

Agenda Supplement – Equality and Social Justice Committee

Meeting Venue:

Committee Room 5 (Ty Hywel)

Meeting date: 15 December 2025

Meeting time: 13.30

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Supplementary pack

Please note the documents below are in addition to those published in the main Agenda and Reports pack for this Meeting

2 Experiences of the criminal justice system: evidence session with Dr Robert Jones

(13:30–14:30)

(Pages 1 – 29)

Dr Robert Jones, Wales Governance Centre

Attached Documents:

Briefing from Dr Robert Jones

3.4 Correspondence from Wales Women's Budget Group and the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales to the Chair regarding the publication of the Welsh Government's Draft Budget 2026–27

(Pages 30 – 34)

Attached Documents:

Correspondence from Wales Women's Budget Group and the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales to the Chair regarding the publication of the Welsh Government's Draft Budget 2026–27 – 11 December 2025

6 Post-legislative scrutiny of the Future Generations Act: key issues

(14:45 – 15:30)

(Pages 35 – 67)



Attached Documents:

Key issues paper

The Expansion of HMP Parc: Wales' (Growing) Imprisonment Rate

Dr Robert Jones

December 2025



Canolfan
Llywodraethiant Cymru

Wales Governance
Centre

About Us

The Wales Governance Centre is a research centre that forms part of Cardiff University's School of Law and Politics. The Centre's work on criminal justice began in 2018 with the launch of the *Justice and Jurisdiction* project. The project was funded by a combination of the Economic and Social Research Council, the Welsh Government and Cardiff University and concluded in 2020. A total of 11 reports were produced throughout the project and the information gathered heavily informed *The Welsh Criminal Justice System: On the Jagged Edge*, which was published by University of Wales Press in October 2022.

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INTRODUCTION

HMP Parc in Bridgend has attracted significant political and public interest in recent years. Following a series of deaths at the prison in 2024, widespread concerns have been raised over the conduct of prison staff, the availability of drugs, the treatment of prisoners, and according to HMI Prisons (2025a: 3), a ‘serious deterioration in standards’. In both the Senedd and the House of Commons, concerted efforts have been made to hold the UK Government and HMP Parc’s senior management team to account. In April, the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee (2025) expressed deep concern about levels of violence directed towards prisoners from staff, as well as the lack of transparency from officials about the prison’s progress. In July, members of the Senedd’s Equality and Social Justice Committee (2025) raised multiple concerns with the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Lord Timpson, about the prison’s deteriorating safety. Despite repeated assurances from Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and HMP Parc officials about the prison’s ‘progress’ and ‘improvement’, valid concerns remain about the welfare and treatment of prisoners at HMP Parc.

While the accountability and safety problems facing the prison have been subject to intense media interest and parliamentary engagement in recent months, another majorly significant development surrounding HMP Parc has, thus far, largely evaded meaningful scrutiny. In May of this year, BBC Wales reported that proposals were being readied to expand the capacity of the prison by a further 345 places (Moffat, 2025). This news followed the Ministry of Justice’s decision in September 2024 to grant HMP Parc ‘pre-application approval’ as part of its efforts to increase prison capacity and tackle overcrowding in England and Wales. After a planning application for the development was submitted by Galliford Try Construction Limited and the Ministry of Justice in July, the plans to extend HMP Parc were formally approved by Bridgend Country Borough Council in November 2025 (Smith, 2025).

At a time when the prison is continuing to face serious questions about its safety and legitimacy, the logic and timing of the Ministry of Justice’s decision to expand HMP Parc raises several far-reaching questions. The purpose of this short briefing is to provide some context to the plans

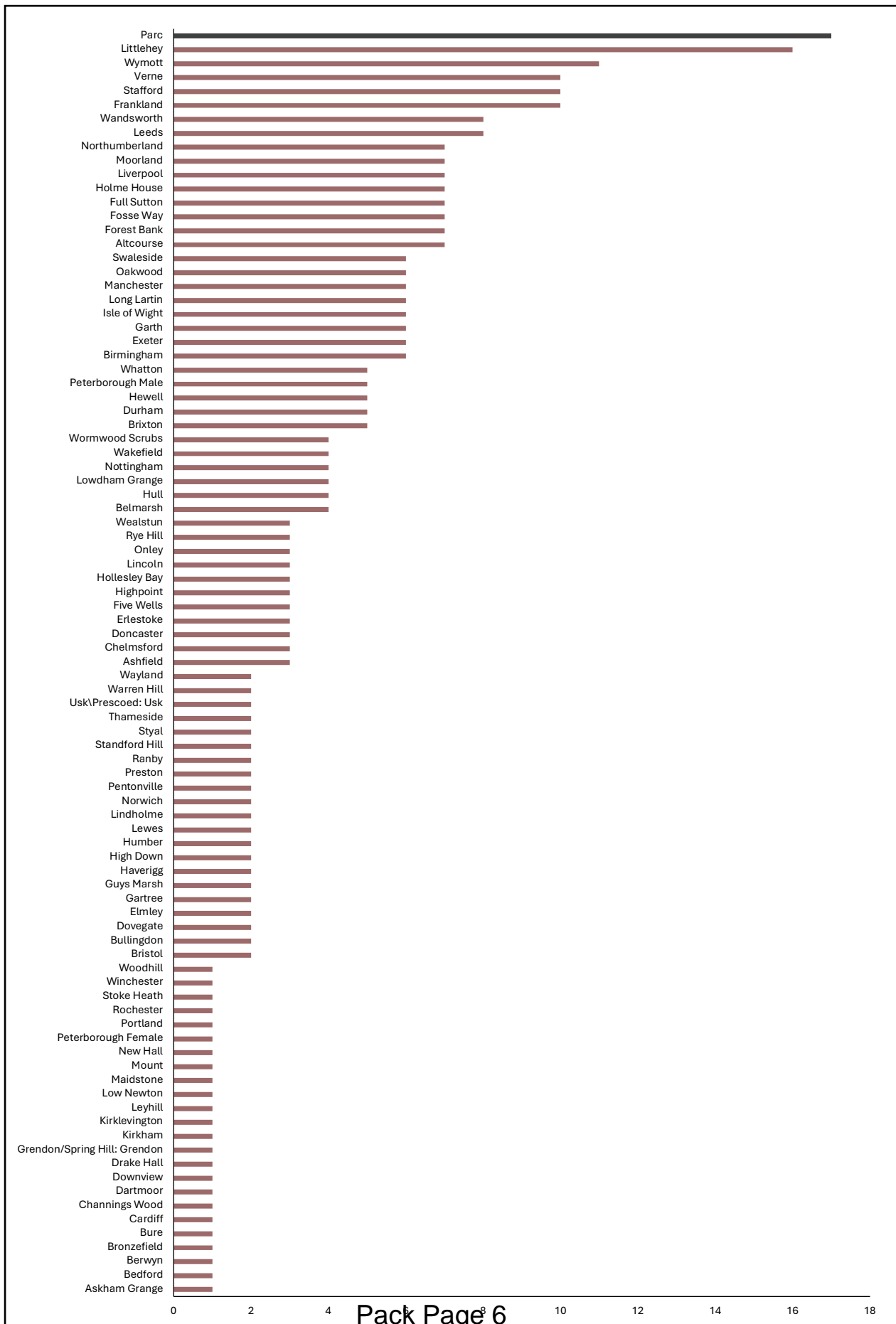
and consider the potential impact of the proposed expansion on the Welsh criminal justice system. This includes raising questions about what the plans mean for Wales' (already) table topping 'in-country' imprisonment rate, as well as what this latest development tells us about Wales' place within the England and Wales system. It is hoped that the information presented here can help to inform the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee's ongoing *Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation in Wales* inquiry, the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee's work on *The Criminal Justice System in Wales*, as well as wider scrutiny, debates and research on Welsh criminal justice.

