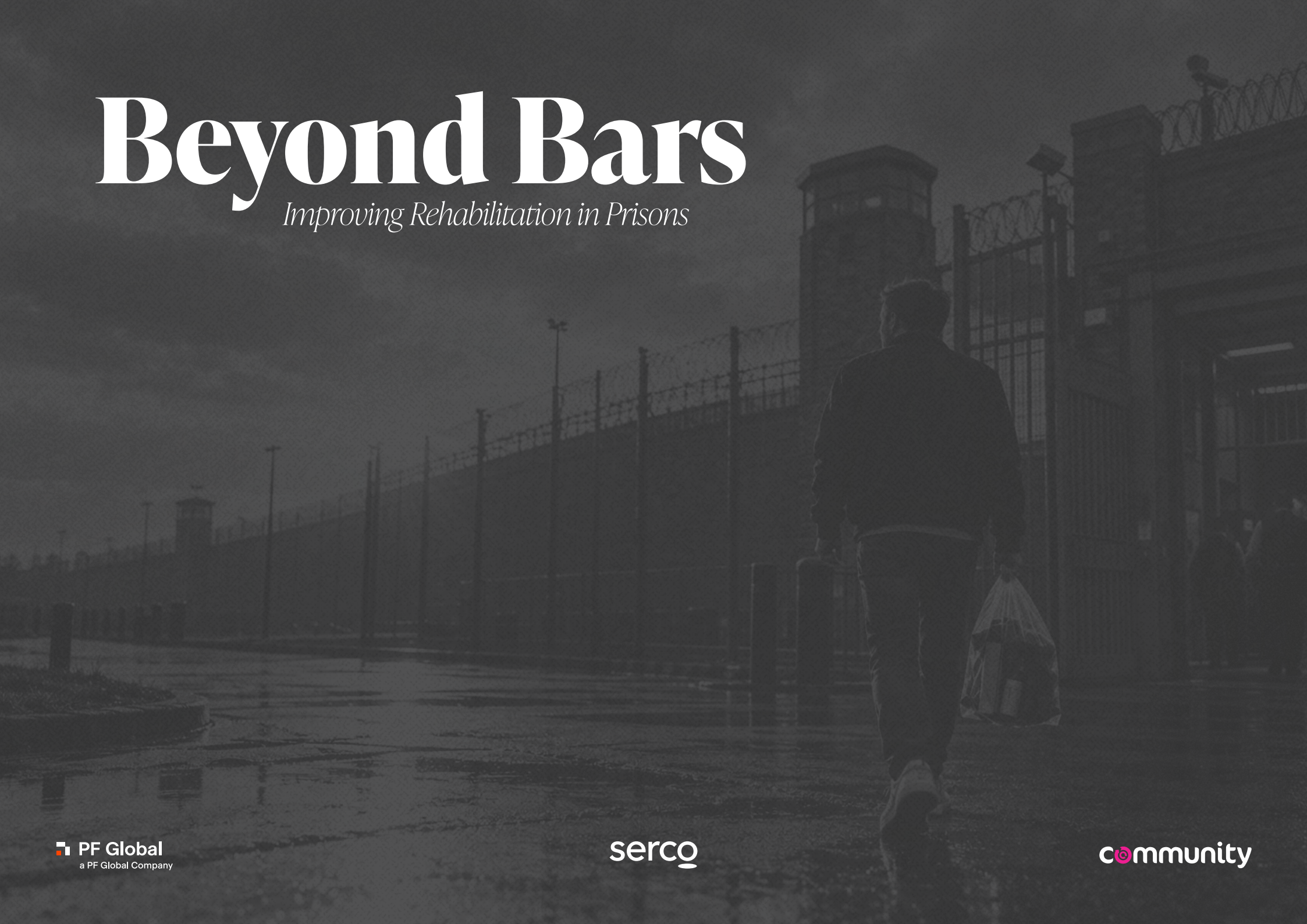
Beyond Bars

Improving Rehabilitation in Prisons



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Executive Summary

Rehabilitation in the prisons of England and Wales is not working. Years of overcrowding, staffing shortages and rising violence has left many prisons struggling to deliver on their core purpose: protecting the public, punishing offenders, deterring crime and reducing reoffending through effective rehabilitation.

Successive governments have prioritised dealing with immediate pressures in the prison system and short-term political gain rather than pursuing sustained long-term reform. The result is a system that too often fails to prepare people for life after prison, contributing to persistently high levels of reoffending and less safe communities.

80% of all offending in England and Wales is reoffending[1], 28% of all offenders go on to reoffend, and 41.2% of those leaving prison go on to reoffend[2]. Improving rehabilitation is essential to breaking the cycle of crime, improving outcomes for prison leavers and protecting the public.

This report focuses on rehabilitation within prisons and argues that reform should look beyond sentence length and pay more attention to what happens inside prison and its ongoing impact on communities and prisoners upon release. While investment in and expansion of the probation service, electronic tagging and community-based support are crucial, how to do so is not in the scope of this report.

Drawing on research with prisoners, custodial staff, prison leaders and criminal justice experts, alongside quantitative and qualitative research with the public, this report finds:

There is a shared belief in rehabilitation as a primary purpose of the prison system, but the system is failing to deliver it. Prison staff, prisoners, experts and the public all see rehabilitation as vital to addressing the causes of offending and giving people a better chance of not reoffending. The problem is not a lack of belief in the importance of rehabilitation, but a lack of capacity to deliver it.

Britain's prison system is not set up to deliver rehabilitation consistently. Overcrowding and operational pressures mean prisons struggle to provide the meaningful, sustained support needed to reduce reoffending and prepare people for release. The legacy of the pandemic has put more pressure on an already strained system; it reduced purposeful activity and compounded court delays, leaving more people on remand for long periods without access to meaningful rehabilitative intervention. Many prisoners are still spending most of the day in their cells.

Workforce pressures are weakening rehabilitative culture. Prisons face staffing constraints which impacts delivery of rehabilitation on a practical level and there are a lack of good, consistent training opportunities. High staff turnover makes it harder for staff to develop the relationships, trust and consistency on which effective rehabilitation depends.

Short sentences, short fixed-term recalls, and high prisoner turnover work against meaningful rehabilitation. Rehabilitation programmes are harder to deliver in short timeframes, particularly for substance misuse. The constant churn of prisoners leaves even less time for rehabilitative work. Short sentences and short fixed-term recall often lead to the loss of employment, accommodation and family breakups without giving prisons enough time to deliver any meaningful interventions to reduce offending.

Rehabilitation has become a postcode lottery, even accounting for prison categories and their intended purpose. There are strong examples of good practice in both public and private prisons, and on particular wings, but provision is patchy. Prisoners do not receive a consistent baseline of rehabilitative support when moved around the estate. This is not just a prisons issue: the geography of the wider justice infrastructure, such as the courts, means that custody rates, sentence lengths and time spent on remand all vary by area, shaping who arrives in prison and how long there is to work with them.

Governance, autonomy and accountability shape what prisons can achieve. Governors in HMPPS prisons have less autonomy and accountability than directors in the private sector. This limits their ability to develop innovative, tailored approaches to rehabilitation, particularly around connections with local employers and skills providers.

Prison education provision is struggling as new contracts have further reduced funding allocations and education hours. The case for prison education as an important part of rehabilitation and reducing reoffending is clear, but the system cannot deliver as it should be due to unsustainable cuts.

Effective rehabilitation depends on meaningful opportunities both inside and outside prison. The strongest rehabilitative approaches provide access to education, training, employment, positive relationships, practical support and specialist substance misuse support in custody, alongside effective support and programmes into employment and the community after release. Yet too many prisoners leave prison without the support they need to sustain their progress and avoid reoffending.

It is widely recognised that long-term reform of the prison system is necessary. The Government's emergency measures to address prison capacity, alongside longer-term sentencing reforms such as the presumption against short sentences and the earned progression model, represent important steps towards creating a more sustainable prison system.

However, these reforms will only succeed if governments resist the temptation to react to flashpoints in the public mood at the expense of long-term change and ensure alternatives to custody, including community sentences and electronic tagging are properly resourced and effective.

Investment in rehabilitation is often seen as politically difficult because policymakers assume the public views it as a "soft" alternative to punishment. Our research shows this assumption is wrong; the public is more supportive of rehabilitation than political debate assumes. Across the political spectrum, including among voters who favour the toughest sentences, there is broad support for rehabilitation when it is framed as a matter of prisoners taking personal responsibility, focused on reducing reoffending and supporting people into employment. The public does not see punishment and rehabilitation as competing priorities. It expects prisons to deliver both.

The evidence from this research is clear that effective rehabilitation is a vital part of how the prison system protects the public but that it is seriously failing to do so. To turn this around, the Government should:

• Tackle overcrowding as an immediate priority, sustaining the presumption against short sentences and expanding community sentences and electronic tagging.

• Publish standardised time-out-of-cell data for every prison in England and Wales, so that compliance with the statutory minimum of two hours out of cell can be seen and addressed.

• As the system stabilises, explore a statutory duty on minimum rehabilitative entitlements within individual sentence plans, giving those plans legal weight.

• Give prison governors a level of autonomy and accountability over recruitment, commissioning, and regime design, comparable to that already afforded to directors of private prisons.

• Deliver a national workforce strategy for the prison workforce, covering national minimum training standards, the reintroduction of the prison officer apprenticeship and clinical supervision for governors.

• Reverse the cuts to prison education and restore teaching and learning hours.

• Strengthen substance misuse provision in prison and in the community, including a new national standard framework for incentivised substance-free living wings in every prison.

• Learn from what already works across the estate, from therapeutic communities and PIPE units to vocational training with external employers, with governors given an explicit mandate and budget to build local employer and community partnerships.

• Improve end-to-end data collection and public reporting on rehabilitation outcomes.

• Reinforce rehabilitation in the community, with prison-to-community pathways offering continuity of personnel and programmes, support into employment and with the basics of housing, welfare and healthcare.

1- House of Commons Justice Committee, Ending the Cycle of Reoffending – Part One: Rehabilitation in Prisons, Seventh Report of Session 2024–26, HC 469, published 14 November 2025, Chapter 1, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmjust/469/report.html#heading-1

2 - PF Global analysis of Proven Reoffending Statistics collection, gov.uk





Methodology

The scope of this research included the adult male prison estate in England and Wales. We adopted a mixed methods approach to answer the following research questions:

- What is the current state of rehabilitation in prisons and how has this changed over time?

- What are the barriers and enablers of good rehabilitation in prisons?

- How can rehabilitation be improved?

- What does the public think about rehabilitation and can they be supportive of greater prioritisation of it within the system?

To answer these questions PF Global undertook:

Interviews with prison experts: we spoke to 10 prison and rehabilitation experts across the UK, including Nacro, the Prisoners' Education Trust, the Howard League for Penal Reform, Revolving Doors and Unlocked Graduates, alongside a range of criminal justice academics.

Interviews with prison staff and leadership: we conducted interviews with staff working in the private sector prison estate, including prison directors, custodial staff, mental health and rehabilitation staff, and senior leadership within Serco.

Visit to HMP Fosse Way: we undertook immersive qualitative research at HMP Fosse Way. This prison was identified due to its status as a new prison with a specific focus on rehabilitation, training and resettlement. This comprised a discussion with the prison leadership, two focus groups with prisoners undertaking education courses, a small number of one-to-one discussions with prisoners, and a tour of the facilities.

Qualitative opinion research with the public: we held three focus groups in June 2026 with key voter groups, namely one group with people who had voted Labour in 2024 and now intend to vote Green, and two groups with people who had voted Labour in 2024 and now intend to vote Reform. All groups were evenly split on gender and age and were in the C1C2D socioeconomic groups.

Quantitative opinion research with the public: We then conducted an anonymous online poll of 1,999 voters in England and Wales between the 7th and 10th July 2026. The poll covered the values voters hold about what the prison system should do, how they perceive it to be working, and how they think prisons and rehabilitation can improve. Data was weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'Raking', with results weighted by interlocking age and gender, region, and socioeconomic grade to nationally representative proportions.

Data was also analysed using K-means clusters to segment voters into individual groups based on their responses to two sets of attitudinal batteries. The K-means algorithm showed that an optimum number of clusters for this data set was either 3 or 4, with 4 chosen to allow for greater nuance to be shown between each cluster. Findings from this analysis are referred to as 'clusters' and the method 'segmentation'.

Data analysis of trends within the prison system: qualitative policy research was supplemented with published data on trends within the prison system, drawing on Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and HM Inspectorate of Prisons statistics, alongside a review of the literature on rehabilitation in prisons.

How rehabilitation is meant to work

Rehabilitation is about providing opportunities for offenders to improve their lives and make a positive contribution to society. Outcomes of effective rehabilitation might include a reduction in offending behaviour, progression through the prison estate, reduced reoffending and recalls to prison upon release, sustained employment, educational achievements, stable housing and family relationships and reduced substance misuse.

The current approach to rehabilitation is captured in one of HMPPS' two main priorities: [providing] safe and supportive environments, where people work through the reasons that caused them to offend and prepare for a more positive future.[3] The Ministry of Justice say prison policy is 'guided by the evidence on what works to reduce reoffending, including employment, education, and support to develop the personal skills and behaviours that are crucial in helping individuals turn their back on crime.' Provision of purposeful activity is central to rehabilitation, with the Government's National Regime Model requiring:

• A minimum of 60 minutes in the open air per day, and a minimum of 120 minutes time out of cell per day. It is our ambition that all prisons will in time provide significantly more than these minimum requirements.

• Tier 1 core curriculum activities such as employment, education, skills and work, which provide fulfilling employment and recognition of worth.

• Tier 2 'extra-curricular' activities, aimed at supporting prisoners to build positive attitudes that can support desistance from crime, such as peer support and activities that promote physical or mental health. [4]

The principle of progression and reducing offending behaviour is built into the prison estate. Every adult who is sentenced is assigned a security category, ranging from Category D open conditions to the high security Category A. Sentenced adults are meant to be held in the lowest level of security consistent with the risk they present. After being sentenced, prisoners are normally held in a category B local prison while their categorisation is sorted. Most prisoners are allocated to a Category C training and resettlement prison, where most of education, vocational training and offending behaviour work is meant to be delivered.

Prisoners can earn recategorisation to Category D open conditions, where release on temporary license (ROTL) allows them to work, study and rebuild family ties in the community ahead of their release. Progression is earned and evidenced at review.[5]

The progression model is about gradually reducing risk and testing the prisoner at each stage with more trust, and more contact with the outside world. The idea is for prisoners to gradually progress towards release as a smaller, managed final step, not a cliff edge. When the system works as it is meant to, prisoners walk out of the prison gate having completed training, gained employment opportunities through ROTL, with strengthened family ties and secured housing.

