I write to thank you, and Richard Heaton and his team, for hosting our visit to the Ministry on Tuesday this week. We found it very helpful to receive an overview of the main challenges facing you, your fellow Ministers and the Ministry and its agencies, and we look forward to opening the formal conversation on these matters at the evidence session on 25 October.

We were particularly grateful for the assurances which you and Mr Heaton gave about the Ministry's intention to be as open, candid and co-operative as possible with the Committee. In that context there are several issues which would assist in getting our relationship off to a good start in this Parliament.

Government Responses

First, we are still awaiting one Government Response to a report published at the end of the last Parliament by the previous Justice Committee, on the implications of Brexit for the justice system. I particularly hope that we will have this response in time for us to consider it prior to your appearance before the Committee on 25 October. Your Response to the previous Committee's two reports published at the end of the last Parliament on prisons only arrived with us this week, four months into the new Parliament. We very much hope that the timeliness of Responses will improve when we begin producing our own Reports. We are always happy to consider reasonable requests for delay beyond the two months stipulated in the Government's own Osmotherly Rules, for example when that time includes holidays or recesses, or when a Report deals with complex matters which require substantial consideration within the Department or across Government.

Prisons

Secondly, in the last Parliament the Committee asked the Ministry to provide us with regular (quarterly) information on a range of specified prison safety-related indicators, set out in paragraph 43 of that Committee's Prison Safety report of 2015-16. We understand that all this information is collated within the Department. The Government's Response did not address those specific recommendations, instead offering "updates on progress against [the Government's prison safety and reform plans] on a six monthly basis". The previous Committee never had a clear explanation of why it was not possible for the Ministry to provide it with the regular statistical information which it requested, to enable it to carry out its function of scrutinising the effectiveness of your prisons policy and operations. If there are issues relating to preparation and
publication of official statistics which means they have to be made public at the same time that they are supplied to the Committee, we can consider accommodating that. If we can have agreement from you in principle to a system of reporting, we would also be happy to discuss the precise indicators.

Transforming Rehabilitation
Thirdly, as you may have seen we have this week announced an inquiry into Transforming Rehabilitation. The focus of that inquiry is on how current Government measures are addressing the challenges facing the probation services. As with all our inquiries we would expect a submission of written evidence from the Ministry. We also request a separate response from the National Probation Service.

We would be grateful if the Ministry could ensure that its submission provides information to us on the following, in addition to the questions posed in our published terms of reference:

• what were the contractual and financial changes made to CRC contracts in July 2017, including a full explanation of the adjustment to the payment mechanism in CRC contracts referred to in the Written Statement of 19 July 2017, and the additional expenditure incurred in relation to each CRC area this financial year as a result. We would be open to receiving the information in confidence and not putting it in to the public domain in full; and
• whether you expect to make any further changes to CRC contracts and to CRC financing in the next 12 months.

As with the prison safety information referred to above, we consider provision of this information to be critical if we are to be able to scrutinise the work of the Ministry.

There is one other matter on which I would be grateful for your assistance. In the previous Parliament the Ministry facilitated visits which individual Justice Committee members wanted to undertake to prisons or courts to gain experience and understanding of how they were operating. Such visits were not formal Committee visits, which are arranged separately and directly by our Committee staff. I hope you would be willing to ensure that any such requests from individual members of the Committee will continue to be facilitated.

Bob Neill MP
Chair
Justice Committee