommodation service where we provide a number of places where people can go as an alternative to custody, or on HTC at the end of the release.

The third, which is particularly pertinent to this group, is CAS3, where we provide 85 nights' accommodation. We literally buy and pay for that accommodation in the hope that what we can do is smooth the passage for them getting into the normal housing system, which, as you know, can sometimes take a little bit of time. What we are trying to do is avoid them being homeless at the point of release.

Lord Timpson: Could I add one more thing on employment? Obviously, accommodation is very important when someone leaves prison, as is to have a meaningful relationship with someone to look out for them, but it is also about a job. Prior to coming into this Government, I was involved in the employment side of things. One of the important factors when somebody leaves prison now is that they need a bank account and the ability to get their driving licence back or their digital identity set up. I was pleased with how staff in the prisons had been working. We now have a banking and identity administrator. They work with the prison employment leads and hubs. That has been a helpful addition, because when people are leaving there will be fewer reasons for being recalled.

Q23 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** You may or may not have the figures to hand, but in terms of those released under SDS40 compared with those not released under that programme, what percentage had gone through the banking and ID administrator and had been set up to ensure that they had that smoother transition into post-prison life?

Lord Timpson: From my experience going round prisons and speaking to these teams, it will vary quite a lot among those prisons that are geared up. For example, the category D prisons and the female estate, where I have spent quite a bit of time recently, are organised and have quite experienced colleagues; others are probably a bit further behind. I think it is an important step and when I first started recruiting people from



prison 20-odd years ago it was not even considered, but times have changed and we need to make sure people have these. Especially if they will be signing on and getting their universal credit, we do not want to put impossible barriers in their way.

Q24 Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst: I am sorry to press you. You say that it is a bit behind in some prisons. Do you have an overall figure of where it sits?

Lord Timpson: I am afraid I do not have a figure.

Q25 Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst: Alongside the announcement of SDS40 was the announcement that there would be 1,000 newly trained probation officers by March of next year. Where are we on that? Are we on track for that?

Amy Rees: Yes, I am confident that we will hit that figure of 1,000. It is worth saying—you have asked a lot about workload—that recruitment alone will not be enough in terms of probation. We need to look again at the work we are asking probation to do. Colleagues will know that we did a reset where we looked again at the work we were asking probation to do, in particular to try to make sure that probation officers spend the right time at the right point in the sentence with those most at risk. I think we need to keep asking ourselves: what work do we really want probation to do? In particular, where do we best target the efforts of our fully qualified probation officers?

Lord Timpson: I will add two more points on that. It is good news that we are on track on recruitment, but I am also aware that it takes time to learn the skills to do this job well. A lot of them are not just the technical ones you need to know to do the job; it is the softer skills; it is how you build trusting relationships with the offenders you are working with, often for a long time. We cannot just put someone in a job and expect everything to be great to start off with. It takes time.

One of the things I am interested in—it fits in a little bit with what Amy was saying—is technology and how we focus our expertise on the people at highest risk at the right time in their journey through probation. What can we do to enable our probation staff to have more face-to-face time rather than time doing administration? Whenever I speak to probation staff and ask, “If you had a magic wand, what are the things you would like me to do to help you do your job better?”, the first thing they say is, “Please help us to do less copy and paste.” One of my goals is to see how we can embrace simple technology to enable them to have more of what I call arm-round-the-shoulder time. That is really what they want to be doing— not filling out forms all day.

Q26 Mrs Sarah Russell: How many staff would you expect to lose over the same period through retirement and/or otherwise leaving the service?

Amy Rees: Our attrition rate in probation for the main grades we are talking about is about 6.5%. It was lower. It went a bit higher during covid and started to come back down again. That is our basic attrition rate. I think you are asking whether we will need to keep recruiting. The



answer is yes. We will need to keep recruiting fully qualified probation officers at around or at the same rate, but we also need to look at the workload and what we are asking them specifically to do.

Q27 Mrs Sarah Russell: My question was: what number of people will exit versus the 1,000 recruited over the same period?

Amy Rees: It is about 6.5% at that grade; that is the number we expect. Are you asking how many of the 1,000 will drop out?

Q28 Mrs Sarah Russell: I do not know how many people in total work in probation at the relevant grade, or more senior grades, because presumably you already have some gaps there. Do the 1,000 replace the number you would expect to lose through natural attrition?

Amy Rees: No. That will be a considerable net increase. At the moment, there are circa 5,500 main grade probation officers and of those the attrition rate is 6.5%. It will be a net increase, but we will have to keep doing that.

Lord Timpson: For your information, we have 20,400 full-time equivalent probation staff.

Q29 Mr Alex Barros-Curtis: What Lord Timpson said is encouraging. It is not just about recruitment; it is also about other skills. The Committee was at HMP Brixton last week, which was really interesting. One very well-established member of staff, who had been there for 35 years, said that the training he had undertaken versus what new recruits were undertaking was vastly different. Back in his day he might have done two or three months of training centrally before being in a prison and working there day to day. I am paraphrasing, but he said that now they would be lucky to get two or three weeks. Part of the retention problem is that the newer recruits come in and their expectations perhaps are vastly different, which is why the retention rate at lower levels has such a significant churn. Chair, I apologise for going wider than the original question, but is that also something that the Ministry is looking at?

Lord Timpson: This is my perfect question and I will make sure I do not go on too long.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis: It wasn't a plant, Chair, I promise.

Lord Timpson: I have just finished a significant review into prison officer training. Now I am in this role, I hope that a number of my recommendations will be put in place. A lot of that is around much more in-depth training and training around the softer skills, not rushed training but more in-person training and a lot of training around how we support people, de-escalate problems and have a long-term vision for training, so that when someone joins they have a really strong, clear idea, if they are ambitious, how quickly they can progress through the organisation. It is something I am passionate about. I have been involved in colleague training in the Timpson business for many years, so it is at the top of the



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list. In some ways I feel a bit sorry for the team in HMPPS involved in training because I am on it all the time.

Amy Rees: Can I just add a few bits more broadly on recruitment? One of the things we are most proud of in the service since covid is that we have recruited really well. In terms of prison staffing, we are 200 staff over our full-time equivalent. That disguises a bit of a problem in that we still find it easier to recruit in some parts of the country than others, hence why we are slightly over because we use them to fill gaps in other places.

What is certainly true is that our balance of experience has changed as a result of that new recruitment. I do not want to be all negative about it. It is great to have new staff in; they bring in loads of new things: technology, a different perspective etc. That is fantastic, but we definitely need to work hard at, first, making sure we train those staff once they have arrived, but, secondly, making sure they get the opportunity to learn. We have been trying to do things like new colleague mentors, because we find that, if people leave, it is in the first two years. Going into a prison is an unusual job, so we are trying to put effort into those first two years when people arrive with us, to get a balance of experience and learning.

Q30 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** As for those released under SDS40, how many have been returned?

Amy Rees: It is too early to have a full set of recall data. As the Minister said, operationally our perspective is that it has not increased that much. It is also worth knowing that in any recalls the profile is that you are more likely to be recalled earlier in the sentence. We might have expected a spike by now that we have not really seen come through, but it is just too early for that data; there has not been long enough left in the system since we released them.

Q31 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** Do you have a timescale for when you anticipate you will have that data?

Amy Rees: We will certainly know more after Christmas about what has come through the system.

Q32 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** Earlier in your evidence you alluded to the fact that the Lord Chancellor has said she will review the position in 18 months' time. What are the specific outcomes or indicators that will be used to measure the impact of the scheme?

