

Diocese of Worcester

Criminal Justice Affairs Group

Annual Report 2024-25

Foreword by the Bishop of Dudley/ Acting Bishop of Worcester



It is ten years since the Criminal Justice Affairs Group was established.

It would be wonderful to report that the past decade had seen marked progress in reductions of rates of offending, in rehabilitation of offenders, in the provision of victim support, in dropping numbers of people in prisons, in improvements in the state of prison buildings and the education and training on offer.

Sadly, none of those changes has happened – quite the contrary. The criminal justice system in this country is in a worse crisis now than ever, with rising numbers of prisoners, of violent incidents, including assaults on staff, of rates of mental illness, neurodiversity and suicide.

This report gives a depressingly clear account of these and other aspects of the criminal justice system.

But we should not despair. In November last year, HMP Long Lartin was inspected. Most of the findings are bleak, but there is at least one ray of hope.

I quote from that report: ‘The well-staffed chaplaincy was notable for its unity of purpose and its reach into the prison community. Chaplains took seriously a commitment to model and foster good relations between all faith groups throughout the establishment. This owed much to the experienced managing chaplain, who led the team with confidence and sensitivity. There was a full range of worship events and sessions for teaching and discussion for all the faiths represented in the prison, although there were currently vacancies for two smaller faith groups. There was good involvement of volunteers from outside faith communities in this programme.’

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to those chaplains and to the volunteers in the faith communities who do not give up. We are likewise indebted to prison governors and staff for their work, challenging and stressful as it is.

I should also add my thanks to the Criminal Justice Affairs Group for all they do to direct our attention to what is happening. The group have recently started producing prayer guidance for the diocesan website and mailing. I commend this to you for use in your private prayers and in public worship. Pray to keep the hope alive; pray for the victims of crime; pray for broken lives to be restored.

+ Matthew

Introduction

The Worcester Diocesan Criminal Justice Affairs Group (CJAG) was formed in March 2015 for the purpose of offering a Christian perspective and advising the Diocese of Worcester on criminal justice matters. From the outset the Group sought to be proactive in its approach to its two main aims:

- internally in the Diocese; offering a Christian perspective & provide expert advice on criminal justice matters, and
- externally to raise public awareness and be catalysts of criminal justice-related social action

CJAG has been in existence for 10 years now and this report outlines the issues covered during the past year. The aim is for the membership to reflect most aspects of the criminal justice system's (CJS) key agencies, the voluntary sector, those with expertise in CJ issues and the Diocese. Some changes in membership have taken place and particular thanks goes to Derek Markie, representing the voluntary sector, who left after having been part of the group since its inception. Charmian Manship has remained as a member, having stepped down as chair, and we are grateful for her leadership over the past nine years. We also give thanks to Stuart Currie in agreeing to be our interim chair until we find someone willing to take on this important role.

We have been delighted to welcome other new members during the year and the group has benefitted from having representation from probation, youth justice and a judge. New members with knowledge and experience of the CJS would be welcome as we continue to build the group's capacity to grasp key issues and hold a passion to make a difference in this area. In particular we are hoping to find someone to join us with criminal law experience.

CJAG presents this annual review of its activities plus its reflections on the way ahead including particular areas of concern for our Diocese and the public to consider. The group has developed a hybrid approach to meetings, making it easier for some to participate if they are unable to attend in person.

The group has continued to gather information about the CJS, in order to increase its knowledge about what is happening across the whole system and better understand what impact this is having on those within the CJS both on people subject to its procedures and their closest friends and relatives, and on those working in agencies.

Themes emerged and particular areas of concern were discussed and highlighted. Of particular note, however, were the apparent deterioration in all elements of the CJS; the growing call for change as a matter of urgency from a range of expert bodies based on evidence and the lack of action to address the problems; and an increase in human rights concerns and injustice for those trapped in the system.

The year was marked by a change in government and therefore political direction; further rises in the cost of living and growing poverty; the serious state of health and social care and therefore the level of available support; and institutions being generally in crisis. These factors have inevitably impacted on the CJS and the people within the system including staff, prisoners, people who have committed offences living in the community, their families and victims.

