



Pre-Budget Submission
Budget 2026

September 2025

Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) is Ireland's principal non-governmental organisation working for systemic penal reform. Our vision is a just, humane Ireland where prison is used as a last resort. 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 research, campaigning and changing attitudes.

This submission is written against the backdrop of an acute prison overcrowding crisis, the likes of which Ireland has not seen before. The overall prison population reached its peak in mid-August 2025, with 5,581 people in custody, representing 120 per cent of prison capacity. To meet this demand for prison space, nearly 496 prisoners had to sleep on mattresses placed on the ground.ⁱ Overcrowding affects every aspect of prisons, increasing tensions, creating unsafe conditions and placing a strain on resources that limits the availability of urgent and essential services to people in prison.

The present prison overcrowding crisis is the product of policy decisions that have failed to address the root causes of offending behaviour, limited community-based alternatives to short prison sentences, and a failure to invest in a person-centred model to prevent reoffending. While capital investment in prison modernisation and improved material conditions for all people in prison is crucial to assist in upholding the rights of people in custody, IPRT maintains that prison expansion will not address the current overcrowding crisis in either the short- or long-term. If financial resources and political will are not invested in supporting and championing effective alternatives to prison, the resources needed to continually increase the prison estate will be a financial and social drain on the State for decades to come.

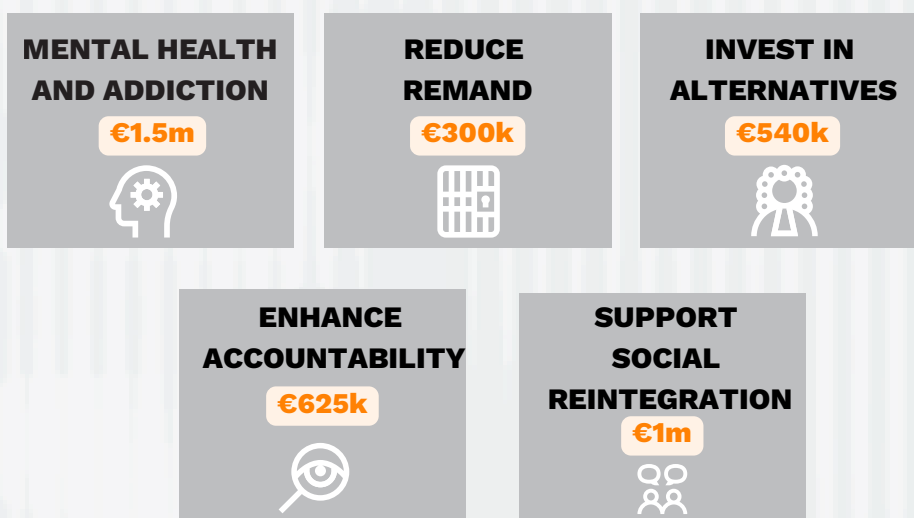
IPRT reiterates our view that while imprisonment is a necessary and proportionate sanction in some cases where there is a threat to public safety, in many other cases it is an ineffective, counterproductive, disproportionate and hugely expensive response to offending. This is particularly so in the context of short sentences (less than 12 months), which made up over two-thirds of all sentenced committals to prison in 2024.ⁱⁱ IPRT believes that both short- and long-term savings can be made within discrete areas of the Justice vote by shifting emphasis to more efficient and effective responses to offending, some of which lie outside of the Justice vote.






IPRT notes and welcomes that progress has been made on some of our key asks from Budget 2025 including the appointment of a dual diagnosis lead by the Irish Prison Service (IPS) in 2025 as well as a welcome change to the ratio of the number of psychologists to people in prisonⁱⁱⁱ although still not at recommended levels. We urge that Budget 2026 is used as a springboard to invest in practical measures that will help to meaningfully alleviate the current prison overcrowding crisis. It also provides an opportunity to invest in key supports to improve the lives of people in prison, people leaving prison, and their families.

