

**Irish Penal Reform Trust  
Strategic Plan**

**2023—  
26**

# FOREWORD

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The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) advocates for a progressive criminal justice system that prioritises alternatives to prison, upholds human rights, and champions reintegration. We have continued to be a catalyst for change over the lifetime of our previous Strategic Plan. Despite the challenges of working through the pandemic, we adapted quickly and changed our way of working. We clearly influenced the 2020 *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* which echoes our calls to include commitments to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT), establish a High-Level Taskforce on mental health, review legislation pertaining to spent convictions and establish a Penal Policy Consultative Council.

Over the last three years we have led on key reforms including the establishment of the Parole Board on a statutory basis and the development of the Sentencing Guidelines and Information Committee. In 2022, we expanded our Children and Families Initiative by securing funding for a full-time three-year post to focus on the importance of family relationships to people in prison and the detrimental impact of imprisonment on a too often invisible group in Irish society.

We believe there is now a real opportunity to leverage political support and momentum to consolidate reform and enable excellence in our penal system. With the publication of the *General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022*, the ratification of OPCAT is closer now than ever. *The Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform* represents a key lever to transform the perception of our penal system's purpose and potential based on solid evidence, while developing innovative approaches in policy and practice. The clear focus on community-based sanctions and alternatives to custody for low-level offences, alongside the stated aim of reducing the number of people sent to prison on short sentences, will help to ensure that imprisonment becomes a sanction of last resort in reality.

Underpinning our work is the belief that our penal system matters; it forever alerts us to addressing the root causes of offending behaviour right across the different stages of life. We know that certain groups of people continue to be particularly impacted by the criminal justice system – people experiencing poverty and deprivation, those who have fallen out of the education system, people with addiction, people with mental health issues, or who have disabilities, some migrant and ethnic minority communities including Irish Travellers who continue to be over-represented in terms of youth justice, women's detention, and adult male prisons.

To this end, over the lifetime of this Strategic Plan, we hope to see the public sector duty to promote equality and protect human rights embedded and advanced across all criminal justice agencies. While IPRT's immediate focus is within the penal system, our impact will resonate across society – creating safer and fairer communities for future generations. IPRT is a highly efficient organisation which achieves real and lasting impact. We leverage our effect through a strategic approach to advocacy, extensive media coverage, and network building.

During the development of this Strategic Plan, we have been incredibly fortunate to benefit from the generosity and expertise of our Board, staff, members and people who have direct lived experience of detention, conviction and the wider criminal justice system. We would like to express our particular thanks to those who participated in a focus group in the Progression Unit in Mountjoy Prison and the women involved in the BRIO Programme of the SAOL Project. All of these inputs have helped shape our thinking and the language and commitments contained in the current plan are intended to reflect the feedback we have received.

As we approach our 30th anniversary in 2024, we are delighted to present our ambitious four-year Strategic Plan 2023-2026 which will build on our previous successes and provides a clear roadmap for further progress.



**Saoirse Brady**

Executive Director



**Seamus Taylor**

Chairperson

# WHO WE ARE

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The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) is Ireland's principal independent non-governmental organisation working for systemic penal reform and change in Ireland.

We are an advocacy organisation. We stand for human rights and hold the State to account for its actions and responsibilities, both national and international.

Our fundamental task as an organisation is to effect progressive change in the criminal justice system in Ireland.

We work for the people and communities who are affected by the criminal justice system in Ireland.

We are campaigners and changemakers, and we are experts who influence policy and practice around penal reform.

# THE CONTEXT FOR THIS PLAN

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This Strategic Plan builds on the work done by IPRT since its foundation in 1994, and the progress achieved in our previous Strategic Plans.

Our analysis of the landscape in which this Plan will be implemented is influenced by several considerations given the potential competing priorities that the Government and the country will face over the next four years.

Existing social and economic inequality was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and while the Irish economy has emerged strongly from the upheaval resulting from the pandemic, the country is facing a predicted economic downturn and continued high inflation.