Our research and the wider evidence base shows that this pathway is not working as it should at any stage. Overcrowding and the growing remand population means sentenced offenders wait for long periods in under-pressure prisons without proper access to programmes available at Category D and C prisons. When transfers come, they are more likely to be driven by the need to create space, than following sentence plans. Lots of prisoners who are serving short sentences never leave the local prison and end up being released from prisons that are not designed to resettle them.

Half of all prisoners are held in Category C prisons, where most of the rehabilitation is meant to happen but it is too often the case that Category C prisons are training prisons in name only. HM Inspectorate of Prisons' 2025 thematic review of work and training found that provisions were rated 'poor' or 'not sufficiently good' in 94 out of the 104 closed prisons inspected over the previous three years, with too many prisoners spending their days locked in their cells and provision undermined by overcrowding, a shortage of workshop space and instructors, and ageing infrastructure.[6] As one prisoner at HMP Rochester told inspectors:

"This is a resettlement prison. It should be a priority to reduce the risk of reoffending. I don't see any encouragement for this." [7]

Even prisoners who do everything asked of them can find the ladder blocked. The Chief Inspector of Prisons has warned that in Category C prisons across the country, people who have met the criteria for open condition are stuck waiting for a move because there are not enough Category D places.[8] When prisoners get to open conditions, which will likely be late in their sentence, the open estate does not always deliver its core function. For example, at HMP Spring Hill, inspectors found only 70 of 241 prisoners in full-time work, training or education, and limited access to ROTL. Prisoners who get to open conditions late into their sentence often arrive without sufficient employment experience and don't have enough time to test work, to secure housing and rebuild relationships before they are released. It is no surprise therefore that two-thirds of prisoners are not in work or training six months after release.[9]

The reality for too many prisoners is a long wait in an overcrowded local prison, a transfer to make space instead of to follow a sentence plan, a training prison that does not provide sufficient training, a late move to open conditions if it happens at all, and a release into the community without the proper reintegration support the system is meant to provide.

3 - HM Prison and Probation Service, 'About Us' (GOV.UK, updated 1 August 2024) https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-and-probation-service/about

4 - Ministry of Justice (2025) Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Justice (RAR0095) to the House of Commons Justice Committee inquiry, Rehabilitation and resettlement: ending the cycle of reoffending: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/135624/html/

5 - HM Prison and Probation Service, Security Categorisation Policy Framework.

6 - HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 'Just passing time': a review of work and training provision in adult prisons, October 2025.

7 - Charlie Taylor, 'Running prisons with purpose', HM Inspectorate of Prisons blog.

8 - HM Inspectorate of Prisons, report on an unannounced inspection of HMP Spring Hill, 2022, and accompanying press notice.

9 - HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 'Just passing time': a review of work and training provision in adult prisons, October 2025.





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Across interviews with prisoners, prison staff, prison leaders and experts, rehabilitation was consistently described as a core purpose of prison, helping people address the causes of their offending, develop the skills to live crime-free lives and reduce the likelihood that they return to prison.

"Obviously, the prison service, slightly dependent on who's in power, is punishment or rehabilitation... [People] come into custody, learn the error of their ways via programmes, via education... at which point they go out with skills in the community that means that they do not return here." — Senior Prison Manager

This view was reflected in our public opinion research. Participants from across voter groups said that prisons should punish offenders and reduce reoffending through good rehabilitation. While there are differences in emphasis, such as Reform leaning participants seeing it as hard work and personal responsibility, and more liberal leaning participants focused on addressing the wider societal causes of offending, both viewed rehabilitation as a vital purpose of prison.

"I think the first one [purpose] should be the protection of the public so people are sent to prison so they can't commit the type of crimes that people need to be protected from. And secondly, a deterrent to put people off from committing similar crimes and thirdly, to try and offer them some form of rehabilitation." — Woman, Labour to Green switcher, 60s

61% of UK adults agree that investing in rehabilitation is an important way to reduce future crime, and only 12% disagree. When asked about the purpose of prison, more people say prisons should primarily rehabilitate offenders (34%) than primarily punish them (27%), with 34% believing prisons should do both equally. Confidence in the current system is low; under 3 in 10 think that prisons are effective at rehabilitating offenders and reducing reoffending, compared with 62% who believe they are not.

Yet despite this, our research found that rehabilitation is not being delivered effectively or consistently across the prison estate. Too many prisoners spend long periods locked in their cells, have inconsistent access to education, training and rehabilitative interventions, and leave prison without the preparation or support needed to reduce their risk of reoffending.

The problem is not to do with a lack of belief in rehabilitation, but about the series of interconnecting pressures that serve to undermine the delivery of rehabilitation across the estate. Our research finds that overcrowding, staffing constraints and poor retention, declining opportunities for education and purposeful activity, inconsistencies in governance, and inadequate preparation for release all reinforce one another, making it much harder for prisons to reduce reoffending and protect the public.

"Obviously, the prison service, slightly dependent on who's in power, is punishment or rehabilitation... [People] come into custody, learn the error of their ways via programmes, via education... at which point they go out with skills in the community that means that they do not return here.

-Senior Prison Manager

Overcrowding

"Overcrowding. The whole system is just poor. I think it's just underfunded. I don't think there's enough personnel to manage the crimes at the moment." — Man, Lab24 to Reform switcher, 20s

Overcrowding is the most significant barrier to effective rehabilitation, and it worsens every other barrier identified in the research. Experts described a prison system operating in crisis mode, where managing rising prisoner numbers leaves little capacity for interventions to reduce reoffending. England and Wales has one of the highest imprisonment rates in Western Europe, with over 85,000 people in prison on 30th June 2026.[10]

Prisons operating at near 100% capacity disrupts the basic conditions needed for rehabilitation. Experts described regimes where prisoners spend long periods locked in their cells and opportunities for education, work and exercise are regularly curtailed by staffing shortages and operational pressures. While there are positive examples of prisoners engaging in a good level of purposeful activity in some prisons, across the estate, 3 in 10 prisoners are spending 22 hours a day locked in their cell, and only 1 in 10 is spending more than 10 hours out of their cell per day.[11]

"Prisons that have a massive turnover...I mean, people think it's an exaggeration to say you can have 100 different names on your documents in a day, in terms of the turnover. I think it is probably nigh on impossible in those kind of prisons to do the sort of things that I'm talking about, because you don't have people for long enough, you don't have the stability, you are firefighting, sometimes literally firefighting every day, to just keep the place going." — Justice Policy Expert

As the Government has itself admitted:

"We want people to be in purposeful activity, education, have time to go to the gym, have visits, go to the library, and all the things they need to do that will help them when they get out to stay out. It is much harder for staff when the prison is 100% full; you are basically just trying to make sure people get clean pants, three meals a day, and a shower."[12]

Prison capacity problems also mean prisoners are moved around the estate frequently, not because it supports their sentence progression or rehabilitation but to manage prison capacity. These transfers interrupt education, rehabilitative programmes and treatment, weaken relationships with staff, and reduce contact with family members.

"We don't deliver interventions here because they're not here long enough to do all that stuff." — Prison Director, Serco

"We are up against the fact that the churn in this prison is very, very high... We may identify suitable candidates [for programmes], assess them, plan to put them on the next programme and then find they've been moved on before that programme starts. And we have no control over that." — Prison Staff

"I think it's really challenging, just because you've only got that small window of opportunity to drive that in and just the churn here is phenomenal... When you try to change the culture within the prisoner's mindset, that's really difficult when you're changing over 50% of your population on a monthly basis." — Prison Director, Serco

Overcrowding also undermines the safety of prisons. Prisoners in overcrowded cells are approximately 19% more likely to be involved in an assault over a 12-month period than those in non-overcrowded cells.[13]

"You need to be able to have the safest, most decent kind of environment to do [rehabilitative work], where everybody's ready to get involved with that... If you don't have a safe environment, and there's rising violence and self-harm, it's harder." — Serco Senior Leadership

High violence levels undermine safety, erode trust between staff and prisoners, and diverts staff time and resources away from education, rehabilitation programmes and meaningful engagement. Reducing violence is vital to creating a stable environment for effective rehabilitation to take place otherwise prisons are forced to prioritise containment.

Relatedly, drug dependency makes it more difficult for prisoners to engage consistently with education, employment, therapeutic interventions and other rehabilitative programmes as well as fuelling debt, intimidation and exploitation.[14] The Commons Justice Select Committee says 'the trade and use of illicit drugs in our prisons has reached endemic levels'[15] and experts told us that drugs are "rampant". In HMIP's 2025/26 annual report, 41% of male prisoners reported that it was easy to get hold of drugs in their prison.[16]

Dame Carol Black recommended to the Justice Select Committee that Incentivised Substance Free Living Wings(ISFLs)[17] should be rolled out in all prisons, and experts and prisoners told us in our research that ISFL wings in prisons work:

"Substance misuse wings in prisons have been pretty successful in terms of regular drug testing, psychological support, peer support...and, as I say, staff who are understanding and perhaps psychologically minded to deal with the kind of problems of relapse and cravings and so on in respect of other matters such as mental ill health." - Justice Policy Expert

The Government recently announced a 'major expansion of incentivised drug-free living wings', which is welcome, though details on how many new wings across how many prisons are not available at the time of writing.[18] However, like other rehabilitative schemes, substance misuse programmes struggle with limited resources. Waiting lists for substance misuse services can be significant, leaving many prisoners without treatment for much of their time in custody.

10 - Ministry of Justice (2026) Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2026/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2026 and see United Kingdom: England and Wales | World Prison Brief

11 - Public First analysis of HM Inspectorate of Prisons annual prisoner survey workbooks

12 - House of Commons Justice Committee, Oral evidence (HC 557), https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/16297/html/

13 - Ministry of Justice, The impact of overcrowding on assaults in closed adult public prisons (Transparency data, June 2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-overcrowding-on-assaults-in-adult-public-prisons/the-impact-of-overcrowding-on-assaults-in-closed-adult-public-prisons

14 - National Audit Office (2026) The costs of tackling drug harms in prisons. HC 1643, Session 2024–2026t: https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/the-costs-of-tackling-drug-harms-in-prisons.pdf

15 - House of Commons Justice Committee, Tackling the Drugs Crisis in Our Prisons, Sixth Report of Session 2024–26, published 31 October 2025, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmjust/557/report.html

16 - HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Annual Report 2025–26, July 2026. Figures are drawn from prisoner surveys in inspection reports published between April 2025 and March 2026.

17 - Black, C. (2024) Written evidence submitted by Dame Carol Black (TDP0028). UK Parliament Committees: https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/137826/default/

18 - Alex Norris, Speech to Labour Party Conference, 28 September 2026, https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/alex-norris-speech-to-labour-party-conference-2026/

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We are up against the fact that the churn in this prison is very, very high... We may identify suitable candidates [for programmes], assess them, plan to put them on the next programme and then find they’ve been moved on before that programme starts. And we have no control over that.

- Prison staff


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Short sentences and rehabilitation

"In terms of sentences, we will get people sentenced to weeks frequently... a couple of months here and there. There's not a prayer of us rehabilitating them in that time." — Justice Policy Expert

"It's just the waiting lists are long. So people with little sentences don't get a chance to do anything." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

The average custodial sentence length is currently 20 months, with half of all sentences being six months or less. The Independent Review of Sentencing found that short prison sentences are less effective at reducing reoffending and promoting rehabilitation compared with suspended or community orders.[19] As a result, the Government's Sentencing Act introduced a presumption for courts to suspend sentences of 12 months or less, in force from March 2026, with the aim of increasing the use of community-based alternatives.

Short fixed-term recalls have a similarly destabilising impact on the prison population and on rehabilitative work. The number of recalls has increased in recent years — doubling from 6000 in 2009, to over 13,500 at the March 2025 peak.[20] The Independent Review of Sentencing found that short fixed-term recall is disruptive for offenders and does not provide enough time for the offender to rehabilitate in custody, or for the right measures to be put in place when they return to community supervision.

Evidence from organisations contributing to the review said that the current application of recall is 'an ineffective use of resource that reverses work taken to rehabilitate'.[21] In response, the Government has changed the length of short fixed-term recalls from 14-28 days to a standardised 56 days through the Sentencing Act.

Interviewees considered short custodial sentences a significant barrier to delivering meaningful rehabilitation. If a sentence lasts only weeks or months, rehabilitation is virtually impossible. Short prison sentences cause enormous disruption to a person's life without enough time for prisons to do meaningful rehabilitative work. Shorter sentences often mean that prisoners lose their homes, their jobs and their family ties, which prisons are ill-equipped to rectify in the time available.

"You sometimes see, you know, a two year wait for things, and you think, well, wow, you know, this bloke's going to be out shortly. So, what's the point of this?" — Justice Policy Expert

"[At one Serco prison] ...the average stay of someone is six weeks, and there's very little you can do in that time, but that doesn't mean to say they won't try and do everything that they can." — Serco Senior Leadership

"Short sentences in prisons don't work generally. So having sentences that are meaningful and afford the right time for rehabilitation within a prison [is beneficial] ..." — Serco Senior Leadership

Rehabilitation that involves tackling substance misuse is particularly challenging and is a clear example of the problems that short sentences can bring, yet perversely short sentences are often given for drug and alcohol-related offences.

"We're still getting many that are spending literally 24 hours with us. We're taking them off the streets, we're stripping all that stuff away from them, just for the fact that it's 24 hours, 48 hours, but in actual fact, that's the stuff that should be done in the community." — Prison Director, Serco

"The majority of people that are addicted to alcohol and drugs are the majority of people that are doing short term sentences...We get exceptions to the rule, but typically you won't get someone that's a heroin addict doing 10 years. A heroin addict will be doing six months for shoplifting or begging or vagrancy." — Lived-experience interviewee

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19 - Gauke, D. Independent Sentencing Review - History and Trends in Sentencing, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67c583a868a61757838d2196/independent-sentencing-review-part-1-report.pdf

20 - Sentencing Bill 2024-25, House of Commons Library, Research Briefing, 24 October 25, Francesca Cooney, https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10332/CBP-10332.pdf

21 - Independent Sentencing Review (2025) Independent Sentencing Review: Final report and proposals for reform: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/682d8d995ba51be7c0f45371/independent-sentencing-review-report-part_2.pdf

The ongoing impact of the pandemic

"There was extraordinarily limited access to gyms [and] no visits, of course. [Virtual contact] took a while to set up because it didn't really exist in the prison service... People think, well, they're locked up all day, it's dead easy. It wasn't. It was horrendous." — Prison Staff

The pandemic effectively paused purposeful activity and left prisoners locked in cells for up to 23 hours a day. Prison staff spent most of their time managing movement rather than facilitating rehabilitative work. Prisoners also couldn't maintain family ties in the same way, weakening one of the key protective factors against reoffending.

