



Howard League for Penal Reform

Annual report 2024-25

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HM Prison &
Probation Service

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Contents

Chair's welcome	7
Meet the team	9
Our objectives	13
Our achievements and performance	15
Financial summary	35
Our plans for the future	37



Chair's welcome

It has been an enormous privilege to be Chair of the Howard League for Penal Reform during another pivotal year for criminal justice. This is my seventh annual report since taking up the role, and this time it really will be the last one. My successor will be appointed in the new year, and I am grateful to Tomas Thurogood-Hyde for being Chair in the interim.



As I prepare to move on, I look forward with confidence to seeing the charity continue in its mission to build a more humane and effective response to crime; and I look forward to playing my part once again as a proud member of the Howard League.

The last seven years have been extraordinary for criminal justice in England and Wales, with severe backlogs in the courts, intolerable pressure on a probation service still trying to recover from the vandalism of earlier governments, and our overcrowded prisons lurching from crisis to crisis, all under the watch of no fewer than seven Secretaries of State for Justice (one of whom did the job twice). People living and working in prisons have been required to adapt to a flurry of increasingly desperate policy decisions to avert crisis – before, during and after a terrible pandemic that forced all of us to view the world in a different way. While we all learned something about the loss of liberty, most of us did so in conditions and circumstances so much more tolerable than those faced by our fellow citizens in prisons before, during and after the Covid-19 lockdowns.

More positively, I am very proud of how the Howard League itself has changed in the last seven years, thoroughly renewing itself to be ready to meet the challenges of the authoritarian, populist and punitive times in which we find ourselves. This is not only an organisation with new leadership, new working practices and a new home (closer to the corridors of power); it is one that has become much clearer and more focused in its strategy and approach. And the achievements of the last 12 months show that these changes are making a positive impact already.

Our five-year strategy identifies sentencing reform as a major priority, and there has been progress this year in the form of an independent review, to which we submitted evidence. Now our attention turns to the Sentencing Bill going through Parliament – potentially the most important draft legislation that we have seen in this field for decades.

Our strategic focus on ending the detention of people on sentences of imprisonment for public protection (IPP) led us to convene a working group, headed by a former Lord Chief Justice, to draw up recommendations for ending the scandal for good. These proposals were launched in the House of Lords and are now with the government.

Other priorities are to address the overuse of remand and the injustice wrought by joint enterprise cases – problems we have highlighted through our legal, research and participation work in prisons. Once again, our legal advice line has been a lifeline for children and young people in custody; the egregious decision to arm staff in English young offender institutions with PAVA spray underlines why this service is so important.

Sadly, this was also a year in which we lost production editor Brenda McWilliams, who worked with such skill and devotion on the Howard Journal of Crime and Justice for almost half a century. Editors, authors and reviewers benefited greatly from her tireless, patient and careful oversight of all aspects of the journal, and she is already sorely missed. My thanks also to Ian Loader who is stepping down as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal, where he has expanded its vision and authority significantly.

I conclude simply by offering my heartfelt thanks to the excellent and committed staff of the Howard League, to my fellow Board members past and present, and to our members, who make the work possible.

Professor Fergus McNeill
Chair

October 2025

Meet the team

Company Number: 898514 registered in the United Kingdom

Charity Number: 251926 registered in England and Wales

Registered office and operational address: 75-77 St John Street, London EC1M 4NN

Board members

Nader Alaghband

Charles Bland

Professor Ben Bradford (until Nov 2025)

Dr Zubaida Haque (until Nov 2024)

Christina Line

Thalia Maragh

Alexandra Marks CBE (until Jun 2025)

Professor Fergus McNeill, Chair (until Oct 2025)

Andrew Morris

John Tress, Honorary Treasurer

Tomas Thurogood-Hyde, Interim Chair from Nov 2025

Honorary President

Lord Macdonald of River Glaven, KC

Staff

Key management personnel

Andrea Coomber KC (Hon.)

Gemma Abbott

Euginia Lolomari

Andrew Neilson

Chief Executive

Legal Director

Director of Finance and Operations

Director of Campaigns

Other staff

Lee Brown	Operations Coordinator
Louis Chapman	Legal Administrative Officer (from Sep 2025)
Dr Helen Churcher	Senior Research and Project Officer
Amy Dolley	Policy and Public Affairs Officer (until Mar 2025)
Oscar Frandsen	Solicitor (until Sep 2025)
Steve Gallant	Development Support Officer (until Oct 2025)
Dr Tim Kerr	Membership Officer
Noor Khan	Press and Public Affairs Officer
Katie Logue	Communications Coordinator
Clara Kraebber	Communications Coordinator (from May 2025)
Sophie Lumsden	Development Manager
Sinead MacCann	Managing Solicitor
Adriana Matrigiani	Solicitor (until Oct 2024)
Rob Preece	Communications Manager
Claire Salama	Managing Solicitor (until Oct 2025)
Anna Spencer	Solicitor
Ayomide Sotubo	Policy Officer
Ryan Walker	Development Support Officer
Maya Ward-Lowery	Legal and Projects Support Officer (until Jun 2025)

Finance, Audit and Risk Committee members

Ben Elger
Christina Line
Lucy Robinson
Delbert Sandiford
Tomas Thurogood-Hyde
John Tress, Honorary Treasurer

Howard Journal of Crime and Justice

Professor Ian Loader <i>University of Oxford</i>	Editor-in-Chief
Professor Rachel Condry <i>University of Oxford</i>	Editor
Dr David Green <i>John Jay College, New York, USA</i>	Editor
Professor Elena Larrauri <i>Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain</i>	Editor
Professor Simon Mackenzie <i>Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand</i>	Editor
Fernando Avila <i>Brock University, Canada</i>	Book Review Editor
Roxanna Dehaghani <i>Cardiff University</i>	Book Review Editor
Brenda McWilliams	Publishing Editor (until Jul 2025)

In the past year, we have said goodbye to policy officer Amy Dolley, legal administrator Maya Ward-Lowery, solicitor Adriana Matrigiani, and solicitor Oscar Frandsen. Our Communications Coordinator, Katie Logue, has gone on maternity leave, meaning we have been joined on a part-time basis by Clara Kraebber. We have also been joined by Louis Chapman as our new legal administrator.