Ross Gribbin: The Lord Chancellor has committed to transparency on the number of releases, which is a significant new initiative. We also have all the usual management information that we track for any kind of releases. We have talked about recalls. Over time, the Department will measure aggregate reoffending rates. I do not know whether Lord Timpson wants to comment any further.



Lord Timpson: I do not have anything to add to that.

Q33 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** I may piggyback my final two questions. How many do you anticipate will have been released by the end of the scheme? Do you think it will be repealed at the end of that 18-month review period?

Lord Timpson: We think the numbers will be around 5,500. That was our intention; that was how the modelling looked at the beginning. It is our plan that it will be reviewed in 18 months' time.

Ross Gribbin: To clarify it, the 5,500 will be the net impact on prison places. Depending on how long the scheme lasts, you would see a rotating cohort going through that.

Lord Timpson: On the ECSL early release, we took on these problems with that scheme because people were released in such a rush. Under that scheme 13,000 people were released.

Q34 **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst:** I probably did not phrase the question as well as I could. At the end of that 18-month period, do you think it will be repealed, or what do you anticipate will be the direction of travel?

Lord Timpson: We have the independent sentencing review. It is our intention that in 18 months' time it will be reviewed and we will see what the review says then.

Q35 **Tessa Munt:** We went to Snaresbrook and to Brixton last week. On both occasions there was reference from individual conversations about trauma-informed training. Does everybody get that now?

Amy Rees: It is a basic part of our standard prison officer training. When a new recruit arrives we do some of that training, and then we do specific other trauma-informed training depending on what you are delivering in the estate.

Q36 **Tessa Munt:** The probation service would get that automatically.

Amy Rees: Yes.

Q37 **Tessa Munt:** I want to ask specifically about probation and whether you have seen any returners. I know there was a horrific attrition rate back in 2013, or whenever it was. Have you had people back?

Amy Rees: Yes, we have had some people back. We have also had some people who have decided to join slightly different roles; they might be doing programme delivery or something of that ilk. As I mentioned earlier, we have stabilised the attrition rate, so we are now at about 6.5%.

Q38 **Tessa Munt:** Eighteen months is quite a long time. I guess there are things you have seen that you might do differently. Is there any flexibility to change within those 18 months, or do you have to wait to the end before you change something?



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Lord Timpson: It is our job to keep our eyes open. It is important in my job, as it is for Amy, to get out and about and speak to colleagues who are looking after offenders and the whole process they are involved in. I am keen on ideas that will reduce reoffending.

Q39 **Tessa Munt:** Are you gathering stuff up on the way? Can you change the way you do things when the next one comes along? You have to wait the whole 18 months before you can change things, I presume.

Amy Rees: There are probably two answers to that. One is a policy answer, which I think Ross will pick up, and the options are as we discussed earlier: either you do primary legislation or you do it in 18 months. Operationally, we enhance things between tranche 1 and tranche 2 because we are learning all the time. We did a lessons learned and we will do everything we can operationally, but what I cannot do is change legislation; I can act only within it.

Chair: We need to go on to a fresh topic. I am entirely in the Committee's hands but, given the time we lost for votes, the more time we spend on each issue the fewer issues we will get through. I am sure the team will be keen to come back but we must take this opportunity while they are here.

Q40 **Warinder Juss:** I want to ask a couple of questions on overcrowding. We know that our prisons are overcrowded, which was why we had the early release scheme. As has been mentioned earlier, we had a prison visit last week. For me, it was quite unpleasant to see two prisoners in a very small cell. How many prison cells do we have that are currently doubled up? Lord Timpson said earlier that the problem is fixable but it would take some time. While the problem of overcrowding continues, what is being done to put in place some precautions or provisions to ensure that prisoners have a safe and healthy environment?

Lord Timpson: Perhaps I may introduce the topic of overcrowding. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think about 10,000 cells are deemed overcrowded. These were built originally as single cells and basically have bunk beds in them. Overcrowding has increased over the years. When you have an overcrowded prison there are direct links to increases in violence and a number of other problems associated with violence, whether it is drugs, self-harm and so on. It is something I am aware of. Our prisons need to be safe places. I want people in prison to be able to do their time safely and to engage with all the things we know will help them not to come back. Maybe Amy can explain overcrowding and how it works operationally.

Amy Rees: The answer to your question is 23.6% of our population. The Minister has given the number of cells. I govern Brixton, so I am intimately familiar with the spaces there. I agree with your assessment. It sounds like colleagues here are aware what it means when we crowd a cell. To be frank, it means that someone defecates in the same place



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where somebody else eats their dinner. We would like to have much less of it.

What do we do to try to manage it? First, it is worth saying that we make a very careful assessment about whether we can tolerate crowding in any prison. That assessment is made and signed off by the prison group director. It is called operational capacity. We do not just decide on a Friday afternoon that we will put five more people in. That absolutely does not happen. We make a proper assessment over time of the number of prisoners who can be held safely in any individual establishment. It is not just about the actual physical space in the cell; it is about all the other stuff we talked about: access to education, access to work, staffing ratio etc. All of those things have to be considered.

In terms of what we are trying to do, first, we try to limit crowding wherever we can and make a safe assessment about it. Secondly, we try to do some physical things in a cell. You might have seen that in Brixton we try to have shower curtains and things around the toilet. Because they are designed for one person there is no covering for that toilet. Most important of all, we try to get the best possible access to regimes, because obviously it is not a place people would want to spend hours and hours in and we need to give them the best possible access to coming out of their cells.

Lord Timpson: To give one example, I visited Wandsworth recently. Wandsworth has had well-documented problems recently. We have a new governor and there is a plan in place. One of the benefits of having more capacity as a result of SDS40 is that we can start to do some of these important projects and ease pressure on the system. In Wandsworth, we have reduced capacity by 150 places to date—we will probably take more out as well—to enable essential maintenance to happen, lots of staff training and give the staff and whole prison community there the opportunity to get back on the front foot. It does give us some flexibility, but Amy and the team are very clear that there is a red line on crowding and that does not get crossed, despite all the pressure we have had on capacity.

Q41 **Warinder Juss:** We were told last week that many prisoners are not on drugs before they go into prison but when they are inside they start taking them. Have you made an assessment as to what part of that is due to prisons being overcrowded?

Lord Timpson: I do not have the exact figures on how it impacts overcrowding, but I know that 49% of those in prison have an identified drug problem. We have a clear problem that we need to deal with. Overcrowding is one of the factors attributable to the problems we sometimes see. I also know of other prisons where they have overcrowding and the pressure is not so bad. I do not know whether Amy has a clear idea on that.



Amy Rees: Drawing a direct line between overcrowding and taking drugs would genuinely be difficult. It is more straightforward to draw a direct line between crowding and access to regime, access to staff and staff time, and access to offending behaviour programmes that might help you. These are all things that may lead people to turn to drugs. I think a direct line is pretty difficult, but it definitely makes access to other things that might support you getting off drugs more difficult.

Q42 **Josh Babarinde:** I would like to ask a bit about prison capacity. Over the past 14 years we have seen a net change of 500 places added to capacity. As the prison population is projected to increase from 94,600 to 114,800 by March 2028, how many additional prison places do you think need to be built in order to satisfy that projection?

Lord Timpson: We will be publishing the 10-year capacity strategy before the year end; it is nearly ready for publication. You are exactly right: even though the previous Government built 6,000 prison cells, they closed 5,500; so the net increase was only 500. As for the prison population, the general trend is an increase of 80 people per week at the moment, so that is 4,500 people a year. It does not give you much flexibility.