"They were banged up for 23 hours a day. That's difficult for the prisoner, it was very difficult for staff... you're arguing all the time, you're fighting all the time... That's what you do all day." — Prison Staff

Experts told us that Covid "flatlined everything" and that prisons have struggled to get back to purposeful regimes since, with the added strain of older, more experienced staff leaving during the pandemic.

"There was quite a hangover in terms of prisons getting out of that kind of zero regime. And indeed, in 2023, 2024 in particular, that's when we saw big spikes in violence, drugs coming back, record assaults. I would argue it is what fills the void if prisons are not offering positive regimes, and none of that can be good for rehabilitation, or the likelihood of someone leaving prison less likely to re-offend than more likely to re-offend." — Justice Policy Expert

"Most staff who now work in the system don't remember prisons pre-COVID...they either have a foundational memory of prisons basically being in complete lockdown during COVID, or they've come in since, and...they're used to this somewhat impoverished regime in most prisons." — Justice Policy Expert



One of the most significant long-term impacts has been on court services, meaning offenders remain on remand for long periods, without being eligible for personal development opportunities. Remand prisoners represented 18% of the prison population in March 2026, with many serving their entire sentence on remand. Experts argued that personal development and rehabilitation provision needs to be made consistently more available to this group.

"They are serving their entire sentence in effect, on remand, and very significant numbers of people by the time they're sentenced, even if they were getting a one-to-three-year sentence, they've already served it before... they actually are treated as a convicted prisoner. That's really problematic for rehabilitation, because, of course, a remand prisoner is not required to participate in any activity they don't choose to, because they're unconvicted...In order to get kind of any value out of rehabilitative interventions, you need the person to have been sentenced or at least convicted for the maximum amount of the period that they're spending in custody." — Justice Policy Expert



A workforce under pressure: staffing, training, pay and wellbeing

"Retention is an issue within the service at the moment, across the patch, so that's a challenge in itself." — Prison Director, Serco

Prison staff are central to effective rehabilitation. Relationships between frontline staff and prisoners underpin much of what makes rehabilitation work: helping prisoners engage with education and treatment, supporting behaviour change and preparing them for release. Many contemporary rehabilitation models rely on staff having the time, confidence, and skills to build trust, motivate engagement, assess needs, and coordinate sentence plans.

But recruitment and retention of custodial staff is a persistent problem across the estate. The number of prison officers fell 25% from March 2010 to March 2015, recovered 36% to a peak of 20,225 in March 2024, and has since fallen 8.3% to 18,554 as of 31 March 2026. This represents a net 7% decrease in prison officers since 2010. At the same time, 1 in 10 officers are currently leaving each year.[22]

As a result, prisons are too often understaffed, underpaid and undertrained, with a meaningful impact on their ability to deliver rehabilitation. On a practical level, understaffing, mixed with overcrowding, means prisoners are unable to be escorted to programmes or interventions as maintaining order must be prioritised over other activities in prison.

"There's quite a...large cohort that has been over the past couple of years of inexperienced staff... [The issue is] sector wide post pandemic, when people left and left the service, and... younger people came on board who weren't experienced. And if you look across HMIP reports over a couple of years, I can't remember seeing one public or private that didn't mention some level of inexperience in the staff cohort." — Serco Senior Leadership

"Staffing turnover is a huge issue and is having an impact on training: the Prison Service risks being so short on staff that lengthy and thorough training programmes run up against immediate staffing needs." — Serco Senior Leadership (Psychology Expert)

"It's like less trained officers, they don't know what they're doing and running loads of people on the wing, they need more experienced officers." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

In the current context, high attrition creates a cycle in which prison staff are so stretched that less experienced officers are unable to attend the training that would develop their capacity to support rehabilitation and develop as prison officers.

The Commons Justice Committee reported that 'training for prison staff has been communicated as non-existent' [23] and experts told us that it is inadequate compared to other countries, with many receiving only nine weeks of training.

One expert said the UK takes a "minimalist approach" compared with countries where the role carries a more professional profile, describing provision here as "pitiful" by comparison. Prison staff and experts also raised concern that staff are being promoted without being supported with adequate training for their new roles. At a time when improving training of prison officers is vital, the apprenticeship scheme for prison officers, which launched in 2020 and had 3,320 starts in 2022/23, has been scrapped citing staffing and capacity issues to deliver it effectively. [24]

"I think we need to address the calibre of officers coming in, so probably pay for officers and the qualifications and skills that they should be demonstrating before coming into the prisons." — Serco Senior Leadership (Psychology Expert)

Unlocked Graduates is a model of what more ambitious prison officer training could look like. Modelled on Teach First, it is a programme that for the last decade has recruited graduates and people who want to change their career into frontline officer roles with intensive training focussed on rehabilitation that is trauma-informed and evidence. This is underpinned by the belief that prison officers can be agents of change within prisons with transformative relationships between prison officers and prisoners.

While good initiatives like Unlocked exist in some areas, there is a clear gap when it comes to the personal and professional development of prison officers. The career pathways are not strong enough and there is not enough consistency or quality of line management. Without a fundamental uplift in the quality, length and status of prisoner officer training, the workforce will remain ill-equipped to deliver the basic conditions for rehabilitation nor the rehabilitative culture that reducing reoffending depends on.

"Having better trained staff and more status to it as well, because there's not much status to being a prison officer, to actually kind of see it as something that people aspire to do, rather than seeing it as just a job." — Justice Policy Expert

"There is a serious turnover problem in staff who run HMPPS, it's really difficult to build up the kind of

institutional knowledge where you have seasoned experts. Keeping staff is really important and that may well mean increasing their salaries." — Justice Policy Expert

Experts also described wellbeing support for staff as inadequate. Some warned that overworked officers without proper support risk becoming desensitised to prisoners' distress. However, there are positive examples that already exist within parts of the prison estate, such as the roll out of the ISO45003 accreditation for wellbeing and psychological support, with HMP Ashfield being the first prison globally to do this. [25]

"We're in a crisis in terms of recruiting, they can recruit, but they can't retain. I think that prison officers become desensitised to the issues, they become desensitised to the self-harm, to the distress that prisoners are under. You've got prison officers who, at night, are looking after 400 prisoners themselves. They don't have time or the head space to be able to actually do anything meaningful, because they're so busy, they're not able to provide the service that ideally, we want." — Justice Policy Expert

Prison leaders and staff raised the lack of mandatory clinical supervision for prison governors and the need for more support and resources. Experts were concerned about the "very macho culture in the prison service" and that asking for help could harm their promotion prospects, while the limited counselling sessions available risked doing more harm than good.

"There's two types of prison governors. There's those who have gone through the very fast track system. And then there's those who have been in the service 30 or 35, years... they've spent years of looking at trauma...And a lot of our participants that we've interviewed have said that it would be like opening Pandora's box that they're only allowed six sessions with a counsellor, but they don't feel that six sessions would be enough, and that if they started to talk about something, then actually it would do them more harm than good, because they'd have to stop after those six sessions." — Justice Policy Expert

"Unlike the police, clinical supervision is not mandatory, and that's been one of our recommendations, that if you make it mandatory, the stigma and the shame goes." — Justice Policy Expert

A workforce that is not properly supported is likely to continue to undermine retention and, in turn, the quality of rehabilitative work that prisons can deliver.

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22 - PF Global analysis of HMPPS Workforce statistics: England and Wales, 2010 to 2026. Spliced from three releases: NOMS Mar 2016, HMPPS Mar 2020 and HMPPS Workforce Statistics, Mar 2026.

23 - House of Commons Justice Committee, Ending the Cycle of Reoffending – Part One: Rehabilitation in Prisons, Seventh Report of Session 2024–26, HC 469, published 14 November 2025, Chapter 1, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmjust/469/report.html#heading-1

24 - Inside Time, Prison Service scraps apprenticeships for officers, https://insidetime.org/newsround/prison-service-scraps-apprenticeships-for-officers/

25 - Written evidence submitted by Serco (RAR0070) to the Justice Select Committee, 2 January 2025 https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/134825/html/

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We're in a crisis in terms of recruiting, they can recruit, but they can't retain.

- Justice Policy Expert



Lack of autonomy for prison governors

"I work with a lot of colleagues that have come from HMPPS and come into the private world, and they will all unanimously say 'God, this is so much better in the private sector, because your hands aren't tied up your back, and you've got far more autonomy as a Director than I had as a Governor.'" — Prison Director, Serco

Prison governors in England and Wales are responsible for the day-to-day running of their prison, including security, staff management, prisoner welfare, and rehabilitation and education provision.[26] However, they operate within a highly centralised system.[27]

A House of Lords inquiry concluded that governors are "over-managed", with too many layers of central oversight limiting their ability to lead effectively.[28] Private prison directors operate with greater autonomy than their public sector counterparts. They can implement more flexible staffing models, engage external partners, and trial new educational or rehabilitative programmes without the same layers of central sign-off.[29]

"I hold all of those partnerships, otherwise I'd be pinging between systems that don't work together. I mentioned health and education - you don't see that flow [in the public sector], but it is important to the work I'm doing. I think the gaps mean that you can often miss important system connections [in public prisons]." — Serco Senior Leadership

When giving evidence to the Commons Justice Select Committee Inquiry, HM Chief Inspector, Charlie Taylor, said:

"The level of autonomy that governors have compared with headteachers is astonishingly low. These are really experienced, really impressive people in some cases -incredibly dedicated public servants who really know their staff- who talk about being constrained by a bureaucracy that does not let them make decisions about things they think are in the best interests of those who live and work in their prisons. It is a real concern that prisoners are not getting into the sorts of real work habits that are going to help them to hit the ground running when they come out." [30]

Private sector leaders and staff pointed to the flexibility the private sector model affords them: one described leading an education redesign with backing from their parent company, something they felt would not have been possible in a public sector prison. Interviewees in private prisons valued the freedom to trial new approaches and adapt quickly, something they saw as central to their professional purpose.

"I've got a budget, and I'm allowed to spend the budget... [on] innovative ways of reducing reoffending, resettlement... We have the gift to come up with some unique ideas that we don't have to get approval to get the money spent, we don't have to do it as a portfolio of prisons going at the same time. We can actually just get on and do it in a timely fashion, depending on what the needs of the establishment are at any given time." — Prison Director, Serco

"I like freedom to... fail fast and fail safely and if I wasn't able to trial the things that we do now, I wouldn't do my job. I would go and work elsewhere. So I think for me, the flexibility of the private sector is we're willing to work to get it over the line, if we think it makes the change. I understand I have a business responsibility, but actually, generally speaking, if it's the right thing and the safe thing, we will find a way to do it. If there's a problem, we will fix it." — Serco Senior Leadership

> "The level of autonomy that governors have compared with headteachers is astonishingly low.
>
> *- HM Chief Inspector, Charlie Taylor*

"I just can't understand why a prison governor in the public sector can't... they're basically given officers from the centre, they don't get to choose the officers that they're recruiting, and that remains, I think, very bizarre." — Justice Policy Expert

"We're currently working on education redesign, and we'll do the standard bits, but we're going to make some major changes. I've got the backing of Serco, I'm confident in that. I think if I've tried to do that in a public sector prison, it wouldn't be able to, and we're one of the few providers that are self-delivering." — Serco Senior Leadership

Several expert participants argued that public sector prison governors should be given greater autonomy, which could help prisons recruit more staff locally and allow governors to engage directly with local business leaders on employment opportunities both in custody and after release.

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26 - Careers Wales, Prison Governor Job Role, https://careerswales.gov.wales/job-information/prison-governor/job-role

27 - House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee, Better prisons: less crime, Chapter 3: Leadership – the role of the governor, para. 104 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldjusthom/153/15307.htm

28 - House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee, Better prisons: less crime, paras. 146-148 https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldjusthom/153/15307.htm

29 - House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee, Organisation and purpose of prisons in England and Wales, para. 86–87 (evidence from Charlie Taylor, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, and Serco Ltd) – https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5901/ldselect/ldjusthom/153/15306.htm

30 - House of Commons Justice Committee, Oral evidence: Rehabilitation and resettlement: ending the cycle of reoffending, HC 469, Questions 175–240, 13 May 2025, https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/15906/html/



Inconsistency across the estate

"There is some great stuff going on. There's just not enough of it, and it's not widespread enough. So, it's a bit of a lottery. Depending on which prison you get to go into, will determine whether you have a chance at rehabilitation or not, and that shouldn't be the case." — Justice Policy Expert

Variation in rehabilitation opportunities is built into the prison system, as it depends on the type and category of the prison. However, our research found that rehabilitation is not being consistently delivered across prison categories, and across the estate. There are strong examples of good practice in both public and private prisons, and on particular wings, but provision is patchy. Prisoners do not receive a consistent baseline of support and experiences of rehabilitation are vastly different depending on the prison.

"Fosse Way is a Cat C training prison. They're the ones that have the time, arguably, the resources, the space, to be able to do things. And I think that comes back to what I said before. It's the training prisons where the good work is." — Justice Policy Expert

"The reason they're able to deliver so much is that it's a brand new prison so the environment allows them to do things. It's a much more rehabilitative environment." — Justice Policy Expert

Prisoners themselves reported wide variation in support. Some described having no regular contact from key workers or offender management staff to discuss their goals and education choices, leaving them to take whatever was available regardless of relevance.

More broadly, participants raised concerns about inconsistency of services caused by prisoner transfers, poor communication between establishments, and disruption to medication and health needs. Prisoners complained that courses completed in one establishment did not transfer to another, particularly between public and private prisons or across different providers' systems, forcing them to repeat training unnecessarily; many also felt their courses lacked proper accreditation, failed to build on existing skills, and that there was no clear or transparent way to find out about course availability or apply for places.

Access to effective rehabilitation should not depend on which prison a person happens to be sent to. The prison service needs greater stability and resourcing to ensure that rehabilitative provision is far more consistent across the estate.