It is interesting to note from a recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the MoJ has fared worse financially than the average government department and that if their day-to-day budget increased at the same rate as the average department, it would have been some 41% (£4.5 billion) higher. HM Courts and Tribunals Service has been relatively protected (with a 3% real terms cut), while HMPs and the Legal Aid Agency have seen larger cuts (11% and 29% respectively). The prison system has been the main beneficiary of recent increased capital funding but with overall financial pressures it is feared that 'unprotected' budgets such as the MoJ could face real-terms cuts over the rest of this parliament.

Concerns have been repeatedly raised by inspections, the Justice Committee, research findings and national voluntary bodies about what is happening in the CJS. This includes highlighting the consequences on people of the major backlogs in courts, rising prison numbers, chronic staff shortages and human suffering. CJAG has carried these concerns and debated its role in raising awareness and influencing positive change, but the reality is that many of the issues are hidden and not of public concern in light of other pressing matters. CJAG sees its role in identifying, raising and challenging them appropriately as central to its pursuit of humane, just, effective and caring treatment of all people.

Criminal Justice Affairs Group members (March 2025)

- **Stuart Currie** (Interim Chair), Bishop's Chaplain
- **Mark Badger**, Archdeacon of Worcester
- **David Cookson**, Deputy Head of Worcestershire Probation Service and probation Faith Lead for the West Midlands
- **Diana Fulbrook**, Former Probation Chief Executive and Parole Board member
- **Amy Johnson**, University of Worcester
- **Dick Johnson**, Chaplain for West Mercia Police and Hereford & Worcester Fire & Rescue Service, and Faith at Work
- **Robert Jukes**, Retired Resident Judge/Recorder
- **Charmian Manship**, Volunteer experience in HMP Hewell Chaplaincy
- **Stephanie Moyes**, Range of prison & CJ experience and a recently retired HMP Hewell Chaplain
- **Tim Morris**, Magistrates Association
- **Lia Palios-Hayden**, Operations Manager, YSS Charity
- **Nick Scott**, HMP Long Lartin Chaplain
- **Keith Stokes Smith**, Overseas nations/Consuls

Part 1 - Key issues

Positioning of CJAG's influence

CJAG is aware of the importance of linking with others to either increase understanding of issues on the ground or collectively influence change by working with others who have common aims. The group recognises that as a small body, CJAG is politically impotent and by going public, the message could be lost amidst views of religious bias. CJAG is apolitical but is concerned about the ongoing politicisation of crime, and the emphasis on punishment stoked by the media. Talking generally about crime in simplistic terms results in a lack of understanding about the complex relationship with social problems and poverty, and misses the impact on individuals, families and communities which encourages a cycle of crime. Along with others, CJAG seeks to have a well-informed debate about society's approach to crime & those who commit offences which is contra culture and the group continues to look at ways to achieve this.

Prisons' Sunday

CJAG again contributed to the morning service at the Cathedral in October by leading the readings and prayers (based on prayers written by prisoners in HMP Long Lartin). The Revd Stuart Currie, interim chair of CJAG, preached. This annual event provides an opportunity to highlight work in prisons and prisoners' issues, and to raise awareness amongst the Christian worshipping community. As always, CJAG is grateful to the Cathedral and Dean for the hospitality extended to us which is much appreciated.

PRISONS WEEK
A WEEK OF PRAYER

Oversight of issues relating to the criminal justice system

The information CJAG has been tracking and monitoring has definite recurring themes: backlogs, prison overcrowding and poor conditions, staff shortages in all agencies, and the increasingly worrying impact on those in the system. Indeed, little has changed in the concerns raised in the last two years' reports and in some respects they have worsened. Particular areas of concern include:

Prison overcrowding:

- At the end of January 2025, the prison population was 86,463, 1,800 higher than projected despite emergency measures introduced at the end of last year to reduce demand on the system
- Those on remand increased by 6%, accounting for 20% of the total prison population. 32% on remand had been held in prison beyond the 6-month time limit, 5% for longer than 2 years
- 18% of the sentenced population are now held on recall. Latest MoJ projections suggest a further rise of 13% by 2026. Most recalls are for non-compliance rather than further offending. There is a strong link between homelessness and recall.