1 HMP PARC: SAFETY IN CUSTODY

- 1.1** The Ministry of Justice’s decision to expand HMP Parc comes at a time when the prison is mired in controversy. Since 2024, there have been significant concerns raised about the prison’s safety record following a sharp rise in deaths at the prison. Out of the 21 deaths recorded across the Welsh prison estate in 2024, 17 were at HMP Parc (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). This was the highest number of deaths recorded by a single prison in 2024 (see Figure 1.1) and the joint highest ever recorded by a prison in England and Wales.¹
- 1.2** Following an unannounced inspection at the prison in January 2025, HMI Prisons (2025a: 3) concluded that there had been a ‘serious deterioration’ in standards at HMP Parc. Inspectors found that the prison had been ‘troubled’ by the steady flow of drugs into the prison, with at least four of the deaths recorded at HMP Parc in 2024 believed to be linked to ‘synthetic opioids’ (HMI Prisons, 2025a: 3). HMI Prisons concluded that not one of its previous four recommendations on safety had been achieved since its last visit to the prison. The four concerns listed by HMI Prisons (2025a) were that: self-harm remained too high; overall rates of violence were too high; the availability of illicit drugs remaining a significant threat; and that there were gaps in the strategic oversight of important areas, including safety.
- 1.3** In May 2024, South Wales Police confirmed that a prison staff member had been arrested in connection with drug dealing offences at HMP Parc (Aitken, 2024). Ministry of Justice (2025b) data show that the number of drug finds at the prison increased by 71 per cent in 2024/25, including a 57 per cent rise in the number of psychoactive substances. In total, there were 1,124 drug finds at HMP Parc in 2024/25.

¹ There were 17 deaths recorded at HMP Lindholm in Doncaster in 2021. The Ministry of Justice’s records on deaths broken down by establishment begin in 2000.

Figure 1.1: Deaths recorded at prisons in England and Wales, 2024



- 1.4** Of the 17 deaths recorded at HMP Parc in 2024, eight were attributed to ‘natural causes’. Between 2020 and 2024, there were a total of 49 deaths across the Welsh prison estate with the cause of death attributed to ‘natural causes’ (Ministry of Justice, 2025a). While a third (33 per cent) of all prisoners in the Welsh prison estate were held at HMP Parc during this period, over half (53 per cent) of all natural cause deaths in Wales were recorded at the prison between 2020 and 2024.²
- 1.5** The Prison and Probation Ombudsman (2017) has determined that a large number of ‘natural cause’ deaths can be explained by inadequate prison healthcare as well as an increase in the older prisoner population. In August 2024, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman published the findings of its reinvestigation into the death of Mr Aaron Nunes at HMP Parc in February 2016. Mr Nunes died in hospital of septic shock and diabetic ketoacidosis. The Ombudsman’s (2024: 1) initial report stated that the care received by Mr Nunes at the prison was ‘equivalent to that he could have expected to receive in the community’. An inquest into Mr Nunes’ death later concluded that the direct cause of his death was ‘his failure to manage his own health adequately’ (Prison and Probation Ombudsman, 2024: 1). However, following legal action taken by Mr Nunes’ mother, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman reinvestigated his death and found that a ‘large number of significant failings’ had in fact contributed to Mr Nunes’ death. According to the Ombudsman (2024: 4) ‘Parc could not offer the clinical care and observation required to meet Mr Nunes’ complex healthcare needs safely’. Ultimately, Mr Nunes’ death could have been prevented had he ‘received dental and diabetic healthcare of an acceptable standard’ at HMP Parc.
- 1.6** HM Chief Inspector of Prisons’ 2024/25 annual report found that many prisons across England and Wales are failing to learn from the Prison and Probation Ombudsman’s recommendations regarding previous deaths, including those recorded as ‘self-inflicted’ (HMI Prisons, 2025b). Three of the 17 deaths at HMP Parc in 2024 were recorded as ‘self-inflicted’. According to the Director of HMP Parc, all three of these

² There were 26 natural cause deaths recorded at HMP Parc between 2020 and 2024.

deaths took place in the first six months of 2024 (House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, 2024).

Figure 1.2: The number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and assaults on staff recorded at HMP Parc, 2010 to 2024

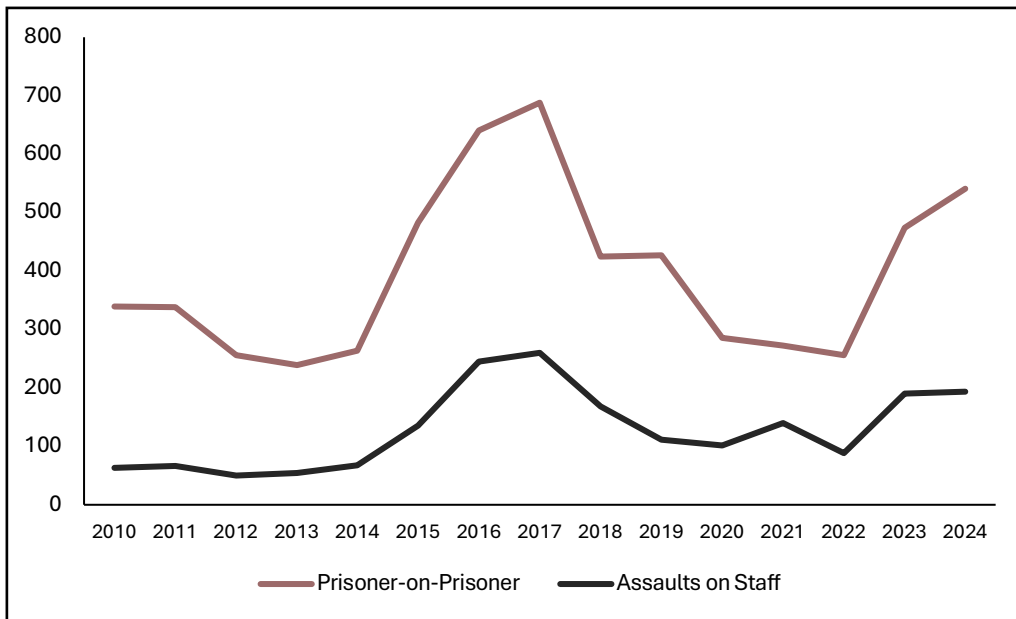
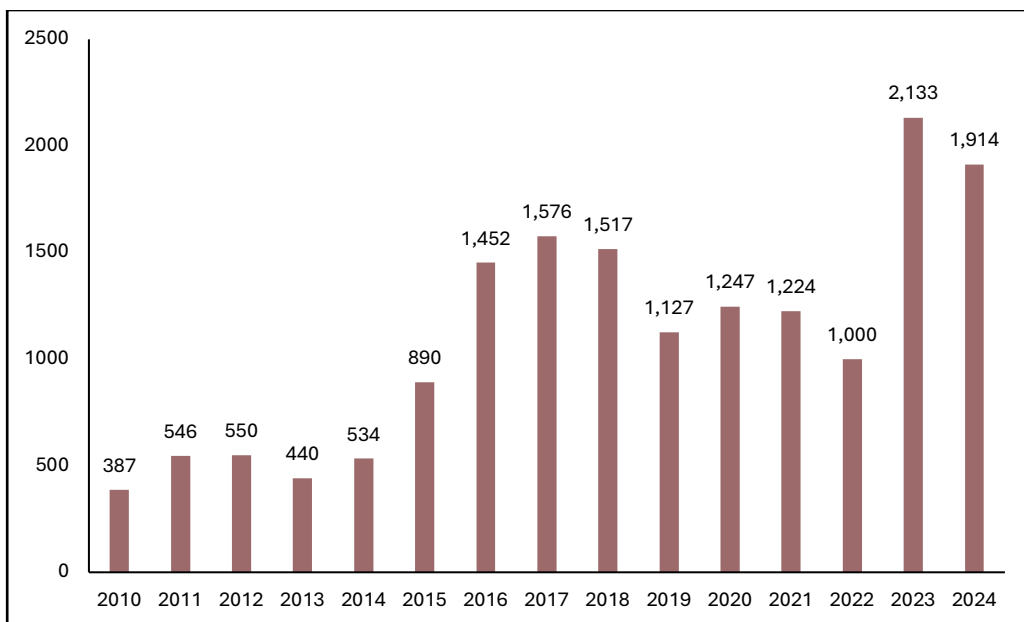