Education and work opportunities

"There is a view that private sector prisons are better at delivering education. And there's a view among some of the PES providers that will become the case more because they won't be subject to the same cuts in terms of provisions so that they will improve while the quality of what's provided in under the PES contracts will fall away." — Justice Policy Expert

Prison education has a strong, well established evidence base as a deeply important part of rehabilitation, that reduces the likelihood of reoffending and increases the chances of finding employment on release.[31] This is unsurprising given people entering custody typically have much lower levels of literary and numeracy than the general population, with the majority assessed on entry as levels 1-3.[32]

Evidence shows that the case for prison education is straightforward, but the volume and breadth of prison education provision falls well short of what is needed, and recent cuts have made this worse. HM Chief Inspector Charlie Taylor wrote in the latest annual report:

"Services have, in many jails, been brutally cut and many teachers made redundant. Attendance in education, training and work is often appalling and, with a few notable exceptions, it has not been sufficiently prioritised in most prisons."[33]

Public sector prison education is delivered through managed contracts from the Ministry of Justice, organised into regional lots.[34]

Analysis from the Prison Education Trust found that new contracts that began on 1st October 2025 brought an average 25% reduction in the number of education hours prisons can offer, with some establishments seeing cuts of 50% or more.[35] This has translated into fewer teaching hours, fewer teachers, a narrower range of courses, and generally fewer opportunities for people to participate.

Prisoners told us they wanted courses that would prepare them for life outside prison, with a particular emphasis on gaining a "trade" they could build on after release. Alongside vocational training, participants felt that courses in employability and life skills, such as how to pay taxes or apply for a mortgage, would be valuable but are currently lacking.

"There are lots of courses, and I've completed most of them, including wellbeing and other intensive courses. But they are not really the courses I want when I am in prison. I would rather get into work." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

"There's no life skills either. How to pay taxes or how to apply for a mortgage." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

Where trade courses do exist, such as plastering, bricklaying, fitness and carpentry, participants spoke positively of them. However, access remains limited: waiting lists are long, and many prisoners are released before they can start a course or only gain access late into their sentence. A barbering course delivered in a Serco prison was highlighted as a positive example, well-resourced and practically useful.

"The actual course it was well run. It was good. They had all the equipment and stuff there and we did learn quite a lot in that short amount of time. But I feel like after you've done that, you just left to your own, you have to buy your own equipment and stuff and if you want to cut here, do it on the wing or whatever." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

"I've done two weeks just sat in a room learning about the weather and green skills. I've been here another two weeks learning about like making coffee." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

31 - See Lois M Davis and others, Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults (RAND Corporation 2013) https://doi.org/10.7249/RR266. And: Ben Stickle and Steven Sprick Schuster, 'Are Schools in Prison Worth It? The Effects and Economic Returns of Prison Education' (2023) 48 American Journal of Criminal Justice 1263 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-023-09747-3.

32 - Ministry of Justice, Prison Education Statistics and Accredited Programmes in Custody, April 2023 to March 2024: 73% of maths and 71% of English initial assessments were at Entry Levels 1-3.Prison Education and Accredited Programme Statistics 2023 to 2024 - GOV.UK

33 - HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual Report 2025–26, HC 432, for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2026/07/HMI-Prisons-ARA-25-26-FINAL.pdf

34 - Ministry of Justice, Education Hours Data (2026), p.1 - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69c9583578ca1aa5a6360a1b/education-hours-data.pdf

35 - Ibid. See also Calum Walker, 'Prison education hours cut by 25%: what we know' (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2 April 2026) https://prisonerseducation.org.uk/2026/04/prison-education-hours-cut-by-25-what-we-know and UK Parliament Justice Committee, "Alarming" reduction in prison education provision "risks jeopardising" prison rehabilitation (2026)- https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/102/justice-committee/news/211651/alarming-reduction-in-prison-education-provision-risks-jeopardising-prison-rehabilitation-justice-committee-warns/ and Inside Time, "IMBs slam 'swingeing cuts in prison education'" (13 January 2026)-https://insidetime.org/newsround/imbs-slam-swingeing-cuts-in-prison-education/





Rehabilitation through-the-gate

"Prison is the easy bit, believe it or not, coming out, is the hard part." — Lived-experience interviewee

Rehabilitation cannot end at the prison gate. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that the greatest threat to longevity of rehabilitation lies not in prison but in the transition to the community.

Several felt that probation services were not adequately supporting people to reintegrate into life outside of prison, including being placed in areas they had no connection to and no support finding work before release. In one account, a participant with lived experience described deliberately committing a more serious offence to receive a long enough sentence to access rehabilitation support that they believed would not have been available to them otherwise.

"Probation should help you find a job…I'm getting released in an area I don't know. So they should help me find a job before I get out so I can go do something. I'm just getting released where I don't know where I'm going. I don't know anyone there. How am I supposed to even do anything?" - Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

"We come jail, we do a sentence, we try and get all these courses…go out and then it's just like you can't get a job and then you just go back to your ways." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

"No rehabilitation in my opinion as well. You come out of here, you're destitute; you've got nothing…it is wading through a minefield, especially on licence." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

"I've done over seven years myself and I'm dreading getting out, to be honest. I'm out in November; I have no idea where I'm going to go." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

Our research found that even the best prison-based work counts for little if community conditions remain unchanged. Without an increase in support on release, from housing and employment to probation capacity, any rehabilitative progress made inside prison will unravel at the gate, and reoffending will remain the likely outcome rather than the exception.

"It's not necessarily in prison, it's when they get out, because all of a sudden that support network that they had is no more…they've got their probation workers who are largely overworked. There's waiting lists to get on things, and they're left with a lot of idle time, which is,

I think, when the re-offending comes into play, because they're not being kept suitably occupied like they were here." - Serco Prison Teacher

"You can have the best prison in the world. But it doesn't mean anything if the situation in the community is the same as when the person came in. The number of times... I hear, see and meet, people who have been recalled to prison, and we're looking at whether we let them out again, they say I had no support, I had nothing I was just left to get on with it." -Justice Policy Expert

"I think it actually ends up wasting resources. If you think about it, if you put somebody through an expensive programme to do something to change the way that they think, and then you do nothing about legal or social barriers to participation in legitimate activities within a country or within a labour market or a community, then all that you've done is create a contradiction between two different aspects of your policy approach." - Justice Policy Expert

While out of scope of this research, any meaningful improvement in rehabilitation within prison must be accompanied by a meaningful improvement in support provided by the probation service and in the community.

The gap between custody and community needs to be bridged, with community treatment and appointments planned, housing, benefits and GP registration sorted before release rather than left to the prisoner afterwards, as well as support with employment and continuing opportunities for education and training in the community.

> "I've done over seven years myself and I'm dreading getting out, to be honest. I'm out in November; I have no idea where I'm going to go.
>
> *-Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way*

What works? Lessons to learn from good practice

"I think [HMP] Fosse Way as a new prison opening is the most successful new prison opening that I've seen or read about over the last 10, 15 years... it's really kind of like wrap around care... they really benefited from some good tie ups with... regional employers [who] have shortages in certain skills that pay really well, and they're really committed to taking on ... ex-prisoners... when they leave the prison." — Serco Senior Leadership

Despite the systemic pressures facing the prison system, our research also identified some clear examples of what works. While not intended to be an exhaustive list, the examples given in our interviews show that good rehabilitative practice is happening on wings and in prisons around the country, and that national lessons can be learned from this.

The best rehabilitative work gives prisoners access to good facilities, a range of education, training and courses with clear routes into employment, practical support and real-life relationships. Prisoners also benefit from rebuilding family relationships and spending more time out of cell.

Approaches such as therapeutic communities were endorsed by many interviewees as examples of effective rehabilitative practice. A therapeutic community 'provides group-based therapy within a social climate that promotes positive relationships, personal responsibility and social participation. It addresses a range of prisoner needs, including interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, self-management and psychological well-being'.[36]

Outcomes from therapeutic communities show improvements in residents' relationships, personal agency and self-esteem, with the process widely experienced as transformative despite being psychologically demanding.[37]

"I know from all of the research that we get our most complex and high risk prisoners to go on to a TC [Therapeutic Community], and the outcomes are improved after that. And you go on to a TC, and you think, if you see these men elsewhere... you can feel the temperature change." — Serco Senior Leadership

Furthermore, we heard that Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPE Units) manage prisoners with some of the highest propensity for self-harm and violence within the system, and that the training for officers is particularly good on these units. We also consistently heard that prisoners benefit from learning from people with lived experience of prison as part of their rehabilitation programme, as well as peer support.

"The role of peer support, and the role that...having people with lived experience the justice system can play in building that trust and encouraging people to engage in rehabilitative programmes. We've seen some really good examples of that, and there is good evidence about peer support generally." — Justice Policy Expert

Employment prospects on release were also widely identified as key to rehabilitation. In particular, the former 'Railtrack' initiative was highlighted as an effective model, which combined skills training with guaranteed employment opportunities upon release.

The partnership with the National Association of Air Duct Specialists UK at HMP Fosse Way is another positive example. The programme has trained over 800 prisoners in professional airduct cleaning whilst in prison and has secured a proportion of them jobs on release, with the employer paying for accommodation and a food allowance for the first six months of the job. [38]

"I think if we can give them that skill set to walk out of here with... a guaranteed interview and a work placement... that's stronger than a lot of the courses that we'll put on for them." — Prison Director, Serco

"Like a little job centre thing in there or they set up your benefits and stuff like that for you, for when you get released and at least you have a place to stay or wherever they literally show you a map of what to do ...I feel like the only place that really does that is cat D prisons where you work there, you have a job for it." — Prisoner, Male, Fosse Way

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36 - Glossary of terms – HM Inspectorate of Prisons

37 - Shuker, R. (2021). 'Trauma, Psychotherapy and Therapeutic Communities.' Prison Service Journal, Issue 255, pp. 18–24. https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/PSJ%20255%2C%20Therapeutic%20communities.pdf

38 - Serco, 'Partnering with Industry to Transform Rehabilitation: Industry and Employer Partnerships' https://www.serco.com/uk/sector-expertise/justice/rehabilitation/industry-employers accessed 13 October 2026.





Best Practice Example: HMP Dovegate Therapeutic Community

A strong example of what works is the therapeutic community at HMP Dovegate, in Staffordshire. It is the UK's only privately owned, purpose-built facility of its kind, providing an environment designed to change people's way of thinking with the shared aim of changing lives for the better.

Serco says that at Dovegate, 'therapy operates as a 24/7 intervention aimed at breaking the cycle of offending, primarily for prisoners serving long sentences.'
Those in the community are known as residents rather than prisoners, and are encouraged to build positive relationships with staff and other residents.

Participation requires a minimum commitment of 24 months, beginning with an induction period of up to eight weeks to familiarise residents with the community's ethos, followed by an assessment phase lasting 8—12 weeks to determine suitability.

It is a mixed therapeutic community accepting a range of offence types, though most residents are serving long sentences for predominantly violent offences, often linked to difficulties managing emotions, coping, problem-solving, or relationships.

Each day includes a "thoughts and feelings" meeting where the whole community, staff and residents together, discuss how they are feeling, followed by small groups, community meetings, or other activities, with small groups allowing up to ten residents to explore their lives and offending in depth with staff facilitation.[39]

This is corroborated by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, whose 2018 inspection of HMP Dovegate's Therapeutic Community found that the communities functioned democratically, with men having a strong say in how they were run, and that staff and prisoners trusted each other, leading to open and honest communication.

Despite housing a high-risk population, inspectors found that very little violence took place, with most problems resolved through the community itself, and that most men felt they had made progress during their time in therapy, with the majority who completed the process able to progress on to other establishments.

Notably, 83% of survey respondents said their experience in the Therapeutic Community had made them less likely to offend in future.

A separate, earlier HMIP inspection similarly described the Therapeutic Community as a thriving and innovative provision, supporting prisoners with complex needs and behaviour to help them make sense of their past and learn to regulate their behaviour, including some impressive work with prisoners who had learning difficulties.[40]

Best Practice Example: HMP Warren Hill

HMP Warren Hill, a Category C public sector prison in Suffolk, holding men serving long sentences, has been repeatedly highlighted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons as an example of good rehabilitative practice.

Its most recent inspection, in February 2025, found an impressively strong and supportive culture, with very little violence or drug use, and a level of staff-prisoner engagement rarely seen elsewhere in the estate.

Prisoners were unlocked for more than 11 hours a day on weekdays, moved relatively freely around the prison, and were engaged in a wide range of education and enrichment activities, with almost all men in full-time purposeful activity; incentives such as minimally supervised family visits and bonus payments for good attendance and qualifications helped encourage positive behaviour.

This builds on an earlier inspection that identified 16 separate features of the prison as good practice, describing it as an excellent facility that gave prisoners serving long sentences, many with little previous hope of progression, a genuine path towards release or open conditions, and recommended that HMPPS examine what could realistically be replicated elsewhere. [41]

Best Practice Example: LandWorks

LandWorks, a charity based on the Dartington Estate in Devon, is a good example of what effective resettlement support can achieve.

LandWorks provides intensive, wraparound support and occupational training, in areas such as landscaping, market gardening, and woodworking, to help people leaving prison rebuild their lives and find meaningful employment.

According to the charity's own evaluation figures, its graduates have a one-year reoffending rate of just 5.2%, and in 2022-23, 94% of its economically active graduates were in employment.

This is achieved at a fraction of the cost of custody: an average of around £7,000 per trainee, against a cost closer to £70,000 for a single prison sentence and period of probation.

Nick Hardwick, former Chief Inspector of Prisons, has described LandWorks as one of the best examples in the country of how to reduce reoffending and prevent future victims, and the charity has secured funding to present its decade of evaluation evidence to policymakers with a view to replicating the model more widely. [42]

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Public support for rehabilitation

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Investment in rehabilitation in prisons is often seen by political decision makers as politically risky. The assumption is that the public views rehabilitation as "soft on crime" and investing in it will have ramifications amongst their voter base come election time.

However, this assumption is wrong.

Our research shows that the public sees rehabilitation as a core purpose of prison and crucial to reducing reoffending and protecting communities. Concern about crime is high, and prisons and their ability to rehabilitate are widely seen as underperforming. The public response is that we must improve both.

Public knowledge of prisons and rehabilitation is relatively limited, and voters do not strongly associate the issue with any one political party. Views tend to be partisan, and voters are more likely to believe that their own party is best placed to lead.

The most effective political argument is that rehabilitation is an essential part of strong punishment, not an alternative to it. The public does not think the two are mutually exclusive. They expect offenders to face meaningful consequences for their actions, but they also expect prisons to reduce future crime.

Framing rehabilitation as a demanding process of personal responsibility, delivered by well-supported prison staff and alongside firm punishment, provides a strong foundation for building public support for reform.

