Response to consultation on changes to Prison Population Projections

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Contents

Introduction

The prison population projections publication currently presents projections of the prison population in England and Wales for the forthcoming six years. The projections are based on assumptions about future performance of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and incorporate the anticipated impacts of agreed policy and procedural initiatives. A range of sub-population projections are provided, covering different population types (e.g. remand, recall, determinate etc.), offender sex and age-bands (i.e. 15-17 years, 18-20 years, 21+ years old).

Within government the projections are produced to aid policy development, resource allocations and capacity planning across the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) at a national level. As a National Statistic these projections inform the wider public interest as to expected future trends in the prison population and provide an overview of the key factors and assumptions driving those trends.

From 30 July 2015 to 25 September 2015, the Ministry of Justice ran a consultation on changes to the prison population projections publication. The consultation reflected the outcome of an internal review by producers of the prison population projections. A number of proposed changes to the publication were put forward in the consultation document with the aim to improve the way in which information is conveyed to users of the projections.

Users' views were invited on these proposed changes and 7 responses to the consultation were received.

This document provides feedback on the comments received and clarifies the changes to future publications that are planned in response to those comments. Our response to specific requests for additional details is provided in view of the scope and range of purposes for the prison population projections outlined briefly above.

Summary of responses

Seven responses were received in response to the consultation. Below is a summary of the main comments received.

1. Improving how we communicate uncertainty

Respondents agreed with the proposal to remove the current higher and lower scenarios, and replace them with an alternative method to communicate uncertainty in the central forecast. Three respondents supported an approach similar to that used for the Bank of England's GDP forecasts, based on showing how previous projections performed against actuals.

Several respondents commented that they would also find useful a retrospective explanation of why previous forecasts turned out to be above or below observed actuals. One respondent asked for a way to evaluate the impact of policies included within previous projections, in order to understand the uncertainty in policy impacts projected forward.

2. Reduce the length of the forecast period

Two respondents agreed with the proposal to reduce the length of the forecast period from 6 to 4 years, while two respondents disagreed with this change. The reasons given against this change were: (i) concerns as to potential impact on strategic planning capability; and (ii) that there was limited evidence suggesting that short-term volatility affected the validity of projecting long-term trends in the prison population.

If the forecast period was to be reduced, one respondent suggested that a table showing the ongoing, long-term impact (i.e. beyond 4 years) of historic trends in determinate sentence lengths and indeterminate sentences should be retained.

3. Publish the projections in August rather than November

Respondents agreed with the proposal to move the publication from November to August from 2016 onwards.

4. Additional statistical tables to be included in the publication

Respondents agreed with the proposal to include tables showing projections of the over 50 years and over 60 years old population.

There were also a wide range of suggestions of additional tables that could be provided. These included a range of sub-population breakdowns to cover:
- Age and gender of offenders, covering: 10-13 age group in Secure Children's Homes or Secure Training Centres; 10-17 age-group; 21-24 age group; over 70 years age group; and gender breakdowns for the 10-17 age group, 15-17 age group, 18 year olds and the 18-20 age group.
- Indeterminate, Determinate and Extended Determinate Sentence (EDS) offenders, including a breakdown of those offenders over tariff.
- The sex offender population broken down by those sentenced offender categories listed above, and where they are over tariff to provide reasons for that including (i) disciplinary action, (ii) failure to comply with a Sex Offenders Treatment Programme (SOTP), or (iii) other reasons.

- A range of offender categories including foreign national offenders, ethnic group, and offenders with particular health problems.
- Detailed projections identifying offenders in custody for breach (as distinct from recall) and breakdowns by geographical region.

5. Other themes

One respondent suggested the publication allude to the trends taken into account explicitly in the projections. Another respondent suggested that recent trends in numbers of sexual offenders needed to be reflected in the projections.

One respondent requested a tool to allow analysis of a broader range of measures likely to have an impact on the future prison population, including those that precede the court process.