Deteriorating prison conditions

The Independent Prison Monitoring Board Report says: "Prisoners routinely live in conditions that can only be described as appalling. Flooded corridors, cramped filthy cells, leaks of raw sewage, and rat and insect infestations in kitchens, showers and on wings are the environments in which prisoners are expected to be reformed & rehabilitated. Whether they are eating, working, sleeping, or receiving medical care, the shocking level of neglect and the impact of this on those living in these conditions, cannot be ignored."

Impact on prisoners

Prisons face an overcrowding crisis of unprecedented proportions which has a devastating effect on those involved. The HMIP annual report stated the combination of chronic under-staffing and an ever-growing prison population means that most establishments are running very impoverished regimes with little opportunity to attend decent work or education classes. This means prisoners are ending their time in prison with either no or little opportunity to improve chances of rehabilitation.

Offending related factors are well known & are repeatedly raised as the way to prevent crime and repeat offending:

- **Drug use** by prisoners is soaring and organised crime groups are headhunting highly skilled drone pilots to deliver drugs and weapons to prison cell windows, proving to be a major problem
- **Mental health** is often central to why people commit crime, and help in prison could reduce the likelihood of reoffending, whereas in fact often their mental health gets worse. Half of male prisoners report mental health issues such as depression, PTSD and anxiety, and 76% of women prisoners have mental health problems. There is a lack of mental health resources to support people in the community and in prison.
- The acute **vulnerability** of people leaving prison has been particularly highlighted and there is a distinct lack of community resources to address homelessness, accommodation & substance misuse as well as mental health problems.

Despite the holistic wrap around approach to offending-related factors having been found to be effective, contracts continue to be given for single issues such as accommodation.



Oversight of issues relating to the criminal justice system continued...

Prisons have been the most overt and reported aspect of the CJS during the year but another major contributor to systemic problems is the courts backlog (In March 2025 - 382,000 cases in magistrates courts, 73,105 in crown courts). Trial dates in crown courts are being set up to 3 years ahead which has an appalling effect on victims as well as defendants, many of whom are held in custody awaiting their hearing. Great efforts have been made to increase crown court time including increasing magistrates powers by doubling their current powers to imprison people.



Other CJS issues noted:

- The effect on young offenders of restricted regimes and having to spend up to 21 hours a day in their rooms, and the restraints used.
- The treatment of women in prison, the rate of self-harm (more than 11 times higher than for males) and deaths, and the lack of care of those who are pregnant.
- A rise in deaths in custody particularly self-inflicted, and increased levels of violence including against staff.
- The increase in the number of older prisoners for whom prisons are not equipped (17% of the prison population). HMPPS has adopted the age of 50 as the start of 'old age' in the prison population, based on evidence that their health-related needs are brought forward by around 10 years, relative to people in the general population.
- The potential use of artificial intelligence in areas such as sentencing and the importance of being open to change whilst also understanding the risks.



A particular area of increasing concern CJAG has noted is the impact of the deteriorating situation on the following:

- Injustices and breaches of human rights with compelling evidence that race and ethnicity play an important role in all CJS decisions.
- Staff shortages with filling vacancies in prisons and probation being undermined by high rates of leavers and the inexperience of recruited staff.
- The continuing restricted regimes resulting in long periods of time spent by prisoners locked in cells.
- The continuing plight of those sentenced to Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPPs) and the injustice of their situation.
- The estimated 192,912 children with a parent in prison and all the consequent effects of this.
- Self-harm by women in prison hit a record high of 20,834 incidents last year. Contributory factors were domestic abuse (70%), and homelessness/unsafe accommodation upon release. 53% were abused as children.
- Violence against women and girls, whilst a government priority, continues to rise. 2m women are estimated to be victims of violence perpetrated by men each year and police chiefs have described this as an epidemic so serious it amounts to a “national emergency”. Crimes including stalking, harassment, sexual assault & domestic violence affect one in 12 women with the number of recorded offences growing by 37% in the past five years and the perpetrators getting younger.
- The United Nations’ recommendation of 14 years as the minimum age of criminal responsibility, the global average being 11.3 years, and in England and Wales it is 10 years.

