

DIOCESE OF WORCESTER CRIMINAL JUSTICE AFFAIRS GROUP (CJAG)

Annual Review and Report 2025/26



Foreword by the Bishop of Worcester

In the Church of England, every diocese is different. When you move to a new diocese, as I did at the start of this year, you never know quite what to expect. In these past few months, I have been encouraged to discover so many examples of good and faithful women and men, young and old, all engaged in becoming Kingdom People, sharing the good news of God in Jesus, seeking to transform communities, bringing faith, hope and love. One precious example of this, which I am delighted to have found here, is the Criminal Justice Affairs Group. Its members bring expertise from various agencies – prison, probation, police, judiciary, magistracy, rehabilitation - offering a Christian perspective and providing expert advice on criminal justice matters, as well as raising public awareness and promoting criminal justice-related social action. This is vital work because criminal justice gets nothing like the attention it deserves. Crime, particularly violent crime, will make the headlines, but there is far less interest in what becomes of the victims or those convicted. The criminal justice system is in permanent crisis, courts are overstretched, the prison population is at a record high, the prisons are often in a poor or even dangerous state of repair, violence on prisoners, on prison staff and self-harm are increasing, as is drug and alcohol abuse, crime is linked to poverty, poor education, broken relationships and a host of other social evils. Yet very little news of this makes it into the headlines unless there is a particular crisis. CJAG members work with great perseverance to raise awareness as part of their efforts to bring hope and transformation. I commend them for their work, and I commend this report to you; as you read it, I invite you to think of ways in which you might respond.



+ Hugh



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THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND

**DIOCESE OF
WORCESTER**

Criminal Justice Affairs Group members (March 2026)

- **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
- **Casey Gallagher**, Assistant Diocesan Safeguarding Officer
- **Robert Jukes**, Retired Resident Judge/Recorder
- **Charmian Manship**, Volunteer experience in HMP Hewell Chaplaincy
- **Gilly Maxim**, Curate on part time placement at HMP Hewell Chaplaincy
- **Tim Morris**, Magistrates Association
- **Stephanie Moyes**, Range of prison & CJ experience and a retired HMP Hewell Chaplain
- **Lia Palios-Hayden**, Director of Services, YSS Charity
- **Nick Scott**, HMP Long Lartin Chaplain
- **Keith Stokes Smith**, Overseas nations/Consuls

Introduction

1.1 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 within the Diocese to offer a Christian perspective and provide expert advice on criminal justice matters, and
- externally to raise public awareness and be catalysts of criminal justice-related social action

1.2 CJAG has been in existence for over 11 years now and this report outlines the focus of the group during the past year. The group aims for its membership to reflect as many parts of the criminal justice system's (CJS) key agencies as possible, plus those with expertise in CJ issues and diocesan representation. Some changes in membership have taken place and particular thanks goes to Dick Johnson, representing the police, who recently left after moving abroad. Whilst Amy Johnson from the University of Worcester is unable to attend meetings, a link is maintained through the minutes of meetings. We also give thanks to Stuart Currie as our interim chair until we find someone willing to take on this important role. We have been delighted to welcome two new members during the year and the group has benefitted from having CJS representation

from prison chaplaincy, probation, youth justice, the magistrates courts and a judge as well as from the diocese. 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 and the police.

1.3 CJAG presents this annual review to summarise its work and the main concerns for our Diocese and the public to consider. Meetings use both in-person and electronic formats. The group gathers information about the CJS to understand its impact on those involved, including affected individuals, their families, and agency staff. Key themes and concerns are discussed regularly. Despite efforts to promote change, there is a general lack of awareness by the public in what is happening in the CJS due to competing priorities. CJAG remains committed to advocating for humane, fair, and effective treatment for all.

2. The State of the Criminal Justice System

2.1. Summary of 2025/26

2.1.1 Last year's report, published 18 months after the general election, reflected optimism about the Prime Minister's commitment to improving the CJS. Reviews of sentencing, courts, and prisons highlighted the need for change. Labour faced challenges of underfunded services, unsustainable budgets, and inexperienced staff and whilst immediate issues like prison numbers were tackled, long-term problems persist with limited progress.

2.1.2 The CJS requires coordinated efforts and integrated services to address the complex needs of offenders. Timely access to interventions for factors like housing, benefits, employment, mental health, and substance abuse is essential to prevent offending and reoffending. Since these resources are outside the CJS, a broader and co-ordinated perspective is necessary. Last year, most public services experienced significant performance declines, and failures in areas such as housing or mental health negatively impacted other services, hindering early intervention. The following table presents public service ratings.