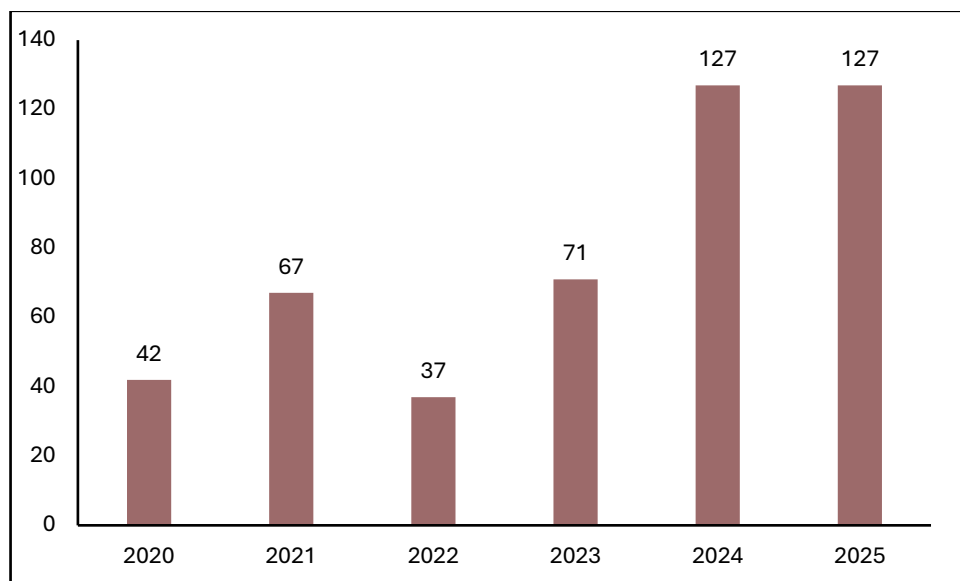
Figure 1.3: The number of self-harm incidents recorded at HMP Parc, 2010 to 2024



1.7 Beyond the number of deaths recorded at HMP Parc in 2024, there were also increases in the number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults (15 per cent) as well as a rise in assaults on staff (3 per cent) at the prison (see Figure 1.2). Although the number of self-harm incidents fell in 2024, the level remained significantly higher than it had been in previous years (see Figure 1.3).

1.8 In response to the many concerns that have been raised by politicians in the House of Commons and the Senedd about deteriorating safety levels at HMP Parc, Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and prison officials have repeatedly insisted that the prison has become ‘far more stable’ since the appointment of a new Director and the introduction of new safety measures (Senedd Cymru’s Equality and Social Committee, 2025). When giving evidence to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in December 2024, HMP Parc’s Director, Will Styles, told MPs that ‘really significant progress’ had been made to improve ‘safety outcomes’ at the prison and that the metrics ‘have improved very significantly’ (House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, 2024).

Figure 1.4: The number of assaults on staff recorded at HMP Parc in first six months to June, 2020 to 2025



1.9 Deaths at HMP Parc fell sharply in the first six months to June 2025. Given that the level reached in 2024 equalled the joint highest level ever recorded in England and Wales, this reduction is perhaps unsurprising. However, there were 11 fewer deaths recorded in the six months to June 2025 than in the six months to June 2024 (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

1.10 Despite the reduction in the number of deaths at HMP Parc, the prison’s performance in other safety areas underlines the need for continuing (and intense) scrutiny. For example, although the prison’s Director told members of the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee that assaults on prison staff had ‘reduced very significantly’ in the latter half of 2024, the latest *Safety in Custody* statistics show that staff assaults at HMP Parc in the first six months of 2025 were identical to the number recorded in the first half of 2024 (see Figure 1.4). While self-harm incidents (Figure 1.5) and prisoner-on-prisoner assaults (Figure 1.6) were both lower in the first six months to June 2025, these levels continued to surpass the numbers recorded at the prison in recent years (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

Figure 1.5: The number of self-harm incidents recorded at HMP Parc in first six months to June, 2020 to 2025