The nature of the Howard League's work can be challenging. To support staff and to nurture a healthy organisation, we have engaged an experienced group clinical practitioner, Patrick Mandikate, to work with staff twice a month. He is wonderful and makes staff feel safer and supported.

We are hugely grateful to Nina Williams at Charles Russell Speechlys LLP for their advice and guidance to our human resources function. We are also grateful to the employment law team at Freshfields for legal advice over the year.

Our objectives

The Howard League for Penal Reform is the oldest penal reform charity in the world. We were established in 1866 as the Howard Association, named after John Howard, the first English prison reformer. In 1921, we merged with the Penal Reform League, forming the Howard League for Penal Reform.

In July 2023, our Board agreed a new strategy and theory of change that will take us to 2028. Over the five-year period, 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.

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.

Our thematic priorities include:

- Campaigning on the failure of prison as the answer to crime generally, as well as for 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 the treatment of secondary parties in joint enterprise murder cases, particularly on women and 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.

Our theory of change – which we keep under review – is based on the understanding that reducing the overuse of prison and improving the lives of people in prison will require a multifaceted approach. This includes public campaigning, policy, advocacy and strategic litigation. Through these activities, we aim to influence public attitudes, enhance political understanding, build accountability and ultimately reform the criminal justice system to deliver a fairer and more effective and less harmful criminal justice system.

Values

The Howard League's Cultural Compass 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 anti-discriminatory organisation. We invest in building an inclusive organisation with diverse members, staff and leadership. We ensure that our staff are equipped to challenge racism and discrimination in all its forms, wherever they see or experience it.

Our achievements and performance

This has been a particularly busy year for the Howard League, with our work on a number of key thematic issues coming to the fore of public and political discourse. Our efforts in recent years to build meaningful cross-team work have allowed us to make the most of these opportunities.

Campaigning

Lifting the lid

At the centre of the Howard League's mission is putting the case for fewer people in prison. To this end, we are consistent in our messaging, to our members and supporters, to journalists and to the public, that sending more people to prison for longer carries significant human and financial costs, and that public money would better be spent investing in housing, education and health services that are proven to cut crime.

Over the past year, the extent of the prison capacity crisis – long foretold by the Howard League – has driven more media and press attention to the realities of sentence inflation and an estate that cannot keep up with demand for prison places. In this context and armed with ever more critical reports by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, our scope to speak to the public about prisons has increased.

We have enjoyed significant reach with the media and have spent much time building the capacity of journalists and commentators interested in our issues. This has led to more 'reactive' stories about prison, as well as longer-form journalism. Some highlights:

- In October 2024, we appeared on the Today programme on BBC Radio 4 and gave television interviews to BBC Breakfast, ITV News and Channel 4 in response to the government's early release scheme and the announcement of an independent sentencing review to be led by David Gauke.
- In December 2024, our analysis of the prison capacity crisis was reported by Sky News, the Times, the Guardian, the Daily Mail and the Independent, prompted by a report from the National Audit Office.
- In February 2025, we were interviewed by BBC News and provided an op-ed article for the Independent in response to an interim report from the independent sentencing review.
- In March 2025, after a political row erupted over updated guidelines from the Sentencing Council, we took part in a live phone-in debate with the Shadow Justice Secretary, Robert Jenrick, on BBC Radio 5 Live. We followed this with an op-ed article for the Independent about the proposed guidelines.

- In April 2025, we criticised the government’s decision to authorise the use of PAVA spray in prisons holding children, with our response being reported by ITV News, LBC, the Times, the Guardian, the Mirror and the Independent.
- In May 2025, we appeared on the Today programme on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Radio Wales to provide our analysis of the final report from the independent sentencing review. We followed this with an op-ed article for the Independent and statements published by BBC News, Sky News, Fox News, the Guardian and the Standard.
- From June 2025, we worked closely with the Independent for several weeks to promote the recommendations of a working group that we convened, aimed at ending the detention of people on IPP sentences. This involved a front-page story on the working group’s report, with an accompanying leader column, and several mentions in other articles about the scandal.

Addressing the IPP crisis

The ongoing injustice of those sentenced under the now abolished IPP (and DPP) sentence is a priority for the Howard League. There are two key aspects.

First, the fact that more than 1,000 people in custody on IPP sentences are over tariff – nearly 700 are more than 10 years over tariff – and remain unreleased by the Parole Board. The Parole Board processes are slow, and people serving the IPP sentence, and indeed those professionals who support their release, often feel that the high threshold for release established in law is impossible for many to meet – in the absence of opportunities in custody and given their psychological profile, to which the endlessness of the sentence undoubtedly contributes.

