



HM Prison &
Probation Service

HMPPS Statement of Operational Evidence Needs (SOEN)

December 2025

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Foreword

The HMPPS Statement of Operational Evidence Needs (SOEN) represents a significant step towards more systematic, evidence-informed decision making and practice. As we work to achieve our strategic outcomes and deliver meaningful improvements that directly support the frontline, the quality of evidence underpinning our decisions becomes increasingly critical.

The SOEN identifies where stronger evidence is needed to support our core strategic objectives and focuses our evidence-building efforts on the areas where improved knowledge will directly translate into improved practice and better results for the frontline.

When we base our strategies on robust evidence, we increase our confidence in the decisions we make and our ability to achieve the outcomes we seek. When we lack evidence, we risk investing time, resources and energy in approaches that may not deliver the outcomes required.

This is particularly important as we face increasingly complex challenges that require innovative solutions. The evidence we generate today will inform the strategies and service delivery approaches of tomorrow. By investing in research that addresses our most critical operational needs, we are investing in our capacity to continuously improve and adapt to changing circumstances.

The SOEN is not a static document but will evolve as we learn more and as our operational priorities change. It represents our commitment to being an organisation that learns from evidence, adapts based on what we discover, and continuously improves our practice in pursuit of better outcomes.

Ben Charnock

Executive Director, Strategy, Performance and Standards

Introduction

The Statement of Operational Evidence Needs (SOEN) provides a means for HMPPS to identify and communicate its critical operational research gaps. It provides a national, cross-agency view of the areas where stronger research evidence is needed to support effective decision making and achieve our strategic outcomes.

The [Ministry of Justice \(MoJ\) Areas of Research Interest \(ARI\)](#) focusses on medium to long term policy-relevant evidence priorities across the wider Department, whereas the SOEN complements the MoJ ARI by focusing on short to medium term operational evidence gaps across prison, probation and youth custody.

Working in close partnership with staff across HMPPS, the Evidence and Partnerships Hub in MoJ Analysis and external Academics, we have undertaken a systematic review of evidence needs across core operational business areas. This process involved:

- Detailed consultation with business area owners to understand evidence gaps aligned to the five [HMPPS operational strategies](#)
- Review of existing research and evaluation activities to understand what we already know and any research already underway.
- Alignment with broader departmental priorities, including the MoJ Areas of Research Interest published in September 2025.
- Input from academic partners, subject matter experts and research specialists to ensure our identified needs could be addressed through feasible research approaches.

The SOEN offers clear direction on the operational questions that matter most to HMPPS. Academic partners and the wider research community can use it to align their research interests with our evidence needs, ensuring that their work contributes directly to operational improvements. It also provides a basis for collaborative research proposals and partnership development between researchers and HMPPS business area owners.

The SOEN is intended to be a living document that evolves as our evidence base develops, and our operational priorities shift. Regular reviews will ensure that it continues to reflect current needs whilst incorporating lessons learned from research activities it has supported.

By using the SOEN systematically across our organisation, we can ensure that our research efforts are focused on the areas where they will have the greatest impact on our ability to deliver effective, evidence-informed services.

Collaboration & Engagement

We invite academics and research partners to engage with the SOEN to align research with the most pressing operational challenges across HMPPS. We encourage researchers to proactively reach out to discuss potential collaborations, and we will facilitate links and collaboration with relevant business leads where appropriate.

Engagement events will also be held throughout the lifecycle of the SOEN to:

- Provide valuable opportunities for academics and research partners to link up with business area leads
- Foster shared learning
- Promote dialogue
- Shape future iterations of the SOEN

We encourage researchers to explore the SOEN, identify areas of mutual interest, and initiate conversations with HMPPS to co-create research that drives change.

Public Protection



- Our vision is to empower people to make positive choices and changes to their lives during the time they are in and beyond our care.
- We will do this by focusing on 3 priorities: better risk assessments, better risk management and better risk communication, alongside and balanced with rehabilitation support to reduce the causes of reoffending.