Service	Performance on the eve of pandemic vs 2009/10	Performance at the 2024 general election vs on the eve of pandemic	Progress since the 2024 general election	Reason
General practice	Much worse	Worse	Little progress on the most important issues, but some on minor issues	Progress on salaried GPs, but no steps taken to make partnership more attractive
Hospitals	Much worse	Much worse	Little progress on the most important issues, but some on minor issues	Government has set out high-level ambitions and reduced competing priorities, but no detail of implementation
Adult social care	Much worse	Worse	Decisions made have exacerbated challenges	Largely ignored. Ending the care visa route without a workable solution for Fair Pay Agreements could cause workforce shortages
Children's social care	Worse	About the same	Good progress on the most important issues	Government has set out a clear and ambitious vision for reform and has backed it with relatively generous funding
Homelessness	Worse	Worse	Little progress on the most important issues, but some on minor issues	Early signs are encouraging, but government has yet to set out its homelessness strategy
Schools	Better	Worse	No progress on the most important issues	Government's plan to reduce inequalities in schools and tackle teacher shortages are unclear, and the crisis in SEND services casts a long shadow
Police	Worse	Worse	No progress on the most important issues	Government has made limited progress in increasing neighbourhood officer numbers and has yet to announce details of planned reforms
Criminal courts	Worse	Much worse	No progress on the most important issues	Increasing court sitting days was welcome, if done too late, but the government has yet to announce a longer-term plan
Prisons	Much worse	Worse	Some progress on the most important issues, but have not gone far enough	Rapid action addressed the immediate population crisis, but there has been limited progress towards a longer-term solution

Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources.

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2.1.3 After taking office, the government moved quickly to address major public service crises, including prison capacity and struggling local authorities, by providing urgent funding—especially in criminal justice. They proposed reforms for sentencing, local government finances, and children's social care. However, there has been little cross-government collaboration or coordinated spending review submissions, resulting in a fragmented approach that undermines efforts to improve criminal justice.

2.1.4 The reviews triggered by the government have resulted in new legislation currently going through parliament, most notably the Sentencing Act. Described as one of the most significant pieces of criminal justice legislation in the past two decades, it aims to reduce demand for prison places through a range of measures, and the government is also funding a prison building programme to create more prison places. However it has been noted that whilst many of the provisions of the Act are welcome, it fails to tackle sentence inflation at the serious end of offending as a primary cause of the growing prison population. The government has accepted it must turn towards the community rather than solely building more prisons but a significant challenge lies in ensuring the probation service is adequately equipped to effectively deal with the additional numbers under community supervision. It is recognised that after a decade of

badly managed probation reform, the service is dealing with poor performance, staff shortages and escalating caseloads.

2.1.5 Limited government resources, global crises and the number of pressing competing demands have resulted in inadequate funding for criminal justice reforms. Conditions have deteriorated throughout the CJS, with concerns about human rights, particularly for prisoners. Despite ongoing warnings from inspections, committees, and organisations regarding court delays, rising prison populations, and staff shortages, government responses generally remain bland and lack apparent action. CJAG is troubled by the gap between clear evidence of serious issues and the absence of a coordinated, well-funded strategy for lasting change.

2.1.6 Prisons Sunday

CJAG again contributed to the morning service at the Cathedral in October by leading the readings and prayers. The preacher was Lesley Redhead, Salvation Army Chaplain at HMP Long Lartin who preached on the national theme of 'God's word is not chained'. This annual event marks the start of Prisons Week and 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.

2.2 Process through the system

CJAG's monitoring reveals ongoing problems including case backlogs, prison overcrowding, poor conditions, staff shortages, and lack of experience in various agencies, all negatively impacting individuals. Many previously reported issues persist, and some have worsened. Following the CJS process, particular areas of concern across the system include:

2.2.1 Arrest and charging

- Police Officer numbers have risen but the average level of experience has fallen
- Although crime has generally fallen it is taking the police much longer to charge offences due to the complexity and requirements of investigating and a skills shortage in this area
- Process changes in, for example, cautions and community resolutions, mean responding to crime is becoming more, rather than less, time-intensive for policing

- It is estimated that domestic abuse victims made up around 40% of all crime victims
- Major reforms are proposed in structure eg fewer number of forces, and the police and crime commissioner role to be abolished

Impact on people: Long gaps for people being investigated; victims and witnesses have long waits with poor communication about progress; police staff demoralised with budget cuts & widening of tasks which outweigh the increase in staff numbers; major changes are stressful.

