



# **Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP/YOI Low Newton**

**For reporting year  
1 March 2022 – 28 February 2023**

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## Introductory sections 1 – 3

### 1. Statutory role of the IMB

The Prison Act 1952 requires every prison to be monitored by an independent board appointed by the Secretary of State from members of the community in which the prison is situated.

Under the National Monitoring Framework agreed with ministers, the board is required to:

- satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody within its prison and the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release
- inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom authority has been delegated as it judges appropriate, any concern it has
- report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

To enable the board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have right of access to every prisoner and every part of the prison and also to the prison's records.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that states designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMB is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

## 2. Description of the establishment

Low Newton was refurbished and reopened as a women's prison in 1998.

It now consists of eight residential wings together with general prisoner use areas, eg. healthcare, education and workshops. One wing is for the induction of new prisoners; this also houses a small unit for prisoners judged ready for transfer to open prisons. One wing houses prisoners taking part in programmes designed to address mental health problems, especially those on the PIPE (psychologically informed planned environment) programme, another wing which opened in 2022 consists of 24 individual modules within an outdoor area for low-risk prisoners judged ready for greater autonomy, and one wing is for prisoners serving longer sentences. The remaining four wings are general purpose. There is a small segregation unit with a capacity of three prisoners. No wing has more than three floors and some have only one.

Low Newton holds women of all ages from 18 years upwards, both those on remand and those who have been sentenced. The population includes those serving short sentences, those serving licence sentences and restricted status (high security) women. There are a few prisoners on IPP (Imprisonment for public protection) sentences.

- operational capacity is 298<sup>1</sup>
- CNA (certified normal accommodation – uncrowded capacity) is 328, using double-cell contingency

During the reporting year, the actual number of prisoners was mostly around 260. For an age breakdown of the prison population, see **Table 1** at Annex B.

Most cells are single occupancy with a small number of double-occupancy cells. Adult prisoners and young adults are integrated. Risk assessments are carried out before it is decided on which wing a young adult should be located.

During the reporting year, extensive work to repair roofs and replace some cell doors and windows was completed.

During the first part of the reporting year, regime restrictions arising from the Covid pandemic were still in place, being relaxed in stages. As a deliberate policy, the prison has not returned to the pre-pandemic regime but based on prisoner feedback, now operates a regime with controls designed to reduce opportunities for bullying and violence amongst prisoners whilst allowing sufficient exercise and association.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures included in this report are local management information. They reflect the prison's position at the time of reporting, but may be subject to change following further validation and therefore may not always tally with Official Statistics later published by the Ministry of Justice.

### 3. Key points

If a prison can ever be described as good, then the Board believes, based on its monitoring, that Low Newton deserves this description as an establishment which is well-run within available resources.

During the reporting year, the biggest challenge faced by the prison was coming out of the Covid pandemic, which meant preparing staff and prisoners properly and risk-assessing successive changes of regime. The Board was aware from its regular discussions with the Governor and other senior managers that one of the biggest risks arose from high staff turnover since 2020. This meant that a high proportion of the uniformed staff had never worked in a normal daily regime, and the much greater prisoner movement and contact resulting from opening up was therefore unfamiliar to those staff, as well as many prisoners. The Board believes that overall, the transition has been a successful one.

However, the longer-term challenge has been to maintain adequate staffing levels. This is not just a local problem; in fact, Low Newton is understood to be relatively well-placed compared to many other prisons. However, throughout the reporting period some staff were on voluntary redeployment to other prisons to alleviate shortages elsewhere. This not only made it difficult to maintain a consistent regime; it also placed a greater strain on staff because when extra demands such as constant watches arose, it meant that prisoners were sometimes locked down on wings when they should not be, and also that a large number of small things done by staff which make the difference between just getting by and providing a positive environment were not possible.

