



INQUEST response to Welsh Affairs Committee inquiry into Prisons, Probation and Rehabilitation in Wales

March 2025

1. INQUEST is the only charity providing expertise on state-related deaths and their investigation. For four decades, INQUEST has provided expertise to bereaved people, lawyers, advice and support agencies, the media and parliamentarians. Our specialist casework includes deaths in prison and police custody, immigration detention, mental health settings and deaths involving multi-agency failings or where wider issues of state and corporate accountability are in question.
2. This submission focusses on the Committee's question "How suitable is the Welsh prison estate for keeping prisoners healthy, safe and ensuring they can access effective rehabilitation services". Our response specifically highlights the issue of drugs in prison in Wales, drawing on a recent joint submission to the Justice Select Committee on drugs in prison by INQUEST, Release and the Drugs, Policy and Social Change (DPSC) research group at Manchester Metropolitan University.¹
3. INQUEST's casework with bereaved families following deaths in prison has repeatedly highlighted how prisons across England and Wales can, and do, induce and exacerbate mental and physical ill health and increase the likelihood of self-harm and self-inflicted death. We have published numerous evidence-based reports and submissions on the issues arising from deaths in prison, including the neglect of prisoners' mental and physical health, the inappropriate use of segregation and the impact of indeterminate and remand sentences. It is clear from our casework that many of the concerns arising from deaths in prison relate to prisons in both England and Wales. A primary concern is the issue of drugs in prison, which will be the focus of this submission.
4. INQUEST therefore welcomes this inquiry by the Welsh Affairs Committee as we believe it represents an opportunity to plan and implement a new strategy to address the issue of drugs in prisons in Wales in order to improve the health, wellbeing and safety of people imprisoned and prevent further deaths. In particular, the submission advocates for an approach rooted in harm reduction: a strategy that aims to minimise the negative effects of drug use through equipping people who use drugs with specialist drug, health and social services.²
5. It is highly concerning that in the five years between 2019 – 2024, 100 people have died in prisons in Wales.³ It is alarming that more than half of all the deaths occurred in HMP

¹ INQUEST, Release and DPSC submission (2025) to the Justice Select Committee on tackling drugs in prison [Download.ashx](#)

² Harm Reduction International (2022) What is Harm Reduction <https://hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction/>

³ For context, in the same time period 1843 people died in England in prison.

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Parc, and that nearly 25% of the deaths in this prison are classified as other non-natural causes, defined by the Ministry of Justice as: ‘accidents arising from external causes, accidental overdose/ poisoning and deaths where taking a drug contributed to a death but not in fatal amounts.’

Prison	Cause of death				Total
	Self-inflicted	Natural causes	Other non-natural causes	Awaiting classification	
Berwyn	1	11	2		14
Usk	1	3			4
Prescoed		1			1
Cardiff	11	9			20
Parc	7	31	13		51
Swansea	3	4	1	2	10
Total					100

Source: Ministry of Justice Safety in Custody Statistics Deaths Data Tool: [Deaths data tool 2024_Q2.xlsx](#)

HMP Parc

- 17 people died in HMP Parc in 2024, more than in any other prison in England and Wales. At least four of the deaths are believed to be drug-related, in suspected overdoses.⁴ By March 2024, when six people had died in the prison in less than a month, South Wales Police confirmed that four of the deaths were linked to a Nitazene-based substance (which falls under the synthetic opioid category). Of those four deaths, two were connected to synthetic cannabinoid spice.⁵ Following the deaths, the Prison and Probation Ombudsman issued an unprecedented warning directly to prisoners on the dangers of psychoactive drugs.⁶
- Given the frequency of drug-related deaths in Wales, and the prison estate more generally, we urge the Committee to further examine the data on drug-related deaths in prison. We also recommend the Ministry of Justice improve their data by disaggregating drug-related deaths from ‘non-natural deaths’ to provide greater clarity and transparency on the impact of drugs in prison.
- HMP Parc is a privately-run prison by G4S. A G4S spokesperson said, “We have a zero-tolerance policy towards drugs and use a range of tactics to tackle the ingress of drugs