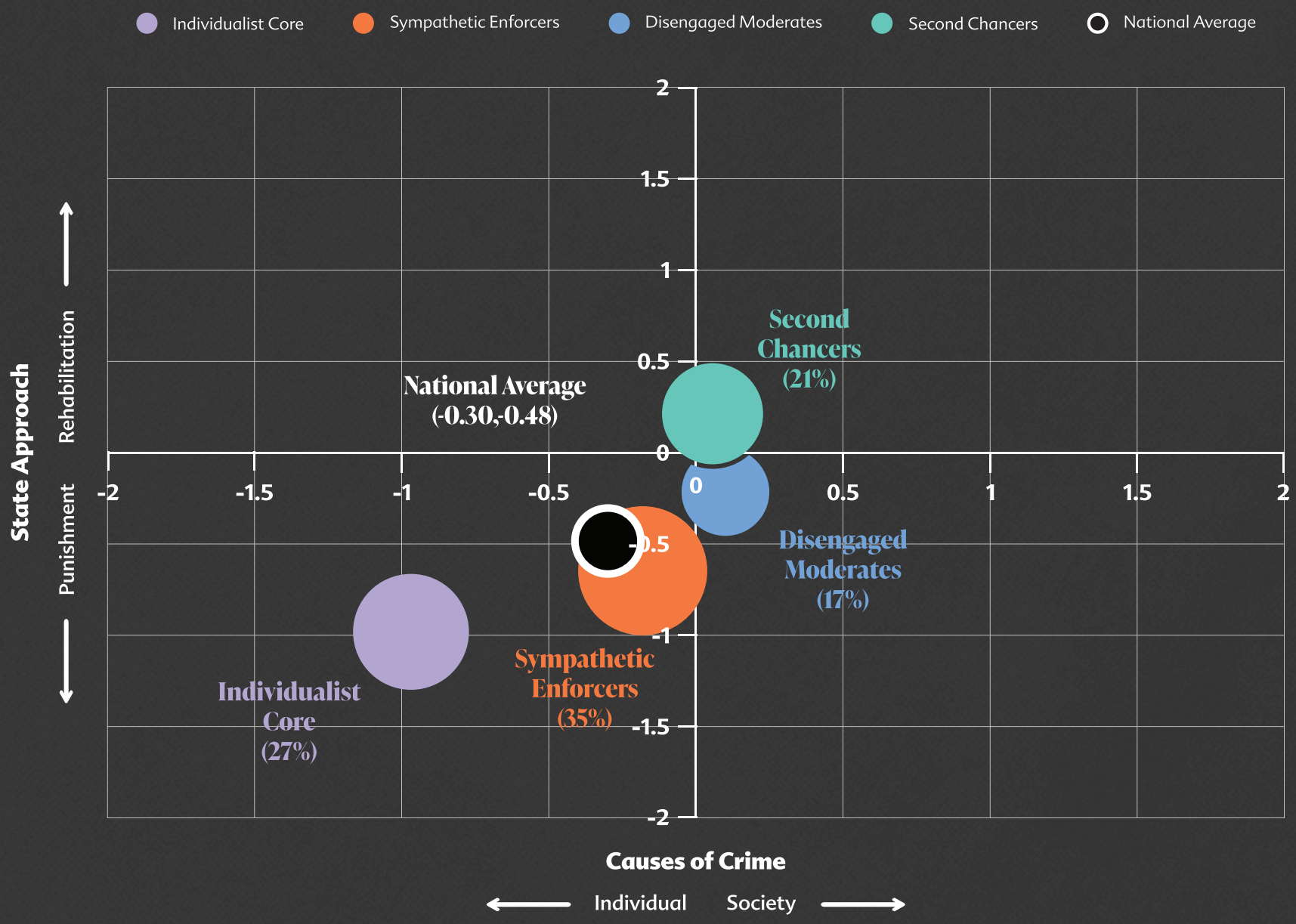


Segmentation

To understand how prisons and criminal justice are understood across the population, we modelled responses to a battery of attitudinal statements, grouping voters by those underlying beliefs.

Public First's K-means modelling found four distinct clusters of voters, based on responses to the attitudinal questions.

Crime Attitude Segments: Mean Position On Two Dimensions



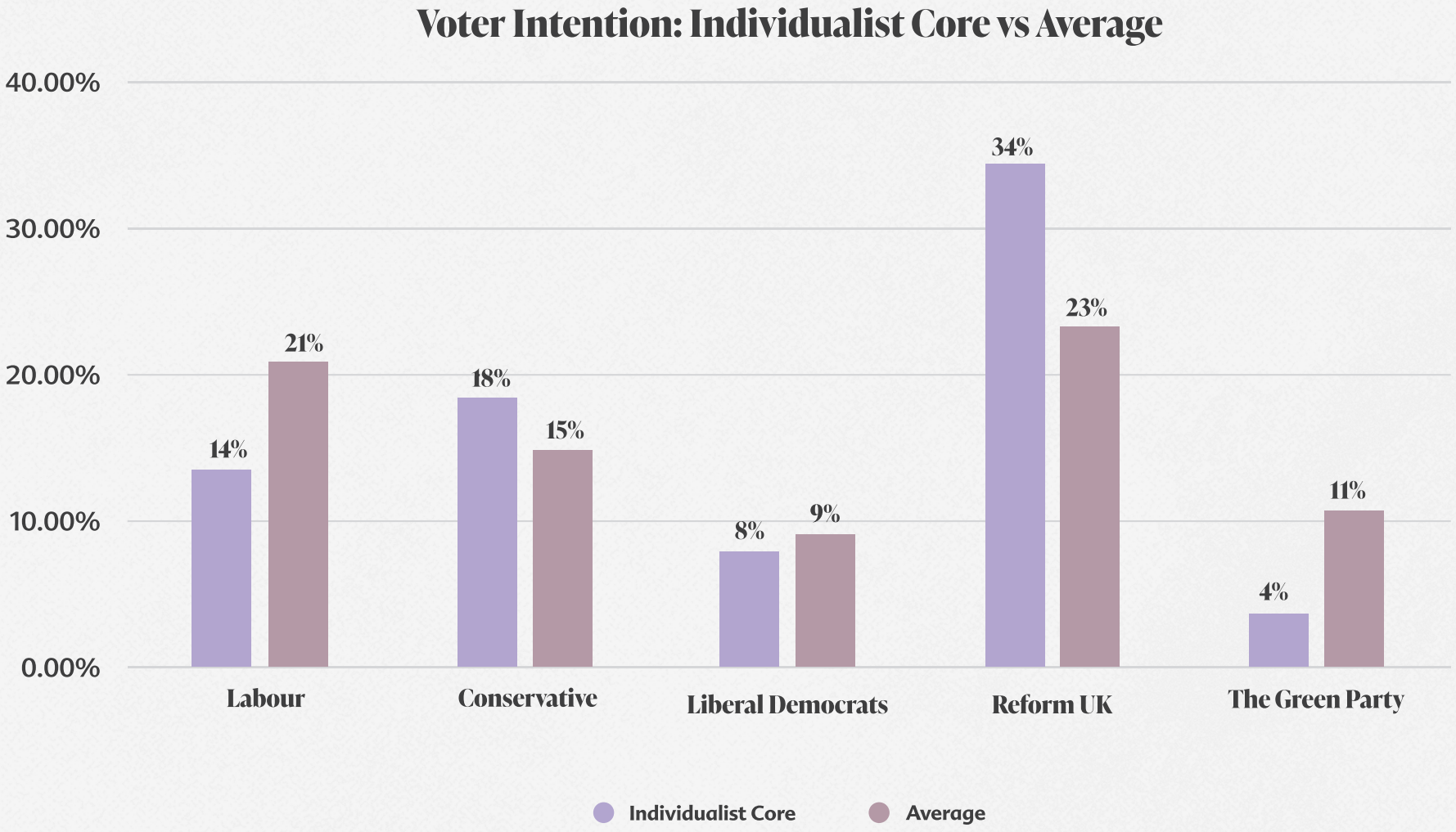
Individualist Core

The Individualist Core views crime primarily as the result of individual choice and places a strong emphasis on personal responsibility and punishment. When presented with a choice between punishment and rehabilitation, this group overwhelmingly prioritises punishment, more so than any other segment.

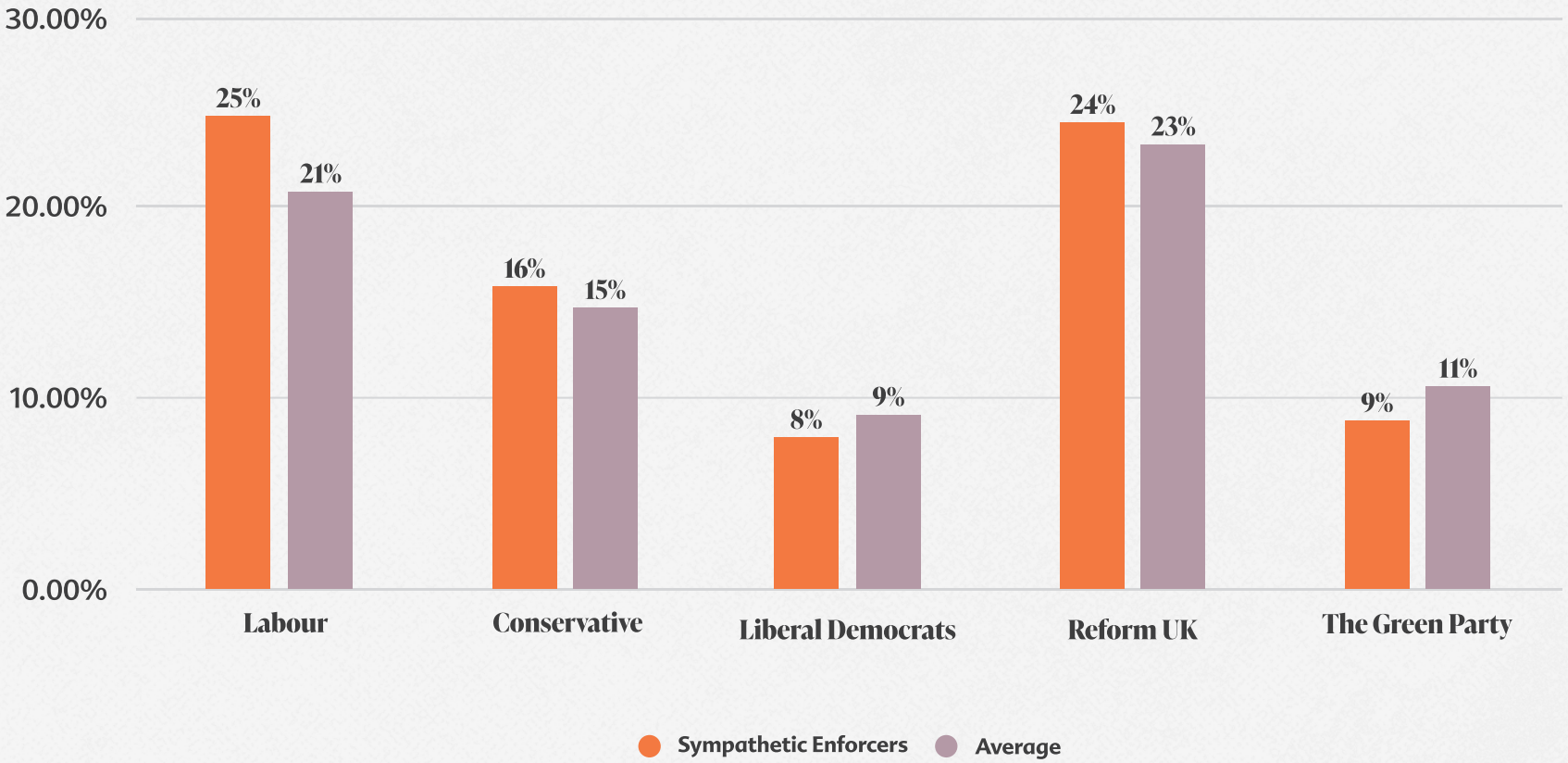
Representing 27% of the sample, the Individualist Core is the second-largest segment identified in our research. It is also the oldest segment, with an average age of 55, compared with an average age of 47 across the full sample.

Politically, the Individualist Core contains a disproportionately high share of right-leaning voters. While it does not encompass all voters on the political right, it represents the more punitive end of the spectrum.

When asked to choose between punishment and rehabilitation, this group prioritises punishment, but it does not reject rehabilitation. Members of the Individualist Core group are receptive to an approach that combines tough punishment with effective rehabilitation, particularly when rehabilitation is framed as demanding, accountable and focused on reducing future crime.



Voter Intention: Sympathetic Enforcer vs Average



Sympathetic Enforcers

While many right-leaning voters sit within the Individualist Core segment, a significant proportion also sit within the Sympathetic Enforcer group. Similarly to the Individualist Core, the Sympathetic Enforcer group believe that those who commit crimes should face punishment, but they take a more nuanced view of why people offend. Responsibility is seen by the Sympathetic Enforcers as shared between the individual and society, but individuals remain accountable for their actions.

The Sympathetic Enforcers believe punishment should be the main response to crime, but they are open to a combination of meaningful punishment with rehabilitation, particularly when rehabilitation is presented as demanding and focused on preventing reoffending.