#### 3.1 Main findings

##### Safety

- The prison is a reasonably safe environment for prisoners and staff. Staff are vigilant but not oppressive. The number of violent incidents has decreased despite a greater degree of prisoner freedom. Use of force is kept at low levels, but the Board will monitor this more.
- There is greater staff confidence in the use of assessment, care in custody and teamwork plans (ACCTs) as a positive way of reducing the risk of self-harm and other problems.
- There continues to be concern that, due to a lack of funding, some areas of the prison (eg the education block and the chapel) lack adequate CCTV coverage. This could enable violence in those areas.
- There was a slight rise in the number of illicit items found. The prison takes a managed risk approach to this in terms of targeted and other types of searches, and use of intelligence. Greater use of dogs would not be economic, whilst the prison's preferred approach, installation of body scanners, is not permitted in the women's estate.
- Low Newton continues to be the last call for many transfer transports from courts when both male and female prisoners are moved, leading to late reception and induction.

## **Fair and humane treatment**

- Although it has caused disruption, the extensive programme of roofing works and cell refurbishment over the reporting period has resulted in significant improvements, contributing to an environment which, taken together with a diligent cleaning and hygiene regime, is one which – within the necessary constraints – is liveable and non-threatening.
- There have been consistent efforts to match the meals regime to prisoner preferences in terms of timing, availability and type, and the meals provided are satisfactory given the limited budget available.
- Segregation is used, but normally only for short periods and is well administered. However, the Board will increase its monitoring of reviews and adjudications.
- The key worker scheme is achieving fair coverage, but full implementation and effectiveness continue to be held back by staff shortages.
- The prison has made efforts to tighten up the administration and effectiveness of the discrimination complaint process.

## **Health and wellbeing**

- The Board has been able to achieve closer interaction with healthcare staff during the year and is pleased to note that the prison is involved in some new initiatives with other prisons.
- Although there are delays in securing treatment, these are mostly reflective of similar delays in the wider community.
- There continue to be a significant number of prisoners with mental health problems; although good work continues to be done by the prison's mental health team, including encouragement of prisoner input, it is not always fully staffed and to some extent it is firefighting rather than being able to implement longer-term treatments. The Board noted that many of its concerns are reflected more generally in the IMB Briefing Note *Mental health concerns in women's prisons* which was published on 16 May 2023.
- The prison's approach to gradual regime changes, so prisoners have more time out of cells without increasing risk unacceptably, has worked well. However, consistent implementation is jeopardised by continuing staff shortages.

## **Progression and resettlement**

- Staff across the prison exhibit a lot of enthusiasm for providing learning opportunities both to address present issues – poor reading, stress, health issues – and also to facilitate progression through a prisoner's sentence and on to release. It is good to see that this work is taking on new impetus after the restrictions of the last two years.
- The prison is taking a more active role in requiring a wider spread of subject provision from the education contractor. However, its full plans will only be realised if capital funding becomes available.

- There continue to be cases, through no fault of the prison, of satisfactory arrangements not being made for accommodation of released prisoners. The Board is aware that this is a work in progress, but that is no comfort to individual women when released.

### **3.2 Main areas for development**

#### ***TO THE MINISTER***

- For over two months in the reporting period, the segregation facility at Low Newton was used to house a prisoner with substantial behavioural difficulties who had been transferred from another prison because of problems there, and in turn was then moved from Low Newton to a third prison; this was a process which caused great difficulty for all involved. What consideration is being given to a better way of helping prisoners in this position?
- When is more flexibility on Friday release of prisoners likely to result from new legislation?

#### ***TO THE PRISON SERVICE***

- Although Low Newton has benefited from capital funding in several areas recently, there remain obvious further needs, including enhanced CCTV, a wellbeing clinic, heating in the segregation unit and capital investment in the education facilities. What can be done to ensure that prioritisation for funding is accurate?
- Is there a need for reconsideration of drugs search policy and equipment in the women's estate?
- How can prisoner transport arrangements be changed in a still cost-effective manner so that women prisoners intended for Low Newton are not disadvantaged in comparison with male prisoners going to other establishments?

#### ***TO THE GOVERNOR***

- How can the key worker scheme continue to be prioritised against competing staff demands?
- How can the Board work with the prison to have better oversight of adjudications, as well as GOOD reviews held in the safety and support unit?