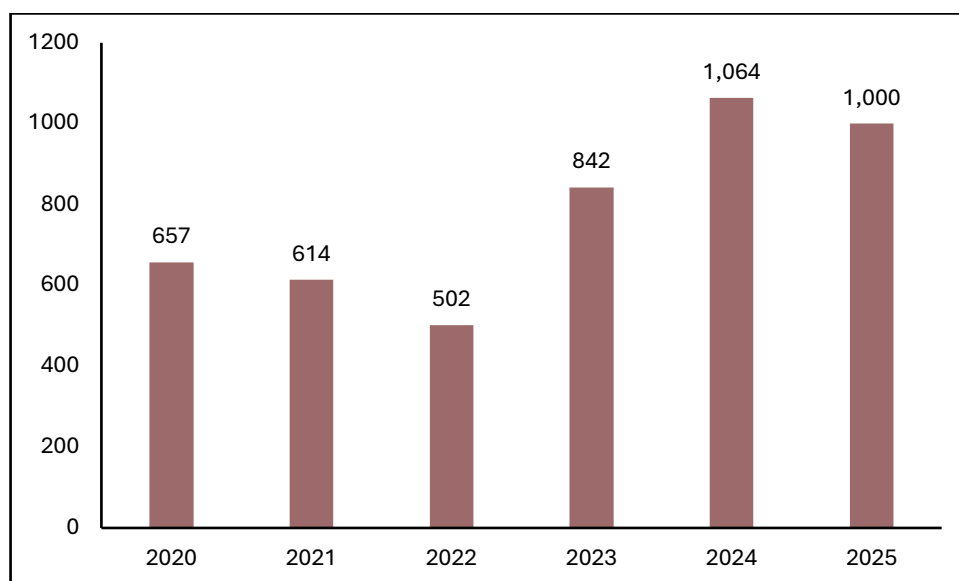
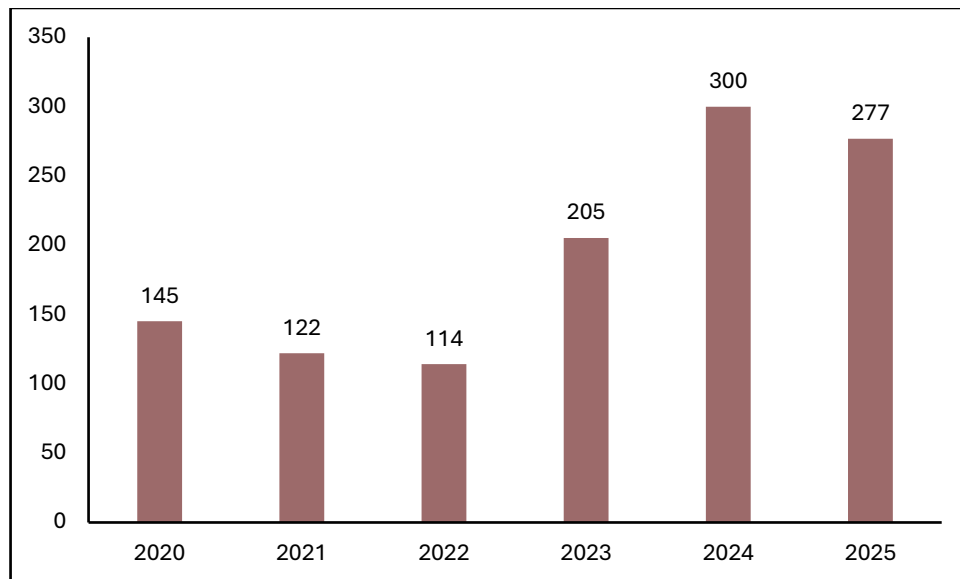


Figure 1.6: The number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults recorded at HMP Parc in first six months to June, 2020 to 2025



1.11 When viewed against the information presented here, the timing of the UK Government’s decision to expand HMP Parc appears ever more curious. With pre-application approval for the expansion awarded by the Ministry of Justice in September 2024, the decision to expand the size of HMP Parc was taken while the prison was firmly in the eye of the storm. Indeed, only a month before the expansion was approved, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman (2024) had published its damning conclusion into the failures that led to the death of Mr Aaron Nunes at the prison in 2016. Perhaps even more concerningly, however, is that the expansion was granted in the same month that four prison officers at HMP Parc were arrested on suspicion of assault and misconduct in public office (Pigott, 2024). Irrespective of these developments, and even before members of the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee had been given the chance to scrutinise and question prison officials about the safety issues surrounding the prison in December 2024, HMP Parc was already destined for expansion.

1.12 The decision to expand the size of HMP Parc should also be read against the latest prison safety statistics. Although Ministry of Justice, HMPPS and prison officials

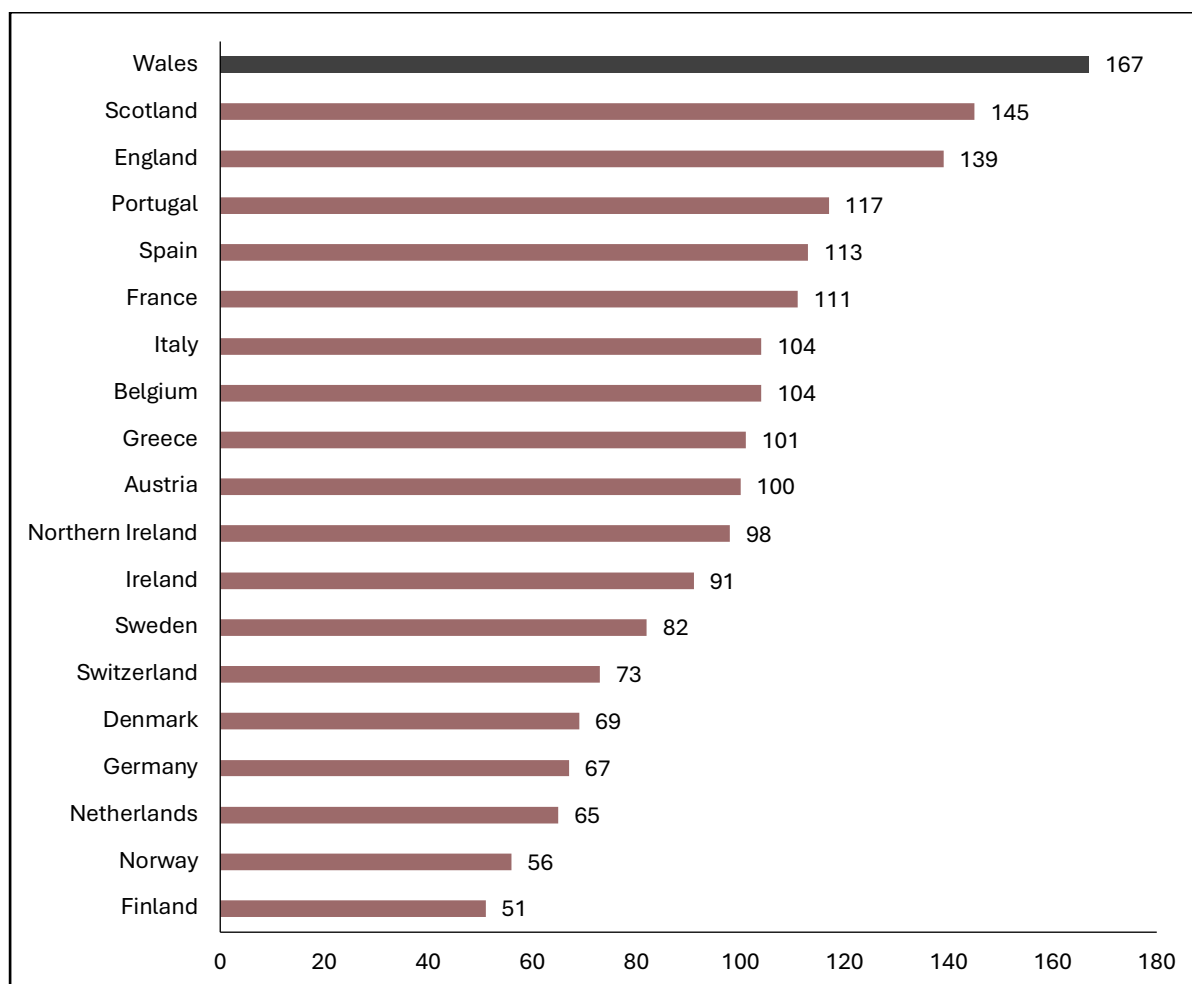
continue to press home the message that HMP Parc is now 'stable' and firmly back on track, 2025 data on assaults on staff, self-harm, and prisoner-on-prisoner assaults underline the need for caution as well as continuing scrutiny of the prison.

