

Howard League Strategy 2023 - 2028

1. Purpose and vision

Our overriding ambition is to move the dial on punishment away from cruelty and towards building a more humane and effective response to crime that provides justice and helps to lower levels of reoffending.

We recognise that law is the product of power; and that it criminalises and punishes some behaviours, people and groups more than others. This undermines the legitimacy of our entire criminal justice system and demands challenge in the interests of fairness and equality.

We understand that our current systems of punishment are often unjust, cruel and counter-productive; and that they make our communities less, rather than more, safe. We want to see a reduction in the use of punishment, specifically a very significant reduction in the use of prison and much better conditions and opportunities for those who remain there.

With numbers projected to rise to more than 106,000 by 2027, our work over the next five years will focus on the acute crisis in prisons. However, we will continue to recognise the challenges presented by the overuse of community supervision and the harms that it can cause to individuals and society. We understand that 100 years of 'alternatives' have ultimately fed more people into, rather than out of, prison.

We believe the answers to crime lie not in the criminal justice system, but in a more fair and equitable society, one investing in education, housing, employment and health. We believe that everyone is better than their worst moment or decision, and that excessive punishment harms the fabric of society. We believe in second chances and in the ability of people to change.

2. Focus of our work

Our work focuses on putting the case for much more restricted use of imprisonment, partly by highlighting the harm that is caused – to individuals and to society – through its careless, cruel and wasteful overuse.

Over the five-year period covered by this strategy, we will focus on:

- Public-facing campaigning to challenge the reliance on prison as the answer to crime, both in general and for particular crimes/cohorts of people in prison.
- Working with politicians across parties to build their understanding of the evidence base and of the economic, human and social costs of prison. We will encourage political courage across parties to pursue policy that works.
- Blending strategic litigation with policy work and communications to highlight the problems with the overuse of prison and to challenge injustices and human rights violations in prison.
- Working with judges, parole board members, and the justice professions to bring a better understanding of the impact of sentencing, release and recall decisions and the realities of prison.
- Improving the quality of public information and dialogue around punishment, including by building a community of people who are interested in and engaged with prisons, people in prison, prison leavers and their families. We will mobilise this community to advocate for better policy.

3. Our position

We are the world's oldest prison charity, with a long history of bringing people together to advocate for penal reform. We have a large membership and network of longstanding supporters. This accumulated experience is a key strength, but we also recognise and welcome the dynamism and diversity of the sector (and among those working and campaigning in related areas like asylum and immigration reform).

While we prize our reputation for excellence and integrity, and as a trusted commentator on the system, we know that we have much to learn from others and so we are committed to being collaborative and building relationships across and beyond the sector.

We are committed to being an anti-racist and anti-discriminatory organisation.

We work on a cross-party basis, urging that criminal justice policy is too important to be left to the party politics and the competing ideologies that have done so much damage in the justice system. We aim to build consensus that prison does not work and that the answers to crime lie outside the criminal justice system.

We safeguard our independence and do not accept any funding from government.

4. How are we different?

The Howard League has several distinctive features.

First, we are a membership organisation with 7,500 members and more than 14,500 supporters, including members in prison, prison leavers and their families. We

actively seek and value the input of people with direct experience of prison in the development of our work and strive to amplify their voices as much as possible. Our network provides us with exceptional convening power.

Second, and uniquely in the penal reform arena, we combine litigation, campaigning and policy work. Our staff include a team of expert prison and public lawyers, working alongside experienced communications and policy staff.

Third, for more than 60 years, we have worked with the press and media to explain the harms of prison and to shape public narratives around crime and punishment. Our work with the press is widely recognised in the sector.

Fourth, we have the country's only dedicated advice line for children and young people in prison, providing support and advice for these particularly vulnerable people and building their experiences into our broader work.

Finally, we have consultative status with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council and in our work have a keen eye on international law and comparative experience, using it to strengthen domestic approaches.

We want to use our distinctive strengths to collaborate effectively with partners, coalitions and others in the sector, and we are particularly keen to share our advantages (as a national campaigning organisation) with grassroots organisations. We believe in, and want to actively invest in, supporting a powerful penal reform sector, of which we are just one part.

5. Our priorities

Our strategic priorities reflect those issues that we consider most urgent and important in addressing the overuse of prison.

Across all our work we will address racial disparity and include consideration of experiences of women, children and young people and other vulnerable people in the system. People from racialised minorities are significantly over-represented in prison. We will pursue work to challenge laws, policies and procedures that result in the over-incarceration of young Black men.

Phased thematic priorities over the coming five years will include:

- Campaigning on the failure of prison as the answer to crime, generally as well as for particular offence-types and cohorts of people in prison.
- A resolution to the ongoing incarceration and recall of people serving the abolished IPP sentence.
- The injustices wrought by joint enterprise, particularly on people from racialised minorities.
- The overuse of remand and experiences of people on remand.

- The challenges around sentencing, including incarceration for non-violent, lower-level offending, and combating sentence inflation across offence-types, but particularly for serious offences.

We will continue to monitor the extent to which prisons can be places where people change their lives for the better, facilitating their safe and supported re-entry to the community.

Beyond these thematic priorities, we will pursue strategic litigation of serious human rights violations and of executive overreach in prison.

We will work with politicians across parties to build their better understanding of the impact of prison on lives and communities, and of its role in perpetuating and exacerbating injustices.

We believe in the importance of expanding the community of people who understand prisons and people in prison, and who can be mobilised to advocate for change in prison policy. We will launch 'Community Builder' to connect initiatives, projects and NGOs working in the prison space with people keen to volunteer, while also supporting people in prison and their families to reach more easily those people and projects wanting to help them.