At the same time, Ireland is dealing with a cost-of-living crisis, unprecedented numbers of people experiencing homelessness, responding to the war in Ukraine with the arrival of many thousands of refugees as well as people from other countries fleeing conflict, poverty and the impact of climate change and seeking international protection in Ireland. All of these phenomena are placing additional pressure on existing state resources and indications of tension were manifesting when this Strategic Plan was being finalised, with indications of the involvement of right-wing groups using social media to create divisions in society and polarise opinion.

Political change is likely during the lifetime of this Plan as a General Election will be held by March 2025 at the latest, with the potential for a historic shift in the make-up of the next Dáil.

The current penal landscape is one in which we see increasing numbers of people in our prison system, with several prisons exceeding their official capacity on a regular basis and the broader prison estate fast approaching maximum capacity. This concerning picture is at odds with Government policy and particularly the commitment to consider incorporating “prison as a sanction of last resort” in law and expand alternatives to imprisonment so as to reduce overcrowding in prisons, as set out in the Government’s recently published *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024*. It also contradicts the increasing emphasis on diversion of people with mental health and addictions needs away from the criminal justice system, as detailed in the *Final Report of the High Level Task Force to consider the mental health and addiction challenges of those who come into contact with the criminal justice sector*.

We accordingly embark upon our new Strategic Plan in an environment in which prisons and the wider criminal justice system will continue to experience significant pressure. Legal and legislative issues underpin our work and opportunities for reform in policy and practice are available, through the above-mentioned policy initiatives as well as the *Inspection of Places of Detention Bill* which paves the way for Ireland’s ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT). We remain cognisant, however, of the challenge of keeping human rights issues high on the public policy agenda which is dominated by the significant issues of housing and homelessness, cost of living and climate change.

# METHODOLOGY

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This Strategic Plan was developed using the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, over a period of five months in the second half of 2022. Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to organisational change that focuses on strengths to build on. The promise of this way of working is that through engagement, the process itself generates self-determined change and helps the organisation move towards a shared vision of the future and the actions needed to make it happen.

A review of IPRT's achievements was conducted, a joint Board and staff meeting was held, three Appreciative Inquiry workshops were facilitated, key external stakeholders were interviewed, and a document review was undertaken.

We also engaged with key audiences and stakeholders, including those who have direct lived experience of the criminal justice system, on the fundamental statements in the Strategic Plan.

# OUR VISION

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**Our vision is a just, humane Ireland where prison is used as a last resort.**

# OUR MISSION

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**Our mission is to advocate for a progressive criminal justice system that prioritises alternatives to prison, upholds human rights, and champions reintegration.**

**We do this through conducting research, campaigning and changing attitudes.**

# OUR VALUES

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Our living values guide us. They are given expression in our work, and in our behaviours as an organisation.

## 01

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Our work is underpinned by **human rights**, a regard for human dignity and the humane treatment of people in the criminal justice system.

We hold the State to account by calling out human rights issues within the system.

We push for the highest possible standards of human rights recognition and compliance within the criminal justice system.

We promote equality and respect human rights in all our work.

## 03

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We are a **reflective** organisation.

We listen to and are open to feedback from our stakeholders and from people who have a lived experience of the criminal justice system.

We keep up to date on current policy and best practice nationally and internationally.

We support our team to learn and grow, adapting and responding as our environment changes.

## 02

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We are an organisation of **integrity**.

We act honestly, ethically and respectfully when carrying out our research, communications and changemaking activities.

We operate to the highest levels of transparency around how we use our funds to advance our purpose in line with charity regulation, legal compliance and ethical practices.

We are an independent human rights voice.

## 04

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We demonstrate **leadership** as an organisation.

We are thought leaders in the advancement of penal reform and imagine evidence-informed alternatives through our in-depth research and insights.

We are the go-to organisation for the most current thinking in penal reform.