2 WHAT IMPACT WILL THE EXPANSION HAVE ON PRISONER NUMBERS IN WALES?

- 2.1** Since HMP Berwyn in Wrexham became operational in 2017, the average number of prisoners held in Wales has increased by 34 per cent. In 2024, there were 5,314 people held in the Welsh prison estate which included, on average, 1,861 prisoners from England (based on home address) (Jones, 2025).
- 2.2** The Wales Governance Centre's *Prison Factfile* reports have routinely calculated Wales' imprisonment rate per 100,000 of the population since 2019. While the widely adopted method within comparative socio-legal studies is to calculate the rate based on the number of prisoners held within a particular country and the general population of that country, the rate in Wales has been calculated using 'in-country' and 'home address' data to reflect the territorial complexities of the 'single' England and Wales system. The 'in-country' method enables us to determine the imprisonment rate based on the total number of people held in Welsh prisons (including those who are from outside of Wales), while the 'home address' method helps us to understand how many Welsh people are in prison relative to the size of the Welsh population.
- 2.3** In May 2024, *The Institute for Criminal Policy Research* published the fourteenth edition of the *World Prison Population List* (Fair and Walmsley, 2024). First produced by the Home Office in 1999, the most recent report provides a breakdown of imprisonment rates for 223 prison systems worldwide using a calculation based on the 'in-country' method which measures the number of people held in prison in national borders. Since it was first published in 1999, England and Wales has recorded the highest (or joint highest) rate of imprisonment in western Europe in eight of the fourteen *World Prison Population Lists*.
- 2.4** Based upon the number of prisoners held in the Welsh prison estate in 2024, Wales had an 'in-country' imprisonment rate of 167 prisoners per 100,000. This rate far

exceeded the level recorded in England (139 per 100,000) and in any other country in western Europe in 2024 (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Imprisonment rates (per 100,000) in western Europe, 2024



2.5 Wales has had a surplus of prison places since HMP Berwyn became operational in 2017. In 2024, there were 4,918 people *from* Wales in prison (across England and Wales), with 5,314 people being held in the Welsh prison estate. By contrast, there were 81,420 people *from* England in prison in 2024, with 81,488 people being held across the English prison estate.³ After the Ministry of Justice had announced plans

³ The Ministry of Justice states that around 97 per cent of prisoners have an origin location (i.e. addresses that are recorded on its central IT system). If no address is given, an offender's committal court address is used as a proxy for the area in which they are resident. Those with no recorded origin are typically foreign nationals or those recently received into custody. No address have been recorded and no court information is available for around three per cent of all prisoners; these figures are excluded from the data included here.

to construct a new 1,600 place prison in Port Talbot in 2017, widespread concerns were raised about Wales being used to house an increasing number of English prisoners (BBC Wales News, 2017).

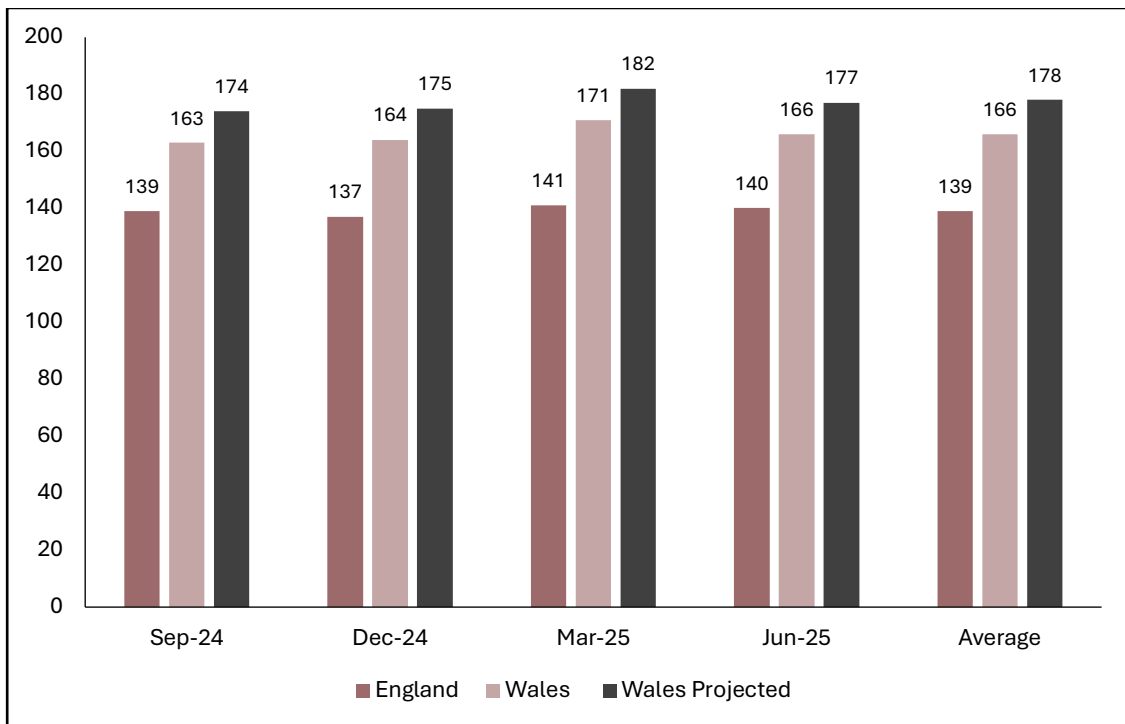
- 2.6** The decision to expand the size of HMP Parc by a further 345 places will increase the prison place surplus in Wales. Using the most recent data published in the Ministry of Justice's (2025c) *Welsh Justice Data: Annual Release 2025*, we can estimate that the prison place surplus will increase from 393 to 738 places in Wales.⁴
- 2.7** While it is vitally important to recognise that the prison estate in Wales is currently unable to accommodate all Welsh prisoners, including women and those held as Category A,⁵ there will be around 700 *more* prison places in Wales than Welsh prisoners if/when HMP Parc is expanded.
- 2.8** The projected rise in prison capacity in Wales will also see its table topping imprisonment rate increase further. Based on an average of the latest annual prison data, Wales' 'in-country' imprisonment rate will eventually rise to 178 per 100,000 of the population once HMP Parc is expanded (see Figure 2.3).⁶ This number not only exceeds the rate currently recorded anywhere else in western Europe, but will surpass the average for the whole of Europe (177 per 100,000) included in the most recent *World Prison Population List* (Fair and Walmsley, 2024).

⁴ This has been calculated using data from September 2024, December 2024, March 2025 and June 2025. Welsh prisoners: 4,903; Welsh prison population: 5,296; Welsh prison population (after expansion): 5,641. Population data: England: 58,620,101; Wales: 3,186,581.

⁵ For further information on this see the oral evidence given by the former Executive Director of HMPPS in Wales, Amy Rees (2018: Q333), to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in 2018.

⁶ This has been calculated using data from September 2024, December 2024, March 2025 and June 2025. Welsh prison population: 5,296; Welsh prison population (after expansion): 5,641.

Figure 2.2: The ‘in-country’ imprisonment rate for England, Wales, and Wales after the planned expansion of HMP Parc



2.9 Even accounting for the planned expansion of the prison estate in England,⁷ Wales’ imprisonment rate (once HMP Parc has been expanded) will continue to exceed the level recorded there. Based on the latest prison and population data for England and Wales, the number of prisoners held in England would need to increase by over 21,000 to achieve a rate equal to Wales following the proposed expansion of HMP Parc.⁸

2.10 The data and information presented here reveal the impact that the planned expansion at HMP Parc will have on prisoner numbers in Wales. Not only will the development add to Wales’ existing prison place surplus but, significantly, further entrench its unwanted international reputation for boasting *the* highest ‘in-country’ imprisonment rate in western Europe. At a time when the Welsh Government (2022) is pursuing policies and initiatives aimed at driving down prisoner numbers in Wales, these

⁷ Once it reaches full operational capacity, HMP Millsike in Yorkshire is expected to hold 1,500 prisoners. In November 2025, construction also began on a new 1,700 place prison (HMP Welland Oaks) in Leicestershire.