All our work is based on high-quality research; on the experiences and insights of our members in prison, prison leavers and their families; on insights gleaned from people working in criminal justice and related areas; and on the information provided by children and young people calling our advice line.

6. Organisational strategy

We will pursue best practice in all aspects of our organisational management, including in respect of financial, human resources and data management.

We will develop a financial strategy that provides long-term financial planning to cover the costs and revenue needed to deliver these aspirations. This Strategy will form the basis of our annual business plan and budget, which will be monitored and measured by the Senior Management Team, Finance Audit and Risk Committee, and the Board.

We will work to attract outstanding staff from diverse backgrounds, including people with personal experience of prison, who are passionate about social justice and prison reform. We will continue to provide our staff with a nurturing and motivating environment, providing for flexible and agile working, and opportunities to develop their skills and confidence. We will provide them with the tools needed to perform their roles, whether that is updated IT, professional training or clinical supervision.

7. Funding our ambitions

We are in the process of professionalising our approach to fundraising, employing dedicated staff to lead and support fundraising efforts.

We will strengthen and diversify our funding base – at all levels – through a mix of trusts and foundations, major donors, individual and corporate funding streams. We will develop and create lasting relationships and structured journeys for our supporters and donors.

Membership distinguishes the Howard League from other charities in the sector. Our members provide us with invaluable insights and with unrestricted income; they also enhance the strength and authority of our voice. Currently standing at 7,500 members, we aim to double our membership over the next five years, improving our membership offer and bringing our members closer to our work.

We aim to continuously improve communication with our members, donors, and other supporters about our work, through various channels including an updated and accessible website that highlights our activities and the impact of our engagements.

With trusts and foundations, we focus on unrestricted and multi-year funding, and increasing our network of donors of all sizes. Unrestricted, multi-year funding offers us the flexibility and sustainability we will need to secure, maintain, rebuild, and then thrive over the Strategy period. We will strengthen our relationships with existing funders, while identifying and introducing our work and priorities to new funders.

With the support of a new Development Board, we will build a major donor programme, bringing them into prisons and sharing the impacts of our work with them at bespoke events. We will also build corporate support for our work.

We will continue to urge our members and supporters to remember us and will honour legators as they wish.

8. Culture and values

We have elaborated a Cultural Compass that underpins our approach to our work, to each other and to those we work with. Our key values are: excellence, learning, accountability, integrity, collaboration, and courage. We regularly reflect on these behaviours and mindsets, ensuring that our values are alive in our daily work.

We are an anti-racist and an anti-discriminatory organisation, working in a criminal justice space that is institutionally racist and discriminatory. We will invest to build an inclusive organisation with diverse members, staff and leadership. We will ensure that our staff are equipped to challenge racism and discrimination in all its forms, wherever they see or experience it. Across our work, we will be alert to the

insidiousness of racism and discrimination. We will act in solidarity with activists within Black communities and in other communities affected by discrimination, prejudice and oppression.

9. Governance

We are governed by a Board of Trustees that meets quarterly to ensure that the charity is effectively run and is meeting its overall purpose as set out in its governing documents. The Board members will be properly inducted into the organisation and will be encouraged to attend training courses on charity governance.

The Chair of the Board will work closely with our Chief Executive, providing necessary support and periodic appraisal. A Finance, Audit and Risk Committee will consider financial strategy, regular management accounts and cash flow, along with dealing with any sensitive human resources matters. The Treasurer will chair the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee and will work closely with the Operations Director in support of strong financial management. We will seek to abide by best governance practice across our work.

A Council will advise the Board and staff, acting as a sounding board, helping to make connections and otherwise supporting our work. The Council will meet twice a year, engaging as necessary between meetings.

Across all three bodies, we will aim for gender parity, with strong representation from people from racialised minorities and will find ways to incorporate the experience of people with personal experience of prison at all levels.

10. Background

The Howard League for Penal Reform was founded as the Howard Association in 1866, in honour of prison reformer John Howard. Our name was changed in 1921 following a merger with the Penal Reform League, and ever since we have been a leading incubator of ideas for, and activism around, penal reform. In 1921 we launched the Howard Journal of Criminal Justice (since 2016, the Howard Journal of Crime and Justice), a leading peer-reviewed academic journal.

In 1947 we became one of the first non-governmental organisations to be granted consultative status with the United Nations, in acknowledgement of our longstanding expert work with its predecessor organisation, the League of Nations.

We have fought many successful and influential campaigns. In 1948 we incorporated the National Association for the Abolition of Capital Punishment; the death penalty was abolished in Great Britain in 1965. Among other successes, we were involved in

the creation of the probation service and the Magistrates' Association.

More recently, our high-profile Books For Prisoners campaign helped overturn restrictions on sending books to people in prison. Our pressure helped secure the suspension of the unfair and unjust criminal courts charge.

Through our legal work, we have transformed law, policy and practice for children and young adults caught up in the system. This work began with a landmark case in 2002, which changed the law to ensure that the protections of the Children Act 1989 apply to children in custody. Since 2010, we have given hundreds of thousands of children a brighter future by working with police to reduce child arrests by more than 70 per cent. And for those children and young people who have been swept into the criminal justice system, we have provided a free, confidential legal service to help them to understand and enforce their rights.

11. Performance

We have adopted a Theory of Change that sets out activities, outputs and outcomes for our priority areas. At the beginning of each part of work, we will plan and map out milestones for success across the life of the work.

For each project, we will establish qualitative and quantitative indicators for measuring and evaluating success; and we are committed to learning from our successes and failures at each juncture.

12. Review

Our business plan and annual budget will be set against this Strategy. The staff will report to the Board each quarter on the elements of this Strategy.

The Board will review the Strategy at its annual Away Day, assessing whether it remains relevant and optimal for the organisation, given changing policy, funding and organisational factors.