# UK government launches tech-driven ‘prison outside prison’ plan to ease overcrowding



The UK government is embarking on a significant transformation of its penal policy, championed by Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood. Her recent proposal for a "prison outside prison" initiative seeks to monitor offenders who might otherwise avoid incarceration, aiming to address the pressing issue of overcrowded prisons. This shift in strategy is indicative of a broader re-evaluation, spearheaded by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, in response to the unsustainable pressures faced by the UK’s penal system.

Mahmood has appealed to major technology firms, including Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, and Google, for innovative surveillance solutions that could be deployed to effectively oversee offenders in the community. According to Mahmood, artificial intelligence and advanced biometric technologies—such as gait recognition—could better track individuals outside of conventional prison settings, thereby reinforcing public confidence in alternatives to incarceration. She articulated this vision, stating, “Where I want us to be is for offenders to know that ‘the eyes of the state are upon you’, just as they would be in prison.”

This strategy marks a critical departure from the long-held belief that increased incarceration rates are synonymous with a safer society—a sentiment echoed by former Conservative justice secretary David Gauke. His upcoming independent review of sentencing is expected to bolster Mahmood's initiative by advocating for a reduction in both the number of individuals incarcerated and the lengths of their sentences. This approach corresponds with a marked pivot away from the 1993 “prison works” doctrine, which had dominated UK penal discourse for decades.

The urgency of this reform is underscored by grim statistics—a projected prison population exceeding 100,000 by 2029, and current facilities operating at near full capacity. Recent government measures, including the premature release of thousands of inmates, highlight the acute crisis within the penal system. Mahmood has also proposed alternative measures, such as house arrest, to manage offenders effectively and alleviate some of the strain on prisons.

Legal experts are cautiously optimistic about the potential applications of technology in this context. Sam Townend KC, the former chair of the Bar Council, acknowledged that while there is “real potential” for improved use of technology in managing the prison estate, it is essential that such projects be meticulously managed, given the Ministry of Justice’s historical challenges with technology rollouts. Mahmood herself showed awareness of this past, stating a commitment to learning from prior missteps.

Moreover, innovations like sobriety tags—devices capable of monitoring alcohol consumption through sweat—have already been rolled out as part of a broader strategy to employ technology within the criminal justice system. These tags aim to assist in reducing reoffending rates by providing probation services with real-time data on offenders’ behaviours.

While Mahmood has not yet disclosed funding specifics for the proposed technological initiatives, her ambition remains clear: to reshape public perceptions of community sentencing as a viable and effective alternative to conventional incarceration. As the government prepares for this substantial policy rethink, the intersection of technology and justice will undoubtedly remain a focal point in discussions about the future of crime and punishment in the UK.

This initiative, poised to redefine the landscape of criminal justice, not only seeks to manage prison populations more efficiently but also heralds a potential cultural shift towards rehabilitation and smarter enforcement strategies that blend innovation with accountability.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: 1, 2, 7
2. Paragraph 2: 1, 2, 7
3. Paragraph 3: 2, 3
4. Paragraph 4: 3, 6
5. Paragraph 5: 2, 3
6. Paragraph 6: 4, 5
7. Paragraph 7: 1, 3, 7

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/438f421c-ca4e-4201-b450-33bbd2e0c5aa> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/438f421c-ca4e-4201-b450-33bbd2e0c5aa> - UK Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood has proposed a 'prison outside prison' strategy to monitor offenders who avoid incarceration, aiming to alleviate overcrowding in English and Welsh prisons. She has enlisted major technology firms like Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, and Google to develop advanced surveillance solutions, including AI-driven tagging and biometric technologies. These innovations could help track offenders in the community, detect drug use, and prevent violence within prisons, while also supporting rehabilitation efforts. The initiative aligns with Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s broader rethink of penal policy. An independent sentencing review by former Tory justice secretary David Gauke is expected to provide political support for reducing prison numbers and sentence durations. Mahmood emphasized the importance of public confidence in community sentencing and acknowledged challenges in public sector tech deployment. Legal experts endorsed the potential of technology but warned of risks due to the Ministry of Justice’s poor track record with tech projects. The government’s approach marks a shift from the long-standing 'prison works' philosophy, aiming for a more efficient and rehabilitative justice system.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/1b0828e2-5280-484a-ae58-4b591dbefcc1> - The UK Justice Secretary, Shabana Mahmood, has warned that building new prisons alone will not solve the overcrowding crisis. Despite plans to invest billions in constructing four new prisons, the prison population is projected to increase faster than new facilities can be built. Mahmood emphasized the need for alternative punishments outside of prison, such as house arrest, to manage the growing number of offenders. A review led by former Tory Justice Secretary David Gauke will propose changes to sentencing, focusing on alternatives for less serious crimes while ensuring prison spaces for dangerous offenders. The Ministry of Justice released a 10-year prison strategy, committing £2.3 billion over the next two years to create 6,400 extra jail spaces. The government aims to add 14,000 new spaces by 2031 by refurbishing and expanding existing facilities. Despite these efforts, prisons are near capacity, and the government is releasing 5,000 prisoners early to manage the current crisis. Projections indicate that over 100,000 prisoners could be held by 2029. Mahmood criticized the previous administration for failing to meet its promise of creating 20,000 additional prison spaces. The Prison Reform Trust highlighted the importance of the sentencing review for achieving a more sustainable and humane penal system.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_tagging> - Electronic tagging is a form of surveillance that uses an electronic device affixed to a person. In some jurisdictions, an electronic tag fitted above the ankle is used for people as part of their bail or probation conditions. It is also used in healthcare settings and in immigration contexts. Electronic tagging can be used in combination with the global positioning system (GPS), but for short-range monitoring of a person that wears an electronic tag, radio frequency technology can be used. Additional technologies include sweat alcohol content monitors, which are available in 35 U.S. states and monitor sweat samples every 30 minutes to detect alcohol consumption. In England, sobriety tags were rolled out in March 2021 for offenders who commit alcohol-related crimes. In June 2022, the British Home Office announced a one-year pilot to track migrants who arrived on small boats with GPS devices to help maintain regular contact and more effectively process their claims.
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sobriety-tags-launched-in-england-to-tackle-alcohol-fuelled-crime> - The UK government has launched sobriety tags in England to tackle alcohol-fuelled crime. These tags monitor offenders' alcohol consumption by analyzing sweat samples every 30 minutes, alerting the probation service if alcohol is detected. The initiative aims to reduce reoffending rates and support rehabilitation efforts by providing real-time data on offenders' behavior. The tags are part of a broader strategy to use technology in the justice system to enhance monitoring and rehabilitation of offenders.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-announces-pilot-to-track-migrants-with-gps-devices> - In June 2022, the British Home Office announced a one-year pilot to track migrants who arrived on small boats with GPS devices. The initiative aims to help maintain regular contact with migrants and more effectively process their claims. The use of GPS devices is part of a broader strategy to manage migration and ensure compliance with immigration procedures. The pilot reflects the government's approach to using technology for monitoring and managing migration flows.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/justice-secretary-asks-big-tech-to-help-create-prison-outside-prison-for-criminals> - UK Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood has asked major technology companies, including Microsoft, Amazon Web Services, and Google, to develop more extensive surveillance of offenders outside jail. This initiative aims to tackle overcrowding in prisons and save money by monitoring criminals who have been spared jail. The government is preparing for a significant rethink of penal policy, with an independent review of sentencing expected to propose changes to reduce the number of people sent to jail and the length of their sentences.