⁸ This is based on a Welsh imprisonment rate of 177 per 100,000 prisoners (June 2025) and England’s prison population (82,304) in June 2025.

data undoubtedly raise further questions about the future use of the Welsh prison estate. This includes Wales' role in helping to absorb prisoner overflows from England, as well as the likely or potential impact that further prison expansion will have on devolved services in Wales.

3 WHO SPEAKS FOR WALES? UNANSWERED

QUESTIONS ON WALES' IMPRISONMENT RATE

- 3.1** Beyond the number of prison places in Wales and its 'in-country' imprisonment rate, successive *Prison Factfile* reports published since 2019 have shown that Wales has also consistently recorded a higher 'home address' imprisonment rate than England since disaggregated data first became available in 2013 (Jones, 2019a; 2019b; 2020; 2023; 2024; 2025). Although this issue attracted some initial attention (Morris, 2019; Sky News, 2019) and political concern (House of Commons Westminster Hall Debate, 22 January 2020; National Assembly for Wales Debate, 22 January 2019; Senedd Cymru's Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2025), little has been done to understand or explain why a higher proportion of people from Wales are in prison (Jones and Wyn Jones, 2022).
- 3.2** Despite several opportunities to do so, UK Government officials have repeatedly failed to account for the fact that Wales has consistently recorded a higher rate of imprisonment than England, not to mention any other country in western Europe. Since 2019, questions about Wales' imprisonment rate have elicited a variety of responses. Some have simply attempted to deny or trivialise the claim that Wales has *the* highest rate of imprisonment. When providing evidence to the Commission on Justice in Wales in 2019, for example, the then Chief Executive of HMPPS, Michael Spurr, claimed that Wales should not be considered as having western Europe's highest imprisonment rate, as this rather dubious honour rightly belonged to Guernsey (Spurr, 2019).⁹
- 3.3** During a Westminster Hall Debate on the recommendations of the *Commission on Justice in Wales'* report in 2020, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, Chris Philp MP, also questioned the validity of the findings, claiming that the rates between Wales and England 'are very similar' (House of Commons Westminster

⁹ The population of Guernsey is smaller than that of Anglesey.

Hall Debate, 22 January 2020). This comparison, however, was based on a calculation of the custody rates (the percentage of cases that result in an immediate custodial sentence) recorded at courts in Wales and England, *not* the rate of imprisonment per 100,000 of the population.¹⁰

3.4 In recent years, the UK Government has moved away from simply denying or challenging the claim that Wales has a higher imprisonment rate than England or any other country in western Europe. Despite this welcome change of tack, however, the UK Government has, to date, yet to provide any meaningful or authoritative explanation for the Welsh imprisonment rate. When probed about the issue by the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee in July 2025, for example, the Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending, Lord Timpson, simply told members that the 'independent judiciary decide who goes to prison and who doesn't' (Senedd Cymru's Equality and Social Justice Committee, 2025).¹¹

3.5 The response given by Lord Timpson represents the latest in a long line of failed opportunities by UK Government Ministers and officials to engage on a serious level with the multiple (and often complex) factors likely to be responsible for Wales' imprisonment rate. The sentencing decisions made by the judiciary only form part of the overall picture, with recent trends underlining the impact that remand and recall decisions have had on imprisonment levels in Wales (Jones, 2025). More broadly, wider research on the social and political forces underpinning criminal justice policy show that factors such as poverty and deprivation are likely to result in more people entering the prison system (Houchin, 2005; Reiman and Leighton, 2010; Wacquant, 2009). The fact that poverty remains a prevalent and persistent issue in Wales (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025), alongside evidence pointing towards a correlation between imprisonment rates and deprivation levels in Wales (Jones and Davies, 2019), underlines the need for this issue to be given serious consideration.

¹⁰ Chris Philp: 'The issue of imprisonment rates was raised. The rate of imprisonment for offenders in Wales is very similar to that in England. It is fractionally higher in Wales—it is about 6.5% in England and 6.85% in Wales. So, as I say, the rates are very similar'.

¹¹ Lord Timpson proceeded to underline the importance of reducing reoffending but made no attempt to suggest that this issue could explain why Wales' imprisonment rate was higher than England's.

- 3.6** The UK Government's plans to expand HMP Parc must be viewed within the context of its continuing failure to engage seriously with the questions surrounding Wales' table topping imprisonment rate. Indeed, at a time when so many questions are being raised about prisons in Wales and the future of Welsh criminal justice, the Ministry of Justice's decision to force through yet another prison expansion in Wales, without any kind of formal or detailed public announcement of the plans, appears both underhanded and ill-judged
- 3.7** The planned expansion of HMP Parc naturally raises further questions about Wales' place within the England and Wales criminal justice system. Despite the determined efforts of officials working for HMPPS in Wales to ensure that the Welsh context is better reflected in UK justice policy, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Wales continues to have low salience among Ministers and officials in Whitehall who remain preoccupied with the challenges facing the prison system in England and Wales system as a whole. More than six years on since the Commission on Justice in Wales (2019: 8) concluded that the people of Wales are 'being let down by the justice system in its current state', the UK Government's decision to further expand the Welsh prison estate will do little to appease those who remain gravely concerned about Wales' needs being routinely overlooked by decision makers in Whitehall.

CONCLUSION

Wales is certainly no stranger when it comes to prison building proposals and plans for prison expansion. In the last two decades alone, the Ministry of Justice has unveiled (unsuccessful) plans for new prisons in Cwmbran (BBC Wales News, 2008), Caernarfon (North Wales Live, 2009) and Port Talbot (BBC Wales News, 2017), as well as (successful) proposals for a new houseblock at HMP Parc in 2013 (Owen, 2013) and the construction of the UK's largest prison, HMP Berwyn, in Wrexham (Ballinger, 2017). The Ministry of Justice's latest attempts to call upon Wales in aid of the overcrowded England and Wales prison estate, however, are being played out at a very different time and in markedly different political circumstances.

Although the England and Wales system remains formally intact, the work of academics, the Commission on Justice in Wales, the Welsh Government, the Senedd, and House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee in recent years have transformed our understanding of the criminal justice system in Wales. No longer simply subsumed within broader discussions played out on an England and Wales level, Wales has become increasingly visible within political and academic debates on criminal justice (Jones and Wyn Jones, 2022). Where decisions once taken by the Ministry of Justice might have ordinarily been overlooked or subject to minimal scrutiny, there is now widespread recognition of the need to meaningfully consider the potential consequences and implications for Wales.