The second aspect is that many who are released are being recalled to prison, often multiple times, for administrative breaches of licence. They then need to be re-released by the Parole Board, often waiting years for the opportunity to put their case. At the time of writing, it takes on average 30 months for someone recalled on an IPP sentence to secure a Parole Board hearing; they now represent the majority of people serving an IPP sentence in prison. Until late 2024, people serving an IPP sentence had to wait 10 years in the community before applying to have their licence terminated, thereby ending the possibility of recall to prison.

The injustice of the IPP sentence was recognised more than 12 years ago when it was abolished, and yet it continues to blight the lives of thousands of people and their families. We have hundreds of people in prison on IPP sentences within our membership, who write every week about the devastation of the sentence and the hopelessness of the IPP Action Plan, which to date is the government’s only ‘solution’ to progress to release.

In the last year, addressing the IPP sentence has taken centre stage in our work, with our focus on providing a meaningful and politically deliverable solution to end its legacy.

Our work has been multi-faceted, but firmly based on the experiences of people serving the sentence. We have attended 'IPP Forums' in various prisons, speaking to people serving IPP sentences about the challenges they face. We have taken the editor-in-chief of a national newspaper into prisons to meet men serving the sentence, along with politicians and lawyers concerned about it. Our membership of people serving the IPP sentence has grown, with increasing press attention around our work.

Our Chief Executive, Andrea Coomber, and Managing Solicitor, Claire Salama, sit on the HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) IPP Expert Challenge Group, which meets regularly with those who are responsible for the care of people in prison on IPP sentences, the Parole Board, psychological experts and civil society, to consider progress. We have consistently put the case for better data collection and data sharing about people in prison on IPP sentences and strengthened communication with those serving the sentence directly.

With others, we successfully lobbied the Secretary of State for Justice in the last Conservative government on the need to reduce the licence period. We welcomed the changes to IPP licences that came into effect with the Victims and Prisoners Act, which included: a reduction of time at which IPPs could have their licence reviewed by the Parole Board from 10 years down to three years; the addition of automatic termination after a further two years on licence for those who do not have their licence terminated by the Parole Board; a change to the Parole Board test for presumption of termination; and a power of the Secretary of State to grant executive release to people on IPP sentences, as well as a power to disapply a recall for the time to count towards automatic termination.

To support those eligible for termination and in recognition of the small numbers who are legally represented with their termination reviews, we prepared a practical 'how-to' guide for licence termination in collaboration with the Prison Reform Trust, the Prisoners' Advice Service and Dr Laura Janes.

The guide was launched in the summer of 2024, explaining both the rules as they applied at the time and the forthcoming changes. The guide was later updated in September 2024 and then again in February 2025 to reflect the announcement of relevant commencement dates. It has received wide acclaim and been shared widely, including by HMPPS and the Parole Board. It has been uploaded on to the Content Hub on prisoners' in-cell laptops.

Our lawyers trained 22 volunteers at law firm Peters and Peters LLP to host an advice line to support individuals with queries about the legislative changes brought in by the Victims and Prisoners Act. The hotline opened on 1 October 2024 and ran until mid-December. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with one stakeholder referring to it as a 'lifeline' for people on IPP sentences. In June, the collaboration between the Howard League and Peters and Peters was recognised at the annual The Lawyer Awards, receiving a 'highly commended' award in the category of pro bono initiative of the year.

While changes to the IPP licence are significant, they do little to change the lot of people on IPP sentences who remain in prison, never having been released by the Parole Board. This group, and those in the recall roundabout, is now our focus.

In late 2024 we formed an expert group, led by former Lord Chief Justice Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, to explore a lasting solution to the IPP scandal. We did this in recognition of the rejection by this government, as the last, of the Justice Committee's recommendation of resentencing of those serving the IPP sentence. The group included leading psychiatrists, psychologists, lawyers, a former Vice Chair of the Parole Board, a probation officer and an advisor with personal experience of serving an IPP sentence. We tasked the expert group with coming up with a resolution which would end the injustice while meeting the government's legitimate concerns about public safety.

The expert group reported in June 2025, with six recommendations. Chief among them was a change to the Parole Board test in IPP cases, where the Parole Board would be asked to set a date as to when a person will be released (within a two-year window for IPP sentenced prisoners, or one year for those on a DPP sentence), and to set out what is required to achieve that safely. The group also made recommendations related to the recall test and decision-making process; appeals; the availability of support packages on release and allowing IPP sentences to become spent under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 2024. We intended this report as a helpful contribution to the government, providing them with a route to address the injustices of the IPP sentence while ensuring public protection.

We continue to work with Lord Thomas and others in the House of Lords and organisations committed to correcting the IPP injustice to push for meaningful reform.

At the same time, we continue to explore the possibility of a legal challenge on the injustice wrought by the IPP sentence.

Joint enterprise secondary parties

'Joint enterprise' is a long-standing and complicated legal doctrine, whereby a number of individuals can be convicted, and sentenced, as if they were the primary perpetrator of a crime. We are particularly concerned about the operation of this doctrine in the context of secondary parties to joint enterprise murder, who are often sentenced to incredibly long sentences, despite having low levels of contribution to the index offence.

While there are very significant gaps in data, figures from the Crown Prosecution Service show that young Black men are disproportionately caught up in joint enterprise prosecutions. Any visit to the lifer estate bears out this racial disparity. Secondary parties often struggle to understand how they have been convicted 'when I didn't kill anyone', and this sometimes affects their progression through the prison system, up to release by the Parole Board.

Despite the landmark Jogie judgment of the Supreme Court in 2016, which found that a certain type of joint enterprise convictions represented 'a wrong turn', the 'substantial injustice' test adopted by the Court of Appeal as a threshold for successful appeal has meant that only one person has been released in line with the Jogie judgment. Prison leaders and prison staff and probation officers often tell us that they only learn if someone is a secondary party years into their sentence, and that better information on this profile of prisoner would be helpful in providing advice and support to them.