2.2.2 Court backlogs

- Magistrates Courts have a backlog of approximately 360,000 cases, despite efforts to increase the number of magistrates, compounded by a lack of duty solicitors
- Despite more sitting days, the Crown Court backlog is about 80,000 with some trial dates being set for up to 4 years ahead
- Poor productivity, more than growing demand, is identified in both court tiers (Institute for Government)
- Proposals for structural reform are being strongly resisted eg trials by jury

Impact on people: Stress for defendants awaiting a court hearing & breach of human rights; time spent in prison for those remanded in custody; anxiety & stress of victims & witnesses; anger & frustration for court staff, judges and magistrates at delays ("4 years to wait for a trial is neither fair nor reasonable, and is outrageous and unacceptable" - Barrister)

2.2.3 Prison overcrowding:

- Prison population is rising by 3000 pa but in the past 14 years just 500 extra places were added
- Despite the introduction of a series of emergency measures to reduce demand on the system (Over 40,000 were released early from prison), numbers are again rising (87,212 at end January 2026) and are projected to increase to well over 100,000 by 2030
- Those on remand remain at the highest level for the last 50 years, accounting for 20% of the total prison population. Most are awaiting trial
- Recalled prisoners account for 20% of the prison population, with over half being recalled due to non-compliance with licence conditions (only 20% are charged with a further offence). A significant factor in this increase is the large number of people released early from prison without adequate support. While recalls may sometimes be necessary, they often stem from failures in providing support or overly cautious responses in an under-resourced system.
- There are over 10,000 foreign national prisoners i.e. 12% of the prison

population some of whom have completed their sentence.

- Releases in error have been highlighted but have been a regular occurrence for years

Impact on people: "No statistic can adequately convey the scale of suffering and human misery that exists behind bars"; shockingly high levels of violence, protests and self-harm (nearly 80,000 with women self-harming eight times more than males); severely limited work and education opportunities; 10% rise in prison deaths (89 self-inflicted, 7 homicides, 16% drug related); worryingly high number of assaults on prison staff).

2.2.4 Prison experience

- Prison conditions are described as "appalling" and deteriorating, and may be in violation of human rights legislation
- Buildings are crumbling/in severe disrepair, many dangerously so, and physical conditions are often unsanitary
- Growing maintenance backlog with delayed cell maintenance used to "create" prison places
- Inspectors raised concerns about living conditions in 24 of the 38 adult prisons inspected
- Limited green space, and both damp/coldness and overheating problems are caused by thick walls and poor ventilation
- About 24% of all operational places did not meet current fire safety standards
- Widespread failure to meet the statutory minimum for time out of cell with many locked up for over 22 hours each day (including young offenders)
- Little opportunity for rehabilitation interventions
- Significant increase in older prisoners - 18% are aged over 50 (16,163), with 474 over 80
- Profound impact on delivery of rehabilitation & purposeful activity

Impact on people: Contributes to poor mental health and disengagement; about 3000 cell fires per year, 95% started deliberately; accessibility problems for ageing prison population; disturbing normalisation of poor conditions, rising violence, and systemic safeguarding failures with staff desensitised to seeing people in acute distress; inadequate mental health support, increased violence and surges in drug use.

2.2.5 Parole Board

- 10% of those released are subject to a parole board assessment
- Although less than 0.5% are convicted of a serious further offence, this results in critical and damaging media attention, undermining public confidence

- Increased transparency of the parole board has led to some public hearings, and political involvement in high profile parole decisions
- Lack of available programmes for prisoners wishing to address their offending related factors

Impact on people: Huge distress on victims' families following a serious further offence; waiting for an oral hearing is stressful; unfair disadvantage for prisoners unable to access programmes designed to reduce reoffending.