It is against the backdrop of this growing interest, engagement and concern with the Welsh criminal justice system that this briefing on the Ministry of Justice's latest plans for prison expansion in Wales has been compiled. By presenting some of the latest data on safety at HMP Parc; Wales' future prison place surplus; and the many unanswered questions surrounding Wales' table topping imprisonment rate, this briefing raises a series of far-reaching questions that undoubtedly warrant further attention and scrutiny. For example, at a time when HMP Parc was facing an unprecedented deterioration in safety levels, why was pre-application approval for the expansion of the prison granted by the Ministry of Justice in September 2024? Despite Wales' existing prison place surplus and already (comfortably) boasting the highest in-country imprisonment rate in western Europe, why are the Ministry of Justice planning to add further

prison places in Wales? Finally, having repeatedly failed to engage seriously with Wales' imprisonment rate and the factors underlying it, what do the Ministry of Justice's plans for yet more prison expansion tell us about Wales' place within the England and Wales system?

It is hoped that these questions can be explored further as part of the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee's ongoing *Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation in Wales* inquiry and the Senedd's Equality and Social Justice Committee's work on *The Criminal Justice System in Wales*. Furthermore, at a time when the devolved government is pursuing its own policies aimed at driving down prisoner numbers in Wales, this briefing can be used by Welsh Government to engage Ministry of Justice officials on the many issues raised here. Indeed, if the Welsh Government has genuine aspirations for an alternative future for justice in Wales, now is the time to show it.

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Briefing: Welsh Government Draft Budget 2026-27

December 2025

Introduction

Together, the Wales Women's Budget Group (WWBG) and the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales have analysed the Welsh Government's Draft Budget 2026-27 from a gender equality perspective. This briefing highlights some key points and recommendations, including those relating to the recent budget agreement between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru announced on 9th December 2025. Our full consultation response can be found [here](#), and a recording of our oral evidence session is available on [Senedd.tv](#). Additionally, our statement response to the Draft Budget 2026-27 is available to view [here](#).

1. Budget agreement, 9 December 2025

- 1.1. We warmly welcome the additional investment in Wales' public services as a result of the budget agreement reached between Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru this week. Due to their unequal economic position, women in Wales are more likely than men to rely on public services, as well as to work within them and to become providers of last resort when services are cut or scaled back. In this context, the additional £300million announced for public services is positive news, particularly following the relative deprioritisation of public services in the UK Government's Autumn Budget 2025.¹
- 1.2. We were particularly pleased to see much-needed investment in Welsh local authorities which provide the vital public services women rely on and work within.
 - However, while the 4% funding floor and investment of £112.8million will help safeguard councils in the short term, it falls short of placing them on sustainable footing. As discussed below, a number of key public services have not received adequate support in this year's budget. In the context of the announced rises to National Living and Minimum Wages in the UK Autumn Budget, it is unlikely that this extra funding will meet growing cost pressures. This may result in increased service costs or cuts to service provision, both of which impact women in Wales disproportionately as lower earners, majority service users and employees. There is an urgent need for a long-term sustainable funding plan to adequately fund local authorities and protect the vital services they provide.
- 1.3. Women make up 78% of the health and social care workforce in Wales.² As noted in our response, the initial uplift allocated in the Welsh Government's detailed Draft Budget was wholly insufficient to meet growing demand and cost pressures within the sector.³ We therefore welcome the additional £180million which will be invested in health and social care next year.
 - We remain concerned, however, that poor pay, working terms and conditions continue to exacerbate the recruitment and retention crisis within social care specifically. It is therefore vital that the additional funding provided in the budget agreement is used to tackle the structural issues within the sector i.e. the prevalence of precarious, zero-hour contracts, lack of job security, and shortage of training and progression opportunities.

¹ WWBG (2025), *Autumn Budget 2025: What does it mean for women in Wales?*

<https://wwbg.org.uk/autumn-budget-2025-what-does-it-mean-for-women-in-wales/>

² WEN Wales (2025), *State of the Nation 2025* (forthcoming)

³ WWBG and WEN Wales (2025), *Wales Women's Budget Group (WWBG) and Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales joint submission to the Finance Committee: Welsh Government Draft Budget 2026-27* <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s500017595/WGDB26-27%2021%20Wales%20Womens%20Budget%20Group%20WWBG%20and%20Womens%20Equality%20Network%20WEN.pdf>

Potential questions:

- **What long-term action is the Welsh Government taking to support Welsh local authorities and the services they provide?**
- **How will the allocations in the Draft Budget 2026-27 be used to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis in the social care sector?**

2. Childcare

- 2.1. The unequal economic position of women in Wales means that they bear a disproportionate share of unpaid caring responsibilities. As a result, they are 2.5 times more likely than men to be working part-time and three times more likely to be economically inactive due to caring responsibilities.⁴ Inadequate childcare provision in Wales continues to represent a key barrier to women's workforce participation, their economic independence and gender equality more widely.
- 2.2. While we welcome restated funding for childcare in this year's Draft Budget, the system remains unaffordable, inaccessible and disjointed with gaps in provision driving parents, particularly mothers, out of work. Funded entitlements for the lowest-income families and children under three are extremely limited and often incompatible with typical working patterns. For example, the phased expansion of Flying Start only amounts to 12.5 hours per week, regularly delivered at 2.5 hours a day. Research shows that funded childcare in the region of 15 hours or less is largely ineffective in addressing parental employment, whereas expanding entitlements to 30 hours leads to significant increases in labour force participation and employment of mothers whose youngest child is eligible.⁵
- 2.3. The cost of childcare continues to rise for all ages in Wales, in some areas rising by more than 10% over the past year.⁶ As noted in recent research by WEN Wales, managing childcare led 60% of surveyed parents to reduce their working hours, 42% to reduce spending on essentials like food, rent or heating and 35% to reduce spending on non-essentials for their children, like clothing, toys or activities.⁷ This is particularly concerning for single parents – 80% of whom are women – who rely on a single income and remain the most likely household type to be living in relative income poverty in Wales, with 35% currently doing so.⁸
- 2.4. Despite high childcare costs, many providers in Wales struggle to break even let alone pay early years professionals a wage that reflects the demands and responsibilities of their role, leading to a continuing crisis in recruitment and retention and gaps in provision. These challenges are likely to become more acute following the increases to National Living and Minimum Wages announced in the UK Autumn Budget, which will result in increased wage bills for the sector. Unless the sector is adequately funded, higher labour costs will be passed on to service users or lead to reduced staffing and services. This represents a 'double whammy'⁹ for women as the majority of childcare workers and service users.
- 2.5. To address these issues, the Welsh Government must expand provisions for disadvantaged families and children under three and support providers to adopt more

⁴ WEN Wales (2025), *State of the Nation 2025* (forthcoming)

⁵ Institute of Fiscal Studies (2022), *Does more free childcare help parents work more?*

<https://ifs.org.uk/publications/does-more-free-childcare-help-parents-work-more>

⁶ Coram (2025), *Childcare Survey 2025* <https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ChildcareSurvey2025-1.pdf>

⁷ WEN Wales (2025), *Transforming Early Childhood Education and Care in Wales*

<https://wenwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Transforming-ECEC-in-Wales-Full-Report-ENG-DIGITAL.pdf>

⁸ Welsh Government (2025), *Relative income poverty: April 2024- March 2025*

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2025/3/4/1743067839/relative-income-poverty-april-2023-march-2024.pdf>

⁹ Women's Budget Group (2025), *The "Cost of Living Budget" 2025: What it Means for Women*

<https://www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Budget-2025-Response-WBG-5.pdf>

flexible models of delivery for part-time entitlements. To deliver this, it is critical that the predominantly female workforce is paid in fair recognition for the responsibilities of their role.

