

# DOES THE PRISON SYSTEM IN THE UK NEED TO BE CHANGED?

## Penal progress

The UK's large prison population is fuelled by a high level of recidivism – when criminals repeatedly relapse into crime. This project for a model prison tackles issues of architecture, management and funding in an enlightened attempt to achieve lasting rehabilitation.

**Project:** The penal system is one of the most direct manifestations of the power of the state but is often also a revealing reflection of the national psyche and the public's attitude to punishment and rehabilitation. Surprisingly, for a prosperous, progressive Western democracy, the UK has a lamentable penal record. Britain's prison population is currently in excess of 60,000 (up 50 per cent from a decade ago) making it the second-largest in Europe. The average cost of keeping an individual prisoner incarcerated for a year is £27,000 (ten times the average expenditure on a secondary school pupil in the state sector). Despite such substantial investment, over half of British prisoners re-offend within two years of release.

Such high rates of recidivism is a serious problem. It means that the prison population is continuing to grow at an alarming rate (recently by as many as 700 a week), so overcrowding is endemic, hampering opportunities for education and rehabilitation and lowering staff and prisoner morale. To ease this pressure, the UK government is investing in the prison estate at historic levels, with 12,000 new prison places proposed within the next few years. Yet, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, Britain's 'new Victorian' prisons are designed for security and control rather than for the rehabilitation and education which is increasingly recognised as what prisoners need. Most are poorly educated young men under 30 (at least 60 per cent of whom are functionally illiterate and innumerate), so without education and skills, few will be able to build meaningful lives away from crime, no matter how often they go to prison, or how long they spend there.

Any transformation of the penal system must start with the redesign of prison buildings. Prison architecture has a clearly discernible effect on behaviour, operational efficiency, interaction and morale. Last year, architects Buschow Henley were commissioned by a think tank organisation working with the Home Office Prison Service to research and develop an alternative prison model that focuses more intensely on rehabilitation through a concentrated programme of intellectual, physical and social education. The model is not intended as a blueprint

but rather a series of principles that might be adapted to support the wider concept of the 'Learning Prison' in which other aspects such as organisation, management and funding would obviously play a part. Key to this is the introduction of a system that groups together prisoners in small communities or 'houses' of between 30 and 40 inmates. This has two important consequences. First, the more compact spatial organisation of the house reduces staff time spent on supervising and escorting prisoners. Second, the system places educational and other facilities at the heart of the building, within easy reach at all times of day, reinforced by a supportive social environment. This model also enables resources to be dramatically redeployed, from a current estimated ratio of 80:20 (costs of security versus rehabilitation) to a predicted reversed figure of 20:80, freeing up much-needed funds to invest in educational programmes, thereby helping to promote rehabilitation, reduce recidivism and initiate a virtuous cycle.

In Buschow Henley's scheme, the proposed group size of 30-40 has the potential for social accountability – each prisoner being known within the community and personally accountable for his behaviour. Houses are semi-autonomous, not just dormitories, with communal, as opposed to centralized, facilities. Circulation is simplified and reduced. Buildings are arranged in a chess-board formation, as opposed to pavilions marooned in space, each with a discrete external area that can be productively used for sport, games or gardening with a minimum of supervision.

Individual cells are replanned to make them less like domestic lavatories and more conducive to learning. In an inversion of the conventional layout, the bed is placed lengthways along the external wall at a high level, freeing up space below. Storage is built-in and each inmate is provided with a moveable table equipped with electronic tools for study. Washing facilities are contained in a small adjoining space (included in the basic 8 sqm allowance) so reducing pressure on prison staff to manage inmate hygiene and ablution. Each cell is paired with a neighbouring 'buddy' cell linked by sliding doors

controlled by individual prisoners to mitigate the risk of self-harm.

While this new type of prison appears to be somewhat liberal, the arrangement of spaces and functions both inside and out is actually tightly controlled. Paradoxically, however, this proscription enables a greater range of activities to take place and makes general supervision easier. In this environment

the prisoners are judged not by their degree of conformity, but by the scope of their activities and achievements, so laying the foundations for genuine rehabilitation. As Martin Narey, Director General of the UK Prison Services observes, 'We have got to accept that prison must be a humane and constructive place, not least because all but 23 of my population are going home someday.'

### Questions 1-5

Complete each sentence with the correct ending, **A-H**, below. Write *ONLY* the correct letter **A-H** in boxes **1-5**.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1 The agenda of current British prison systems is primarily
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2 The primary role of prisons should be
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3 The new prison scheme will create
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4 Existing prison architecture causes
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5 The positive results of reducing the number of prisoners in one space include
- A** improved security, supervision and education.
- B** rehabilitation and education.
- C** reduced efficiency, morale and interaction.
- D** reduced risk of self-harm.
- E** security and control.
- F** an alternative prison model
- G** a learning environment rather than a punitive compound.
- H** organisation, management and funding.

### Questions 6-9

Choose **A**, **B**, **C** or **D**, and type *ONLY* the letter.

- 6 The project to reform the penal system in the UK
- A** is progressive. **C** will eliminate the need for supervision.
- B** is inexpensive. **D** is, primarily, to make prisoners more comfortable.
- 7 The proposal to create 12,000 new prison places, within the next few years, indicates that
- A** prison cells are too small. **C** there is an increasing population of offenders in the UK.
- B** a lot of money is invested into educating offenders. **D** the government is getting tougher on offenders.
- 8 The proposed changes to prison architecture are designed primarily to
- A** improve the aesthetic value of the building. **B** boost self-esteem and social behaviour.
- C** allow prisoners more living space. **D** increase running costs within prisons.



- 9 Why is the bed placed lengthways along the external wall at a high level?
- A to make room below for washing facilities    B for the improvement of the inmates' hygiene  
C to allow room below for storage and shelves    D to make room for sliding doors

**Questions 10-13**

Label the diagram below.

Write **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** from the passage for each answer.