⁴ BBC (2025) Bridgend Parc Prison: Inmate dies suddenly, police confirm [Bridgend Parc Prison: Inmate dies suddenly, police confirm - BBC News](#)

⁵ South Wales Police (2024) HMP Prison Parc deaths in Bridgend [HM Prison Parc deaths in Bridgend | South Wales Police](#)

⁶ Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (2024) An urgent, public plea from Ombudsman Adrian Usher [An urgent, public plea from Ombudsman Adrian Usher – Prisons and Probation Ombudsman](#)

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and reduce demand.”⁷ This strategy has been failing, with fatal consequences for those imprisoned. Many prisoners in HMP Parc have alleged that prison staff are partly responsible for the entry of drugs into prison, with one HMP Parc prison officer imprisoned in 2024 for attempting to smuggle class A drugs into the prison.⁸ In the period from 2020 – 2023, more than 4,000 prison staff were investigated in relation to the supply of drugs in prison.⁹ In response to the deaths at HMP Parc, G4S said security measures had been “significantly strengthened, including an increase in the number of dedicated searching staff, patrol dogs and specialist equipment like drug detection devices and X-ray body scanners.”¹⁰ This approach directly contrasts one rooted in harm reduction and contradicts significant evidence that has, for example, highlighted that mandatory drug testing has pushed people to use more harmful substances. Evidence included in our submission to the Justice Committee on tackling drugs in prison¹¹ emphasises that a punitive approach to using drugs, including strengthening and expanding security measures, has been found to severely impact on people’s wellbeing, and has also lead to death. For this reason, we believe a change in approach to one rooted in harm reduction is necessary to safeguard the wellbeing of people in prison and prevent further deaths.

HMP Swansea

9. A punitive approach to drug-using not isolated to HMP Parc. The death of Dean George highlights how a punitive approach to drug-using, specifically in relation to enforcing drug withdrawal, can play a role in contributing to death. Dean George was a 40 year old man who was dependent on heroin and alcohol and died in HMP Swansea in 2016.¹² In April 2016, he was imprisoned for eight weeks. As he was not prescribed methadone in the community, Dean was denied opiate substitution treatment to manage his detoxification from heroin and instead was forced to withdraw in a manner that healthcare witnesses agreed was “brutal” and “inhuman”. Dean was left alone on his cell to undergo the painful detoxification process. He was found hanging in his cell. The jury concluded that the forcing of Dean to undergo opiate withdrawal against his will contributed to his death, and the system in place for managing opiate withdrawal was not equitable to what Dean would have access to in the community. Dean’s case highlights our concerns with the approach to managing drugs in prison and evidences the need for a wholesale change to treating drugs in prison. A harm reduction approach would not enforce opiate

⁷ BBC (2024) HMP Parc: Families of dead prison inmates call for justice at protest [HMP Parc: Families of dead prison inmates call for justice at protest - BBC News](#)

⁸ BBC (2024) Bridgend: HMP Parc prison staff alleged to be bringing in drugs [Bridgend: HMP Parc prison staff alleged to be bringing in drugs - BBC News](#)

⁹ Inside Time (2024) More than 4,000 prison staff investigated over drug supply [More than 4,000 prison staff investigated over drug supply – insidetime & insideinformation](#)

¹⁰ ITV (2024) HMP Parc: Bereaved mum calls for more searches in prison after son’s suspected drugs death [HMP Parc: Bereaved mum calls for more searches in prison after son's suspected drugs death | ITV News Wales](#)

¹¹ INQUEST, Release and DPSC submission (2025) to the Justice Select Committee on tackling drugs in prison [Download.ashx](#)

¹² INQUEST (2020) Multiple failures contributed to death of Dean George at HMP Swansea [Multiple failures contributed to death of Dean George at HMP Swansea | Inquest](#)