Part 2 - The way ahead: Reflections & prospective thinking

Reflections

The CJS is described as in crisis and the new government talks of inheriting a broken system, exacerbated by a lack of an overall strategy and chronic underfunding. CJAG has been shocked at the information received and the human cost of all agencies being clearly in a parlous state. With the incoming government, many have taken the opportunity to submit alternative approaches to criminal justice, drawing on solid evidence of what works. It is heartening that the government has commissioned a sentencing review led by a former (Conservative) Lord Chancellor, David Gauke, and a courts review led by Sir Brian Leveson, and hopefully a coherent CJS strategy will result. In addition, Dame Ann Owers has been asked to lead a prisons capacity review to consider the reasons for a gap between prison supply and demand, and make recommendations which may help future governments avoid the cycle of repeated prison capacity crises.

David Gauke has already published the first part of the sentencing review explaining reasons for the current crisis in prison overcrowding. He writes:

“The reality is that our prison population has grown very rapidly over the last 30 years and the principal cause of this increase is prison sentences have been lengthened substantially by successive governments. It is an approach that has emphasised the importance of punishment understood primarily as incarceration – an important aspect of sentencing policy – but has been insufficiently focused on the most effective ways to reduce crime. There has been an underinvestment in probation and other alternatives that can provide rehabilitation and reduce reoffending. The political impetus to simplify CJ policy to a “lock them up and throw away the key approach” is costly and ineffective. The piecemeal and unstrategic manner in which sentence lengths have increased in recent decades has meant that there has been insufficient consideration of all of the statutory aims of sentencing: punishment, crime reduction, reform and rehabilitation, public protection and reparation. Punishment is an important aim for the CJS and prison plays a vital role in delivering punishment. But too often decision-making has been based on an approach that punishment is all that matters, and that the only form of punishment that counts is imprisonment. The consequences of this approach has left England and Wales with a very high prison population by historic and international standards, which has diverted resources from other parts of the CJS that could contribute more to reducing reoffending”.

This welcome analysis seems to be an opportune time to take action, reinstating a focus on rehabilitation & community interventions. It's therefore disappointing that the new government announced the building of 14,000 more prison places rather than to properly resource community alternatives.

Responses from the MoJ when challenged on issues and concerns has been bland. The human cost of this approach and the lack of compassion for all those affected is heart-breaking.

Areas for consideration:

Societal/Systemic Concerns

- The disproportionate impact of living costs & government policy on the poor and disadvantaged, and the increase of those living in poverty, so strongly linked to crime.
- Impact of government policies promoting an increasingly punitive approach towards those vulnerable to social problems.
- Gaps in public service provision & a lack of resources / inconsistencies in supporting rehabilitation & protect victims, eg survivors of domestic abuse, mental health support, substance misuse services, lack of accommodation.
- The lack of early help interventions to support families and prevent entry to the CJS.
- The disproportionate funding of CJ agencies which affects how the whole system operates.
- The politicisation of CJ matters leading to continuous change and lack of stability.
- The piecemeal approach to problems and lack of long-term planning - a co-ordinated whole system strategy and plan are needed.
- CJ agencies are not joined up nationally either between government departments or strategically which makes it difficult to work together effectively on the ground.
- The role of voluntary organisations depleted because of commissioning and funding rules, and lack of resources for them to deliver.
- The disproportionate treatment of women who offend and discriminatory biases, especially relating to young people.
- Staff shortages, high level of inexperience, poor morale and stress in all CJ agencies.