Questions

- PP1** Drones. How do we prevent, detect, exploit and deter drones from conveying illicit items including contraband and weapons into prisons?
- PP2** Illicit item detection. What emerging technologies (such as sensor technologies e.g. motion detection, thermal imaging or sound sensors) could be used to identify illicit items including drugs, mobile phones and harmful objects within the prison environment or as they enter the prison?
- PP3** Behavioural pattern predictions. How can AI and machine learning algorithms predict non-compliant behaviours and de-escalate violent incidents by analysing behaviour patterns and environmental data? How might wearable technologies (e.g. smart wristbands) help detect heightened stress levels or aggression in offenders and notify staff in real-time?
- PP4** Smart uniforms. How can smart uniforms or wearable tech for prison staff provide real-time alerts during physical altercations or medical emergencies, while ensuring appropriate protection for our staff?
- PP5** VR training. How can virtual reality training improve prison officer's ability to handle high-risk situations, such as hostage crises or violent offender behaviour?
- PP6** Digital forensics. How can we use technology to scale up the processing of illicit digital and media devices so that it provides actionable intelligence?
- PP7** Technology for security measures. Can robotic patrols, biometric technologies, such as facial recognition or gait analysis, replace traditional security measures like manual counts or physical checks?
- PP8** First time in custody - how many individuals are self-harming for the first time in prison, and what are the specific drivers for those individuals (Explore different cohorts – adults, children, male and female)?
- PP9** Does diagnosis of terminal illness impact on risk of suicide within custodial setting?

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- PP10 Explore the relationship between assaults and Use of Force. Is there any causal or correlational relationship between assaults and Use of Force?
- PP11 Explore how low-level violence, emotional violence, psychological violence could be reduced or managed (Explore different cohorts – men, women and children).

Rehabilitation



- We can reduce reoffending by working together, believing in change, and taking an evidence-led approach to Rehabilitation.
- Everyone across HMPPS has a duty to ensure we create the right conditions, right relationships and right services for effective Rehabilitation.
- Rehabilitation supports, informs, and strengthens all our risk management and safety activity to protect the public.

Questions

- R1 Behavioural Science: how can behavioural science principles be integrated into emerging technologies to enhance offender rehabilitation, improve compliance with community sentences and promote long term behavioural change?
- R2 Virtual environment for rehabilitation. How could we create a controlled virtual environment enabling us to test what works and what doesn't work for rehabilitation and to build evidence quickly?
- R3 How do we improve relationships, culture and environment? What are the conditions staff need and what are the systemic challenges we need to solve to provide them?
- R4 Behavioural science. Can insights from behavioural science help us design and implement interventions that are more likely to achieve their desired outcomes?
- R5 How can we use violent offender profiles to forecast and manage custodial and community behaviour more effectively (including differences between male/female estates)?
- R6 Explore type of violence committed by these cohorts (could include qualitative research with prisoners to understand reasons for repetition/non-repetition of violence).
- R7 Explore extent to which particular drivers drive one-off or repeated assaults, and links to drivers of other harmful behaviour.
- R8 How do we define 'incentivising behaviour' in prisons, and how the potential outcomes can be maximised from this approach?
- R9 Is there evidence that a large proportion of fires are started by a specific group of identifiable prisoners?
- R10 What proportion of prisoners started setting fires whilst in prison with no previous fire setting history, and what do we know about what contributed to them starting that behaviour?

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- R11 What can we learn from prisoners who have only ever set one fire in prison?
- R12 What can we learn from following a prisoner's fire setting journey in custody? A case study of the most prolific fire setters.
- R13 Other than the Launchpad project, what is the emerging evidence about which technology use cases are most valuable for use by prisoners / people on probation?
- R14 What can we learn around how technology can be used to maximise rehabilitative opportunities and minimise risks for offenders in the community from other countries and criminal justice systems (evidence synthesis?)
- R15 Mediation and conflict resolution –what are the impacts of these approaches to reduce violence in prison custody?