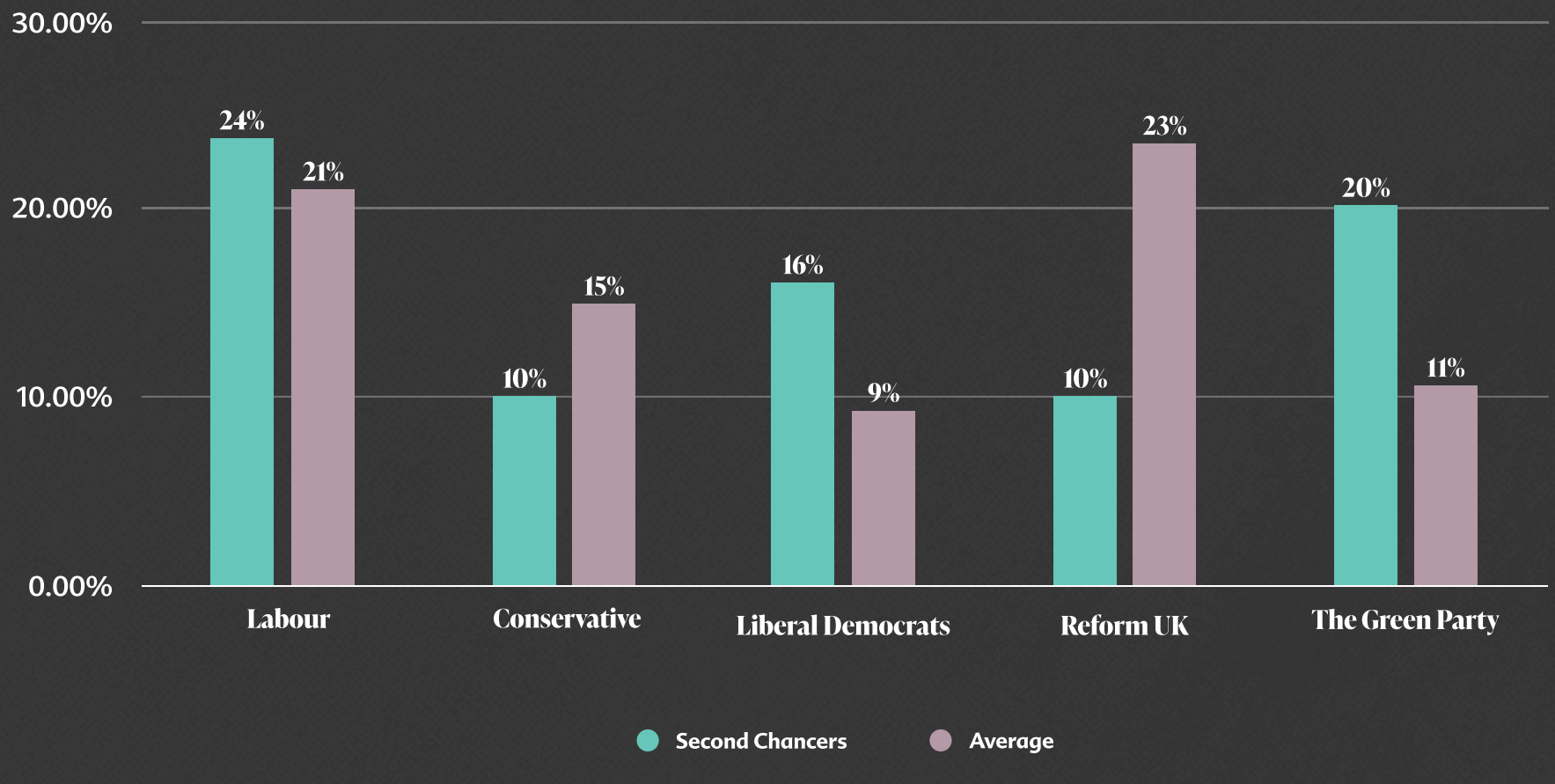
The Sympathetic Enforcer is the largest segment identified in our analysis, representing 35% of the electorate, more than one in three voters, with the broadest age profile of any group. Politically, it closely reflects the national electorate, with voting intention for each of the major parties falling within four percentage points of the national average. As a result, this segment provides the clearest indication of where public opinion on punishment and rehabilitation is likely to sit overall.

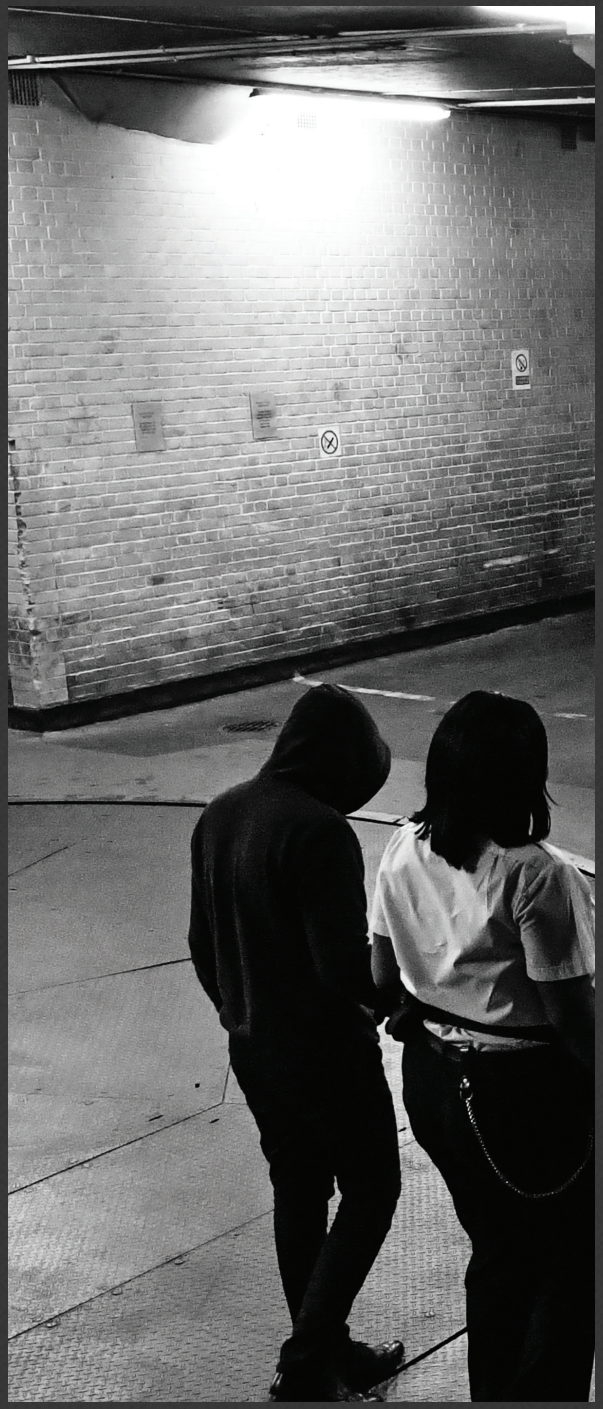
Second Chancers

The Second Chancers are concentrated on the left of the electorate and take a more nuanced view of both the causes of crime and how the state should respond. They are more likely than other groups to see offending as shaped by wider social factors as well as individual responsibility, and they sympathise with a greater focus on rehabilitation. They are the most likely group to prioritise rehabilitation when asked to choose between rehabilitation and punishment.

Representing 21% of the electorate, the Second Chancers are the second-smallest segment. They include above-average proportions of Liberal Democrat and Green voters, while Labour voters make up the largest political group. The proportions of Labour voters among the Second Chancer segment and the more punishment-focused Sympathetic Enforcer segment are almost equal, highlighting the diversity of opinion on crime and justice within the party's electoral coalition.

Voter Intention: Second Chancers vs Average







Disengaged Moderates

The Disengaged Moderates are the smallest and youngest segment identified in our analysis. Politically diverse, they are characterised less by a distinct set of views than by uncertainty, tending to take neutral positions on the attitudinal questions used in the segmentation



The public thinks the system is failing

54% of the public believe the prison system is performing badly. Right-leaning voters are particularly critical of the current prison system, with the figure rising to 67% of the Individualist Core and 66% of Reform UK voters.

The same pattern is evident in attitudes towards rehabilitation. Overall, 1 in 2 believe the Government's current approach to rehabilitation is performing badly, compared with 63% of Reform UK voters and 60% of the Individualist Core.

It is the most punishment-focused parts of the electorate who are among the strongest critics of the Government's current approach to rehabilitation.

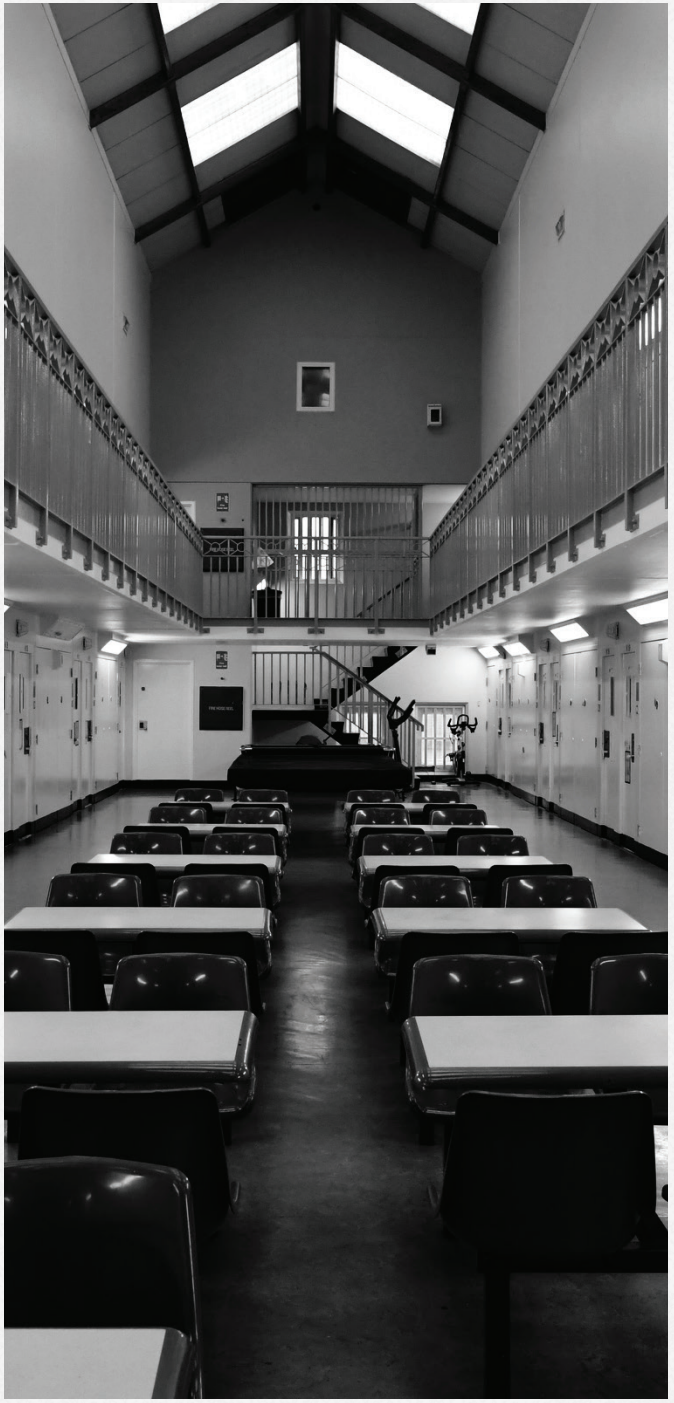
These concerns are shared broadly across the electorate. In our qualitative research, participants from across the political spectrum expressed concern about the state of the prison system, mentioning overcrowding, underfunding and staffing constraints as evidence that the system is not working as it should.

Participants were also sceptical about the effectiveness of rehabilitation in its current form. Rather than rejecting rehabilitation as a principle, many questioned whether the existing system was successfully reducing reoffending and wanted it to deliver better outcomes for offenders and the public alike.

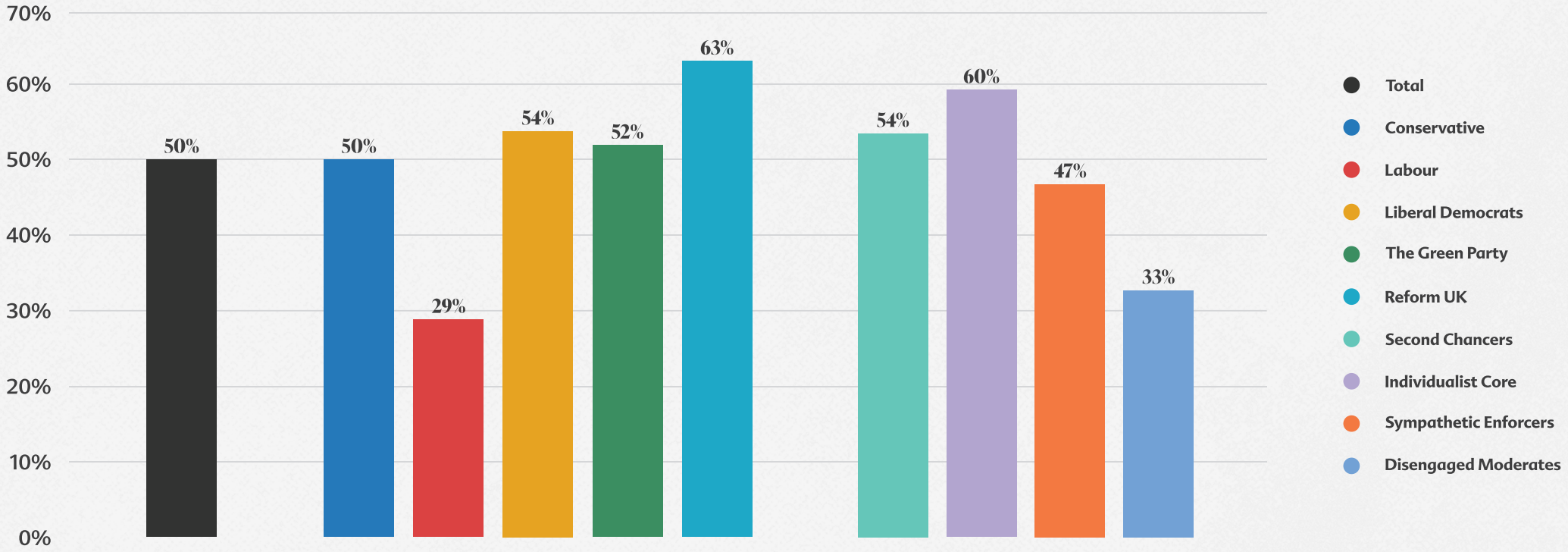
"I just haven't got the confidence in it because there's been rehabilitation for prisons for years now, and nothing, nothing, has changed, if anything there's more and more people going to prison" — Female, 50s, Labour to Reform group

"Too full and not actually rehabilitating people so when they're in there, they learn to do other crimes and they come out and maybe reoffend" — Male, 40s, Labour to Green group

Importantly, this does not translate into opposition to rehabilitation. Instead, it reflects frustration that the current system is failing to deliver both punishment and rehabilitation effectively.



Using the scale below, please rate how good or bad you think that the government's current approach to rehabilitation is [sum of 'good' scores]



Rehabilitation is seen as core to what prison is for, and the public wants to see more of it

The public does not see punishment and rehabilitation as competing alternatives. Instead, most people believe the justice system should deliver both, with differences emerging only in the emphasis placed on each.