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withdrawal nor deny Dean of opiate substitution treatment. Furthermore, harm reduction would have reinforced Dean's agency and provided him with multiple options on how to deal with drug dependency, such as for example engaging with a needle and syringe programme or getting drugs checked for content and potency, alongside information and education of how to manage drug dependency in prison.¹³ INQUEST strongly encourages the Committee to consider the evidence in favour of implementing harm reduction in prisons.¹⁴

An opportunity to develop a new strategy on drugs in prison

10. INQUEST's joint submission¹⁵ to the Justice Committee's inquiry on drugs in prison highlights how imprisonment itself is a major driver in drug use, as drugs provide a relief to boredom through escapism in a context where many prisoners are locked in cells for 23 hours a day.¹⁶
11. Our submission also noted how the introduction of Mandatory Drug Tests (MDTs) in prison has significantly changed patterns of drug use in the last decade, with more and more prisoners switching from traditional drugs such as cannabis to synthetic cannabinoids and other drugs such as heroin, as these are less likely to be detected by MDTs.
12. Synthetic cannabinoids are more harmful than cannabis, with prison staff and prisoners noting that it was possible to quickly build up tolerance and become dependent. They have also been linked to self-harm, seizures and synthetic cannabinoid-induced psychosis.¹⁷ Considering how current drug testing policy has resulted in shifts to more harmful substances to avoid detection, we recommend the removal of MDTs to ensure the wellbeing of people in prison.
13. Further, a punitive approach to using drugs in prison severely impacts prisoners' wellbeing and can contribute to their death. For example, as exhibited in the death of Dean George above, prisons' zero-tolerance approach to drugs can lead to people experiencing serious withdrawal symptoms on arrival as well as a rapid decrease in drug tolerance which increases the risk of fatal overdose on release.¹⁸
14. Evidence also indicates how the emphasis on supply routes has resulted in the development of new technologies and measures to prevent the entry of drugs in prison,

¹³ Harm Reduction International (2022) What is Harm Reduction [What is Harm Reduction? - Harm Reduction International](#)

¹⁴ Harm Reduction International (2022) The Global State of Harm Reduction

¹⁵ Harm Reduction International (2022) What is Harm Reduction [Download.ashx](#)

¹⁶ HM Inspector of Prisons (2024) Annual Report 2023-24 [HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2023-24](#)

¹⁷ Ralphs et. al., (2017) Adding Spice to the Porridge <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0955395916303073>

¹⁸ Kings College London (2025) N-ALIVE [N-ALIVE | King's College London](#)

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such as sniffer dogs and body scanners, all of which have ultimately failed. This can be attributed to the fact that the most common routes of drugs into prison remain via prison staff and new prisoners, especially those serving short sentences on license recall.¹⁹

Implementing harm reduction in prison

15. Statistics on drug-related deaths in prison in England and Wales found 145 drug-related deaths between 2008 – 2019, with a rise between 2016 – 2019.²⁰ We believe it is crucial all prisons develop and implement harm reduction strategies with respect to drug use to ensure the wellbeing of people in prison and prevent further deaths.

- a. People imprisoned should have equivalency of care to those in the community and as such there should be rapid access to Opioid Substitution Treatment as well as the establishment of Needle and Syringe Programmes.
- b. Naloxone on release should be mandatory in all prisons.
- c. Mandatory Drug Tests should be abolished in recognition of the perverse conditions they create resulting in people often moving to using other, undetectable, substances which have higher harm profiles.

¹⁹ INQUEST, Release and DPSC submission (2025) to the Justice Select Committee on tackling drugs in prison [Download.ashx](#)

²⁰ Office for National Statistics (2023) Drug-related deaths and suicides in prison custody in England and Wales 2008 – 2019

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/drugrelateddeathsandsuicideinprisoncustodyinenglandandwales/2023-01-26#:~:text=Of%20the%20total%20drug-related,in%20prison%20custody%20each%20year>