I am clear that we need to build more prisons, and really good ones. For me, prison design and the way they operate need to have a real focus on reducing reoffending. As mentioned before, HMP Millsike is opening in the spring and we have other accommodation blocks coming on. I do not want everyone to think that we need only new prisons. We have some Victorian prisons that are operating very well at the moment. I spent a couple of days in HMP Preston with the staff going round doing all the jobs they do in a prison over a couple of days. When you walk into the governor's office, there is a board with the names of all the governors and the year they first started their governing job. The first governor of Preston started in 1798. Dan, the governor there, and his team run a really good prison despite it being a very old one. I think it is a combination: we do need to build new prisons and maintain the ones we have so we do not lose them at the back end.

Q43 **Josh Babarinde:** How many of the Victorian prisons do you think are beyond maintenance? We heard lots about rat infestations and things like that that are almost impossible, or have proven impossible so far, to root out. We have seen and heard not dissimilar stories from other prisons. I appreciate there might be some solid leadership and programming in some of those Victorian prisons, but how much of the physical infrastructure itself is beyond repair?

Lord Timpson: Let me give just two examples. HMP Dartmoor is currently closed due to health and safety concerns over radon. We are hoping to reopen HMP Dartmoor as soon as we safely can, because that is 600, maybe more, places there. I also went to HMP Manchester. As I am sure you are aware, it has been the subject of an urgent notification. I have been going to HMP Manchester for over 10 years, so I have seen



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the good and the bad. This was the worst I had seen it. The sewage system under the prison has collapsed; there are rats running around; the big cooling tower in the middle is collapsing; windows have not been repaired.

We have inherited a prison estate that needs to be maintained. I do not think it is just about whether our prisons are too far gone. No, they can be maintained. To touch on one example, there is something called Q Branch. They call it different things in different prisons. Essentially, it is about working with prisoners who have experience in maintenance. They work with a couple of prison officers who are experienced in trades. They go round the prisons painting and fixing doors and doing basic jobs. They do not do electrical work or anything like that, but there are lots of things they can do.

One thing that is important to me is standards. I have never known a great organisation to have poor standards. Something I learned in business is that you need to have high standards. One of the challenges I will be setting HMPPS is an idea that I have been running in the Timpson business for many years. It is called the perfect day. I would like to do it for each establishment, the probation office and my own office as well, where on one day it is immaculate; the standards are really high. I believe that those prisons that have high standards have better results for offenders.

Q44 Josh Babarinde: As well as building capacity, a key part of improving prison capacity is around our prison officers. We have spoken about training, but there is a need to recruit more prison officers. What do the MOJ's plans look like to recruit the number of prison officers required?

Lord Timpson: We have 200 over our number of prison officers at the moment, but, as Amy said, they are not all in the right place. Similar to what we are talking about with probation officers, they are not all experienced enough yet. I think we need to keep recruiting. One of the things I am passionate about is looking at retention, because you can work hard in recruiting people, but you do not want lose people just as quickly at the other end. Part of this is what we want to do on training, but also part of it is stability. I feel that in this organisation people do not want big change; they do not want a revolution. Every day we need another step forward, just gentle improvements. That is what I think will improve staffing and retention levels, and that falls on to the prisoner experience and how we can reduce reoffending.

Q45 Josh Babarinde: I ask about the plan. It has been pretty well documented that Unlocked Graduates is an organisation that has facilitated the training of many prison officers over a number of years. It featured in the *Sunday Times* top employers. The MOJ has really relied on it to help fuel the recruitment of prison officers. We have seen an issue recently where there has been a breakdown of communication and relationship between the MOJ and Unlocked over the negotiation of a contract. I understand you might not be able to go into the details of



that, but at the moment there seems to be a void. It does not look to be the case that there is a contract specification for the recruitment of more prison officers via a scheme like that—certainly not for next year—and it is not clear what happens beyond that. Are you able to share with the Committee and those beyond this room what your plan is to get that up and running again, not necessarily with any single provider but generally with a provider?

Lord Timpson: I will start off and then hand over to Amy if that is okay. I have been fortunate to work alongside many colleagues who have been through the Unlocked scheme. As part of the training review I did, I spent a whole day in Leeds with the Unlocked graduates on their course. It has added a huge amount to the service as a whole. We still have more graduates coming through until 2026. This was another problem that we inherited—a procurement process that did not work. I will hand over to Amy.

Amy Rees: There are a couple of things. First, I totally agree with you that Unlocked has been a huge part of helping to provide for cultural change in the organisation. In fact, we have a programme internally that we call “Enable”, which is looking at staff training and how we develop managers at all levels of the organisation, and it is fair to say that a lot of that has been learned from Unlocked. It is not quite true to say, though, that we have been reliant on Unlocked for numbers; it is relatively small in terms of what it does because it is specialist and has been more about cultural training. The gap created by Unlocked for me is not one about physical numbers of prison officers but the cultural change and people who might be brought into the organisation who would go on to much more senior roles. We are thinking about that. As you know, there is still a live cohort of Unlocked, and they will be with us for quite some more time. If we do a re-procurement for anything like a graduate scheme, Unlocked will be able to tender for that.

Q46 **Josh Babarinde:** What plans are there to do a re-procurement?

Amy Rees: We are considering at the moment exactly what gap we want to fill and whether or not there will be a re-procurement for something like we procured for before. As you know, we had a live procurement. Unlocked was a bidder but in the end did not sign the contract, which is obviously its choice. We are working through now whether we would do something similar and look at what specific gap we think we want to fill in the market.

Q47 **Josh Babarinde:** What are the timelines on that? Let us take Unlocked as an example. Without being able to understand whether something may be coming down the line, the likes of Unlocked may be forced to close altogether. What certainty can you provide, not just to Unlocked but to any other bidder that might want to enter the process, that something like this might be coming down the track?



Amy Rees: At this stage, the honest answer is no certainty because we are still considering exactly what we want to do, what we would procure for and if we would go out to market, and we are working through that with Ministers and the Lord Chancellor.

Q48 **Mrs Sarah Russell:** I have two questions on the maintenance but both focus on investment to save. When we were in Brixton, I looked up at the roof and watched the amount of heat that must have been going out through it. I wondered about the day-to-day revenue costs of running our estate and how long the repayment period would be for capital investment, because some of that, I suspect, would not be that long. Do you have a breakdown of your figures on that £1 billion backlog of maintenance around what would potentially be invest-to-save schemes versus what is just day-to-day maintenance, and how do you unpack and explore that?

The second thing I wanted to ask on this topic is this. Some prisons clearly have netting around them, which appears to be quite an important facet of dealing with drugs entering prison. The differential in quality between some netting and the standard of the fencing that is up is huge. I suspect that, again, there is a potential invest to save there if you took better physical steps to reduce the number of drugs that went into prison and/or the maintenance budget associated with the netting. What work is being done on those types of issues?

Lord Timpson: I will start and then Amy can help me on the details. Obviously, we have enough money for essential maintenance such as I described about HMP Manchester. These things need to be fixed and they are getting fixed. I am on it and I will be going back in due course to have a look at progress.

When it comes to netting specifically, when you go to somewhere like HMP Berwyn just outside Wrexham, it is a really new prison. I think it is seven years old. A lot of the area is netted and they have a small number of drones coming in, whereas HMP Manchester, which is in the city centre, does not have much netting and has a drone problem.

It is not just about putting up netting. This is a cross-Government piece of work to do. There are now restricted fly zones and so on. It is important that we work through the maintenance. I have had a number of conversations about netting. You have to be careful. It needs to be snow-proof. Some of our prisons today will probably have lots of snow on them. It is not just as straightforward as putting up a simple net.

