1. About the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

1.1 The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies is an independent educational charity that advances public understanding of crime, criminal justice and social harm. Through partnership and coalition-building, advocacy and research, it works to inspire social justice solutions to the problems society faces, so that many responses that criminalise and punish are no longer required.

1.2 The Centre brings people together to share ideas and develop solutions. In partnership with Oxford University Press and an independent international editorial board, it publishes the *British Journal of Criminology*, one of the world’s top criminology journals. Its annual publication, *UK Justice Policy Review*, reviews criminal justice and welfare policy across the four nations and regions of the UK. It also produces a range of other reports drawing on its own research, as well as that of its partners and collaborators.

1.3 The Centre also runs the Justice Matters initiative, promoting fresh thinking on downsizing the UK’s criminal justice systems and the development of alternative policies and practices.

2. The purpose of prisons

2.1 The purpose of prisons is the infliction of punishment and emotional pain. They are harmful places of despair and misery, for male and female prisoners. They are harmful places too for prisons officers, who experience higher levels of stress, and earlier deaths than those in comparable professions.

2.2 The notion that prisons can be places of rehabilitation, if only the ‘right’ number of people are imprisoned, the ‘right’ staffing ratios are in place, or the ‘correct’ programmes are delivered is a peculiarly persistent set of beliefs with little by the way of credible evidence in their favour.

2.3 The starting point of any coherent approach to reforming our prisons is a clear commitment to ending the unnecessary imprisonment of tens of thousands of our fellow citizens.

3. The prison population

3.1 As documented by previous Justice Committee inquiries and reports, there are a number of formidable challenges facing the prison system. These include high levels of suicide and self-harm, stressful working conditions for prison staff and deteriorating buildings and infrastructure.
3.2. These challenges have unfolded against the backdrop of a rising prison population in England and Wales, illustrated in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prison population (annual average)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>46,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>50,962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>75,979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>85,626</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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3.3. The long-term rise in the prison population was the product of a series of political and policy choices, by successive governments, relating to, among other things, sentencing policy, police priorities and a wider array of social and economic policies.

3.4. The most fundamental challenge for the government is to get the prison population back under control. The prison population grew on average by five prisoners a day between 1995 and 2015. A target to reduce the prison population by an average of five prisoners a day, if successfully met, would deliver a population of around 80,000 by the time of the planned 2020 General Election; 70,000 by 2025; 61,000 by 2030 and around 52,000 by 2035.

4. The prison building and closure programme

4.1. In the 2015 Autumn Statement, the government announced a £1.3bn prison building programme. The programme includes plans to close some existing prisons and to sell the land for redevelopment. Receipts from these sales are intended to be recycled into the prison building programme. Holloway prison in north London is the first prison to have been closed under the programme.

4.2. The Centre is in favour of prisons being closed, as part of a strategic approach to downsizing the prisons estate. However, there are three areas of concern in relation to the current plans it would wish to bring to the attention of the Committee.

4.3. First, the Ministry of Justice is yet to provide concrete details in relation to the prison building programme. The apparent lack of planning and strategy is a matter of concern. The Centre would urge the Ministry to publish detailed proposals as soon as possible, and in any case by no later than the end of this year, to allow for greater parliamentary and public scrutiny.

4.4. Second, recycling the receipts from the land sales into further prison building is a backward step. The closure of Holloway, and other prisons, offers an opportunity to reap a justice dividend: using the savings made and the income generated to invest in more socially worthwhile infrastructure, such as social housing and community facilities.

4.5. Third, the expected sale of the Holloway land to private developers for the purposes of luxury housing development risks squandering a golden opportunity to address some of the
housing and related needs of low-income Londoners in one of the most populous boroughs in London.

4.6. We recognise that aspects of these concerns extend beyond the specific remit of the Committee. We raise them because achieving a positive legacy out of the closure and redevelopment of Holloway, and other prisons, is an important policy goal.

5. Reform prisons

5.1. The prison system in England and Wales is in a parlous state. Suicides, and self-harm incidents are on the rise. The prison population is disproportionately high. Safety in prisons for staff and prisoners is a major challenge.

5.2. The proposed reform prisons programme is in no sense a serious response to the deep problems affecting the prison system. Its implementation would represent a significant distraction from what is really required: a period of institutional stability and action to ground prison regimes in decency and respect: for staff, prisoners, families and visitors.

5.3. The Centre is encouraged by the indication from the Secretary of State, when she gave evidence to the Committee in early September, that she was reviewing plans for reform prisons. The Centre is strongly in favour of the Ministry of Justice shelving the plans for reform prisons and focusing its energies on the important task of real and sustained prison reform.

30 September 2016