### 3.3 Response to last report

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
Women with severe mental health issues being housed inappropriately in the prison due to lack of places in secure psychiatric facilities.		There continue to be cases of this happening.
What assessment has been made of the effectiveness of current contracts for the resettlement of prisoners who have no permanent home to go to upon release, given the importance of this issue in reducing reoffending?		The probation service has given two presentations to local IMBs about this issue, which continues to arise for some prisoners. The Board understands that progress on the related issue of release taking place on Fridays is dependent on legislation.
Could the CCTV system be replaced to assist in monitoring incidents around the prison?	The prison management is aware of deficiencies and sought funding	No funding was made available in the 2022-23 financial year
How can the Governor ensure that targets are consistently met for delivery of the key worker scheme?	The prison has tried throughout the year to maximise key worker contact despite staffing pressures	The prison has been able to maintain a relatively high level of key worker coverage, but staffing shortages continue to hold back full implementation.
How can the Governor ensure that body worn cameras are used more consistently during use of force incidents?		Use of these is now more consistent, aided by the issue of better equipment. Prisoners are becoming aware that use of the cameras can be in their interest.



## **Evidence sections 4 – 7**

### **4. Safety**

Based on evidence through frequent prison visits, regular observation and systematic monitoring, the Board is satisfied that safety of both prisoners and staff is a major priority for the leadership team

Weekly and monthly safety meetings are very well attended by all relevant staff, the meeting reviews all the elements of providing a safe environment, and action points with follow-up activities are reviewed at the next meeting by the safety governor.

As part of improvements to safety for both staff and prisoners, the prison has updated body-worn video cameras; this has increased the number of better-quality cameras to over 100, allowing more staff to wear them - including instructors and other civilian staff who work with prisoners.

#### **4.1 Reception and induction**

On first arriving at Low Newton, all prisoners are processed through a dedicated reception area. This was redecorated in the spring of 2023 and is laid out to offer a reasonably comfortable and unthreatening environment on arrival. Initial procedures such as a check by healthcare staff on immediate needs are carried out here.

However, the arrival late in the day of some prisoners due to the contractor's persistent use of Low Newton as the endpoint for multi-prison transfers from courts means that reception is sometimes more hurried than it should be.

All new prisoners at Low Newton are then initially housed in the wing dedicated to induction, whether or not they have previously been held in any prison. They are individually assessed for readiness for a move to the general prison wings, in the meantime following a timetabled sequence of induction activities - which have been modified recently to avoid information overload. The Board was pleased to note during the year that the prison had introduced more evening activities, as one of the difficulties faced by new prisoners is often simple boredom.

However, some newly admitted prisoners have acute difficulties arising from mental or physical health conditions, and from the trauma of being newly imprisoned. In consequence, the number of prisoners on assessment, care in custody and teamwork plans (ACCTs) is high on this wing. ACCTs set out the basis on which the prisoner is monitored and given access to services such as healthcare. New prisoners have access to the Samaritans-backed Listener scheme services provided by two experienced Listeners, although the fact that they are from another wing can delay access.

Although Board members visit the wing regularly, inspect ACCT documents and speak to prisoners on ACCTs, the Board plans to increase its monitoring in this area during its next report year.

## **4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody**

This year's total of recorded self-harm incidents, at 395 (see **Table 2** at Annex B for month-by-month breakdown), is a decrease from the previous year's 427.

In comparison to the year before, there was more consistency month on month. Also, a downward trend in incidents began in July 2021 and has continued through most of the current reporting year.

There was one anomaly in February 2023, where the number of self-harming incidents rose from an average level of 31 per month in the preceding 11 months to 52. This was attributable to three prisoners who made up 52% of all incidents; one prisoner accounted for 12 incidents, one for eight and one for seven. Cuts and scratches were the most common method of self-harm, followed by ligature.

The prison staff's monitoring of those prisoners who were placed on ACCTs has played a part in reducing self-harm.

The number of ACCTs opened during this reporting period, at 281, was 42 more than the previous year's level of 239. The average number opened per month was 21 to December 2022; in January to February 2023, numbers rose to 30 and 34 respectively.

There is no identifiable trend as to the reasons why ACCTs are opened, as these vary between low mood and thoughts of self-harm and suicide. At the weekly safety intervention meeting (SIM) each case is reviewed individually by staff who monitor the ACCTs, and actions are followed up prior to the next meeting.