One of the other points, which I am sure you are aware of, is that the people who bring drugs and illicit goods into prisons do so for financial gain generally. When you close one door, they will try to find where the next door to open is. It is not just a case of putting a net across a prison and solving the problem. They are looking for all the weak points all the time. It is something you need to be looking at continually.



Amy Rees: Just a couple of bits of detail on maintenance. You mentioned the backlog. In this financial year up to £220 million has been made available to us to try to spend on maintenance. Next year, 2025-26, we will have up to £300 million. That will give us a really good insight. Some 25% of my estate is Victorian. Without a shadow of a doubt, it is more costly to run both in maintenance and in day-to-day running costs. The difficulty, though, is that if you were to compare that to Millsike, which is being built on a completely different specification—an all-electric prison, with modern, fit-for-purpose sustainability—converting Brixton to that is a very tricky and expensive job and will probably require us to take all of the capacity out of use to be able to facilitate that. There are difficulties of money, the capacity in the system and the cost of converting very old prisons as opposed to building new, but there is a vastly different maintenance cost to running those two things.

Chair: We have moved on to maintenance. Did you want to go back to prison building?

Q49 **Linsey Farnsworth:** Just briefly if it is okay. It is probably timely. You have just mentioned again new prisons. We will come back to prison maintenance shortly. On the point of new prisons, it is great to hear that Millsike is opening in April, and I think you mentioned a new block opening elsewhere as well. It is clear from what the Minister has said that we need to build more prisons and more purpose-built prisons for where we want to be in this country with the way that we want to sentence as well, potentially. The Ministry of Justice has faced challenges previously in building new prisons, particularly in relation to planning permission. This is probably a question more for the Minister. What steps are being taken to improve the planning process for new prisons? How soon can that be sorted out so that you can get on with building the prisons that we need?

Lord Timpson: You are right; it is really important that we get on with this. The previous Government had long planning delays. That is why we had only a net 500 increase in prison places, which is why we have had the capacity problems over the summer and all the other associated problems when you have full prisons. It is important that we really focus on this. In our manifesto, prisons are nationally important, and we are going to go down the Crown development route. I met earlier this month with Minister Pennycook as well to go through this. It needs to be a cross-Government approach. It is really important that we address this now because we cannot be in the position that we were in, in July, when every day we were getting closer to having no prisons. We need to build new prisons, but we need to build really good prisons.

Q50 **Linsey Farnsworth:** How will you decide where those prisons should be?

Amy Rees: Shall I just add a bit of detail? First, there are the three Gs, as we call them. They are the ones left to build: Gartree, Garth and Grendon. We estimate that between one-and-a-half to three years have been added by planning permission difficulties. It is worth saying,



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though, that, of the 20,000 portfolio, now over 87%—17,000 places—have planning permission. We have been through a lot of that process.

As to where we decide to build new prisons, there are a couple of factors to take into account. We need a certain square footage, and we prefer flat land, as most people who build do. Then we have to consider things like transport links. Then it is what gap we are trying to fill. In terms of a cat D or a cat C prison, you can place those a bit differently from where you need to place a reception, which needs to be really close to a court. They are harder to find. We really try to work with the local community. There are obviously things that people have concerns about when building loads of prisons, but we are also really good employers both at the time of construction and afterwards.

Q51 Linsey Farnsworth: There have been problems with construction, though, as well, have there not? ISG was a construction company that collapsed, essentially. Has that affected specific projects that you have been working on? Do you have alternative contractors in mind ready to take over going forward?

Lord Timpson: This is to be added on to the list of the number of problems that have come across our desks since we took over in July. When ISG went into administration, 100 projects across the prison and court estate were impacted. Seventy-nine will require re-procurement. We are on it quickly. We have had contingencies in place. It is worth bearing in mind that other Government Departments, unfortunately, have been impacted as well by ISG, as have Tesco, Marks & Spencer and lots of other organisations. One of the bigger projects it has been doing is rebuilding some of the Victorian wings at HMP Birmingham. But I am confident. It will mean we have some delays, but the team are acting really quickly and talking to construction companies that want to bid for this work because I would like to think that we are a good customer.

Q52 Pam Cox: I will take you back to prison maintenance, if I may. In 2021, I understand there was a £1 billion backlog in terms of prison maintenance. Could you give us a sense of what the current figure is four years on?

Lord Timpson: On the exact details on the backlog, I suspect if I went to speak to the governors of every prison and walked in every cell, every workshop and every laundry the figure would be completely eye-watering. We need to understand that the maintenance required is what is required, not necessarily wanted. As Amy said, 25% are Victorian prisons. They all come in different shapes, sizes and ages. The backlog has doubled, but what is important is that we need to focus on essential maintenance. One of the priorities at the moment is focusing on fire safety upgrades. We still have 23,000 cells that need fire safety upgrades, and that is a real priority for us. One of the advantages of the capacity that we have gained—even though it is not significant, we still have some capacity now—is that you can get these jobs done quite quickly and more efficiently.



Amy Rees: You mentioned quite an old figure. As you would expect, we recently conducted a condition survey, and we will be publishing that soon. We have done all the work to go out again, look again, and look exactly at what that backlog figure is now.

Q53 **Pam Cox:** Thank you very much. As a follow-up, what levels of autonomy do prison governors have in determining what is and is not essential, and in decision making around contractual arrangements and procuring and that kind of thing?

Lord Timpson: I am very aware that prison governors are great at governing prisons, but they are not always great at doing procurement processes. When I was running the Timpson business, the buying team never let me anywhere near it because that was not one of my skills. It is important that the procurement processes are handled by the experts. But saying that, it is what I call the B&Q question: what can the governor spend to get something resolved quickly and locally? They have authority to spend £10,000 or less. There are proper procedures in place because they are spending public money. I am still learning about the procurement rules in government, and the more I look at it the more complex it seems to get. It is important that governors have the ability to sort out small things day to day, but I do not want them being involved in big procurement processes.

I am also aware that governors spend a lot of time doing contract management. They have lots of big, complex contracts, and I just want to make sure that we really focus their time on governing the prison.

Q54 **Pam Cox:** Do you think enough is being done on the management of those contracts in terms of the monitoring of effective performance? These contracts could be anything from replacing netting to running therapeutic services. It is a huge range of contracts for services. Are there mechanisms in place to ensure that their goal-oriented regulation is going on there?

Lord Timpson: We need to be very careful; we are spending public money, so we need to make sure we get really good value for money and what we are paying for is what we get. I will hand over to Amy just on how you practically deal with that.

Amy Rees: There are lots of mechanisms where we try to hold providers to account, as you might imagine. I will not go into all the detail of those. Absolutely, for sure, governors would like more autonomy to do things locally and to do things speedily and more quickly. We have been trying to trial some of that. We have been saying, "Okay, we'll give you a pot of money. Let's see what you can do." One of the barriers we are finding is that, unfortunately, it is inherently inefficient to do small works in a prison. You need to be security cleared to come into us. You can only work at certain times of the day. You need an escort. We are finding that in some parts of the country there is not necessarily a massive market for



doing small works. We have to try to package up the works so that they are meaningful to a supplier. I definitely recognise what you are saying.

We have really robust contract management. We are trying to improve where we can, and that is often with the smaller jobs, if you see what I mean. A lot of people understand that big contracts get let across Government, but what about just small reactive things? That is where the Q Branch and the £10,000 limit come in. We also have to package groups of work, otherwise sometimes we just do not get people who want to do it in our environment.