Potential questions:

- **How will the Welsh Government ensure that its childcare and early years system effectively supports low income families and reduces child poverty, by supporting child development and parental employment?**
- **Is the Welsh Government confident that existing funding levels and mechanisms are suitable to ensure providers can fairly remunerate early years professionals, retain qualified staff and ensure high quality provision for all children?**

3. Housing

- 3.1. Having a safe, secure and affordable home is essential to us all. However, the housing crisis in Wales means that housing is increasingly unaffordable. A lack of social housing, rapidly increasing private rents and persistent issues with home ownership affordability are fuelling this crisis. While both men and women face issues of housing affordability, these are more acute for women in Wales due to their unequal economic position. Forthcoming research from WWBG indicates that private renting is unaffordable for women in 16 out of 22 Welsh local authorities and that women's incomes fall short of the average income required for a mortgage in all 22 local authority areas.¹⁰ Many women are thus locked out of private renting and home ownership and are more reliant on social housing. This is evidenced by the fact that single parent households – the majority of whom are women – are overrepresented on social housing waiting lists.¹¹
- 3.2. In this context, we welcome the Welsh Government's increased investment in social housing resource and capital. This will help to increase the availability and quality of social and affordable housing for women and other vulnerable groups, as well as reduce waiting list times. We are also pleased to see more available funding for the Welsh Government's Help to Buy Scheme, which makes home ownership more accessible. However, to determine the gendered impact of such schemes, the Welsh Government must improve the collection and publication of data related to them, to determine whether they are supporting men and women equitably.
- 3.3. We are concerned that the Draft Budget did not include any support for the private rental sector. As noted above, our forthcoming analysis shows that private renting is unaffordable for women in 16 of Wales' 22 local authorities. The least affordable areas are Cardiff, Newport and Torfaen, where rent takes up over 40% of women's monthly income. In contrast, for men, private rent is only unaffordable in two Welsh local authorities (Cardiff and Newport).¹² This disparity is likely to widen following the decision of the UK Government to not uprate the Local Housing Allowance in line with local rents in the Autumn Budget 2025. This decision will intensify rent pressures for low income households, disproportionately impacting women who spend more of their monthly income on housing. We therefore urge the Welsh Government to introduce the measures outlined in the *White paper on Adequate Housing* as a matter of urgency to improve affordability in the private rental market and support women and other low income households to cope as private rents continue to soar.

Potential questions

¹⁰ WWBG (forthcoming), Housing affordability in Wales – A gendered analysis

¹¹ Shelter Cymru (2025), Waiting for a home: An update on social housing waiting lists in Wales

<https://sheltercymru.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Waiting-For-a-Home-1.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

- **What action will the Welsh Government take to support low income private renters following the continued freeze of the Local Housing Allowance in the UK Autumn Budget?**
- **Are there plans to collate and publish gendered data on housing schemes such as Help to Buy?**

4. Third Sector

- 4.1. When public services are under pressure, vulnerable individuals often turn to third sector organisations in Wales for vital support. However, post-EU funding challenges, the cost of living crisis and increases to National Insurance Contributions have all had marked impacts on the third sector in Wales, with organisations facing increased demand and operational costs alongside limited resource.
- 4.2. These pressures are amplified for the Welsh women's sector, which faces unique and disproportionate pressures when compared to the wider charities sector. Recent research from the Rosa Foundation shows that 9 out of 10 women's organisations have experienced an increase in demand for their services over the past year. In contrast, only 65% of organisations in the wider charities sector have experienced an increase. 93% of women's organisations are expecting this demand to grow, rising to 100% for organisations supporting black and/or minoritised women and girls.¹³
- 4.3. Financial constraints are a critical barrier to women's organisations being able to meet this demand and deliver their vital services. Alongside increased costs, women's organisations in Wales and across the UK rely on a small number of narrow funding schemes. This is further problematised by the short-term nature of grants, which rarely last more than two years. This uncertainty falls far short of the long term security needed to meet growing demand and provide specialist services. It also affects organisations' ability to meet planned objectives and makes it extremely difficult to plan strategically for the future.
- 4.4. Faced with having to do more with less, three quarters of women's organisations have had to compromise in some way, either by reducing service provision and staff hours, increasing costs or even drawing on financial reserves to address shortfalls.¹⁴ The serious consequence of this situation is illustrated by the regrettable closure of longstanding organisations such as Chwarae Teg, which represented a significant setback in the fight for gender equality in Wales.
- 4.5. In this context, we were disappointed to see that the Social Justice portfolio received the smallest uplift of all departments in the Draft Budget 2026-27. Without adequate support, the Welsh women's and wider third sector is likely to contract further. To counteract the alarming loss of expertise in the Welsh third sector, the Welsh Government must take urgent action to protect its sustainability. We urge the Welsh Government to recognise the value of the third sector and to protect its organisations through targeted, medium to long-term funding, as delineated in its new Third Sector Scheme: code of practice for funding the third sector.¹⁵

Potential questions:

- **Is the Welsh Government confident that the funding levels are sufficient to halt the rapid loss of capacity in the Welsh third sector and protect the sustainability of support services?**

¹³ Rosa Foundation (2025), Underfunded, under resourced and under the radar: the state of the women and girls' social sector <https://rosauk.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Underfunded-under-resourced-and-under-the-radar.pdf>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Welsh Government (2025), Third Sector Scheme: code of practice for funding the third sector <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2025/5/3/1746614524/third-sector-scheme-code-practice-funding-third-sector.pdf>

- **How is this budget supporting third sector organisations, particularly women's organisations, to mitigate increased cost pressures including the continued impacts of increasing employer NICs?**

5. Gender Budgeting

- 5.1. Gender budgeting remains a key tool at the Welsh Government's disposal to tackle inequality and mitigate unequal gendered impacts such as those discussed above. It does so by ensuring that policy and spending decisions are rooted in fairness, equality and evidence, requiring decision-makers to respond to the needs of different groups of women and men, in a way that improves outcomes for all.
- 5.2. As an approach, gender budgeting works best when it is specific to the political, cultural and structural context, and responsive to what is feasible and effective therein. For this reason, we were pleased to see the evaluation of the Welsh Government's three gender budgeting pilots – Personal Learning Accounts, Young Persons Guarantee and E-Move – which were undertaken during 2019-2023, published alongside this year's Draft Budget.
- 5.3. While the evaluation was high-level in nature, it provided useful learnings including some positive examples of how gender budgeting improved outcomes. For example, gendered analysis within the E-Move pilot highlighted the barriers that women face to e-bike usage, including lack of secure storage, weight of bikes and the need to transport children and luggage. The bikes were adapted as a result which increased uptake by women who accounted for 48% of users over 3 years.¹⁶
- 5.4. However, it is now *critical* that the gender budgeting pilots do not become siloed, and that their context-specific learnings are used to support the wider roll out of gender budgeting across Welsh Government.

Potential questions:

- **How will the evaluation of the Welsh Government's gender budgeting pilots inform plans for the wider roll out of gender budgeting?**
- **What is the next stage of this process?**

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¹⁶ Welsh Government (2025), Gender Budgeting in Practice: Learning from Pilot Schemes in Wales 2019-2024 [Gender Budgeting in Practice: Learning from Pilot Schemes in Wales 2019–2024](#)

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