We engage diverse voices and encourage change in favour of greater social justice and to inform proposals to improve policy for people affected by the criminal justice system.

We are courageous about standing up for what is right, even when our opinions are unpopular.

# OUR STRATEGIC GOALS

## 01

We campaign for a progressive criminal justice system that upholds human rights. We do this through research, advocacy and changing attitudes.

## 02

We continue to develop a sustainable, well-governed, independent organisation.

# GOAL 1

**We campaign for a progressive criminal justice system that upholds human rights. We do this through research, advocacy and changing attitudes.**

## 1.1

**Area for action: Upholding human rights and respect for human dignity in Ireland’s criminal justice system for adults and young people.**

**Outcome:** IPRT will have held the State accountable for Ireland’s compliance with its human rights obligations under relevant international treaties, directives and domestic law and will have influenced policy and decision-making so that respect and vindication of an individual’s rights are embedded and reflected in all aspects of the penal system.

### **How will we measure success?**

- International human rights monitoring bodies, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN Committee on the Convention Against Torture include IPRT’s recommendations in their reports on progress by the Irish State.
- Updated Prison Rules reflect international human rights standards and provide improved protection of people’s rights within custody with access to an effective and efficient complaints system with clear redress and remedies for any violations.
- Legislative reform, government policies and political debate reflect IPRT’s evidence-informed research, positions and rights-based language on priority areas including ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) and strengthening of the powers of the Office of the Inspector of Places of Detention.



## 1.2

### **Area for action: Promoting effective alternatives to prison, where prison is only used as a measure of last resort.**

**Outcome:** IPRT will have influenced relevant national policy and legislation so that effective non-custodial responses are the default response to less serious offending.

#### **How will we measure success?**

- The principle of imprisonment as a last resort is embedded in policy, expressed in legislation, and reflected in practice. This results in a marked reduction in the use of custodial remand and short-term prison sentences with increased availability and use of effective community-based sanctions as a viable alternative to imprisonment.
- IPRT contributes to the established campaign for a national strategy for restorative justice, which is adequately resourced and evaluated, and has national consistency in the availability, use and operation of restorative practice at all levels of the criminal justice process.
- Progressive, proportionate and evidence-informed sentencing policy and practice is in place, with greater transparency around the principles and purpose of sentencing that increases public confidence in the sentencing process. There is no expansion of mandatory sentencing laws.

## **Area for action: Championing a criminal justice system that has social integration at its core.**

**Outcome:** IPRT will have worked with relevant partners and agencies to establish a best practice reintegration model across the prison estate, which ensures effective collaboration between organisations and is centred on the individual needs of the person leaving custody resulting in a cultural shift in which reintegration is better understood by the wider public.

### **How will we measure success?**

- A more expansive, progressive and inclusive legal regime is enacted to limit the impact of a person's conviction history on their lives ('spent convictions') with a focus on progressively reducing the barriers they encounter in accessing decent work and societal involvement.
- Regulations are enacted to expand the remit of the Parole Board to include and consider people serving longer-term determinate sentences.
- Integrated Sentence Management (ISM) systems in prison are person-centred, accessible and available across all prisons on a consistent basis, and recognise the importance of maintaining relationships with children and families to support the reintegration of people leaving prison into society.
- A greater variety of cross-government and inter-agency actions are taken to support people before, during and after their release from custody. These measures include providing additional open prison spaces with a dedicated open prison for women, appropriate step-down facilities and consistent access to temporary and day release with dedicated and adequately resourced social supports and probation services available to all who need them.

## 1.4

**Area for action:** Changing attitudes and challenging misconceptions about people in the criminal justice system among the public, policy officials, politicians, media and the legal community, including the judiciary.

**Outcome:** IPRT will have led the national conversation on the use of imprisonment in the context of wider social issues and will have changed the narrative around people who are affected by the criminal justice system.