The prison has secured training for Band 4 and 5 operational staff and 100% of these staff have been trained in ACCT case management. The prison provides weekly upskilling meetings, which all Band 4 and 5 operational managers attend. In this weekly session a quality assurance tool is used for both ACCTs and challenge, support and intervention plans (CSIPs), which provides good practice training.

The IMB attends many of the weekly SIM meetings, and ACCTs are observed and monitored on weekly rota visits, so the vast majority of the month's totals are monitored by Board members. The Board does not consider the increase in the overall number of ACCTs to be a cause for concern, but rather a demonstration of greater willingness by staff to use the ACCT procedure in the interest of prisoners, even though it increases the load on staff.

There were no cases of suicide during the reporting year.

There was one death in custody, in August 2022. However, this was a death in custody in a technical sense, in that the prisoner concerned died in hospital from natural causes, having become ill soon after being admitted to Low Newton. The board was able to comment on the draft report by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman.

### 4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

The breakdown of recorded incidents of violence (see **Table 3** at Annex B) deals with the three main kinds of acts of violence: assaults on staff, prisoner-on-prisoner violence where one prisoner attacks another, and fights, when two or more prisoners are actively involved in an incident.

There was a reduction in the yearly total number of violent incidents: 72 compared to the previous year's 94.

The Board is satisfied as to the way in which prevention of violence is managed to reduce conflict and acts of violence between prisoners. It endorses the post-Covid changes in regime which are designed to reduce the likelihood of violence occurring in areas such as the dining hall, and during association.

From March 2022 to February 2023, there were 41 recorded prisoner assaults on staff in comparison to 53 from March 2021 to February 2022, representing a significant decrease, although in February 2023, 11 assaults on staff were committed - of which 10 were carried out by one recently transferred prisoner, who has subsequently been moved to another prison. The Board was very impressed by the efforts made by staff at all levels to cope with and improve the behaviour of this prisoner, who was held in segregated accommodation throughout her time at Low Newton.

This year's total of recorded prisoner-on-prisoner incidents, at 17, was slightly below the previous year's level of 21. The average number of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults by month over a three-year period is 1.5, and there are no negative trends. The Board is satisfied with the way this is closely monitored and managed.

Over the reporting year there were 14 recorded fights, a decrease from the previous year's level of 21. There were six months with no incidents and three months when only one fight took place that month.

### 4.4 Use of force

The combined total of recorded incidents of use of force (UoF) by staff during this reporting year was 176 - marginally up on the previous year's level of 171. See **Table 4** at Annex B for a breakdown.

Both guided holds and control and restraint incidents increased over the previous year. This was mainly due to the prisoner referred to in the section above, who in February 2023 was involved in 22 of 29 incidents.

Personal protection incidents, at nine, were well below the previous year's corresponding period, when personal protection had to be used 22 times when use of force by staff occurred.

The Board is satisfied that use of force by prison staff is only a last resort and is low overall, at fewer than one incident every two days. However, it hopes during this year to increase its monitoring of this aspect of safety and, as an important step in that process, a Board member now attends the panel which reviews UoF incidents.

The Board was asked by a few prisoners about the use of body-worn cameras to provide evidence in cases where staff used force and was assured by the prison that

body-worn cameras were used in all such cases, for the protection of both staff and prisoners.

#### **4.5 Preventing illicit items**

Illicit items are discovered through targeted and intelligence-led searches, as well as many other methods, including prisoners who find items and hand them in to staff.

During this reporting year, 244 illicit items were found, an increase in comparison to last year's total of 208. There is a wide range of items, but the great majority are drugs in some form.

The safety and support unit (SSU) holds for short periods prisoners who are suspected of involvement and continues to be used in the prevention of illicit items being distributed within the prison. It has a capacity of seven prisoners (14 if cells are in double use) and prisoners held there are seen whenever possible by Board members during rota visits.

## **5. Fair and humane treatment**

### **5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food**

Much of the prison accommodation is cleaned by prisoners, and Board members have always been struck by how clean the prison is kept. Visitors on tours conducted by the Board have also remarked on this.