We are particularly concerned about the highly disproportionate number of men from racialised minorities who appear to be convicted as secondary parties in murder cases, and about the dearth of data about this group. We are also acutely concerned about the invisibility of women from the joint enterprise discourse, with worries about women caught up in offences committed by abusive intimate partners.

Over the past year, our ongoing work with leading joint enterprise campaigning group JENGBA and law firm Travers Smith LLP has seen the digitisation of JENGBA surveys of people in prison convicted under the doctrine of joint enterprise. These surveys represent the only available data on this group of people, with no distinction between primary and secondary parties being formally captured at the time of conviction or sentence. We are now in the process of analysing this data with a view to publishing a policy briefing that makes the case for the prison service doing its own audit of those convicted as secondary parties.

We continue to believe that telling the stories of joint enterprise secondary parties is critical to unearthing the realities of how this law operates and its impact on people in prison. To this end, we have built relationships with groups of joint enterprise prisoners at two prisons outside London, where we are in the process of working with the men to capture their stories, which speak to the injustice of secondary liability.

Over the last year, we have been working with a group of men at Coldingley prison who are serving life sentences for joint enterprise; to understand their experiences in prison and their concerns about the law. We have been working with them to develop case studies to demonstrate how joint enterprise works and have brought in potential allies in our work from the music industry to build their understanding.

Building on our work together, we supported the men to submit written evidence to the Westminster Commission on Joint Enterprise, where they shared their concerns with the Commission about the unjust nature of the law and made suggestions for reform. In July, we prepared the men to deliver oral evidence to the Westminster Commission, which held an in-person evidence session. The men spoke with authority not only about the experience of what it is like to serve a life sentence for an offence that you did not commit, but spoke to the weaknesses in prosecution, trial and judicial practices in such cases. We are now working with them to submit evidence to the Law Commission's consultation on murder, which includes a section on joint enterprise.

As part of our conversations with the men, we have discussed campaign ideas to raise awareness of joint enterprise, generate support and improve public understanding, including exploring how the music industry can be an effective tool for campaigning and driving change. These conversations have also highlighted systemic issues that, if addressed, could improve the experiences of the men in prison, such as concerns about the Parole Board's understanding of joint enterprise.

Our work in Coldingley has proven very rewarding for the men, but also for our staff and supporters in understanding the challenges of this kind of work. In September 2025, we brought together a group of women convicted of joint enterprise murder and serving life at Send prison, to better understand the challenges that they face. In the coming year, we plan to deepen our relationships with people at both prisons and build a programme of coproduced work based on their insights. With dedicated funding, we hope to be able to expand this work to other lifer prisons.

Remand

The remand population has been at a 50-year high this year, with people on remand accounting for more than a fifth of the total male prison population, and a quarter of all women in prison. The growing population reflects an increase in both the number of people being remanded to custody and the length of time people are spending awaiting trial and sentence as a result of the growing backlog in the criminal courts. Many of those who are remanded do not go on to receive a custodial sentence.

Prisons are in crisis and remanded prisoners experience particularly impoverished regimes, often in overcrowded Victorian local jails, with no opportunity to progress while they await trial and/or sentence.

Our work over the year has focused on youth justice and on women on remand.

As part of the Howard League's work on racial disparities in youth justice, we have been exploring the use of remand to youth detention in England and Wales. We set out to gain a clearer picture of how these disparities manifest across the different regions in England and Wales. To do this, we submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the Youth Custody Service asking for data on the number of children held on remand each month in each region, disaggregated by ethnicity, in the year ending March 2023. We then compared this data with the latest census data of children in each region and in each ethnic group.

The work uncovered concerning disparities in the use of remand for Black and Mixed heritage children in most regions in England and Wales when compared to the percentage they made up of children in each region. The data revealed that Black children are disproportionately remanded in all regions, other than in the north-east and south-west. The greatest rate of disproportionality was in the East Midlands, where Black children were remanded at eight times the expected rate. For Mixed heritage children, they were disproportionately remanded in all regions in England, with the greatest rate of disproportionality in the south-west, where they were also remanded at eight times the expected rate.

We have published a blogpost detailing this work with a breakdown of the disparities we found. We will continue to push government to explain and to address the causes of the disparate treatment.

With respect to women, we are part of a collective of women-led and justice organisations, funded currently by Firebird Collective, aiming to end the remand of women. The collective takes an intersectional and co-produced approach and is comprised of organisations with a range of experience in service delivery, complementing the Howard League's research and policy expertise. To date, we have worked to conduct evidence scoping and gathering for the collective. We supported the development and writing of a systematic literature review. We have also conducted data analysis on official statistics and made data requests aiming to address key remand data gaps and inform the collective's work.

This research scoping has confirmed our assumptions about women and remand and has allowed us to develop a programme of work going forward. We have also worked closely with project partners to develop the collective's strategies and next steps, recently devising a Theory of Change which has been agreed by partners. The coming months will see the launching of coproduction which will underline activities focused on campaigning and promoting narrative change, as well as statutory, court and legal accountability.



Sentencing

If there is one single driver for an overcrowded, ineffective prison population it is 25 years of poor law and practice around sentencing.