Changes to Prison Population Projections

1. Improving how we communicate uncertainty

Following agreement through consultation, the higher and lower scenarios will be removed from the publication and replaced with an alternative method to communicate uncertainty around the central forecast. For the November 2015 publication this will be based on measurement of how previous projections have performed against actuals since publication.

The Ministry publishes impact assessments that appraise the expected impacts of new policies on the gov.uk website, including setting out plans for post implementation reviews, here. Policy impact evaluations are published on the gov.uk research and analysis page here.

2. Reduce the length of the forecast period

Following consultation, the length of the forecast period will be reduced from 6 years to the maximum of either (i) the time to the end of the current Spending Review or (ii) 4 years. This means that for the November 2015 publication, the horizon will extend to the end of the financial year 2020/21. This is consistent with how far ahead the Ministry typically looks when making decisions on prison capacity planning and so addresses the request to consider the impact on strategic planning capability.

3. Publish the projections in August rather than November

Following agreement through consultation, the publication will be released annually in August from 2016 onwards.

4. Additional statistical tables to be included in the publication

We welcomed the suggestions of a wide range of additional projections that respondents would find valuable. In considering which of these to take forward in future publications we were constrained to the current model methodology, as quality assured for publication as a National Statistic. Details of the current methodology are outlined in Appendix B of the prison population projections.

Offender Age and Sex breakdowns

Tables showing projections of the over 50 years and over 60 years old population will be provided in the November 2015 publication. We will consider expanding this to include projections of the population over 70 years old in future publications.

Following consultation requests, tables of the 18-20 age group broken down by sex will be provided in future publications. The projection for the 15-17 age group currently only includes male offenders. We will therefore make it clear in the publication that tables that the 15-17 age group projections relate only to male offenders.

The prison projections cover offenders held in the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) estate. This estate covers male offenders aged 15+, and female offenders aged 18+. Projections of Secure Children's Homes or Secure Training Centres, which are outside of the NOMS estate, are not included in this projection

because the prisons data used in the modelling does not include information for these establishments.

One respondent requested the 21-24 age group breakdown following Lord Harris' report on deaths in custody of young people, which are included in this broader group. The Ministry of Justice has not yet responded to Lord Harris' report. Once a response has been published we will consider including a breakdown of the 21-24 age group.

Indeterminate and Extended Determinate Sentences

The Ministry currently publishes historic information on Indeterminate and Extended Determinate sentences here, and information about tariff length of the prison population here. The prison population projections publication currently includes a table detailing the projection of the indeterminate population, combining both IPP and Lifers (see Appendix A, Table A.5 here)

Numbers of offenders over tariff is not currently a calibrated output of the modelling, and an explicit, accurate projection would require further model development to produce. There are no plans to provide this breakdown in future publications.

Given the recent introduction and subsequent changes to the Extended Determinate Sentence (EDS), the data covering EDS offenders is not yet sufficiently robust to support an explicit statistical projection of this sub-population. We will consider providing this breakdown as more data becomes available.

The models used to produce projections of the determinate population, whilst informed by offence-specific trends, are calibrated only at a total determinate population level. The model used to project the indeterminate population does not take account of offence-specific information. Detailed projections of the determinate and indeterminate sex-offender population, and those over tariff broken down by reason are therefore beyond the current scope of the prison projections.

Foreign National Offenders (FNO)

Data on that nationality of offenders is not currently used within the prison projections methodology. Significant work would be required to develop the modelling methodology to produce a statistical projection of the FNO population. We do not propose to provide an explicit projection of FNO population on this basis.

Other suggested Breakdowns (Ethnicity, Breaches, Geographical split by 21 Probation Contract Package Areas, Health Needs)

Data on these more detailed factors is not currently included as part of the prison projections methodology. Due to the modelling complexity these elements would require, and that in some cases we have insufficient data to produce projections at this level, there is no plan to include projections on this basis will not be provided.

5. Other themes

Publications from November 2015 onwards will include references to other statistical publications which explain the key trends taken into account within the prison population projections methodology.

Provision of a dedicated tool to support analysis of a broader range of cross-CJS measures likely to have an impact on the future prison population would require significant work to develop. There are no plans to develop such a tool as part of the publication.