### How will we measure success?

- Discussion and debate across media, politics and the legal sphere will have moved from punishment as the sole purpose of detention to incorporate IPRT's key messages in recognising and addressing the root causes of crime and focusing on opportunities for early intervention for children, young people and adults in areas of social policy, including housing, mental health policy, social protection and drug and alcohol policy.
- Public attitudes and understanding around people with experience of the criminal justice system will be more positive ensuring greater understanding of the negative impact that prison can have on an individual, their family and wider society.
- The voices of people with lived experience of the criminal justice system are heard and inform and influence penal reform discussions and solutions.

## 1.5

**Area for action:** Creating and sharing innovative solutions through strategic engagement, networking, and mobilising others.

**Outcome:** IPRT will have strengthened collaborative approaches to finding meaningful solutions to issues in the criminal justice system.

### How will we measure success?

- IPRT outputs, to the greatest extent possible, are informed and enhanced by the voices of people with lived experience of the criminal justice system and our members who regularly work with them or represent their views. IPRT regularly engages with members and supporters and is an active member of key networks and campaigns on social justice issues aligned with our strategic priorities.
- IPRT uses our position on the Penal Consultative Council to influence and engage with policy and decision-makers to ensure the criminal justice system is progressively improved.
- IPRT empowers people in prison to assert their rights by providing them, and those working in the penal system, with accessible and updated information on their legal rights and highlighting effective remedies available to them where those rights are not respected.
- Greater levels of robust disaggregated data are routinely published by relevant departments and agencies, and IPRT effectively analyses this data to inform our positions and identify solutions for reform.

# GOAL 2

**We continue to develop a sustainable, well-governed, independent organisation.**

## 2.1

**Area for action:** Maintaining transparency and good governance in how we operate internally as an organisation and with members, our Board and stakeholders.

**Outcome:** IPRT will have remained fully compliant with legal obligations, the Governance Code and our own governance guidelines/processes.

**How will we measure success?**

- IPRT is fully compliant with all statutory and legal obligations, including the completion of Annual General Meetings, submission of Audited Accounts to the Company Registrations Office and regular reporting under the Lobbying Register.
- IPRT is fully compliant with the Charities Governance Code and our own governance guidelines with a view to achieving Triple Lock status from the Charities Institute of Ireland.
- IPRT's internal policies and processes are regularly reviewed to ensure compliance with relevant company, charities and employment legislation and best practice.
- IPRT's Board continues to have the relevant financial, legal, academic and practical expertise, including expertise through lived experience of the criminal justice system, to operate at the highest level of governance.

## 2.2

**Area for action:** IPRT will be a great place to work with a high-performing team and where staff feel valued.

**Outcome:** IPRT will have become known as a supportive, dynamic, diverse and flexible workplace.

**How will we measure success?**

- IPRT team members are motivated to effect change and continue to engage in regular professional development to ensure they are equipped and supported to achieve their full potential.
- IPRT's recruitment processes and internal policies promote inclusion, especially for people with lived experience, to ensure a progressively diverse, inclusive and versatile team.
- Evaluation and learning are integrated into individual and annual workplans, to ensure IPRT staff can remain agile and responsive to emerging issues or updated working practices.

## 2.3

**Area for Action:** IPRT will continue to be a sustainable and independent organisation.

**Outcome:** IPRT will have generated and grown diverse, sustainable and philanthropic funding and income streams to further our strategic objectives without compromising our independence.

**How will we measure success?**

- An updated income generation and fundraising strategy is in place to diversify funding and attract independent philanthropic funding that aligns with and supports our strategic objectives.
- IPRT continues to secure essential core statutory funding for key operations but will ensure that being in receipt of state funding does not impede our strategic goals or impact our independence.
- IPRT maintains at least six to nine months reserves to ensure that the organisation is operating in a responsible way and is sustainable over the lifetime of this Strategic Plan and into the future.
- IPRT's funding is spent in an ethical and transparent way to advance our strategic objectives and support social enterprise initiatives where possible.



