

Making proper use of 'proper prisons'?

The Victorian estate and
the future of the prison system

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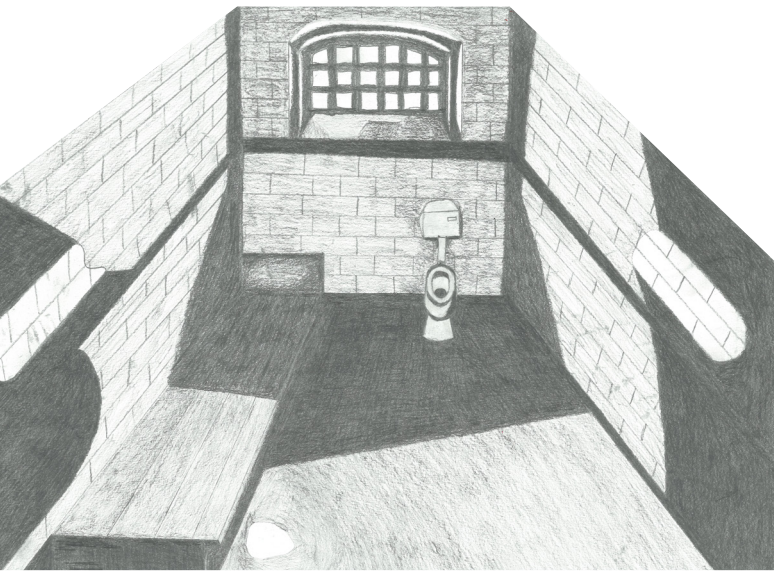
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Artwork by Dylan, HMP Liverpool, 2023

Over 20% of people in prison are currently housed in prisons with Victorian-era accommodation. This significant part of the prison estate is a legacy of Victorian policy and ambition, both in terms of construction, and in the creation of a new social institution, the modern prison. Both the physical infrastructure and the ideological foundations of the Victorian prison persist today.

This once 'visionary' prison design has been widely regarded as an historical relic, a barrier to progress and innovation. These establishments can be characterised by poor-quality accommodation and a relative shortage of opportunities for purposeful activity. The Victorian estate can exhibit some of the worst conditions across the prison system, with HMIP frequently reporting dark, damp cells with poor ventilation and drainage.

Despite these challenges, the Victorian prison remains a significant component of the urban prison estate, located close to courts and communities. Our research, conducted with those living and working in Victorian prisons, highlights some ways in which these challenging buildings may be reimagined and re-deployed.

The persistence of the Victorian prison also has conceptual implications. This 'modern' prison was conceived in part to resolve a 'penal crisis' beginning in the 1770s, following the suspension of

transportation to America and a growing distaste for corporal punishment and execution, as well as in response to changing social and moral values. The prison sentence itself became the punishment. Today's debate about the nature and purpose of punishment and prison recalls that of the nineteenth century (as evidenced, for example, in the [Howard Journal's special Centenary issue](#)).

The challenges evident in the Victorian prison often bring it into the public eye. Today, the prison estate in England and Wales is experiencing acute pressure, with the population currently at its highest ever level, reaching a peak of 88,225 in October 2023 (and closely matched in March 2024). The Victorian prison estate arguably persists in part because these pressures prevent serious consideration of closure of establishments of any era. The prison system is already operating above the Ministry of Justice's own measure of safe and decent accommodation and is set to reach capacity in summer 2024. Criminal justice stakeholders and oversight bodies have repeatedly raised concerns about the levels of crowding and the impact on safe, decent, and purposeful environments for those living and working in prisons. Prison population projections indicate that this is a long-term problem, with the prison population set to grow to up to 114,800 by March 2028. The Ministry of Justice have announced a raft of emergency measures aimed at increasing capacity, including the renting of police custody cells and cells abroad, and the construction of 'rapid deployment cells', prefabricated temporary accommodation with a 15-year lifespan. Draft legislation has proposed scrapping custodial sentences of 12 months or less, and the early release scheme continues to expand. Whilst efforts to reduce the prison population are welcome, short-term measures are limited in their effectiveness in addressing longer-term challenges.

These pressures tell us that the system requires a rethink, both in terms of its infrastructure and, more abstractly, its purpose. Tackling the challenges faced by the Victorian prison estate, and the system more broadly, will require ambition, a clear vision for the future of the whole prison system, and the foresight necessary to effectively deploy Victorian prisons to support rehabilitation and promote reintegration.