Chair: Thank you very much. Before we press on, with the consent of the witnesses and at least a majority of the Committee, I would like to go over time, to go to no later than 5 pm, in order to make up the time we have lost. I understand if some people may need to leave, but so long as we have a quorum I want to take this opportunity. I still do not think we will finish. I will aim to get as far as the section on imprisonment for public protection. That might affect both how quickly people ask and answer and when they come in. With that, can we go to back to you, Linsey?

Q55 **Linsey Farnsworth:** That is right. I would like to explore adult custodial remand with you a little if possible. The sentencing review is just that: it is about sentencing. My understanding is that it does not cover remand in custody. Are you seeking to reduce the number of people who are remanded into custody. If so, what steps are you taking?

Lord Timpson: The independent sentencing review has ambitious terms of reference. We have asked it to deliver its final report within six months, so it has a lot to do. That is why we decided we would not include homicide, youth offending, remand or IPP sentences. Apart from IPP, which I am sure we will come on to later, we will deal with homicide, youth offending and remand at a later date. We wanted to make sure we really focused on that.

There are 17,662 people on remand, which is about 20% of the total prison population. It is a significant part of our reception prisons, and it clogs up the whole system. This certainly does not apply to all offenders on remand, but a number of people on remand do not really engage in prison life and do not engage in education, personal activity and some of the jobs that are on offer in prison. We have increased magistrates' sentencing powers. We are doing a number of things around the Bail Information Service. We are investing in all courts for that. I am really on this, but we need to keep looking for new options as well. Ross, I will hand over to you.

Ross Gribbin: I have a couple of things to add. As you will be aware, the remand test has not changed. It is set in legislation that has been in place for a long time now. The evidence we have is that the actual remand rate has not changed. It is obviously difficult to make comparisons, but that is the available data. The increased number of



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people on remand is a function of the outstanding caseload in the courts system and some of the other pressures that the system is under. As the Minister said, it is a very important issue. A lot of prison places are currently being occupied by people on remand, and it is absolutely something that we are looking at. For the reasons the Minister gave, it simply is not part of the sentencing review itself.

Amy Rees: There are a couple of things that I might add. I am really glad you mentioned it. We talked about sentencing earlier. Remand, recall and FNOs make up over 40,000 prisoners. It is a significant chunk of what we do.

As to what we have been trying to do, if you do not change the remand test, we can try to put together packages for people that would mean that bail is a reasonable alternative for the courts. We have been investing in bail information officers to try to do that. That is very much linked, though, to what I was just describing about accommodation. As much as we can put together a package, what you really need for those people is alternative good and safe accommodation. That is where CAS2 is necessarily very important. We currently have 850 spaces. We are ramping up by the end of 2025 to 1,350.

Q56 **Linsey Farnsworth:** What about other options for supporting bail? Electronic tagging was mentioned, which has been around for a long time. I was really excited to hear a debate in the House about tags that monitor alcohol use and things like that. That is really exciting for an old prosecutor like me. Could you tell me a little bit more about those sorts of options or new-style options that would support people on bail as opposed to remanding in custody?

Lord Timpson: I can give you a good example of the sobriety tags, as they are called. They have a 97% compliance rate. I actually tried one, not because I was sentenced or anything, but as part of my job as a Minister to see how it actually works and what it is like to be someone who has one of these tags on. I will not go into the details, but I was tasked to make sure that the sobriety tag had to make some readings, so I successfully did that. Unfortunately, it was on a Tuesday evening, so I was not great for work on Wednesday.

I am a big believer in technology for managing offenders in the community. That is why I am going to Spain in a couple of weeks' time. They are doing some really interesting things there. It is not just on basic tagging; it is around pushing. Basically, offenders wear a bracelet that reminds them when they need to go and see their probation officer and when they need to go for various appointments. I do not know the details on this but I am looking forward to learning how victims can get much better information on where offenders are geographically and giving better information for them. Hopefully, in due course I will be able to come back to this Committee to update you on what the options are, but I am really excited about them.



Amy Rees: I have just a couple of bits to add on tagging, if I may. We have 20,800 people on tags now. It is a significant number. The biggest single group is court bail at 7,400-ish. Tagging is used a lot by courts already. What we are seeking to do all the time is make the courts aware of what tagging can do and the availability of the technology. One of the big shifts as well as alcohol monitoring, which has been great, is the shift to GPS, which not only means that we can know the offender was or was not where they should be in the curfew, but it can actually locate them. If there is a crime, it can locate them in the vicinity of the crime. We have used it in several successful prosecutions. The police force is delighted with the kind of information that you can get from it. So GPS tagging is a real technology step forward.

Q57 **Pam Cox:** On that point about technology, as a Committee we want to look at data and digital strategies across our work programme. Do you have a data and digital strategy currently?

Ross Gribbin: Yes, we do. We are looking at investment in data and digital in a number of areas. The Department has excellent work improving data linking, which is obviously a key part of building the evidence base on this. We will be looking at additional technology to support community sentences, some of which have already been talked about. I agree; there is a lot of exciting potential in this area.

Q58 **Pam Cox:** We were in Brixton last week. Every record we saw was paper—a paper record and paper file for every prisoner. Every Government service is going through a digital transformation. I just wonder how we might work together on that.

Lord Timpson: I completely agree. If I could wave a magic wand, I would get rid of as much paper as possible in prisons because we want to improve the amount of time that officers have on the wings talking to prisoners, sitting down and building those important relationships rather than filling out forms or looking for where they put the paper.

Amy Rees: You are absolutely right to look at it across the portfolio. One thing you are probably looking at is records that have been right through the system—through the CPS, the courts and the police—so it is important that we try to do this end to end.

Pam Cox: Prisoners arrive in a reception centre and nobody has any information on them despite there being lots of information about them elsewhere.

Chair: Pam, I think it is you next as well.

Q59 **Pam Cox:** Yes. Very quickly, on the very important matter of the Women's Justice Board, the Government have said prisons are not working for women. What would you say are the alternatives?

Lord Timpson: I am really pleased that the Women's Justice Board is being formed. We will announce it hopefully in the new year. The experts



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we will have on the board are really going to help us provide a strategic vision and direction in reforming women's justice to deliver the priorities, which are really clear. I believe we need to look at diverting women away from the criminal justice system in many cases.

I have been going to women's prisons since the age of nine because my mother was a foster carer and she used to look after babies. I never went in the prison when I was a baby or young child; we used to sit in the car park while my mum went in. I have been going to Styal Prison probably six times a year for probably 20 years, and I continually see a number of women who are very ill—mentally ill and prolific self-harmers. I believe a number of those women should be diverted away. I think 68% are there for non-violent offences.

Prison very much has its purpose, but when we are talking about diverting women away I am sure you have heard of some really good examples of residential women's centres. I mentioned the intensive supervision court in Birmingham and some of the things we have touched on around technology as well. The Women's Justice Board is a really exciting move. It is important not just that we get the right ideas but we get the delivery done as well. It is a really important step, and I am looking forward to coming back in due course and telling you how we are getting on, what the plans are and the delivery plans.

Q60 Chair: Thank you very much. Could I just ask one question on the youth estate? We have received a letter today from Charlie Taylor, the chief inspector, about the analysis of children in custody from 2023-24. I am sure you are familiar with it. It says, among other things, that more children in custody felt unsafe last year—in fact, double the number of the year before. Children were spending the majority of their time locked in their cells with little done to address their offending. There was violence and conflict on the wings. Only half felt cared for by staff. This is a pretty desperate catalogue. What is your response to that?