Last year's report outlined our work with five of the senior most retired judges in the country on the trend of ever-increasing sentences. *Sentence Inflation: A Judicial Critique* was published in September 2024 and explains the drivers of decades of increased prison sentences, and the financial and human costs of sentencing policy being dictated by political expedience. The judges put the case for the anticipated sentencing review to reverse years of sentence inflation, and to examine ways of accelerating the release of those people who are currently serving very long sentences.

The paper had an extraordinary impact, representing an unprecedented intervention of senior retired judges, attracting significant press and media interest, which continues to the time of writing. It was referred to by a wide variety of stakeholders as part of the Independent Sentencing Review, chaired by former Lord Chancellor David Gauke, which was launched at the end of 2024. Hailed as a once-in-a-generation opportunity, the Gauke Review was tasked with recasting the approach to sentencing in England and Wales.

With support from the Bromley Trust, Treebeard Trust and Henry Smith Charitable Trust, we were able to dedicate time to the Gauke Review, with the Howard League taking a leading role in corralling civil society efforts. We commissioned nationally representative public polling and focus group work from Public First, which was shared with the Review and Ministers. We met with the chair of the Review, David Gauke and with its lead official.

Our own submission to the Gauke Review was referred to extensively in its February interim report, which very much echoed the conclusions of the judges' report, that penal populism had resulted in increased sentences. The Review's final report unfortunately lacked the ambition of the interim report, with a focus on ensuring that its recommendations were politically deliverable. Its recommendations have been further watered down in the Sentencing Bill, that is currently before Parliament. The early Autumn of 2025 has seen us brief on the Sentencing Bill, as well as communicate with our members and the public about the importance of sentencing reform. As is reflected below, the Gauke Review – its launch, interim report and final report – have provided rich opportunities for media and press work to explain why sentencing policy matters.

Public affairs

The new Labour administration and a continuing capacity crisis in prisons laid fertile ground for the Howard League's public affairs work this year. We began the period by pressing the case for tackling sentence inflation and over the course of the year circulated public explainer pieces on prison overcrowding, on sentence inflation, and on the need for IPP reform.

The government's Independent Sentencing Review was our primary avenue for engagement over the winter and spring, with significant engagement on the Review as outlined above. The Howard League also convened a number of meetings for organisations in the sector to discuss the Review, and the subsequent Sentencing Bill now introduced before Parliament. Our briefing for parliamentarians on the Bill was referenced during the Second Reading debate in September. The Howard League also published a parliamentary briefing on the Mental Health Bill.

Our parliamentary work on IPP reform, based on the paper by the expert working group that was published in June, is ongoing. We launched the paper with an event in the House of Lords and held a subsequent briefing meeting for peers to discuss our recommendations. The paper's recommendations were also debated in the Lords in September.

In addition to the Independent Sentencing Review, the Howard League submitted written evidence to the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts. We also submitted written evidence to the Justice Select Committee inquiry on rehabilitation and resettlement, to the Public Accounts Committee on prison estate capacity, to the Joint Committee on Human Rights call for evidence into Human Rights and the Regulation of AI, and to the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee on electronic monitoring. We also gave oral evidence to that Committee's inquiry on prison culture.

Outreach

While digital audience statistics indicate that use of social media is generally in decline, we have consolidated our position as a go-to point for criminal justice analysis on the main platforms.

At the end of September 2025, our social media accounts were followed by almost 50,000 users: 32,375 on X (formerly Twitter); 6,352 on LinkedIn; 5,764 on Facebook; 2,494 on Bluesky; 1,506 on Instagram; 532 on YouTube; and 312 on Threads. This represents a modest rise of 3.7% in our total social media following over the course of the reporting year. We have lost followers on X – in common with many other charities – but have seen considerable growth on LinkedIn and Instagram, while welcoming thousands of followers to our newly established Bluesky account.

The website attracted a total of more than 87,000 users – an annual increase of 9.2% – and there were almost 205,000 page views. Web traffic reached its peak in March 2025, when we drew media attention to the fact that the prison population had risen above the level it had been when the Labour government came to power. This was also the month that ministers announced that they would no longer place girls in young offender institutions – a victory for our campaign.

We held eight events:

- 26 November 2024, Howard League Lecture in memory of Lord Parmoor, with Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers, Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd and Lord Burnett of Maldon, in person at Mishcon de Reya.
- 5 December 2024, annual members' meeting, online.
- 27 February 2025, The 2024-25 Sentencing Review: An opportunity to address the urgent need for sentencing reform, held jointly with Garden Court Chambers, online.
- 20 May 2025, Girls in custody: exploring the harms, in person at Doughty Street Chambers.
- 11 June 2025, Spotlights 11: Unpacking the sentencing review, online.
- 23 June 2025, launch event for the working group report, Ending the detention of people on IPP sentences, in person at the House of Lords.
- 2 July 2025, Spotlights 12: Ending the detention of people on IPP sentences, online.
- 29 September 2025, Spotlights 13: Probation under pressure, online.

Recordings of all Howard League Spotlights events are available for view on our website.

Litigating for change

Over the last year, our legal team has been developing a programme of strategic litigation cases alongside the day-to-day legal work that arises through our advice line for children and young people in prison.

PAVA spray

After some two years of deliberation, the Ministry of Justice finally announced in April 2025 that it would authorise PAVA spray to be used by officers in young offender institutions holding children in England. PAVA is a chemical irritant spray that can cause severe pain when sprayed in the eyes. It is classified as a prohibited weapon under the Firearms Act 1968.

It was originally expected that a decision would be made by the end of the summer of 2023, but this was repeatedly delayed both before and after the change in government – we understand in part because of our ongoing threat of legal action if PAVA was authorised for use against children in prison.