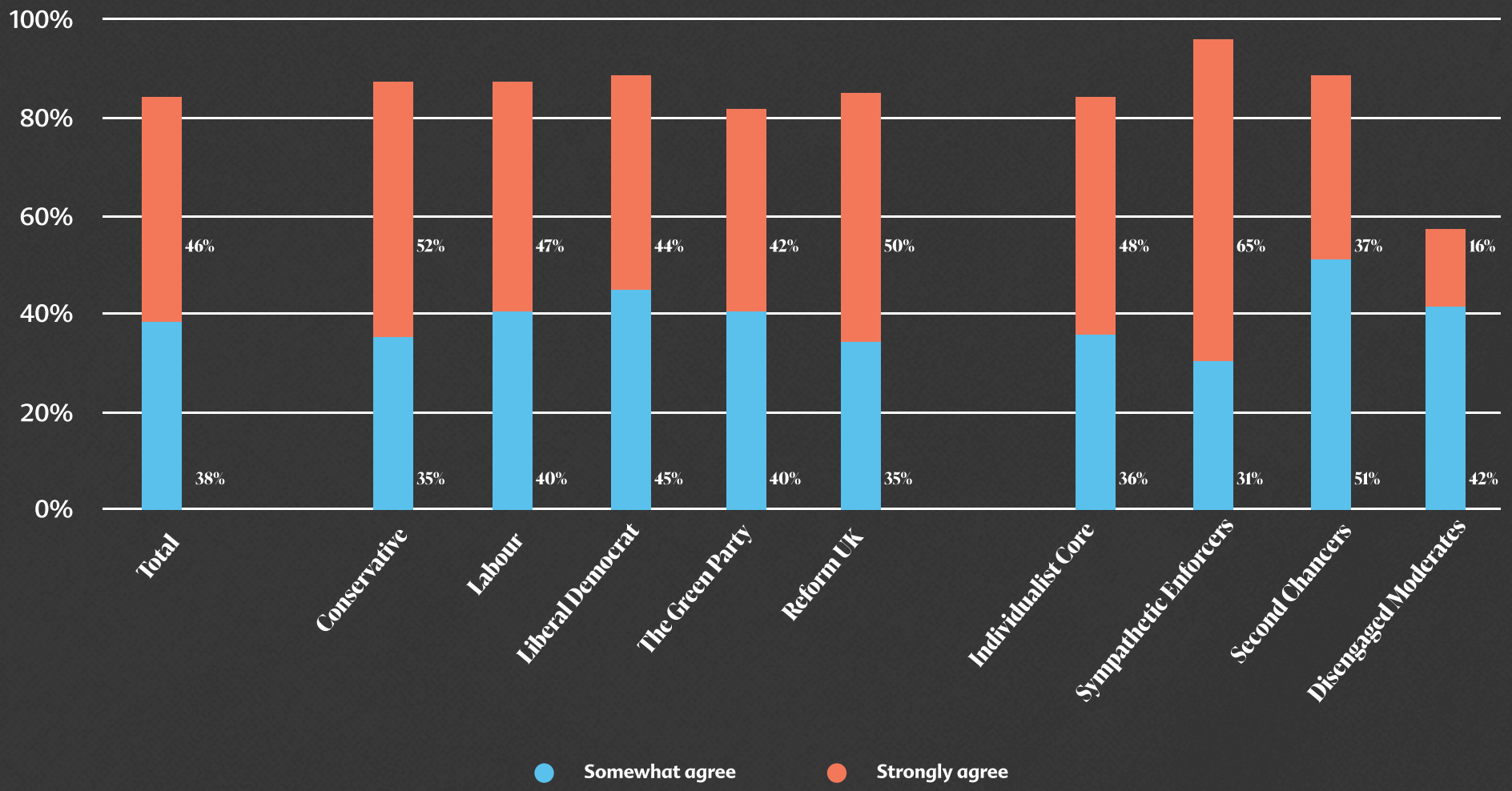
Across the electorate, **85% agree that a prison sentence should serve as both a punishment and a means of rehabilitation.** This support remains consistently high across political parties and voter segments, with more than three-quarters of every group, including the Individualist Core and Second Chancers, the two segments furthest apart ideologically, supporting a combined approach.

Support is strongest where rehabilitation involves work and training. The best-performing message we tested described prisoners using their time in prison to work, learn new skills and address the causes of their offending, and it outperformed every alternative framing across the electorate, including among Reform UK voters voters and the Individualist Core.

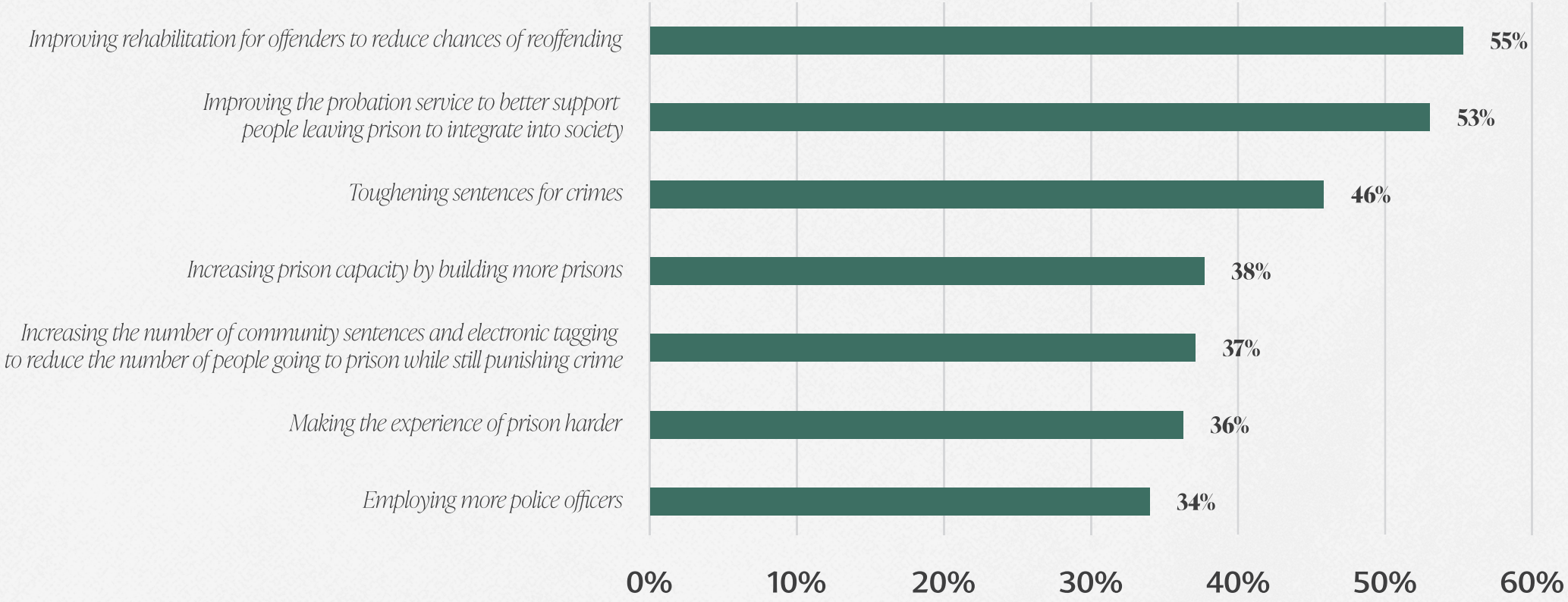
Where opinion differs is in the balance between punishment and rehabilitation when it is a forced choice. When respondents were asked to prioritise one over the other, ideological differences became much more pronounced.

For example, 87% of Reform UK voters and 92% of the Individualist Core agreed that punishment should be the primary goal of the justice system, compared with 75% of the public overall and 34% of Second Chancers. Conversely, 92% of Second Chancers agreed that rehabilitation should be the primary goal, compared with 59% of Reform UK voters and 42% of the Individualist Core.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "A prison sentence should act as both a punishment and rehabilitation" [Agree responses]



Below is a list of ways that the justice system in the UK could be changed. Please rank these in order of how important you think they are for government to be prioritising



Taken together, these findings suggest that public debate should not be framed as a choice between punishment and rehabilitation. Across the electorate, there is broad support for both.

In qualitative research, voters, particularly those on the political right, were sceptical of how rehabilitation is currently delivered, not of the principle itself. Participants consistently argued that rehabilitation should complement punishment by helping offenders take responsibility for their actions, reduce their risk of reoffending and safely reintegrate into society.

As one participant put it:

"It should be like a three-pronged approach. Give back to society, the punishment and then also reform." — Male, 20s, Labour to Reform switcher

Another argued that rehabilitation should be strengthened, not replaced:

"I think [priority for investment] would be into more staff, better programmes and then equally more employers taking these people out of prisons... 100% you need more prisons, you need more staff... and make sure there is rehabilitation too." — Male, 20s, Labour to Reform switcher

The Sympathetic Enforcer segment provides a good illustration of this balance. As the largest and most nationally representative group in our analysis, it strongly supports both punishment (96%) and rehabilitation (85%). Rehabilitation is not seen as an alternative but an essential way of ensuring that punishment reduces future crime.

This is reflected in the public's priorities for the justice system. When asked to rank the ways in which the system could be changed, a majority (55%) favour improving rehabilitation, closely followed by improving the probation service. This is significantly higher than wanting to see increases in prison capacity or making the experience of prison harder.

"

It should be like a three-pronged approach. Give back to society, the punishment and then also reform.

- Male, 20s, Labour to Reform switcher

The argument that works: Personal responsibility

Our message testing shows that support for investment in rehabilitation depends not only on what is proposed, but how it is communicated. The most persuasive messages framed rehabilitation not as a benefit provided to offenders, but as a process of hard work, accountability and personal effort.

As part of the message testing arm of quantitative polling, respondents were shown three separate messages about rehabilitation and then asked whether they supported or opposed more investment into rehabilitation. The three messages are shown on the next page.

Message testing: Three arms shown to the sample (rehabilitation investment, split sample)

Respondents were randomly split into three equal groups

Each group read ONE of the three messages below, then answered the same question: "To what extent would you support or oppose the government investing more in rehabilitation for people in prison?"

Public safety frame

"Invstment in rehabilitation is not about being soft on crime.

Instead, it is about making people less likely to commit more crimes after they are released.

If prison does not reduce reoffending, the public pays the price through more crime, more victims and less safety.

Education, treatment and work skills are tools for public protection, not rewards."

Table 111

Taxpayer cost frame

"Taxpayers pay when people leave prison and quickly offend once more.

Helping people leave prison with skills, treatment, and a plan is better value than funding the same cycle of crime repeatedly.

The aim is to have fewer victims, less pressure on prisons, and smarter use of taxpayer money."

Table 112

Expectation frame

"People in prison should be expected to use their time to learn, work and address the causes of their offending.

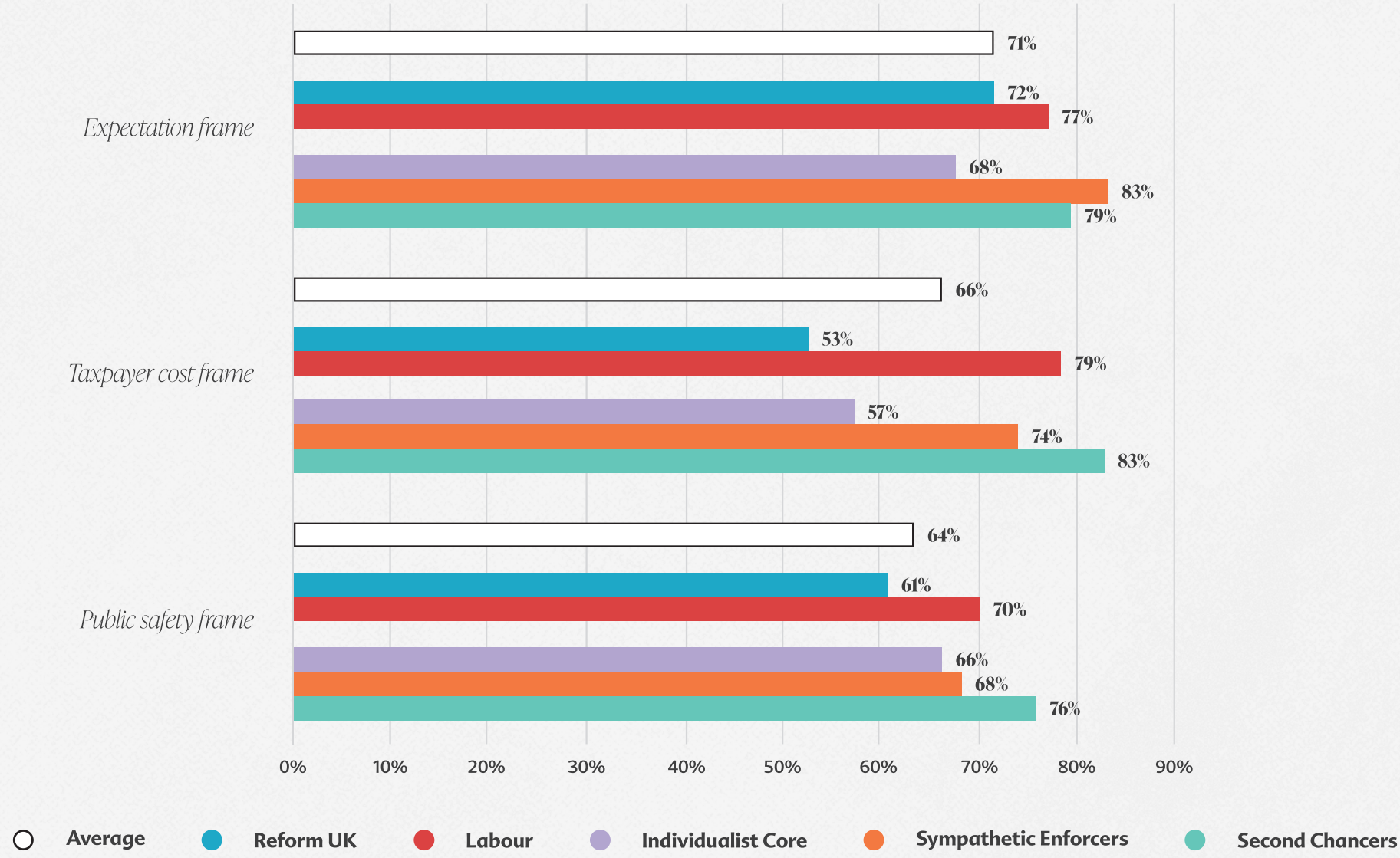
Support should go with rules, effort, and accountability.

Rehabilitation should help people live crime-free lives and contribute instead of returning to prison."

Table 113

Source: Public First polling for Serco/Community, n = 1,999 UK adults, July 2026, Tables 111-113

Having read this, to what extent would you support or oppose the government investing more in rehabilitation for people in prison? [Net support]



Among the three messages tested, the strongest performing framed rehabilitation as an expectation placed on prisoners that they should use their time in prison to work, learn new skills and address the causes of their offending.

This message performed best not only across the electorate, but also among Reform UK voters and the Individualist Core segment. It also attracted high levels of support among the more rehabilitation-focused Second Chancers, suggesting that framing rehabilitation around personal responsibility resonates across the political spectrum.

By contrast, messages focused primarily on reducing costs to taxpayers performed least well among Reform voters and the Individualist Core segment. Economic arguments increased support among some more liberal voters, but they were not as persuasive as messages framed on personal responsibility and accountability. Similarly, a framing of rehabilitation as "not being soft on crime" still attracted majority support but was less effective than presenting rehabilitation more positively, as something offenders are expected to earn through effort and commitment.