Lord Timpson: We are very concerned about the youth estate. It is another part of HMPPS that we inherited that is under severe pressure. It is not my specific area of responsibility; it is Nic Dakin's. I have known for a long time about the complex nature of the young people who are in custody and the needs that they have to help them so that when they are released they do not go back in. Often, they are very vulnerable young people. I have read Charlie Taylor's report. I will hand over to Amy to give her reading on things.

Amy Rees: I am sure Minister Dakin will want to come in and speak to the Committee about it. He is focused on both short-term and long-term plans—short-term remedial actions such as increasing the time out of cell. What are our medium to long-term plans for the youth estate? Colleagues will know we opened the first secure school. We are very interested to see what that will do and whether it will change the landscape and give us other options in the system.



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Chair: Okay. I hear what you are saying.

Q61 **Tessa Munt:** Back to Charlie Taylor, I am afraid. He has issued four urgent notifications this year—three in the last three months. Are you expecting more? Is that going to become increasingly common? It sounds from some of the things you have said that it would not be a surprise if there were more. The second part of my question is: how does the prison system address the things that he raises? How do you respond?

Lord Timpson: To answer your question, “Will there be more?”, I hope not, but there may well be. I do not want to sound like a broken record but we have inherited a really difficult situation here. I do not want you to think that Manchester, Winchester and Rochester are good examples of what we are seeing. We have some fantastic prisons. Go and see HMP Oakwood, HMP Hatfield, Drake Hall and a number of others. These are world-class establishments.

There is a set process involved of what happens after an urgent notification, which Amy will take us through in a minute. What is important is what I do as the Minister in charge. I have been to Manchester. I am going to Winchester the week after next. I am on it on these. What the team needs is support. We have staff who work really hard. We have governors who really want to turn things around. Amy and the team are really focused on supporting them. I see my role as very much being someone who supports them and works out with the team what they need to turn things around.

Take the example of Liverpool Prison maybe 10 years ago. It was in a dreadful state, the subject of an urgent notification. It has now completely turned around and the team have done a really good job. It does happen. I am in regular contact with Charlie Taylor on a weekly basis. In fact, I am seeing him tomorrow. Amy can take us through the steps to actually get that done.

Amy Rees: A couple of bits of detail: we have eight prisons that we are actively trying to manage and improve under the urgent notification process at the moment. In terms of the process, within 28 days of receiving an urgent notification we publish an action plan. That action plan normally has two parts to it—things that are very specific locally and then there are often themes. We have covered quite a lot of them today: staffing, maintenance, consistency of senior leaders, physical infrastructure etc.

A good example in Liverpool of what we have tried to do is to close some places to relieve some pressure. That has obviously been very difficult in the last couple of years. We are trying to do it at Wandsworth now. As the Minister said, that is both to give the establishment an opportunity to get on top of the stuff it needs to and because, often, we need to do physical infrastructure and maintenance work, and that is very difficult unless you can take a block. In Wandsworth, at the moment we are trying to refurbish showers, boilers, flooring and windows—all those sorts



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of things. The process we go through is writing an action plan, then delivering it, and seeing what we can do to really give it the biggest boost to help it get back on its feet.

One of the honest learnings that we have experienced, just as the Minister said right at the beginning of this session, is that we have a lot of success by focusing support and improving a prison in three to five months. It is a different question about whether it sticks in three to five years, so we really need to ask ourselves properly how we get a sustained, continued improvement in these places.

It is not for lack of brilliant leadership. Lots of these places have our best leaders in, but they are the most difficult places to run, so it is looking at that consistent staffing and the regular investment and all those things. We are really asking ourselves now: what is the three-to-five-year journey we can go on for these places?

Q62 Tessa Munt: Thank you. One of the concerns that is raised is self-inflicted deaths. Do you want to comment on that and how you see the ability to reduce the number of deaths in prisons?

Amy Rees: First, self-inflicted deaths at the last reporting are slightly down.

Q63 Tessa Munt: Sorry, can you say that again?

Amy Rees: Sorry, self-inflicted deaths at the last published reporting are very slightly down. One death is too many, so I do not want to over-focus on that. I also do not want to say to you that there is a really simple action plan we can do for this, because, as you will appreciate, we are talking about very complex problems. We are also talking about a lot of trauma and a lot of problems imported from outside into prison.

We are trying to do a number of things. One is identification. At the moment, people come into prison identifying that they might have needs. Some of those might be acute mental health needs that need support maybe out of prison but certainly with that kind of healthcare staff in prison. Some of it might be more mentoring support and support that we can actively do on the wing.

At the moment we have a pilot in six reception prisons, including Preston, where we are trying to do peer resilience. We are trying to really invest with a course delivered by other people with lived experience about how they can be emotionally resilient during their time in prison. We then have a framework for actively monitoring people we are worried about called ACCT, where we have a forum and we try to monitor people. There is investing in staff training.

If we look to the women's estate where the self-harm problem really is acute—eight times what we experience in the male estate—we are trying to pilot a lot of different things as well. We know that family ties is one of the big problems. In four of our 12 women's prisons, we have social



workers and we are trying to work on family ties. We are trying to do some more psychology-led approaches, particularly with our women who are prolific self-harmers. We are working hand in glove with our healthcare partners to try to work with the relatively few women and men who prolifically self-harm and really have lots of instances of it. We do a lot all the time, but we have to keep asking ourselves this question because it is an enormous challenge for prisoners and staff.

Q64 **Tessa Munt:** Do you think the ACCT stuff is effective?

Amy Rees: Yes, we think it is an effective framework. There is a separate question about always improving it and always reviewing it, which we do. As I am sure you know, after any death in custody, even if it is not self-inflicted, we have a PPO. They will look at whether the individual was on an ACCT and whether they should have been, and what the quality of those ACCT entries was like. We also know that things like regime and getting people out of their cell are all very important.

Tessa Munt: Thank you.

Q65 **Mike Tapp:** Thank you for sticking with us for a little longer. We are going to move on to talk about organised crime in prison. We know that prisons are hard to get out of—we hope—but the public are often shocked to hear about the drug use in prison. Of course, there are those that are made with components within such as spice, but far too much is getting in. We know that there is data on the increase of drone activity around prisons. From your knowledge, what are the most common methods being used to get drugs into prison?

Lord Timpson: When it comes to the whole area of serious organised crime, it really worries me. We estimate that about 10% of the prison population have connections with serious organised crime. It is a big risk to security and stability and how we can reduce reoffending. I have been going around prisons for, as I say, 25 years, and this is a significant problem we need to tackle and we need to take very seriously, and at pace. People smuggle phones in so they can carry on their business outside prison. They can also find ways of getting drugs and illicit substances into prison. When they sell drugs in prison, they can create prisoner debt and it creates more violence. The added complexities that this brings is a serious problem. At the end of the day, this is not helpful for what I want to do, which is reduce reoffending. So we need to tackle this.

I am pleased you have raised it because this is the one thing that really concerns me at the moment. I am pleased with the approach. I spend a lot of time with the team on one of the areas we need to focus on. I know Amy and the team are also aware of the complexities of the way they operate in prison and outside prison.

Amy, maybe you can come on to the details of how things are getting in and the specific area of drones.



Amy Rees: In terms of methods of entry, it will vary from site to site. It also varies over time, because if we get very good at blocking one route you will find they are pretty good at switching to another. The main routes are: prisoners smuggling it in themselves, so we have tried to do enhanced gate searching and security in our most troubled sites; throw-overs— literally trying to throw it over where there is netting or whatever that you can get it through; drones; and to a much smaller extent sometimes by staff or partners who work with us.