In July 2025, we issued judicial review proceedings in the High Court, submitting that the decision to authorise PAVA was unlawful because the Secretary of State for Justice failed to understand and investigate sufficiently:

- the physical and psychological damage that PAVA spray will cause to children in custody.
- the likely discriminatory use of PAVA spray against Black and minority ethnic children, Muslim children and children with disabilities.
- whether introducing PAVA spray would increase violence and cause more harm overall.

In September 2025, the High Court gave permission for the case to go ahead and on an expedited timetable. It is expected to be heard before the end of the year.

To support our work in bringing this challenge, we launched a CrowdJustice fundraising campaign and have raised more than £13,000 to date. We have also been campaigning alongside other organisations in the sector, including the Alliance for Youth Justice, Article 39 and Prison Reform Trust, on this issue.

Use of force

We have been scrutinising the use of PAVA spray specifically and the use of force more generally in the adult male estate. We know from data published by the MoJ that PAVA spray and other types of force are used disproportionately against young, Black and Muslim men and we have used targeted Freedom of Information Act requests to better understand the prisons where this is particularly acute.

This learning has been enriched by callers to our advice line, and from testimony gathered and shared by others, who have spoken first-hand about the misuse of force in adult prisons.

We continue to explore legal action to tackle the MoJ's failure to address this disproportionate and discriminatory use of force, and are glad to collaborate with others in the sector, such as Maslaha, who are also shining a light on the misuse of force in prisons.

Overcrowding and conditions

Following our success in tackling the squalid and filthy conditions in the segregation unit at Bedford prison last year, we have continued our work to address chronic issues of overcrowding and consequential poor conditions across the prison estate. We are not yet able to share the fruits of this work publicly but anticipate legal action in this area over the coming months.

Segregation

We reported last year on the conclusion of the long-running case of *AB*, which the government settled at the eleventh hour with the admission that *AB*'s Article 3 rights had been breached with his 55-day solitary confinement when held as a child at Feltham prison. Unfortunately, the practice of separating children from their peers continues.

In April 2025, we issued legal proceedings in the High Court, challenging a separation policy in force at Oakhill secure training centre, which allowed staff to lock children and young people alone in their rooms for longer than the law permits. In September 2025, we were given permission by the Court for the case to proceed and an urgent hearing was scheduled for November 2025. Subsequently, the government conceded the claim. The Secretary of State for Justice accepted that children held in a secure training centre cannot be left unaccompanied in their room for more than three hours, as required by the law governing secure training centres, and that staff at the secure training centre cannot override this. He has committed to ensuring that children will only be separated from their peers in accordance with the law, and that the policy for separating children at Oakhill will be updated and communicated to staff.

We were supported to bring this case by Law For Change, who provided us with an indemnity of up to £10,000 in the event the case was unsuccessful in Court and we became liable to pay the government's legal costs.

We have heard from a number of young people through our advice line who are being held in conditions of solitary confinement as they feel at risk and unable to associate with other young people. They have been treated as 'self-isolating' and, as such, they have not been subject to a 'rule' for removal from association and the safeguards this entails. We have been exploring legal challenges to this practice for a number of individuals, as well as seeking to address the issue from a policy perspective with key contacts at the MoJ and HMPPS.



Girls

Last year we noted our concern about the continued placement of girls at Wetherby prison, which had persisted as an “interim” measure following the closure of Rainsbrook secure training centre in late 2021. We had launched a campaign in early 2024 in response to the terrible reports of the treatment of girls at Wetherby and were on the brink of litigation when the general election was announced. Our campaign – which was based on years of correspondence with the Youth Custody Service and various ministers on the failure to have an adequate plan for girls in the estate – secured more than 2,000 signatures. When the new government came to office, we wrote immediately to the minister to set out our concerns, calling for the cessation of the placement of girls at Wetherby prison and for an urgent and independent review into the placement of girls more broadly.

This call was heard and an independent review into the placement and care of girls in youth custody – which was carried out largely on the terms we requested and with our input – reported in March 2025. We are glad to say that the policy of placing girls in young offender institutions has at last been brought to an end. There is still much to do for the new government to deliver a meaningful and considered long-term strategy for girls in the criminal justice system and we do continue to advocate for change in this area.

In-person hearings and procedural fairness

Additional days of imprisonment form a punishment awarded through prison disciplinary procedures. We have long campaigned for their abolition but the government has elected to make the existing mechanism of additional days the cornerstone of its new ‘earned progression’ model, as detailed in the Sentencing Bill recently introduced before Parliament.

One particular area of concern relates to procedural fairness and, in particular, an apparently persistent refusal to hold independent adjudications in person, despite the relevant policy allowing for face-to-face hearings to take place at the district judge’s discretion, when in the interests of justice to do so.

In July 2024, we issued a judicial review challenging the procedural fairness of five adjudication charges heard by the Independent Adjudicator at HMYOI Swinfen Hall, who refused to adjourn a hearing despite the absence of paperwork or an opportunity to take instructions and advise the client. He found the client guilty and awarded him 36 days (which was reduced on appeal to the Prison Casework Unit to 28 days). The Court considered the case on 31 October 2024 and quashed the findings of guilt and 28 days’ punishment in our client’s favour, awarding inter partes costs.

However, we were not given permission to proceed with the second issue in challenge, relating to the apparent de facto abolition of ‘in-person’ hearings before Independent Adjudicators in the prison estate in England and Wales. In April 2025, the Administrative Court refused permission at an oral renewal hearing on the basis that the claim was academic because our client, at an earlier stage of proceedings, had had his additional days quashed.