2.2.6 Supervision and support in the community

- Probation Service identified as a 'post traumatic organisation' struggling to recover at a time when it is expected to do more
- Poor quality of work (particularly in public protection) is seen within the context of the difficult and damaging journey that probation and its staff have been through i.e. nationalisation and relocation within the civil service, enforced privatisation then reversed, and re nationalisation in 2021
- Proposed pivotal role in reducing prison numbers by increase in community sentences
- Probation is chronically under resourced with a shortfall off around 10,000 full time staff
- Lack of resources to support rehabilitation hampers addressing the key offending related factors e.g. homelessness, accommodation, substance misuse and mental health
- 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
- Low availability of offending related programmes
- Staff too focused on risk management at the expense of promoting desistance
- Centralised approach to decision making e.g. recalls or breaches of supervision, removes professional discretion and can affect meaningful engagement

Impact on people: Many offenders feel unsupported in the areas that would prevent them reoffending; high reconviction rates partly due to resettlement problems (42% were reconvicted within one year of release); many prisoners on licence are in constant fear of being recalled ("Release is not the same as freedom"); staff overloaded and stressed.

2.2.7 Youth justice

- Strong correlation between parental and child offending
- Worrying increase in children being expelled from school many becoming

socially excluded and vulnerable to exploitation

- Significant increase in the number of exploited children being criminalised once they turn 18 - blurred lines between safeguarding and criminal justice
- Increase in use of violence by young offenders, driven by poverty, deprivation and alienation with drugs a key factor. Fearful of gang violence, knives are carried in self-defence. Situation spiralling out of control
- Significant disproportionate treatment eg white young adults sentenced more leniently than their black counterparts; young women more likely to be held in pretrial detention for offences that do not ultimately lead to a prison sentence
- Looked after children with challenging behaviour are often punished through the CJS
- Fewer young adults are being sent to prison but are getting much longer sentences
- 45% of children in custody are on remand. 35% were subsequently acquitted and 38% received a non-custodial sentence
- Poor custodial regimes in children's estate despite good staffing levels and resources

Impact on people: High level of disadvantaged children criminalised; those in custody report feeling unsafe, lacking supportive relationships with prison staff, and having no one to turn to if they had a problem; negative media attention drives sense of alienation

2.2 Other issues noted by CJAG

2.3.1 Other repeated themes noted over the last year include:

- 20% of adult prisoners have a literacy level of only entry level 1 (age 5–7), far below the general population. Level 3 (age 9–11) is considered necessary for daily life. Despite a new national prison contract, reduced funding has led to cuts in core education and vocational courses
- Organised criminal gangs control the profitable prison drug market, leading to widespread illicit drug use. Unregulated psychoactive substances increase violence, debt, and worsen mental health issues. 61% of deaths within 14 days of release are drug-related, with as many as 20 occurring in a single day. Drones smuggling drugs and weapons have caused major challenges for police and prisons
- Stable accommodation plays a crucial role in successful rehabilitation, with homelessness substantially raising the risk of re-offending. 15% were homeless prior to entering custody and remained homeless or were sleeping rough upon release. Additionally, 41% of those released did not have settled accommodation.

- Indeterminate Public Protection sentences are regarded as one of the most unjust punishments ever ordered in this country. 946 have never been released (73% have spent more than 10 years over tariff), and there have been 1476 IPP recalls. The indeterminacy has serious adverse mental health issues, and a sense of hopelessness (90 have committed suicide)
- Violence against women and girls has been described as a national emergency and continues to rise. Crimes including stalking, harassment, sexual assault and domestic violence affect one in 12 women and the perpetrators are getting younger
- The treatment of women in prison: "the CJS is designed for men and is not working for women". Women's prisons are full of trauma - over 60% have experienced domestic violence and over half have experienced abuse as a child. Inquiries and reports have all concluded that prison is rarely a necessary, appropriate or proportionate response to women who offend
- Almost 200,000 children are estimated to have a parent in the justice system and this has a significant negative impact on them both short and long term
- Acute mental illness is present amongst prisoners, with approximately 10% receiving treatment against 70% of the population experiencing some form of mental health need. Anxiety and depression are the most common primary conditions with some individuals turning to illicit drugs to cope due to being unable to access mental health services
- The potential use of artificial intelligence in areas such as proposals to court, sentencing and the importance of being open to change whilst also understanding the risks. Currently AI is not allowed to be used in prisons
- Staff shortages across all agencies, with high turnover having led to an inexperienced workforce Unable to cope with the size and complexity of demand

2.3.2 Positives

There were also some positives noted by CJAG including:

- Suitably qualified prisoners were used to repair their own open prison, earning a full wage
- Government listened to feedback for proposed changes e.g. not pursuing naming and shaming offenders on unpaid community work
- Christian alliance: A coalition of Christian leaders have published a report calling on the government to work in partnership with churches, communities and faith-based organisations to tackle a failing CJS
- The first inspection of an approved premises rated it as outstanding
- An Inspection of HMP Long Lartin, although overall raising significant concerns, made very favourable comments about the chaplaincy