During the reporting year, the new J wing – with individual modular accommodation for 24 prisoners within a fenced outdoor compound – opened and has been well received by most of the women allocated to it.

Significant recent completions include:

- new IT throughout the establishment
- cell door replacement in C, D wings and E3 due to ligature and fire risk
- roofing in many parts of the establishment, to eliminate leaks
- G wing demolished (and consequent exercise yard surfacing completed soon after end of report year)
- internal roofing fully replaced in education, gym and workshops
- new lighting in corridors
- new toilet suite in the workshops
- new disability suites on E and I wings

The CRED (clean, rehabilitative, enabling, decent) cell refurbishment programme continued during the year at a cost of £61,000:

- A1, A2, A3 – 29 cells
- B1, B2, B3 – 31 cells
- C1, C2, including corridors and showers – 39 cells
- D1, D2, including corridors – 39 cells
- E2, E3, E4, association rooms, offices and corridors – 47 cells
- F1, F2, association rooms, offices and corridors – 40 cells
- I wing – 39 cells

Income within the prison is earned from the shop, café and salon and is used to reinvest into the shop/café to enable decency and toiletry products to be sold at favourable prices. Also, income is earned from the Ocado workshops which is spent on improving the prison. The following are recent examples of its use:

- new cardio equipment for the main gym
- new BMI measuring scales and cholesterol-testing kits for the gym
- windproof and waterproof coats for waste management prisoner workers and those working in the gardens
- new shed for the gardens
- memorial garden for staff
- reflection garden for prisoners
- hard landscaping materials for the prison borders
- menopause material for staff
- gardening books for use by those working in gardens

- new tools for gardens to enable roll-out of more qualifications
- new balance balls for gym
- new workout CDs for gym
- tabards for work parties
- furniture for refurbished cells

Prisoners can make meal choices from weekly menus that are issued to them. The menu has recently been changed. Although the catering budget remains low, even after an increase in early 2023, prisoners are offered meals that appear to be nutritious, well cooked and of good variety. IMB members are invited to taste the food and it is always found to be good. There is also a comments book available for prisoners to record their thoughts.

Meals are planned and prepared in accordance with food and hygiene regulations, with options available to meet cultural, religious and dietary requirements. The recent Ramadan fast period fell after the reporting year, but in preparation for it the Muslim chaplain spent time creating a suitable menu. Healthy eating options are also available.

Regular theme nights also feature, and these have always proved popular.

R-Café on the main corridor, providing snacks for staff and prisoners, continues to have a high level of business. However, its opening hours are less than ideal due to staffing patterns.

Members have occasionally received applications relating to special dietary provision, but on investigation these have usually been found to be based on unrealistic expectations or miscommunicated information.

## **5.2 Segregation**

There is a small segregation unit called the care and separation unit (CSU) off the prison's main corridor. It has three cells, an adjudication room and an interview room. It is a concern to the IMB that two cells have insufficient heating due to lack of funds and extra bedding had to be issued last winter.

Staff working in the unit work hard at building up a rapport with prisoners and encouraging them to improve and control their behaviour. Comparatively few are placed on extended stays in segregation, rarely for more than 14 days and more often up to seven days.

IMB members are informed of all moves to the CSU and the safety and support unit (SSU) and, if possible, visit that person. Subsequent GOOD review panels are conducted by a governor, attended by appropriate members of staff, with all necessary information available. The prisoner attends if she wishes and is encouraged to make representations. Those reviews which IMB members have been able to observe during the reporting year have been conducted fairly and in detail, with prisoners given ample opportunity to present their views.

However, the Board has been concerned that it has not been able to monitor enough reviews. Although reviews subsequent to the 72-hour review are scheduled to take place on Wednesday afternoons, they have often been held at different times.

Recently changes have been agreed and a trial of these is taking place in the spring of 2023.

Prisoners who are awarded cellular confinement at adjudication but cannot be accommodated in the CSU due to its small size are located on landing cells. They are still managed by the CSU. This is not a regular occurrence and is risk-assessed on a case-by-case basis. Visiting members, if possible, visit anyone awarded on-wing cellular confinement.