The concern regarding the absence of face-to-face hearings remains, however. We represented two clients at independent adjudications in early May 2025, a child and an 18-year-old, asking for face-to-face hearings. Both were diagnosed with ADHD and reported significant communication difficulties, as well as mental health difficulties. Both applications were refused. Our research by means of FOIA request and through correspondence with the Chief Magistrate indicates that, in fact, no face-to-face hearings have been held since 2020, notwithstanding the lifting of Covid restrictions in 2022. This risks fairness and access to justice, particularly for vulnerable prisoners or those with communication needs. We will continue our work in this area to address this.

Other legal work

Access to justice for children and young people

The Howard League runs the country’s only dedicated advice line for children and young people in custody. In the period ending 30 September 2025, we provided advice and assistance to 242 young people aged 21 and under on 314 matters, including their treatment in custody, adjudications, transfers, and release planning. We also pursued 17 cases, funded by legal aid, to help children and young people with treatment issues in custody, adjudications, and recall and parole. We have supported people in custody across the estate by making safeguarding referrals where needed.

As well as providing this valuable support to children and young people who contact us, our legal advice service provides us with first-hand information about, and a greater understanding of, the issues affecting the custodial estate, both for children and adults. This informs and enriches our broader work, including strategic litigation, as described elsewhere in this report.

Over this period, we have received universally positive feedback from clients and from young people who used our access to justice service. All of those who provided feedback felt listened to and said they would recommend our service to others. One young person said that they would “fully recommend the Howard League as they ... go ahead with what they say” and another thanked one of our lawyers by name, saying “she listened and helped me in ways she don’t even know”.

We continue to benefit from multi-year funding provided by BBC Children in Need in March 2024 to continue to provide our free legal advice service for children in custody, and to better understand the needs of children who are within the remit of our service but who do not call us, in order to increase our ability to support them. We have also received funding from the Allen & Overy Foundation towards the running of our advice line service, which also supports young adults aged 21 and under.

In addition, we received funding from TaP Futures to produce an animated video to promote our advice line service across the prison estate. We know from speaking to children and young people that they particularly appreciate information being provided in a video format. We worked with freelance design director and motion designer Mike Harrison on the video, which the YCS has agreed to upload to all laptops used by children in secure custody. We hope that this will increase awareness of our service and, therefore, help us to reach more children and young people who would benefit from our support. Although it is harder for us to reach young adults (most of whom do not have laptops in custody) with video content, we are nonetheless working to ensure that the video is disseminated as widely as possible in the adult estate too.

Life sentences for children

Last year, as part of a project funded by the Legal Education Foundation through the Justice First Fellowship, we produced a legal guide for young people who commit murder as children and are serving sentences of detention at His Majesty's Pleasure (an 'HMP sentence'). The guide explains how HMP sentences work, with a focus on the key dates in the sentence.

We received a lot of feedback about how useful the guide was and so made the decision this year to update and re-launch this guide online. The refreshed guide is available to children through their laptops and has also been shared with criminal justice and social care professionals. Staff also visited HMYOI Werrington to join sessions run by the chaplain for young people serving life sentences, where we were able to discuss the updated guide, explore common myths around parole processes and share lived experiences of the sentence. We received unanimously positive feedback from these sessions, with young people saying "it was an amazing experience" and "it was a good experience to know how certain processes work and what parole myths there are".

Education

We have continued our work to understand and advocate for children and young people in custody to access education. We often speak to young people in youth custody whose access to education is woefully inadequate, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

As part of this work, we have reported on the hours of education and time out of cell that children in each of the YOIs in England and Wales have received, having gathered this data through monthly Freedom of Information Act requests. The picture is bleak and shows a failing system across England that is consistently unable to deliver even a bare minimum level of access to education or regime. We continue to explore potential litigation to address this.

We have collaborated with Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (IPSEA) to publish an updated version of our joint guide, *Education inside penal detention for children in England*. This is the only resource of its kind that explains the legal rights and entitlements of children with special educational needs (SEN) in custody. It was originally published in 2022 and has been updated to reflect changes in the youth justice landscape. It provides an overview of the current education provision available for children with SEN in custody, and outlines the stark disparities between the legal entitlements of children in detention and those of their peers in the community.

Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry

Earlier this year we provided evidence to Module 8 of the Covid inquiry, which relates to the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. Our evidence reported on our work across the relevant period and concluded with our view that few lessons have been learned from the pandemic.

Our main recommendations around reducing the prison population – including by significantly reducing the use of remand and recall and reducing the imposition of short sentences – remain features of our campaigning in the post-pandemic context and would be highly relevant in the event of a future pandemic. For as long as prisons remain in their existing state of permanent crisis, those inside them will remain highly vulnerable to the shocks of another pandemic or civil emergency. Similarly, without addressing the strategic and systemic failures that blight the youth custodial system, children and young people caught up in it will remain exposed in the event of a future pandemic.

We received pro bono legal support from Kingsley Napley LLP, as funding for our contribution was not provided by the inquiry.

Strengthening the charity

Membership

Our members are at the heart of our campaigns and our ability to influence change. They provide vital funds that sustain our work, give us a stronger voice in public debate, and add weight to our calls for reform. Their support has made a tangible difference.

As well as giving us a stronger voice, members provide the unrestricted funds that allow us to act quickly on urgent issues and maintain long-term campaigns. They amplify our message by sharing our work, taking part in public campaigns, and ensuring that our demands reach policymakers. Our communications team has deepened these connections with monthly email updates, an expanded social media presence, and a broader programme of events that bring members and supporters together.