Among Reform UK voters and the Individualist Core segment, there is a clear appetite for tougher sentencing and prison regimes. Sixty per cent of Reform UK voters rank tougher sentences among the Government's top three justice priorities, compared with 46% of the public overall, while 50% believe making prisons tougher should be a priority, compared with 36% nationally. These findings demonstrate a stronger emphasis on punishment among the most right-leaning groups, but they should not be interpreted as a rejection of rehabilitation.

As our wider polling and message testing shows, these voters are supportive of rehabilitation when it is presented as a demanding process that reinforces punishment through accountability, work and personal responsibility. Therefore, the challenge for policymakers is not to choose between being "tough" or "soft" on crime, but to show how effective rehabilitation strengthens punishment, reduces reoffending and ultimately makes communities safer.

Our qualitative research reinforces this finding. Reform-leaning participants consistently argued for a tougher response to crime and believed prison should involve meaningful punishment, but this didn't come with opposition to rehabilitation.

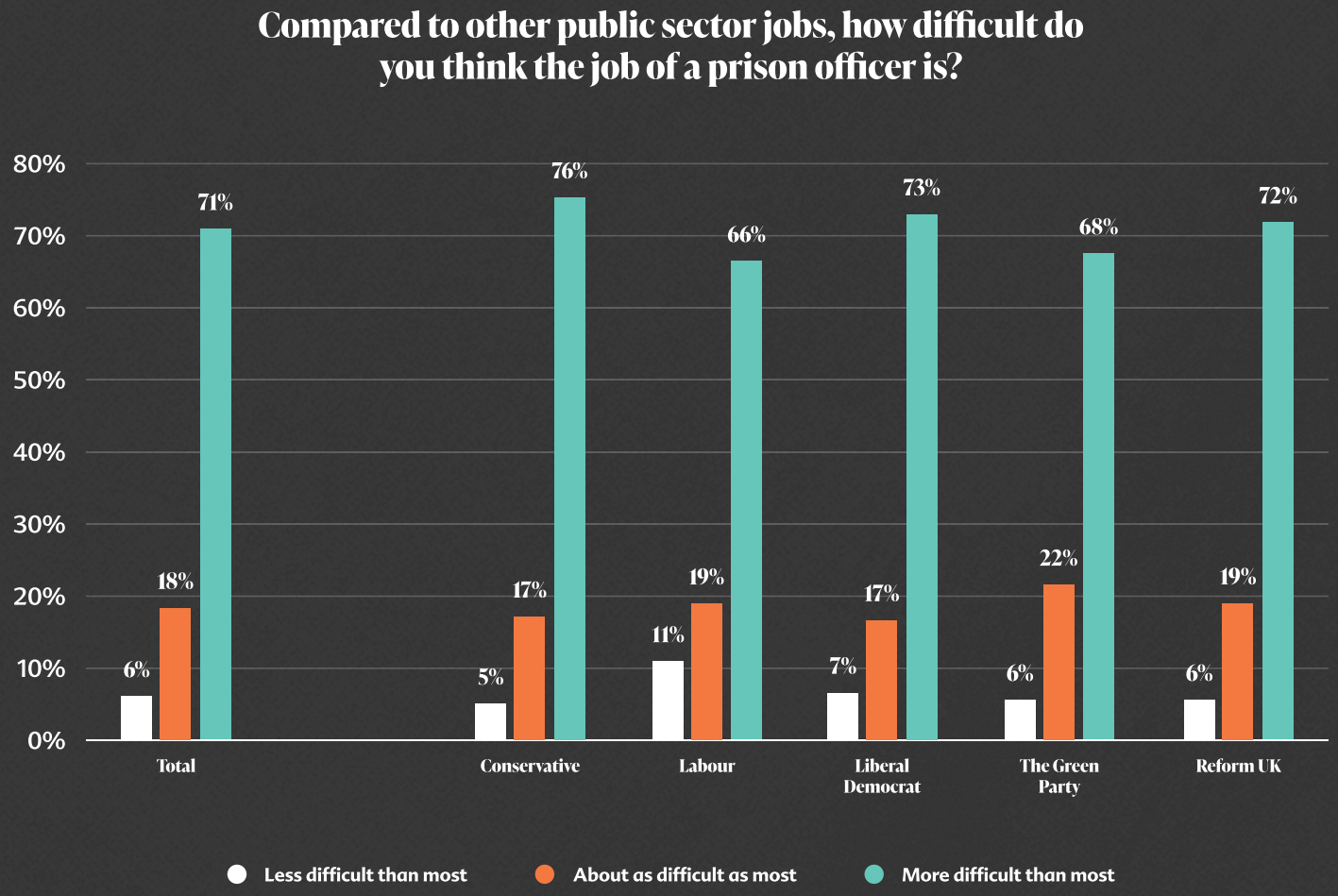
"[The purpose of prison is] trying to reform people to try and get them to change and live better lives when they come out of prison surely, and also punishment for the crime and to try to make them live a better life when they come out." — Female, 50s, Labour to Reform switcher

The public backs prison officers and thinks they are undervalued

Our research suggests that prison officers occupy a unique position in the public's understanding of the prison system. Prison and probation officers are viewed as among the most undervalued public sector professions. Across every voter segment, respondents ranked them as the least valued by society.

Support for rehabilitation is matched by support for investing in the people responsible for delivering it. Across the political spectrum, prison and probation officers are viewed as doing a difficult and undervalued job, creating broad public sympathy for greater investment in the prison workforce.

Overall, 71% of the public believe the role of a prison officer is more difficult than most public sector jobs, including 72% of Reform UK voters and 76% of Conservative voters. Similarly, 55% of the public believe prison officers are not sufficiently valued by society, a view shared by 56% of Reform UK voters and 62% of Green voters. These findings suggest there is cross-party recognition of the pressures facing the prison workforce.

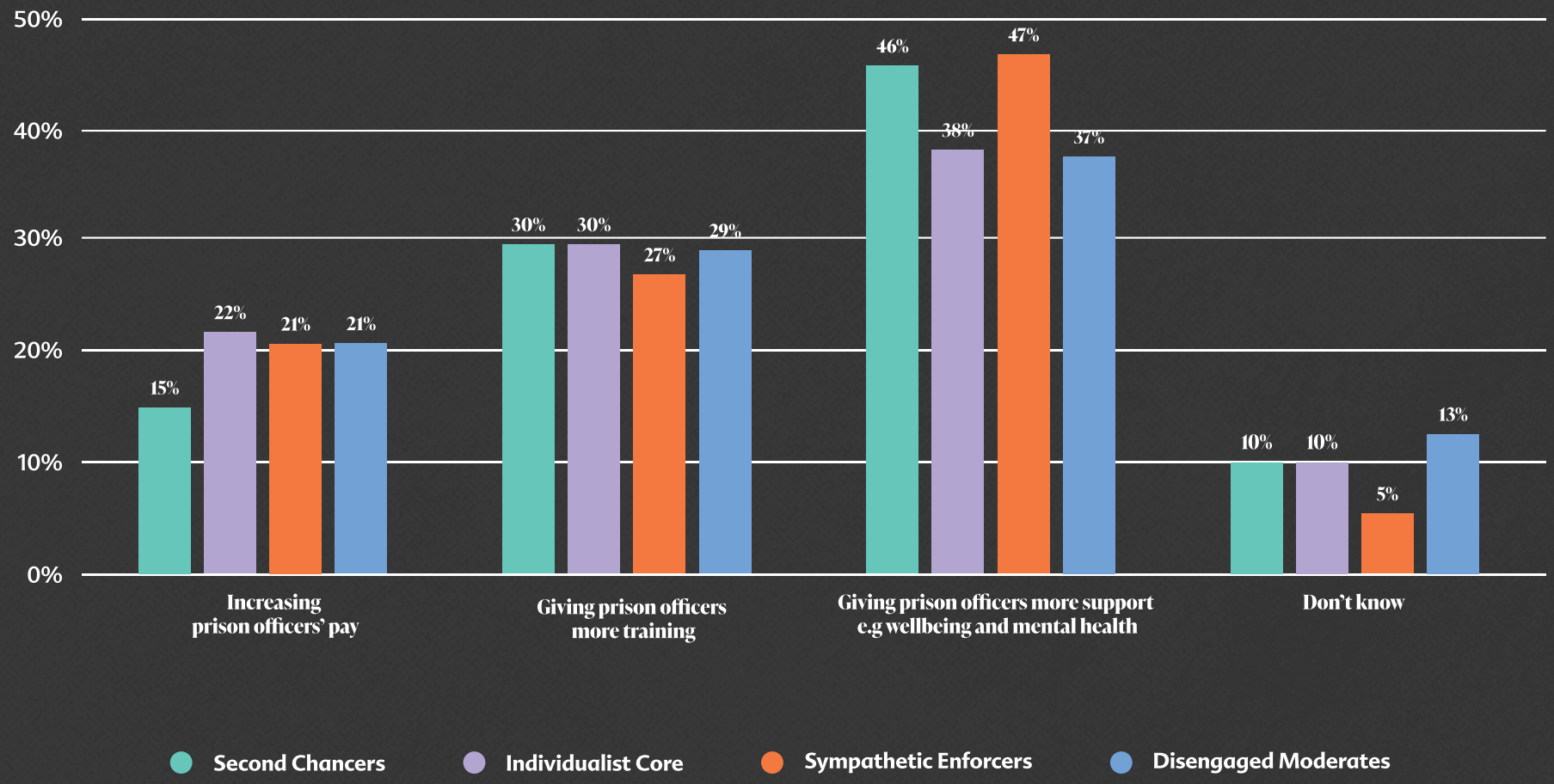


Our qualitative research reinforces this. Voters described prison officers as underpaid, undertrained and expected to manage increasingly difficult prison environments with insufficient support. As one participant observed:

"I don't see how you can have rehabilitation without prison officers. I suspect they don't get the qualifications and training they would like to be able to do. I'm pretty sure they're underpaid for the job that they do." — Female, 60s, Labour to Green switcher

When asked what additional investment in prison officers should look like, voters consistently prioritised measures that would better equip officers to do their jobs. Across all voter groups and segments, support for improved wellbeing and mental health support emerged as the most popular option, followed by giving officers more training.

If the government were to spend more money on prison officers, which of the following do you think should be the bigger priority?



Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusion - page 49

All recommendations - page 50

Conclusion

Prisons have long been one of the most highly contested and politically difficult areas of public policy. Yet this research suggests that there is considerably more common ground among the public than political debate and newspaper headlines often suggest.

People up and down the country are worried about crime in our communities, about the state of the prison system and are dissatisfied with its ability to reduce reoffending. People want offenders to face meaningful punishment, but they also expect prisons to rehabilitate people effectively, so they are less likely to commit further crimes when they are released. Our message testing shows that the public do not see these as competing priorities; they expect prisons to deliver both.

Rehabilitation in the prisons of England and Wales requires urgent new attention. Political leaders must find the political courage to talk about and make the big decisions required to reform our long-struggling prison system, break the cycle of crises and deliver a rehabilitation system that prisoners, prison staff and the wider public deserve and expect.



All recommendations

1. Tackle prison overcrowding as an immediate priority

Capacity pressure is the single biggest constraint on purposeful activity and rehabilitation, and every other reform in this report depends on relieving it. It is vital that existing government policy and sentencing reform is maintained, in particular the presumption against short sentences and expanding the use of community sentences and electronic tagging.

2. Publish standardised time out of cell data for every prison

Publish standardised time out of cell data for every prison in England and Wales, to ensure that the statutory minimum of two hours out of cell per day is being met. Without published data, the scale of non-compliance and inconsistency it creates across the estate cannot properly be understood or addressed, and the Government should reverse its decision to reject this recommendation from the Justice Committee. The Government's decision to track purposeful activity is welcome, but they should track the key metric of time out of cell too.

3. Explore a statutory duty on minimum rehabilitative entitlements

As the prison system stabilises in the longer term, policymakers should explore a statutory duty on minimum rehabilitative entitlements within individual sentence plans, giving those plans legal weight and creating real accountability for delivery.

4. Give prison governors a level of autonomy and accountability

Give prison governors a level of autonomy and accountability comparable to that already afforded to directors of private prisons, with reforms designed together as a single package. Governors should be able to recruit and select their own officers and specialist staff, as well as education and health partners, rather than it being centrally allocated. Their power to commission bespoke local services directly should be expanded without lengthy central procurement, and they should be able to adapt regime structures, such as education slots, the timing of activities and visiting arrangements to local need. This must include stronger accountability measures on progress and outcomes to match new flexibility.

5. Deliver a national workforce strategy for the prison workforce

Rehabilitation cannot succeed without a stable, skilled workforce, and our polling shows strong public support for investing in prison officers. The strategy should; set more robust national minimum training standards focused on rehabilitative culture, with annual training as a floor and further training required on promotion; reintroduce the prison officer apprenticeship as the system stabilises; and introduce mandatory clinical supervision for governors.

6. Reverse the funding cuts to education provision in prisons

Prisoners who engage in education while in custody are less likely to reoffend and more likely to find employment after release. The cut to education hours is unsustainable in an already struggling system. The Government should urgently set out plans to restore the funding required for core provision to increase teaching and learning hours.

7. Strengthen substance misuse provision in prison and in the community

Incentivised substance-free living (ISFL) wings should be rolled out in every prison, with a new national standard framework to ensure that every ISFL wing operates to a consistent standard. Strengthening substance misuse provision should include better access for those serving short sentences and on remand, and a significant increase in community-based treatment. Prison directors and governors should be part of the decision-making process for substance misuse intervention services in prisons.

8. Roll out and learn from what already works across the estate

Therapeutic communities, PIPE Units, good in-prison work opportunities, vocational training with connections to employers and efforts to strengthen family ties should not remain confined to a small number of prisons. Prisons need the physical space, time and resources to deliver these programmes meaningfully. As part of this, governors and directors should have an explicit mandate and budget line to build local employer and community partnerships.

9. Improve data collection and reporting on rehabilitation

End-to-end tracking of individuals as they move around the estate should be improved, and published outcome data monitored by the Inspectorate, so that good practice is shared between public and private prisons.

10. Reinforce rehabilitation in the community

Stronger support in the community is needed to reinforce work done in custody and ensure progress is not undone on release. While outside the scope of this research, investment in and strengthening the probation service, electronic tagging and community-based support are crucial. This should include prison-to-community pathways offering continuity of personnel and programmes, support into employment upon release and the basics like housing, welfare and GPs.

KEEP US
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