Board members make every effort to observe adjudications when making rota visits, although the numbers and incidence are necessarily erratic. The Board has been concerned to note that recently a significant number of adjudications have been adjourned due to difficulties with arranging legal representation. There are also accommodation difficulties if several adjudications are due to take place close together.

### **5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers**

Generally speaking, relationships between staff and prisoners are good and to some extent might even be characterised as relaxed – but not lax. Staff tend to have a good knowledge of prisoners, as Board members find when discussing specific prisoners during rota visits – for example, those on ACCTs. However, this is sometimes jeopardised by staffing changes or shortages. The Board member who attends most monthly safety meetings continues to find that there is in-depth knowledge of the prisoners who are of concern and are discussed in detail at the meetings

The monthly prisoners' consultative committee (PCC) meetings enable wing representatives to bring any concerns that prisoners have. Occasionally these meetings are cancelled at short notice, which is unfortunate and disrupts IMB attendance at them. The Board has also been concerned to note that in the latter months of the reporting period attendance by prison departments at the meetings has declined, which lessens their value; the prison management has acknowledged this and is making efforts to secure improvement. The Board will be checking this through the new reporting year as it believes that such attendance is important to secure prisoner trust in the PCC's usefulness.

During the reporting period, the Board has discussed the key worker scheme several times with the Governor and is aware that achieving increases in coverage is not easy, due to staff shortage and regime changes. However, data at the end of the report year showed that 190 out of 261 prisoners (73%) had key workers and the session per total prisoner rate was 1.42. Only three other women's prisons had rates which were higher, and most were lower – some considerably so. The Board will continue to monitor this during the new reporting period, as it believes that full implementation will have considerable benefits, not only for the prisoners themselves but also for the smooth running of the prison.

## **5.4 Equality and diversity**

The prison has a low number of foreign nationals – only six at the end of the reporting period. The number of recorded Black, Asian and minority ethnic prisoners was 12. No breakdown can be given in this report of nationality or ethnicity due to data privacy rules because the numbers for each category are below 10; however, within these overall numbers there are no preponderant groups. These figures reflect the make-up of the communities from which most prisoners at Low Newton are drawn, in the north-east of England and Cumbria.

The Board is conscious that although most prisoners are aged under 50, there is a not insignificant minority of older prisoners and it hopes, during the new reporting period, to carry out a survey of their needs and perceptions of prison life.

In terms of disability, 101 prisoners out of 258 had at least one declared disability. Again, data protection rules preclude a full breakdown, but the most common declared disability was having a mental health condition, followed by reduced mobility and learning difficulties (eg dyslexia).

Prisoners who believe that they have been subjected to some form of discrimination by staff, other prisoners or visitors can submit a discrimination incident reporting form (DIRF). The incidents are then investigated. The number of DIRFs received in the report period was 57, which represents an increase after several years of downward numbers. No clear reason is known for this, although the opening up of the regime post-Covid, leading to more interaction between staff and prisoners, and between prisoners themselves, may have contributed.

During the reporting period, the administration of the DIRF process was changed with a view to making improvements. An IMB member attended a meeting which reviewed DIRFs received in November 2022; the meeting had one of the chaplains present to give oversight. The Board also carried out an analysis of DIRFs received in May 2022 and January 2023 (a total of 12). The issues raised varied considerably, but in each case an investigation had taken place and action had been taken. One of the improvements the prison is attempting is to ensure that there is a clear outcome and follow-up (for example, if a prisoner is found to have used racial slurs against another prisoner, she must undertake a session which looks at the implications of her behaviour, rather than just receiving a warning).

During the reporting period, the government finalised its new policy on the locating of transgender prisoners, of which Low Newton has a small number. The Board was able to discuss the implications with the Governor, but decisions affecting individuals were taken after the end of the reporting period. The Board was concerned that details of the policy were not made available to IMBs, although the prison was able to indicate the range of potential outcomes for prisoner reviews.

## **5.5 Faith and pastoral support**

The prison has a chapel and a multi-faith team of chaplains led by a managing chaplain. The prison population is predominantly of declared Christian or no faith, but there are also small numbers of other faiths, including Muslims and Pagans. Although no systematic monitoring of faith issues has taken place during the year, Board members regularly meet chaplains going about their tasks on the prison wings



and believe that prisoners have satisfactory access to their services.