Recommendations:

- **A comprehensive strategy for prisons should be created, to articulate a clear and appropriate purpose for the Victorian estate within the wider context of a modernising prison system.**
- **Some Victorian prison accommodation should be redeployed, reinvesting in infrastructure, and**
- **Inspection assessment criteria should be reconsidered for the Victorian estate.**

The Victorian estate

Victorian prisons have faced harsh criticism since their construction. Although these buildings were designed as ‘visionary’ institutions that reflected many of the major engineering innovations and ideas of citizenship and reform emerging in the Victorian era, critics quickly fell upon the perceived flaws of their infrastructure and regime. Indeed, almost exactly a century ago, the 1922 Report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee argued that although the Victorian estate had only recently been built, ‘the only reform to which [their] buildings can be usefully subjected is dynamite’.¹ In more recent discussion of penal reform and the prison system, the critique is just as unyielding. Our archival research traced the ebb and flow of debate across the past century, showing that the ‘problem’ of the Victorian estate often seems most acute at moments of crisis – e.g. after a riot, escape, or other exposé. Despite repeated promises, often prompted by concern for poor conditions, to close prisons described by the then Chancellor in 2015 as outdated ‘relics’, Victorian infrastructure remains an integral part of the prison estate.² These institutions persist because the original buildings endure, because they influence the design of more contemporary prison structures, and because the overuse of incarceration continues to place pressure on the system, precluding the closure of establishments, regardless of their age.

Endurance: Public discourse frequently describes the Victorian-era estate as ‘crumbling’ and this terminology has arguably become synonymous with

these buildings. However, the mere fact that they are still in use indicates that – like many Victorian structures – they are *more* robust than many modern prisons. Indeed, prisons built decades *after* 1901 exhibit multiple and expensive issues of degradation and dilapidation. Due to less successful design and the poor quality of original build standards and materials, some have already had to be demolished.

Influence: The 90 Victorian prisons built or added to during a concerted building programme between 1842 and 1877 were largely constructed to a consistent design. Internal finishes and exterior styles varied, but most conformed to a radial hub-spoke layout, built in brick and/or stone. All featured small cells intended for single occupancy, arranged along landings stacked three or more storeys high. Galleried spaces and internal atria provided clear sight lines, enabling officers to see, and be seen, by colleagues on other levels. Following a series of deviations from this ‘blueprint’ since the Second World War - many subsequently deemed unsuccessful - recent prison construction has, to some extent, returned to this radial hub-spoke model, albeit using modern materials and techniques, and with integral infrastructure and services. In this sense, their design is recalled in modern facilities such as HMPs Berwyn, Thameside and Oakwood.

What, then, is the impact of the persistence of the Victorian prison in the contemporary prison system? The following sections outline key components of these buildings in terms of their function in the 21st century.

Site and location

Victorian prisons were built on what were then the outskirts of towns and cities. These purpose-built prisons were often in quite compact spaces, designed to efficiently meet the needs of the prison population and deliver dominant ideas of reform and discipline. However, as a result of urban expansion, they have usually become enclosed within the city itself, and scope for prison expansion has become more limited. This now restricts opportunities to provide facilities for education and training, or outdoor exercise areas. Provision of green spaces is often limited, a shortcoming which has proven negative effects on the wellbeing of people living and working in prisons.³



However, their urban location does mean that Victorian prisons are now usually well-served by public transport infrastructure. They are also close to incarcerated people's families, to the community and to courts (although the development in remote hearings suggests that the significance of this function may diminish over time). Proximity enables family contact, known to support reintegration and reduce recidivism. For many incarcerated people we interviewed, this proximity to home and community counterbalanced challenging living conditions.

