



Irish Penal Reform Trust: Key Asks for the Programme for Government 2025+

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) calls on the new government to adopt the following six key commitments in the next Programme for Government. These priorities are evidence-based, cost-effective, and aligned with Ireland's international obligations. They address systemic challenges in the justice system and aim to reduce offending, enhance public safety, and ensure dignity and fairness for all.

These asks follow on from [IPRT's pre-election priorities for party manifestos](#).

IPRT's priority calls for the next Programme for Government are:

1. Prioritise Non-Custodial Sanctions and Alternatives to Prison
2. Ratify OPCAT and Establish a National Preventive Mechanism
3. Develop a Whole-of-Government Strategy for Rehabilitation and Reintegration
4. Enhance Coherency and Transparency in Sentencing
5. Address Mental Health and Addiction
6. Support Children and Families Affected by Familial Imprisonment

1. Prioritise Non-Custodial Sanctions and Alternatives to Prison

Why this matters: Over-reliance on imprisonment, especially for less serious and non-violent offences, leads to overcrowding and undermines rehabilitation efforts. Community sanctions and restorative justice are more effective at reducing reoffending and are more cost-effective than imprisonment. This also aligns with public sentiment, with nationally representative [public polling commissioned by IPRT in October 2024](#) finding that the vast majority of adults (81 per cent) support alternatives to prison for non-violent offenders being prioritised in the Programme for Government. This would go some way towards addressing the overcrowding crisis without requiring costly prison expansion.

Proposal:

- Commit to legislating for non-custodial sanctions as the default for less serious offences and placing the principle of prison as a last resort on a statutory footing.
 - Fully resource community-based alternatives, including restorative justice programmes and bail support schemes.
 - Implement the recommendations of the [High Level Task Force on Mental Health and Addiction](#) to divert people with complex needs away from prison (or the criminal justice system entirely) and into appropriate services.
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2. Ratify OPCAT and Establish a National Preventive Mechanism

Why this matters: Ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) will ensure independent oversight of all places of detention in Ireland, safeguarding the rights and dignity of people deprived of liberty. This is a preventative system of oversight that seeks to prevent harm and ill-treatment from occurring, rather than responding after the fact. This is a long-overdue commitment that Ireland has yet to fulfil. Ireland is now the only EU Member State to not yet ratify OPCAT. However, it is a relatively low-cost measure that has significant international and domestic support. Progress is already underway as the underpinning domestic legislation – the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022 – has undergone pre-legislative scrutiny by the Justice Oireachtas Committee and the legislation could be progressed and enacted quickly if afforded priority.

Proposal:

- Ratify OPCAT within the first 12 months of government formation.
- Establish and adequately resource an independent National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) that is accountable to the Oireachtas.

3. Develop a Whole-of-Government Strategy for Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Why this matters: Breaking the cycle of reoffending requires comprehensive support for people leaving prison. Without adequate reintegration services, such as housing, employment, and addiction support, people are more likely to return to offending. It is in everybody's interest that rehabilitation services and supports are prioritised and adequately resourced. Again, legislative proposals are already in train in the form of the [Criminal Justice \(Rehabilitative Periods\) Bill 2018](#) which had cross-party support when it passed all stages in the Seanad in 2021 but was not yet introduced in the Dáil. It could be progressed in the short-term if prioritised.

Proposal:

- Develop a cross-departmental strategy to support rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Convert existing prison spaces into open, lower security and step-down settings for men and women and explore the model of small-scale detention houses in place of large institutions.
- Remove barriers to employment and education for people with convictions, by expanding spent convictions legislation and supporting access to education and training programmes.

4. Enhance Coherency and Transparency in Sentencing

Why This Matters: Disparities in sentencing undermine public trust in the justice system. Sentencing guidelines promote fairness, proportionality, and transparency while protecting judicial independence.

Proposal:

- Fully resource the Sentencing Guidelines and Information Committee of the Judicial Council to accelerate the development and implementation of sentencing guidelines.

- Avoid introducing mandatory minimum sentences, which are ineffective at reducing crime and disproportionately affect marginalised groups.
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5. Address Mental Health and Addiction

Why This Matters: A significant proportion of the prison population experiences mental health and addiction issues, yet current services are inadequate. Addressing these challenges is key to reducing reoffending and supporting rehabilitation.

Proposal:

- Fully resource the recommendations of the [*High Level Task Force on Mental Health and Addiction*](#).
 - Pilot and expand a National Clinical Programme for Dual Diagnosis to support people with co-occurring mental health and addiction needs in prison.
 - Increase the number of mental health and addiction professionals working within the prison system and ensure continuity of care post-release.
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6. Support Children and Families Affected by Familial Imprisonment

Why This Matters: Children with a parent in prison face significant emotional, social, and economic challenges, often leading to adverse impacts on their lives. Supporting these children and their families is critical to promoting social inclusion and ensuring they are provided with the necessary supports to maintain a relationship with their imprisoned parent while at the same time having their own needs met and rights respected. It is a low-cost, high-impact measure that ensures children do not bear the unintended consequences of parental imprisonment.

Proposal:

- Develop an interdepartmental strategy to support children impacted by parental imprisonment, including educational supports and improved visiting conditions.
 - Expand the rollout of the family links programme across the prison system.
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Conclusion

These six key asks offer practical, evidence-based solutions to address critical challenges in Ireland's justice system. They are cost-effective, align with many of the commitments previously made by Government parties, and deliver long-term benefits for individuals, families, and communities.