Youth Custody



- We want to ensure that every child in our care is safe, supported and strives for a better future, by:
 - focusing on quality education, service provision and relationships with children
 - working towards estate reform and developing our evidence base
 - addressing wider system issues around voice of the child

Questions

- YC1 How do we reduce non-associates?
- YC2 What is the nature of disparity in YCS? Are we taking the right actions to address disparity and disproportionality within a) our practice and b) our policies and c) analysis and monitoring?
- YC3 How well are we meeting the needs of children and young people on remand and very short sentences?
- YC4 What can we learn from psychology (and other) needs analysis data about our population needs? What does this tell us are the gaps and strengths in our service and understanding? What can we learn from [Blackpool Young Offender Needs Assessment](#) that might improve our approach?
- YC5 What happens when disruptive children move to the adult estate (or other setting) and settle effectively? What can we learn from this?
- YC6 Safe access to technology: how may we develop safe access to technology for children and young people in our estate, ensuring it supports rehabilitation, education and wellbeing while mitigating the risks of harm?
- YC7 Safeguarding online. What safeguards and digital interventions can be implemented to help young people in custody to develop positive online behaviours and prevent engagement in harmful digital activities?
- YC8 Mental health. How can tech be used safely to support the mental health and resilience of young people in custody, ensuring responsible access to social connection and support networks?
- YC9 Controlled environments. How can we create controlled but meaningful digital communication tools that allow young people to maintain relationships with family and positive role models while preventing exploitation or criminal networking?

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YC10 AI and behavioural science. How can AI and behavioural science inform the development of digital monitoring tools that balance security, privacy and rehabilitation?

People



Our vision for all staff, regardless of their role, is that they:

- are proud to work for HMPPS
- feel supported, included and competent every day
- feel like they are always developing both personally and professionally
- to do this we will create a modern offer for our people to ensure that HMPPS is a psychologically safe employer of choice who recruits and retains the right people.

Questions

- P1 Technology for operational roles. What is the potential impact of robotics and automation in prisons, such as for cleaning, food service or maintenance tasks, on operational costs and staff roles? How can we use technology for remote operations and service delivery?
- P2 What can we learn about staff activity during a prisoner's early days in custody so we can better understand how the assessment of risk is undertaken?
- P3 How do staff in reception prisons approach the task of defensible decision making and what are the key drivers behind their approach?
- P4 What benefits and/or additional skills does a younger/less experienced staff group bring?
- P5 In what ways could we expedite their learning, so they feel more confident and competent? How does our Open Learning Culture need to change to facilitate their learning?
- P6 To what extent is staff training related to improvements in risk identification?
- P7 What are the optimal conditions which enable prisons to embed new approaches to improving safety?
- P8 What alternative approaches to training and information sharing (i.e. behavioural approaches) could further increase a prison's potential to embed safety-related change?
- P9 What methods around learning and continuous improvement are most effective in creating positive change in a prison's culture?
- P10 How can each staff member have a role to play in improving culture across their prison and can we measure cultural change?
- P11 Define what we mean by Organisational culture, which is often poorly defined ([Gifford & Wietrak, 2022](#)).

P12 To what extent is the impact of repeated exposure to safety-related incidents effecting prison culture and how staff deliver care in prisons?

Estates and Infrastructure



- We want a safe, secure, sustainable, and resilient estate - this means decent conditions for all, supported by modern technology.
- Guided by 4 principles: providing safe, secure, and decent conditions, securing long-term funding, harnessing technology, and evidence-based decision making.
- It acknowledges risks including unforeseen changes in demand and supply, wider Criminal Justice System priorities, and climate change