We have more than 500 prison members, whose voices have been central to our work over the last year, including our contribution to the government's sentencing review, ensuring that those most directly affected are included in shaping reform.

We have recruited new members through prison visits, our regular newspaper column, and the many letters we receive from prisons each week. Our partnership with National Prison Radio – funded by the Belpech Charitable Trust – has also opened up new ways to share our work and invite participation.

Members in prison receive regular updates on changes to policy and legislation, as well as news about our campaigns. We encourage them to act as advocates for reform within their prisons and share their perspectives with us. This ongoing dialogue helps us understand the realities of prison life and challenge public misconceptions.

Families are also at the heart of our work. More than 1,600 of our members have a loved one in prison, and their experiences continue to shape our campaigns and advocacy.

In the coming year, we want to go further. We will explore new ways of engaging members in shaping our policy positions, expand opportunities for families and people in prison to contribute directly to our campaigns, and continue strengthening our links with supporters in the community. Membership will remain at the heart of our strategy: not just as a means of raising funds, but as the driver of a collective movement pressing for lasting change in how society understands and responds to crime and punishment.

Fundraising

This year, we have continued to strengthen our development function by building relationships with trusts and foundations, generating a pipeline of funders and supporting our development board.

Trusts and foundations play a critical role in supporting the work of the Howard League. Over the year, we have received a number of grants, including multi-year grants, from trusts and foundations, both as restricted and unrestricted income.

We received new unrestricted grants or donations from: Sigrid Rausing Trust; AB Charitable Trust; John Armitage Charitable Trust; and Tolkein Trust.

We received restricted grants from: Allen & Overy Foundation (for legal work); 29th May Charitable Trust (for the legal advice line); Henry Smith Charitable Trust (for work on sentencing); Bromley Trust (for work on sentencing); City Bridge Charitable Trust; Treebeard Trust (for work on sentencing); and Firebird Foundation (for work on women on remand).

Financial summary

Income	£
Donations and legacies	226,687
Other trading activities	13,720
Investment income	27,069
Charitable activities	871,442
<i>Total income</i>	<i>1,138,938</i>

Expenditure	£
Raising funds	99,494
Charitable activities	1,471,659
<i>Total expenditure</i>	<i>1,571,153</i>

Assets and liabilities	Value (£)
Own use assets	3,263
Long term investments	1,500,000
Other assets	555,239
Total liabilities	-73,545

Charitable spending

<i>Spending type</i>	<i>Value (£)</i>	<i>% of total spending</i>
Raising funds	99,494	6
Charitable activities	1,471,659	94

The summary of financial information shows the income raised for our activities, the cost of raising the income, and amounts spent on our charitable activities. The information is taken from the full financial statement, which was approved by the board of trustees on 26 November 2025.

For a fuller understanding of the charity's financial affairs, copies of audited financial statements, the trustees' annual report, and the auditors' report can be obtained from the Howard League office or from our website (www.howardleague.org/about-us).

Plans for the future

This report covers a big year for the Howard League. It has seen consolidation of our strategy, involving significant advances in respect of several priority areas, and progress in the development of an impactful litigation docket.

Despite the adoption of a new Sentencing Act and government efforts to build new prison accommodation, we anticipate that the coming year will again see the prison system run out of places.

The quality of the existing prison estate – after decades of under-investment and increasing overcrowding – will put more pressure on the government in respect of penal policy. We anticipate that much of the coming year will see us shining a light on what overcrowding means for safety and decency behind bars, and its adverse impact on reducing reoffending to keep the public safe. We will continue to scope legal cases as a means of holding the government to account for the state of the prison estate, and its treatment of those 87,000-plus lives within it.

We will build on our emerging work with the Ending the Remand of Women Collective, with a focus on consolidating the research base and leading on influencing. With dedicated funding, we hope to deepen and rollout co-produced work with those convicted of joint enterprise murder. We will focus on the profound racial disparity in these cases, as well as highlighting the particular challenges for women convicted under joint enterprise. Our data analysis work with JENGBA and Travers Smith will feature heavily in this work.

With other civil society actors, including members of the Howard League, we will continue to work towards the meaningful end to the IPP sentence, pursuing the release of people who are over tariff and who have been recalled to prison under the IPP licence. We will expand this work to pre-IPP two-strike prisoners, a small group whose injustice predates those on the IPP sentence.

In the past year, we have ramped up the impact of our litigation, and the coming year will see the continual building of a portfolio of cases that hold the government to account and shine a light on public law and human rights breaches in the context of prisons. We need more lawyers to meet the scope of challenges in the system.

As ever, all of our substantive work depends on securing funding for the charity. This means deepening our relationships with existing funders and donors, and building new supporters. Our 160th anniversary in 2026 will provide some opportunities to showcase our work and our impact over the years, and to put the case for more resource.



The last 18 months has seen a change in government, the acute crisis of prison capacity coming to ahead with early releases and urgent sentencing reform, and worsening conditions in prisons across the country. Our work could not be more important. As this report shows, our high-profile interventions hold real weight with government, and our willingness to litigate to hold government's feet to the fire only increases the need for a strong Howard League.

As ever, I am hugely grateful to the fantastic staff at the Howard League and to our board, who have all worked above and beyond over the past year. I am also thankful for our amazing members, funders and supporters. Our membership base is growing – in prison, but also beyond it. Our members really do provide authority for our voice and insights and we are committed to building them into a volunteer army for change.

Andrea Coomber KC (Hon.)
Chief Executive

October 2025



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