Q66 **Mike Tapp:** On the staffing side of things, what is the level of vetting for prison staff working on the ground?

Amy Rees: We have a good standard level of vetting for prison staff. We also have a basic level of vetting for anyone who comes into the prison. We also have a couple of other things. We have a staff corruption unit with about 150 staff. As with the police and other services, we are actively trying to ensure that professional standards are met. We try to educate staff because some of these players are looking for weakness. They are quite adept at corrupting staff, so we try to train staff both when they join and regularly afterwards to look out for it, look for support, and look for how we can support people. There are a number of ways we try to counter the risks that are there.

Q67 **Mike Tapp:** Where does it fall into the vetting category? Is this SC, CTC or DV?

Amy Rees: It will depend on exactly the type or nature of prison that you are working at. Working at a cat D is quite different from working at a high-security estate. It depends on the level of prison, but we have a good standard basic level.

Q68 **Mike Tapp:** Is there consideration for bringing it into the vetting standards of other organisations like the police?

Amy Rees: You mean a higher level of vetting. One of the things that we have been considering is not so much necessarily a higher basic standard or level of vetting, but things like enhanced checks of social media. How we get on top of social media checks is part of vetting, which would not necessarily change the total standard but might change what we put in the package. Does that make sense?

Q69 **Mike Tapp:** Yes. Is there monitoring of staff relationships with prisoners? That is where this problem can begin—with the recruitment of prison officers.

Amy Rees: Absolutely. I mentioned that we have a corruption unit that tries to look at and manage exactly that. We get a regular number of convictions every year. We are not just monitoring it; we take them right through police prosecution and we get criminal justice outcomes. Particularly at the low levels, we try to support people. You are absolutely right that what we want to do is stop the relationship at the point at which you start to have concern. As I mentioned earlier, we are trying to



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have good mentoring and good support so that when brand-new staff come in they can learn from more experienced staff about the appropriate relationships and boundaries.

Q70 Mike Tapp: Thank you. How are you working at the moment with other law enforcement agencies such as the police and National Crime Agency to form that intelligence picture within the prisons?

Amy Rees: As you might expect, I meet with them regularly and work with them closely. We are trying to think at the moment in the area of serious organised crime—you obviously have a bit of a specialty in this—about the model we have used for counter-terrorism, which has been effective in the way we have worked with other agencies, and we are trying to think about whether we could roll that out. The numbers are very different, though, in SOC than they are in CT, so we will have to think about the kind of model that we could apply, and we are thinking about how we could work on that together. We work very closely, but we want to use the formula that we have used in CT and see if we can apply it to SOC.

Q71 Mike Tapp: That is good to hear; fantastic. Finally, in terms of randomised drug testing, how successful is that? I have a question from something that was raised earlier: are there tags that can also detect drug use?

Lord Timpon: On random drug testing, I was quite shocked when I came into office in the beginning of July that, because of the capacity problems, random drug testing had not been at the volumes it should have been. When a prison is 99.9% full, the most you can do is get people a clean pair of pants, three meals a day and a shower. Random drug testing takes time. It is important.

Looking forward, I have stressed to the team that we need to do this very proactively. We are also interested in new technology coming through on random drug testing. We are also doing a lot more water-based testing in the sewage system for drugs. It is important that we do not just test but we also encourage people not to take drugs, with drug-free wings and incentivised substance-free living wings. I have seen some really good examples. The one at Oakwood is world class. The way prisoners engage in it is important. It is important that we have a deterrent, that we test and we know what our problems are. On the other side, we need to have the carrot as well.

Q72 Mike Tapp: One final question, please, Chair, going back slightly. In terms of the prison estate, what are the rules on vehicle searches for visitors or prison staff when they come on to the Government-owned estate?

Amy Rees: Vehicle searches will vary according to the category of the prison. At any closed site, we would expect the underside of a vehicle to be searched. We would expect a physical search of any apertures such as boots opening. We would expect that the cars did not come into the



grounds and pass through the gate unless absolutely necessary. Only a small number of vetted vehicles should be coming in and out.

Q73 **Mike Tapp:** Do prison staff park within the boundaries of the estate?

Amy Rees: Not on a closed site. It is a car park only.

Chair: One supplementary from Linsey.

Q74 **Linsey Farnsworth:** Thank you, Chair. I have a very quick question. You mentioned the phones in prison and organised crime groups essentially continuing with their business model from within prison. You have said that you work with other agencies as well. If you receive intelligence to suggest that there is an operation going on in one of your prisons from an OCG, do you have the opportunity to move and disrupt those groups by moving people around? If so, how have the prison capacity issues impacted on those sorts of methods that you can use?

Lord Timpson: I am sure you will understand that there are certain things we cannot really talk about in public, such as the way we manage some of these challenges. If I just touch on the capacity issue, you are 100% right: when you cannot move anybody around, you cannot deal with difficult prisoners. There are ways of moving people around. On some of the specifics, I will hand over to Amy.

Q75 **Chair:** Are you moving more dangerous prisoners to lower-category prisons as a result?

Amy Rees: Shall I just try to answer both of the questions? On the first part, obviously I am slightly constrained on what I would say to this kind of audience. Broadly speaking, on your question, we would never allow capacity or anything else to interfere in an individual case. If we had intel on an individual, we would move that individual. What capacity absolutely does is affect our ability to manage relative volumes—the number of people you are trying to manage at one site versus another. It also pushes a lot of prisoners out of area, which creates its own tensions and problems. So, to answer your question, not at the individual level, absolutely, but at the bulk level, if that makes sense.

Chair: We are going to move on to IPP with Alex.

Q76 **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis:** Thank you, Chair. As the Chair said, I want to ask a few questions on IPP. I note that the IPP annual report was laid before Parliament on Friday. I would gently say, as the Committee noted, it is a non-sitting Friday, which does somewhat hamper our ability to effectively scrutinise it, so I hope that was just a one-off. Helpfully, your letter, Lord Timpson, to the Chair of today underscored the Government's desire to be determined to drive further progress in improving the prospects of those serving IPP sentences, which is welcome to read. Would you agree with the view of the previous Lord Chancellor, who referred to IPP sentences as "a stain on our justice system"?



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Lord Timpson: First, I apologise about the Friday date. Actually, I had a very in-depth and challenging debate in the other House on Friday, so it was very much an IPP day.

I am very clear that we need to do all we can to help IPP-sentenced prisoners get out safely and protect the public. I have been fortunate in my role running the Timpson business to work with a number of people on IPP sentences. They were fantastic. They turned their lives around. They were great colleagues, ambitious and got stuck in. I am also aware of the complex nature of the whole range of the 2,964 people on IPP sentences.

The Parole Board has a key role, as does the IPP action plan. At the moment, 30% of our IPP-sentenced prisoners are in the wrong prison to do all they need to do to get on the right courses and get the right skills, because we want to have a successful parole hearing. I am also really pleased with the way that the HMPPS team is galvanising around this. I am pushing it as hard as I can. I spend a huge amount of time on this area because I am so passionate about helping these people get out safely, but we need to do all we can. It is absolutely vital that they get the support that they need in the right prison.

Q77 **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis:** Absolutely. I note that your letter to the Chair of the Committee referred to your passion for that. I can say on behalf of the Committee that we will be a willing partner to help in supporting that. The figure you just read out, I am presuming, is the total number of individuals currently serving an IPP sentence. What proportion of that, though, are still in custody beyond their original minimum tariff?