Prison is expensive both in terms of the significant cost to the State as well as in terms of the toll it takes on individuals, their families and wider communities. Furthermore, the evidence demonstrates that serving a short prison sentence of less than a year is not an effective deterrent, nor will it change offending behaviour unless necessary and accessible therapeutic and rehabilitative services are in place. This is something that the wider public understands given that according to public attitudes polling by RED C commissioned by IPRT, more than one in three people would favour person-centred interventions such as additional drug treatment places, extra youth workers, and more consultant psychologists to address crime while fewer than one in 10 would prioritise additional prison spaces.^{iv}

In 2024, a single annual prison space cost €99,072 – a 12 per cent increase on the previous year.^v Probation supervision and other alternative community-based sanctions cost significantly less than a staffed prison space – less than 10 per cent – and are more effective in preventing reoffending overall.

In Budget 2025, the Probation Service received an overall increase of €4 million yet the additional allocation for the Irish Prison Service was more than the entire €60 million budget allocated to the Probation Service.^{vi} Budget 2026 should rebalance the scales in terms of making a significant investment in the Probation Service, particularly to take account of forthcoming legislation which will expand the use of Community Service Orders^{vii} and to future-proof the Service for other alternatives which IPRT hopes will come onstream during the lifetime of this Government.

IPRT calls for evidence-based and strategic investment under five action areas:

Summary of IPRT's priority investment areas for Budget 2026

MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate €500k to the Irish Prison Service to develop training pathways and programmes to upskill Prison Officers in supporting the mental health needs of people in custody. Allocate €1m to the Irish Prison Service to conduct a Mental Health Needs Assessment.
REDUCE REMAND 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allocate and ring-fence €300k to the Probation Service to cover staffing and operational costs associated with establishing a supported bail service for women.
INVEST IN ALTERNATIVES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest €540k in the expansion of the Prison In-reach and Court Liaison Service (PICLS) to at least one other prison in 2026.
ENHANCE ACCOUNTABILITY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide an additional €175k in funding to the Office of the Ombudsman to expand its remit to review prisoner complaints. Allocate €450k of ringfenced funding to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons and other statutory bodies or agencies that will form part of the National Preventive Mechanism.
SUPPORT SOCIAL REINTEGRATION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest €1m in supports for people leaving prison, including provision of accommodation and support into employment.

Allocate and ring-fence €300,000 to the Probation Service to cover staffing and operational costs associated with establishing a supported bail service for women

Throughout June 2025, an average of 19 per cent of people in Irish prisons were held solely on remand (pre-trial detention).^{viii} This is a costly expense for a population that should be presumed innocent unless proven otherwise. Development of alternatives to custodial remand, such as bail support schemes, would improve compliance with bail conditions and better address some underlying causes of offending.^{ix} This would follow the successes of the Bail Supervision Scheme for children and young people in Ireland, and long-operating bail support schemes for adults internationally.^x While IPRT commends the proposed pilot Bail Support Scheme for women,^{xi} as recommended in the Review of Policy Options for Prison & Penal Reform 2022-2024,^{xii} investment should be ring-fenced in Budget 2026 to ensure that the scheme is established as a priority and becomes operational in 2026. Monitoring and evaluation should be built in from the outset to ensure that it can be adapted to meet the needs of people involved in the scheme in the first instance. Ongoing evaluation means that it can act as a blueprint for similar schemes and be replicated without any long delay for young adults and other marginalised persons, including those with severe and enduring mental illness, as a meaningful and more effective alternative to remand in custody.

Invest €540k in the expansion of the Prison In-reach and Court Liaison Service (PICLS)

The PICLS model is a multidisciplinary psychiatric service to assist Courts in identifying defendants with major mental illness and provide practical solutions to accessing appropriate mental health care through liaison with community services. PICLS has helped arrange diversions from custody to healthcare for over 1000 people with severe mental illness since 2006.^{xiii}

The expansion of the successful PICLS model has been considered and recommended by a range of bodies,^{xiv} and the implementation plan for Ireland's national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision*, contains an action "devise an implementation plan for expanding PICLS nationally,"^{xv} earmarked to happen in 2023 but this has not yet been implemented. Research on PICLS has noted the increased likelihood of successful transfer of care to the community through the addition of a "relatively low-cost" housing support worker to the model.^{xvi} The High Level Task Force on Mental Health and Addiction also noted that this should be "an integral component" of nationwide PICLS provision.^{xvii}

IPRT is calling for further funding to expand the PICLS model to at least one additional prison in 2026. In addition to operating costs, the pilot expansion should include posts for 0.5 WTE Consultant Psychiatrist, one working grade psychiatrist, one Advanced Nurse Practitioner, one forensic mental health nurse, and one housing support worker. Cost savings could be achieved if some staff could serve on multiple sites and if administrative functions could be centralised. Outside of the greater Dublin area, the prison with the highest proportion of people on remand is Cork Prison, and as such, a similar service could be considered. This might also be supported by the relative concentration of other services in Cork City.