Role of the Church/Diocese

- Understanding the impact of the societal/systemic concerns on local communities, people who have committed offences, victims/survivors and agency staff.
- Recognising the strong link between offending and poverty/social problems.
- Encouraging distinctive Church thinking in parishes, and increasing public awareness of the issues.
- Including social and criminal justice in its priorities.
- Working together in the Faith Community, harnessing congregational resources to contribute and influence at Parish, Deanery and Diocesan levels.
- Supporting CJAG in its activities and challenges about criminal justice matters.

Role of the Criminal Justice Affairs Group

- Focus on a small number of issues whilst keeping track of new developments and the overall CJS landscape.
- Keep oversight by “thinking global and acting local”.
- Provide focused direction/activity on key issues.
- Bring interested parties together to discuss a specific issue and to identify potential improvement actions.
- Raise awareness in the Diocese and parishes.
- Find ways to influence policy & take action to address concerns.
- Encourage religious organisations to challenge the growing use of punishment and ask whether it positively changes behaviour and whether anyone is ‘incurable’.

What next?

Continuing areas of interest for CJAG during the next year will include:

- The link between poverty and crime.
- Social characteristics of those involved in crime such as homelessness / accommodation, education / school exclusion, and people who have experienced care, the inter-generational cycle and poor parental supervision.
- The disproportionate impact on those from black and minority ethnic communities at all stages of the CJS.
- Imprisonment for Public Protection prisoners (IPPs).
- Mental health provision.
- Support for victims/survivors.
- Youth Justice.

Key focus points for the coming year

CJAG will continue to focus on a small number of key issues whilst also keeping in mind the overall context. This year, the group will keep tracking issues in the CJS; identify areas of concern and consider how to be most effective in advising the Diocese; raising public awareness; and influencing thinking/ policy where relevant.

During last year, It was hoped to run an event on the link between poverty and crime to raise awareness and understanding about the predicament so many find themselves in, and to support wider debate. This did not prove possible but remains an aim of the group. It is hoped to organise a public lecture next year as a forerunner to a larger event the following year. CJAG will continue to revitalise its membership and review how best to influence change, taking account of anticipated political transformation. Activities and achievements for 2025/26 will be reported at the end of the year.

Prayer guides

There is an overwhelming amount of information available about the CJS, and whilst the group ensures the group's briefings are placed on the diocesan website, it is also aware of the need for a more focused document. To this end, a bi-monthly prayer guide is produced based on one issue that emerges from each meeting. It contains key points on an issue to raise awareness and knowledge, plus a prayer. In October this concentrated on prison overcrowding, in December on homelessness, and in February on young people in the CJS. It is intended to promote awareness of this resource in parishes

Conclusion

The past year has been very challenging for the CJS, and CJAG remains passionate about justice and the need to show compassion towards those in a powerless position and in need of support. The group has tracked the deterioration in provision and the state of services with dismay, and noted the continuous stream of reports and audits from eminent bodies that appear not to have been acted upon. Human rights have been breached and the human cost to those involved has been enormous. A holistic view must be taken with an understanding that piecemeal decisions and crisis management affect the way the whole system operates.

Within a national context of extreme problems and repeated reference to 'crisis' and 'systems being broken' across society, it is understandable that the CJS remains generally hidden and little interest is taken by the public.

Injustice and a lack of humanity towards some of the most marginalised in society remains a key moral and ethical issue for us all, and an appropriate focus for the church. In the face of such a dismal picture and lack of action, CJAG remains passionate about having a CJS based on fairness and rehabilitation, and sees seeds of hope in mounting concerns about social problems and a new government's opportunity to develop a long term strategy that works.

Much of the population is humane but this is not translated into the way we operate as a society. This is the challenge and CJAG will continue to work to achieve a fair and compassionate society for all.

As the previous Chair of the Justice Select Committee said, the Post Office scandal shows that "when the government decides to tackle an injustice, it can be done". CJAG will therefore keep trying to raise awareness and thanks all those who have worked with us to pursue this.