Lord Timpson: There are 2,694 in custody. Of those, 1,095, nine of whom are women, have never been released, and 1,599, 25 of whom are women, have been recalled to custody. As of 1 November, we had 1,742 IPP licences automatically terminated. There is another stage in February next year when we hope more will have their licences automatically terminated. I am also conscious that, when we say 2,694 people, they are all people, and we need to really focus on them because they need our support.

Q78 **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis:** You mentioned already that 30% of IPP prisoners are not in the right place where they need to be. This ties to an experience we had at HMP Brixton last week where we saw and spoke with the teams there about the London Pathways Unit and the individuals' successes when they are in the right place. You have recognised that there is a problem, and that is pleasing to see. The London Pathways Unit is one example, but what are the other examples of things that you are doing that can help IPP prisoners in that regard?

Lord Timpson: I will give you one example in the Parole Board and then I will hand over to Amy on other things that we are doing. The IPP taskforce is made up of 25 members of the Parole Board, who are specialists with psychology and psychiatry backgrounds, and they focus



just on IPP-sentenced prisoners' Parole Board hearings. So we can really focus on those. That is one of the things, but there is a lot more we can do.

Amy Rees: A straightforward answer to your question is absolutely robust individual action plans, and that is what we have committed to—trying to take the individual and ask what they need at which point in their sentence. That can be complicated because it is very difficult to throw everything at people all at once. It needs to be properly sequenced. Then we need to commit to that, using the pathways, psychologists and the Parole Board team to make sure we try to get them the most help that we can. The bigger problem for those in custody is recall, and that is why we have been looking at licence periods as well.

Q79 **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis:** Very quickly, I have one final question, Chair. In recent correspondence with the Committee, there was discussion about the Government not being willing to explore whether an expert committee could be tasked with devising a scheme to enable IPP prisoners to be resentenced. Can you perhaps explain a little bit more about that to the Committee?

Lord Timpson: I am very clear that I trust the Parole Board's decision making on risk. Public safety has to be our No. 1 priority. The number of serious further offences following a Parole Board hearing is half of one per cent. I do not think resentencing and people being released automatically will help improve public safety at all. It is our job to keep the public safe. What we are doing with the IPP action plan and supporting IPP offenders to get out safely is what we need to be focusing on.

Q80 **Chair:** As we have raised that issue, hopefully tomorrow we will write to you in relation to this issue of resentencing. We understand that there is a difference of opinion between what the previous Committee said on that and what your view and the view of this Government and the previous Government is. We think there has been some misunderstanding in terms of what the Committee said previously. Rather than go through it at length today, it would be helpful if you can look at what we say and come back on that. We are all trying to achieve the same ends, but we need to understand each other's position on that.

Lord Timpson: Of course.

Chair: Have you finished, Alex?

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis: Yes, I will leave it there, Chair, thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am not going to try to do justice to rehabilitation and the operation of the Probation Service and other issues that we were still hoping to cover because of the time and because we will return to those issues early in the new year. We may well ask whether you can come back and talk to us about that as part of an inquiry that we are doing. However, I am aware that Sir Ashley Fox was



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going to ask some questions on this, so in the few minutes that we have left, Ashley, would you like to go ahead?

Q81 **Sir Ashley Fox:** Thank you, Chair. I wanted to ask you, if I may, about the new prison education contracts. I understand these were due to start from April 2025. Is that still the case? If not, when do you anticipate that they will start?

Lord Timpson: On the details, I will hand over to Amy. I am looking to set up a prison education advisory board and to gather a group of experts in education to support the HMPPS team on exactly this subject—on the future direction we go on education and who we work with to provide education.

Amy Rees: We have secured an extension to the existing contract. It will be a bit later. We are working through the precise timings of when is the best time to turn on those new contracts right now in light of the new Government and in light of allocations.

Q82 **Sir Ashley Fox:** What caused the delay? My understanding is you started the tender in September 2023. That is more than 12 months ago. The original timetable was for a decision in October 2024. Why has this been delayed? What is the cause of that?

Amy Rees: In part, the general election was the reason for the delay. Also, as the Minister has just said, we really want to try to maximise what we can get out of those prison education contracts. We are really trying to think about how we can get the best value for money and the most hours that we possibly can. We have been making sure that we have some flexibility on those contracts to try, if we can, to maximise the number of hours we can get for prisoner learning.

Q83 **Sir Ashley Fox:** When you say the general election interfered with the process, you are suggesting that the tender process was stopped because you were not happy with what was originally being asked for. There has been a change of policy.

Amy Rees: Not necessarily a change of policy. We are trying to maximise the flexibility that we have in those contracts to make sure that we can get the most that we possibly can out of those education hours. I would not say the policy has changed.

Q84 **Sir Ashley Fox:** Describe to me how you hope these new contracts will differ from the old ones and what will flow from that.

Amy Rees: There are a couple of things. As I say, we are hoping to maximise hours. We are also hoping to focus in on the core basics. Colleagues might know that literacy, maths and, in particular, reading has been something that has been very close to my heart, because I just think it is a basic building block. We are trying to focus in more on the core subjects. We are also trying to think about how we can build education into other areas in the prison like workshops to maximise that



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use and to give as much flexibility locally as we can to local governors. The other thing that we have done is to employ experts. We now have people with an education background leading the management of these contracts locally. You might have met them at Brixton, in fact, when you went.

Lord Timpson: Longer term, I am interested in how we can use technology better within a prison to help someone's education. There are some really good examples of in-cell technology. Basically, it is a tablet. There are Coracle computers. There are a number of different methods. When people are in their cells and everyone is locked up, they can still learn, do Open University courses and so on. We need to think longer term about how we really embrace technology.

Q85 **Sir Ashley Fox:** You will presumably have to deal with the issue of security in granting prisoners access to these tablets and access to the internet.

Lord Timpson: It is a pretty well-managed situation at the moment. At Five Wells, they have a really good internal system. It is not connected to the internet at all; it is very much an internal system. A company called Coracle supplies laptops in prisons, and the prisoners treat them immaculately. Some of these computers are even six or seven years old, but they are so precious to them because this is their one way of learning. Again, it is not connected to the internet at all. It is preloaded education, news and so on. It gives them a much better way, when they are released, of integrating back in because they understand how to use a computer. I remember many years ago recruiting a guy from prison. He was working in the office and he could not use a mouse. He had never seen one before because he had been in prison for 15 years. We need to get that right.

Q86 **Sir Ashley Fox:** Finally, if I may, Chair, you referred to basic literacy and numeracy. Yes, that is important, but what about vocational skills as part of that educational experience?

Amy Rees: It is absolutely hugely important. We know that there is a strong link between those vocational skills, getting employment and then not having repeat offending. We are trying to build the basic literacy and numeracy into those vocational skills and try to make more of a link in that way.

Lord Timpson: What was important for me as an employer in my previous job is that people needed to have the basic skills but they did not need to be experts in maths and English; they just needed to be able to do the basics. Through the training academies we opened up within prisons, we learned that you want to pick the right person who has the right ambitions and the right personality. They often need support beyond classroom support when you start developing them in the role because they are adding on new skills. It could be understanding how health and safety works. There is a lot more that we need to teach them



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if they are going to be job-ready, but getting the basics right is absolutely vital.

Sir Ashley Fox: Thanks, Chair.

Chair: Thank you very much. I am going to bring the meeting to a close. I thank the Minister and his officials for appearing before us and giving such full and frank answers, and particularly for staying late. If we have learned nothing else today, we have learned that you are a man who is going to have his time occupied quite fully in the coming months and years, so we wish you all the best of luck with that. With that, I will close the meeting.