Physical fabric, conditions and accessibility

Victorian prisons often give a strong aesthetic impression that they are 'old', which is unsurprising given many original features of these buildings are preserved under listed status. Many participants reported that assumptions about the inside of the prison were strongly connected to the exterior appearance, with them expecting 'old-fashioned' and 'Victorian conditions' to match the exterior age of the building. What we characterise as the Victorian prison is, however, a product of physical additions, adaptations, and alterations which have been ongoing for decades. The fabric of the Victorian estate has changed markedly over time, with alterations beginning in the nineteenth century itself. Wings have been extended in length, width, and height. Windows have been enlarged; original doors, flooring and railings repaired and replaced. Roofs have been completely replaced to let in more natural light. In-cell sanitation has been installed, along with first gas and then electric light, as well as telephones, etc. In many cases, of the original construction, only the walls remain. However, the thickness of these walls presents challenges for retrofitting and for general maintenance, which can be expensive and time consuming. Installing ensuite shower facilities is impractical in many Victorian-era prisons, for example. Described as 'quirky', 'one-off', 'idiosyncratic', buildings by maintenance staff, in the context of the outsourcing of the prison maintenance contract, this can mean that Victorian prisons constantly have a long list of jobs that need to be done.

Temperature regulation is a persistent problem, despite efforts to modernise heating and ventilation systems over the past century. In many prisons, maintenance staff struggle with heating infrastructure. Temporary boilers are in place, and incarcerated people complain that they are frequently cold because of the poor quality of prison-issue blankets, and due to intermittent heating on the wings. Thick brick or stone walls take time to warm up. In many cases, the same parts of the buildings that are persistently damp and cold today (e.g. cells in corners of buildings facing the prevailing wind), had been reported as such in nineteenth century Governors' reports.



Conversely, in summer, poor ventilation means that cells overheat, creating extremely uncomfortable conditions. Thick walls initially protect inhabitants, but once they become warm, they retain and radiate heat. In the original Victorian construction, a simple and effective 'plenum' ventilation system had ensured a flow of fresh air into cells but over decades of refurbishments, and due to modern fire regulations, many plenum cell vents have been blocked, and most ventilation stacks (resembling chimneys) on roofs have been dismantled and removed, rendering this system ineffective. Modern retrofitted windows with 'trickle vent' ventilation offer wholly inadequate ventilation, and both incarcerated people and staff suffer in extremely hot and stuffy conditions on wings.

Throughout the estate, the overheating of buildings is already recognised by HMPPS as an operational problem that will become worse given the more intense extremes of weather that we can expect under a climate crisis. The Victorian estate is not immune to this challenge.

Victorian prisons are also acutely affected by the ageing prison population. Despite extensive modernisation programmes, narrow landings, steep staircases, galleried wings, and the difficulties of undertaking building work mean that Victorian prisons present challenges for accessibility. Installation of lifts is difficult. People with mobility issues, including the growing number of older and elderly people (currently the fastest growing age group within the prison population), often find themselves confined to one landing, with few opportunities to leave their wing.

Conditions and regime are further impacted by high and rising remand populations (currently accounting for a fifth of the prison population, and at a 50-year record high). Many people on remand are held awaiting trial or sentencing in inner-city Victorian establishments due to their proximity to local courts.

As well as 'crumbling', Victorian prisons have also become synonymous with the term 'overcrowded'. Almost without fail, HMIP reports note that cells designed for single occupancy are now doubled-up. The result is a very significant problem both of decency and of hygiene, given the proximity of toilets, (where sanitation has been provided within every cell rather than via three-into-two, where two cells each access one half of a middle cell that has been split into two and converted into two separate toilets, each serving a cell on either side). The impact of crowded accommodation on wellbeing has been heightened by the impact of Covid-19 and staff shortages, which mean people are locked up together for upwards of 20 hours a day.

Although the Victorian estate has barely ever been operated with the intended single occupancy (only a few years after opening, some already had two or three people living in cells intended for one), many of its operational challenges are as much, if not more, a factor of consistent overcrowding, than of the characteristics of the buildings. The specific challenges that crowding poses in these buildings are clearly the result of the increasing population of the prison system itself, and resulting management decisions, rather than of the age of the prisons.