Questions

- EI1 Green technologies. What are the trade-offs between adopting green technologies and maintaining operational resilience in prison estates?
- EI2 Smart building technologies. How can smart building technologies such as energy-efficient systems and water recycling, be implemented to make prisons more sustainable and reduce operational costs?
- EI3 Digital twins¹. How can technology such as digital twins support the move to net zero? How can this tech make the estate resilient to natural hazards linked to climate change?
- EI4 Emerging technology for prison estate management. How can emerging technologies (e.g. AI and digital twins) optimise prison estate management, including resource allocation, maintenance and capability forecasting?
- EI5 In what ways could information sharing processes be improved with key partners, and how could this impact safety outcomes?
- EI6 How can we use technology (BWVC's) to support situation judgement?
- EI7 What can we learn around how technology can be used to improve efficiencies and productivity for probation staff (reducing administration burden)? What does any evidence/ experiences suggest are the best value areas to invest in to achieve this (in any area of HMPPS)?
- EI8 What are the best ways for Government departments to evidence efficiency and productivity savings made through digital products?

¹ A digital twin is a digital representation of a target entity with data connections that enable convergence between the physical and digital states at an appropriate rate of synchronization

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- E19 What can we learn about the most valuable user interfaces for AI products for people to engage, and use them appropriately?
- E110 What is the best practice around the design of AI products to maximise interpretability to support decision-making specifically? (e.g. nudges, giving insights...)
- E111 What is the evidence about the broader value of AI tools for offenders e.g. more qualitative studies focusing on wider outcomes than improving efficiencies?
- E112 What is the emerging evidence for AI transcription services and what are the most valuable use cases for this?
- E113 Qualitative or mixed method studies of the impact of all digital data tools on decision-making (specific tools for MoJ, or other organisation's experience of other tools)?
- E114 How can digital data tools enhance data interpretation capability? For example, evidence of value of effectiveness of specific features, interactive features, displaying insights?
- E115 Who can get left behind if services are designed digitally? Evidence around minimising this?
- E116 What are some good examples of where digital products have helped to change behaviour in public service settings? Or generally?
- E117 Viability of current technology application in prisons and probation to support decarbonisation. I.e. Internet connectivity across sites to enable real time monitoring of technology, consumption and controls (required for solar, batteries, digital twins)
- E118 Practicalities of utilising electrical vehicles across fleet (business continuity, security etc)
- E119 Preparedness of the prison and probation estate for new technologies (e.g. Hydrogen)
- E120 Cost and feasibility of the use of sustainable HVO as diesel alternative in large fleet vehicles and temporary and backup generators.

Further Information

National Research Committee (NRC)

Overview

Anybody seeking to undertake research (specifically the application of research methods) involving staff and/or offenders in prison establishments, across the Probation Service or within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Services (HMPPS) Headquarters are required to formally apply for approval to the HMPPS National Research Committee (NRC).

All NRC applications must be made using the online application form – [HMPPS NRC Online Application Form](#)

Guidance on applications

Guidance on the NRC process, including information that should be included in the application form and tips for completing your application is available: [NRC Application Guidance](#) (PDF, 605 KB, 31 pages).

Review and approval process

Applications must be submitted by 5pm on the last working day of the month to be considered in the following month of reviews.

The NRC reviews a maximum of 14 multi-site applications per month. This cap operates on a first-come-first-served basis with any surplus applications carried over into the following month.

Student applications

Undergraduate students: Due to the potential volume of applications, the NRC is unable to accept research proposals from undergraduate students. This applies even when HMPPS or MoJ business support is provided.

Postgraduate (Masters) students: we are unable to accept Masters applications without written evidence of HMPPS/MoJ business support. Business support should be from Prison Group Director (PGD) for custody, Regional Probation Director (RPD) for community or Deputy Director level for HQ requests. A letter/email of support must be uploaded with the NRC application. We are unable to process applications without this confirmation.

Postgraduate (Doctoral) students: The committee does accept student applications at doctoral level. Business support is beneficial but not required.

Contact us

Contact Us

If you have any questions, need support, or would like to provide feedback, please reach out using one of the following options:

SharePoint Site

Visit our SharePoint site for resources, updates, and useful documentation:

[HMPPS Statement of Operational Evidence Needs](#)

Functional Mailbox

For direct enquiries, please email the team via our functional mailbox:

[**ICF-analysisdata@justice.gov.uk**](mailto:ICF-analysisdata@justice.gov.uk)



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