Allocate €1 million to the Irish Prison Service to conduct a Mental Health Needs Assessment

In 2022, the Department of Justice published the Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service (NHA) undertaken by Crowe Consulting.^{xviii} The NHA assessment provides a valuable overview of areas of improvement in delivering health services in Irish prisons. At present, the Irish Prison Service is seeking to commission a Mental Health Needs Analysis of the prison population. The IPS has advertised the tender twice but has been unsuccessful in securing a contractor to complete the work.^{xix} IPRT supports this important initiative as it will serve to set a baseline of accurate data of how many people in prison experience mental health concerns as well as how many have a disability. It is crucial that it is appropriately resourced to ensure the analysis is robust, comprehensive, and will lead to meaningful improvements in the provision of mental health services in Irish prisons. IPRT therefore calls on the Government to allocate at least €1 million to undertake a Mental Health Needs Analysis and to put in place an effective roadmap to implementation.

Allocate €500,000 to the Irish Prison Service to develop training pathways and programmes to upskill Prison Officers in supporting the mental health needs of people in custody

The 2022 Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service (HNA) identified mental health training for Prison Officers as an important area for improvement.^{xx} The HNA reported that Prison Officers believed that the care provided to prisoners would be enhanced by a better understanding and knowledge of mental illnesses. IPRT believes that this is particularly important for prison staff who are assigned to work in prison facilities that deliver specialist health and support services, such as the High Support Unit in Mountjoy and D2 Wing in Cloverhill. IPRT is calling for resources to be provided to developing training opportunities and pathways in supporting people with mental health challenges for all Prison Officers, as recommended in the HNA, and for advanced mental health training to be provided for those Prison Officers assigned to specialist health and support services.

Invest €1 million in supports for people leaving prison, including provision of accommodation and support into employment

Opportunities for meaningful employment is another key factor that supports desistance from crime and the development of an inclusive, fair, and equal society.^{xxi} Successful reintegration following imprisonment can, in part, be measured by employment outcomes for people following their release. However, according to *The Secondary Punishment* report commissioned by IPRT, there remain substantial barriers to employment for people with convictions, including stigmatisation, external prejudices and discrimination. IPRT is calling for an investment of €700k to be allocated to social initiatives that support people with convictions to (re)enter the workforce following their release from prison. This should also include the development of interactive support provisions, including phone and email supports and training sessions, for employers willing to hire people with previous criminal convictions, providing supports relating to both recruitment and retention. This ask aligns with Action 2.3 under the *Building Pathways Together Strategy 2025 – 2027*,^{xxii} which contains a commitment to develop these services for employers.

Provide an additional €175,000 in funding to the Office of the Ombudsman to extend its remit to review prisoner complaints under the updated complaints process

An effective and trusted complaints system is at the heart of a fair prison system and serves as a critical safeguard against ill-treatment. It is particularly important that prisoner complaints, which are initially submitted to and handled by the Irish Prison Service, can be reviewed by an impartial, independent body. IPRT believes that the Office of the Ombudsman is well-placed to take on this additional role and calls for an additional allocation of €175,000 to the Ombudsman's Office to establish the necessary processes and systems, and to recruit and train additional staff to handle prisoner complaints.

Allocate €450,000 of ringfenced funding to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons and other statutory bodies or agencies that will form part of the NPM

The 2025 Programme for Government promised to make good on Ireland's commitment to ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture (OPCAT) by passing the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill as a priority.^{xxiii}

IPRT believes that this is an historic opportunity for Ireland to implement a world-class monitoring system for all places of detention, including prisons. For this to be realised, however, additional ringfenced funding should be provided to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to ensure it can effectively fulfil its functions as the coordinating body for National Preventive Mechanisms under the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill^{xxiv} as well as other bodies including the new Inspectorate of Places of Detention.

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