Management and security

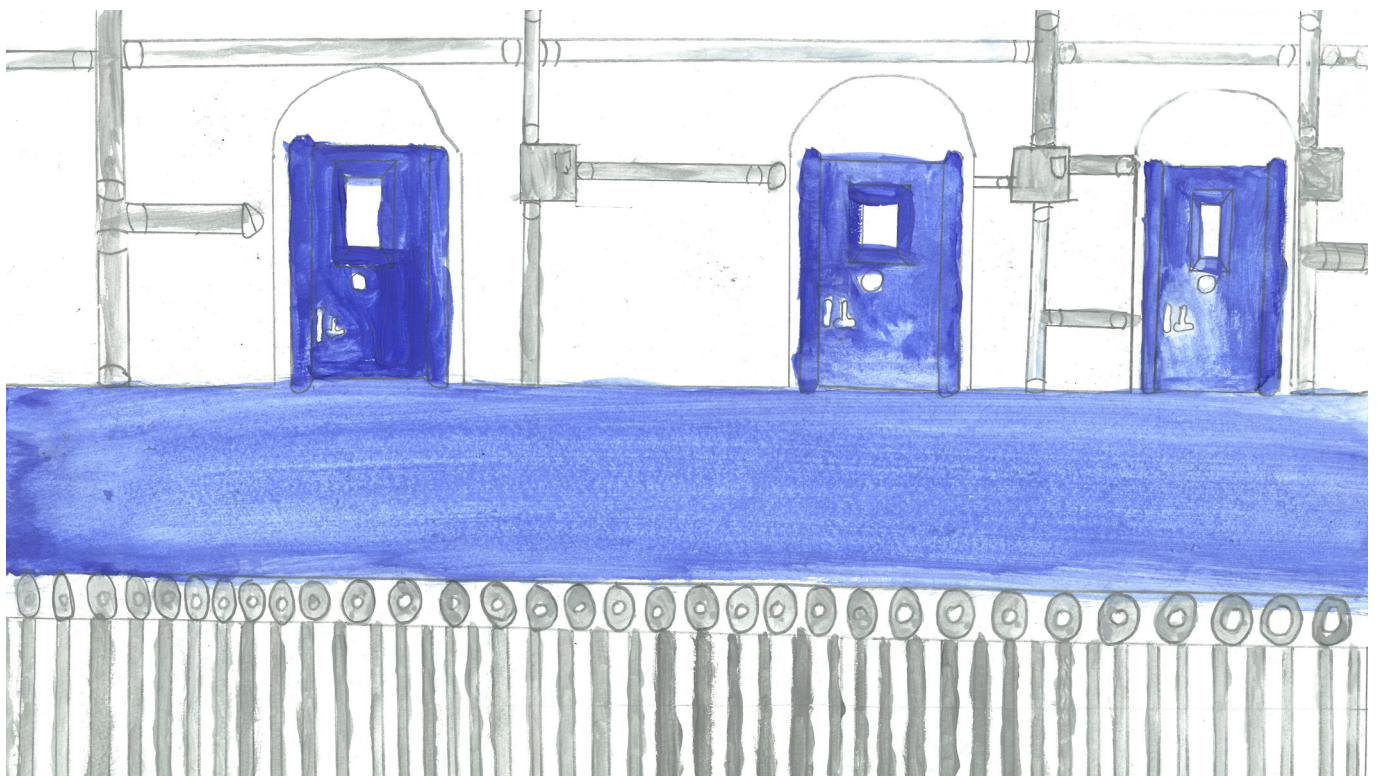
The Victorian estate represents some of our most robust prison accommodation. The quality of the original building expertise and materials was very high. As a result, where well-maintained, these buildings are some of the most physically secure within the prison estate. During research interviews, several senior respondents reflected that since these prisons form the secure 'backbone' of the prison estate, they are often a backstop location for the most challenging and disruptive individuals. Therefore, dispensing with them without suitable replacement would be operationally extremely challenging.

A consistent message throughout our interviews was that Victorian prisons 'got the layout right'. The visibility afforded by long galleried wings with good sightlines in all directions and with few hidden corners, was linked to feelings of safety on the part of both incarcerated people and staff. Perhaps related to this feature, Victorian prisons see fewer cases of self-harm and violence than the estate as a whole.⁴

However, modern refurbishments have impeded these sightlines. Staff office 'bubbles' on wings, and robust steel structures supporting new netting and new wider staircases, impede visibility and acoustics, meaning that staff can no longer see or hear one another as clearly as before.

Even where staff office 'bubbles' have been created, staff make themselves highly visible. Operational staff and prison governors told us that in more modern prisons with better staff office provision, staff could remain in offices during shifts. In Victorian-era prisons staff were more likely to be out on the landings interacting with incarcerated people, with the result that they knew them better and were better able to support rehabilitation.