- More data is available with issues being more transparent so gaining better insight into what is happening

3. Reflections and Way Forward

3.1 Holistic view and suggested response

3.1.1 It is clear that a number of societal and systemic issues are driving people to commit crime and need to be addressed if crime and the harm it causes are to be reduced. These include:

- Growing poverty, strongly linked to crime, and the disproportionate impact of living costs and government policy on the poor and disadvantaged
- Public attitudes towards crime and offenders resulting in criminal justice being seen as a low priority and the role of the media and political response to this, fuelling opinions
- The impact of government policies that promote an increasingly punitive approach towards those vulnerable to social problems
- 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
- Gaps in public service provision and the lack of resources and inconsistencies to support rehabilitation and protect victims eg survivors of domestic abuse, mental health support, substance misuse services and lack of accommodation
- 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 is 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 particularly in relation to young people
- Staff shortages, high level of inexperience, poor morale and stress in all CJ agencies

3.1.2 Role of the Church/Diocese

A suggested response to the concerns:

- Including social and criminal justice in its priorities

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 about criminal justice in parishes, and increasing public awareness of the issues
- 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.

3.2 What Next?

3.2.1 Public influence

The group recognises that as a small body, CJAG is politically impotent and by going public, the message could be lost amidst views on religious bias. Although apolitical the group is concerned about the politicisation of crime and media-driven focus on punishment. Simplistic views of crime overlook its complex links to social issues and poverty, as well as its effects on individuals and communities, perpetuating a cycle of crime. CJAG aims to promote informed debate on society's approach to crime and continues to seek effective ways to do so.

3.2.2 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. In the coming year, the group will keep tracking CJS issues; identifying areas of concern and considering how we can be most effective in advising the Diocese; raising public awareness; and influencing thinking/policy where relevant. The Prisons Sunday service in the Cathedral is an important event in promoting consciousness of CJS matters. An open session is planned for the Autumn in the Cathedral and it is hoped to develop a wider event subsequently. The challenge remains as to how parishes can be encouraged to participate as a means of increasing public understanding, particularly to counteract the mostly negative media approach to crime and offenders.

3.2.3 The briefings considered at each CJAG meeting are placed on the diocesan website, as are the prayer guides now provided after each meeting based on one issue that emerges from discussions. It contains key points on the issue to raise awareness and knowledge, plus a prayer for use in intercessions. In April this concentrated on Women in the CJS, in July on Substance misuse, in October on Challenges facing the Police; in December on Children affected by parental imprisonment; and in March on the Probation Service.

3.2.4 CJAG will continue to revitalise its membership and review how best to influence change, taking account of further political transformation. Activities and achievements for 2026/27 will be reported at the end of the year.

4. Conclusion

4.1 The state of the CJS makes grim reading and CJAG has at times felt overwhelmed by the picture painted and the impact on people. Having hope is important for those desiring change and this appears to be in short supply for those trapped in the system. The human cost is incalculable for all involved - victims, offenders, families, staff, and communities. The way people are treated affects outcomes, and injustice and a lack of humanity towards some of the most marginalised in society remains a key moral and ethical issue for us all so is an appropriate focus for the church. Much of the population is humane but this is not translated into the way we operate as a society and must be challenged. It is also important to recognise the amazing work that takes place day in, day out by committed staff who simply want to make a difference and change someone's life.

4.2 The year was marked by crisis management and fragmented decision-making resulting in unintended consequences for the functioning of the entire CJS. Efforts to prevent crime must be integrally tied to addressing broader social issues. The CJS relies heavily on support from societal services, but lacks a cohesive vision and a cross-party long term strategy with a coordinated and coherent plan to deliver the changes required. Political will and investment are needed, as criminal justice rarely receives priority or adequate resources. Recent approaches have been inconsistent, for example expanding prisons whilst also promoting community sentences, and introducing an earned progression model for prisoners without providing necessary interventions. While some positive initiatives exist, there has not been the necessary funding to support them.

4.3 CJAG continues to advocate for social justice, fairness and rehabilitation, and remains committed to fostering a more effective and compassionate justice system. Achieving meaningful progress necessitates sustained dedication, coordinated action, and increased awareness within the Church regarding its role in addressing and challenging systemic issues. As has been said: "Government faces an unavoidable choice: invest in tackling the problem or keep paying for the consequences" - so it must now progress from hope to delivery.