Staff felt that the Victorian prison facilitated staff training. Since many are 'locals', they hold: people awaiting trial and sentencing; people relocated closer to home in the latter stages of their sentences whilst navigating re-entry; and people serving the whole of their sentences and engaging in employment and training. This enables junior staff to quickly become familiar with 'everything that can happen to someone in prison'. Since some Victorian prisons also lack in-cell technology, staff also supported people in prison in submitting paper applications for everyday requests. This required staff to understand and explain the operational systems behind these 'apps'. Together with the intense nature of interaction on landings this was described by many as 'fast track' training for prison staff.



Artwork by Mark, HMP Liverpool, 2023

The connected layout of Victorian prisons (i.e. long wings connected at a 'centre', rather than detached campus-style buildings) meant that Governors and other senior staff felt visible and approachable. One commented that since he walked around the whole prison every morning on the '2's' (at first floor level), if people wanted to speak to him directly, they would know where and when to find him, and would have the opportunity to do so. For senior staff, this meant that it was quick and easy for them to 'take the temperature' of the wings, and to effectively identify and resolve issues.

For Governors, the fabric of the buildings and their restricted urban sites posed problems of appropriate provision of activity. In many establishments, it is simply more difficult and expensive to add new structures or repurpose existing spaces. However, whilst describing these as drawbacks, they simultaneously recognised potential benefits. Governors and senior management teams needed to develop more creativity in their problem-solving than would be the case in a more flexible site and had to use their available resources in the most effective manner.

Cultural significance

The Victorian estate occupies a particular place in the collective consciousness of both the people who live and work within it, and the general public. More than a fifth of the custodial population of England and Wales currently reside in prisons with Victorian accommodation. Furthermore, since many of these are 'local' prisons (holding those awaiting trial or sentencing), very few of the remaining (male) prison population will *not* have spent time in one, meaning that the Victorian estate constitutes something of a shared experience for men in prison. The sheer longevity of the Victorian estate, and by extension the plethora of representations in literature and on screen (including sitcoms like *Porridge* and dramas like *Time*), means that there is today a sense of the Victorian prison as the 'archetypal' British prison, firmly established in the collective cultural consciousness.

For prison staff we detected a sense of pride in having worked in one of these prisons; we had anticipated that prison staff would demonstrate a sense of attachment to the Victorian prison as a workplace, connected to its long history within their city and sometimes intertwined with their own family history of prison work. More unexpected was a similar attachment on the part of some incarcerated people. These interviewees valued the sense of history that they felt was carried by the buildings, felt a connection to the generations of people who had occupied the cells before them, and readily compared their own experiences with how they imagined past lives had been lived in these prisons. Although they could astutely contrast the conditions in their cells with more modern prisons they had served in or heard about, they could also imagine everyday life in their current prison in the era of slopping-out, and before in-cell technology like televisions.

The Governor states that the gaol was built for separate confinement, but the system has been departed from in each of the two years it has been occupied, because of it being too small for the number of prisoners confined ...

The excess of prisoners has been provided for by sleeping two... and three in a cell, in the number of cells required.

Prison Commissioners on
HMP Liverpool, 1857.

Photo: Andy Aitchison





Photo: Andy Aitchison

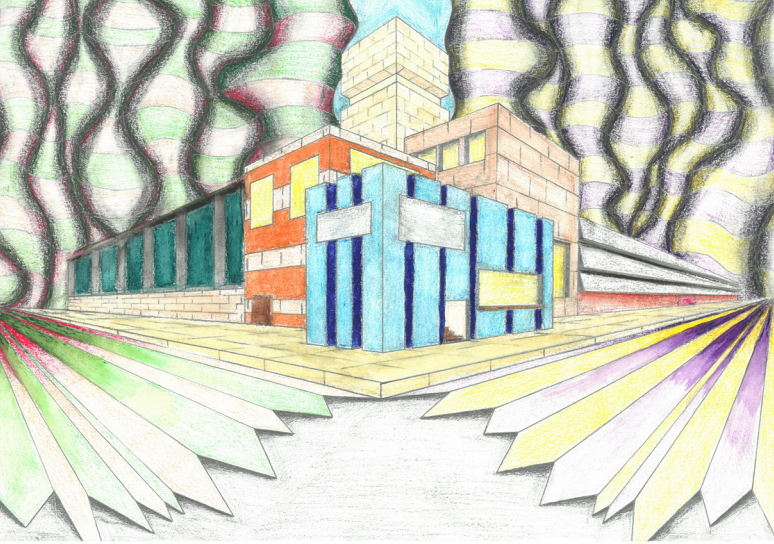
And I always felt safer, if you like, in the Victorian style prison, in the radials, because I knew wherever I was someone else could see me. And what's more, not only could someone else see me, but they've got access to get me help very quickly, because help was nearby.

Former staff member, HMP Leeds

We might have expected that those living and working in these 'crumbling', overcrowded prisons would condemn their living conditions as not fit for purpose, but their views were far more complex and nuanced. Incarcerated people contrasted the 'historical' external appearance of these prisons – 'like a castle' – with their modernised interiors. Many with experience of imprisonment in newer establishments, strongly favoured the Victorian institution. They felt that the staff in these prisons were more confident and competent than their counterparts. Both incarcerated people and staff used the term 'a proper jail' in reference to the Victorian estate countless times during our research.

This briefing paper draws on the research project [The Persistence of the Victorian Prison: Alteration, Inhabitation, Obsolescence and Affirmative Design](#), 2020-24, in partnership with The Howard League for Penal Reform and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/T005483/1).

The project tracks the continued operation of prisons built during the Victorian period (1837-1901), focusing on how the fabric of their buildings has changed over time, how they function today, the experience of living and working in them, their cultural significance, and the impact of their continued operation. It has involved over 50 interviews with formerly incarcerated people and former prison staff with experience of the Victorian-era estate; six weeks of fieldwork within two Victorian-era prisons (HMP Lincoln (2022) and HMP Liverpool (2023)) involving over 100 interviews with people serving custodial sentences and current staff. This research was supported by extensive archival research; conversations with senior civil servants; creative work, photography, public engagement, and analysis of statistical data pertaining to the Victorian estate. The project has informed successful public exhibitions at the Midlands Art Centre (Birmingham), Lincoln Central Library, and Museum of Liverpool.



Artwork by David, HMP Liverpool, 2023

Conclusion and recommendations

In many ways, the crisis the system is currently experiencing is made visible in the Victorian prison estate. The problems caused by overcrowding are both present in and accentuated by conditions in Victorian prisons.

The nature of Victorian-era accommodation and the relative shortage of opportunities for purposeful activity both stem from and are compounded by overcrowding. The robust physical infrastructure, limitations on space and high cost of renovation preclude very significant improvements to cellular accommodation.

And yet, despite facing significant challenges, as a substantial component of the prison estate, Victorian prisons may offer a much more significant opportunity to encourage and improve rehabilitation and reintegration than is currently being realised.

The main advantages of Victorian prisons are their proximity to courts and to communities. The predominant Cat B local function benefits from this location, enabling transfer to in-person court hearings. For many incarcerated people, proximity to family and community outweigh poor living standards. However, the use of (arguably) the worst accommodation in the estate for people awaiting trial, whose guilt has not yet been established, is morally questionable.

There have been many calls over the past century for the closure of the Victorian estate, but since projected growth in the prison population outstrips projected growth in estate capacity, these are unlikely to be answered. **For the foreseeable future,**

Victorian prisons will need to remain in service.

Their problems are really the problems of the prison system and of prisons policy in general and can only be effectively addressed at this level.

It is vital for the Ministry of Justice and HMPPS to reconsider the role of the Victorian prison within the wider penal estate.

Whilst ultimately, solutions to the pressures faced by the system lie in a comprehensive programme of decarceration, this project has highlighted some ways to deploy the Victorian prison estate. It has illustrated the humanity and resourcefulness of people living and working in prisons, and shows how their experiences can help to make change.

Reducing population pressure in the overall prison system is clearly essential in order to ease the overcrowding whose effects are particularly acute in the Victorian-era estate. Beyond this:

We recommend the development of a comprehensive strategy for prisons, which articulates a clear and appropriate purpose for the Victorian estate within a modernising and significantly reduced prison system.

As part of this strategy, we suggest prioritising the following key areas:

Effective deployment of Victorian accommodation

The most effective deployment of the Victorian estate would limit the negative impacts of poor-quality accommodation whilst maximising the benefits of an urban location offering some of the opportunities for purposeful activity that cannot be provided within the prisons themselves.

One way to reduce the impact of poor living conditions is to limit the length of time spent in them, for example by deploying some Victorian prisons - either wholly or partially - within the Category D Open estate. This move brings dual benefits:

People in open conditions may be less likely to 'fail' where open and closed functions are co-located, through improved selection and preparation, and opportunities to undertake appropriate investigations before initiating recall.⁵

For those remaining in closed conditions, the re-purposing of some Victorian living accommodation from closed to open would improve outcomes by (i) reducing the likelihood of cell sharing, and (ii) improving access to purposeful activity through reduced pressure on limited workshop accommodation.

The longstanding issue of overcrowding in Victorian prisons (and the system as a whole) must be decisively addressed, for reasons of decency, safety, and wellbeing. These prisons – whose cells are uniquely inappropriate for crowding - must finally be operated in single occupancy, as originally intended.

Reinvesting in proven infrastructure

The Open/Category D estate is unlikely ever to require the full capacity of the Victorian estate, so those prisons remaining as closed establishments will require continued modernisation to raise living standards.

The advantages of investing in the Victorian estate are that the design of these prisons is considered by both staff and incarcerated people be effective (in terms of clear sightlines, design-enabled staff development and staff-resident interactions, and genuine community integration). By contrast, the efficacy of newer prisons, often located away from urban centres, is as yet unproven. Bearing in mind the irreplicable urban accessibility of many Victorian prisons, before future investments in new prison infrastructure are made, serious consideration should be given to investment in the Victorian estate, due to its location. Priority should be given to accessibility, and to the resolution of longstanding issues with key infrastructure such as heating and plumbing.

Reconsidering inspection assessment criteria

At present, HMIP assesses all prisons against the same four tests for a healthy establishment: safety, respect, purposeful activity and rehabilitation and release planning. Arguably the limitations of the Victorian estate - predominantly the limited availability of opportunities for purposeful activity, given the restricted scope for workshops etc within small footprints - mean that they are very likely to receive reduced scores in certain categories.

We therefore suggest a thorough revision of the assessment criteria to account for the unique infrastructural situation of Victorian prisons, thereby enabling a more nuanced appreciation of their attributes. In doing so, managers will be able to more effectively ascertain the scope for the use of these establishments in the current and future prison estate.

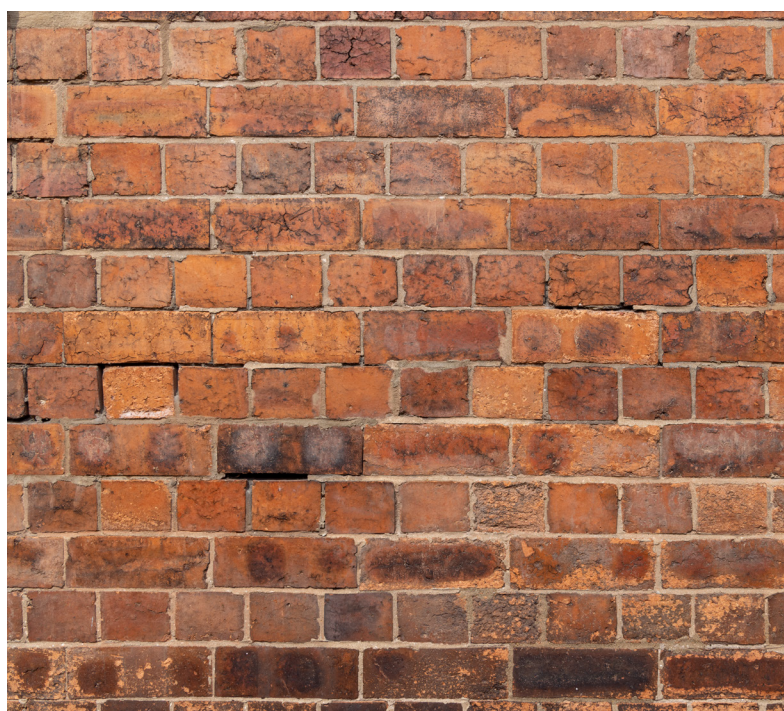


Photo: Andy Aitchison

¹ 1922 Report of the Prison System Enquiry Committee, p91

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prison-building-revolution-announced-by-chancellor-and-justice-secretary>

³ Moran et al (2021) Does nature contact in prison improve wellbeing? Mapping land cover to identify the effect of greenspace on self-harm and violence in prisons in England and Wales. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111 (6): 1779-1795

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Goodley, G., & Pearson, D. (2024). Monitoring prisoners preparing for release: Who 'fails' in open prison conditions? *European Journal of Criminology*, 21 (2): 251-273



Photo: Andy Aitchison

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