## **5.6 Complaints**

Each of the Board's monthly meetings receives a comprehensive set of data on complaints received by the prison during the previous month to show any developing trends. Variations in numbers and subject are often caused by multiple complaints from an individual prisoner, or from one wing in an orchestrated campaign. Notwithstanding these, across the reporting period complaints in total are proportionate in terms of wing location, age and ethnicity. A typical number of complaints received each month is 50-60, and only occasionally is there a late response from the prison.

The most common subjects for complaints across the year included residential (i.e. issues with cells, the daily regime and so on), property, food, staff and work.

Some prisoners show reluctance to use the prison complaints system before making applications to the Board, and it has been necessary to remind them that this should normally be done so that if an application is eventually made, the Board member can take proper account of information derived from the complaints process.

## **5.8 Property**

During the reporting period, the Board tried to disengage from property issues raised by prisoners. There are undoubtedly problems in tracking property when prisoners are transferred from other prisons, and sometimes the national rules on receipt of parcels are misunderstood by prisoners, resulting – from their perspective – in delays and frustration. However, there is normally no useful action which can be taken by Board members to remedy the situation, although in serious cases the Board will check that prison staff are taking action so far as it is possible at the Low Newton end.

## **6. Health and wellbeing**

### **6.1 Healthcare general**

The healthcare unit is cleaned by prisoners who are proud of the work that they do. There are shortages of healthcare staff at times with the team relying on agency and other workers. A new pharmacist and an advanced nurse practitioner have been appointed. Prison training lockdown days have proved beneficial to healthcare staff for in-house and mandatory training. Getting some prisoners to appointments for healthcare can be a little problematic because of staffing difficulties, but work is being done to resolve this.

Low Newton healthcare staff revised the reception template for healthcare screening, and the prison is the pilot site. This change formed part of the review of women's health and social care, which was a collaboration between healthcare commissioners, providers and HMPPS. The original template was lengthy and sometimes asked irrelevant questions. Regular meetings are held to monitor how it is now working.

Board members visit the healthcare unit on nearly every rota visit; there are usually two or three prisoners receiving inpatient care at any one time. During the year, Board members have been able to sit in on team meetings and discuss provision with the newly appointed head of the unit.

Plans for a new wellbeing unit are on hold. It is understood that the capital funding was allocated to other prisons. Creating new healthcare facilities would enable improvements to be made at Low Newton, particularly provision for mental health services. It would also help reduce noise levels for inpatient prisoners from those attending day appointments.

### **6.2 Physical healthcare**

In-house screening in radiography and ultrasound is provided and the take-up is good. Waiting times for the dentist had been falling and were down to two weeks but are now about six weeks. Sometimes prisoners attending dental treatment are not being brought down until later in the afternoon and there then is no time to see them. Podiatry wait times are about three weeks. Physiotherapy appointments were taking place in less than a week. The longest GP wait is about two weeks, although urgent appointments can usually be seen on the same day if the GP is on site. This is not satisfactory but is not out of line with the general situation in the community. However, optician appointment wait times are lengthy.

Specialist midwives from the north of England are involved in a workstream, identifying how antenatal sessions are delivered in the prison service and evidencing best practice. A questionnaire was initially distributed to all prisons and feedback received identified that antenatal classes vary across the establishments. The aim of the workstream is to restructure the classes, so all women receive the same level of care. Within Low Newton a PRAMS (pregnancy recovery and midwife support) group has been set up. As part of one of the PRAMS meetings, the group invited health visitors from the local area to attend Low Newton to discuss their role in caring for mothers and babies whilst in the community, and prison mother and baby units. All

pregnant women have now been allocated pregnancy mattresses, and feedback to date is very positive. An emergency hospital bag is to be set up for pregnant women leaving the establishment.

The perinatal pathway is in place to give extra support to prisoners who are currently pregnant, have a child aged under two years or have had any other pregnancy outcome in the previous 12 months. The Board was pleased to note the recent introduction of pregnancy, mother and baby liaison officers (PMBLOs).

### **6.3 Mental health**

The mental health team has been working well, although there have been some staffing issues. The team is in a small room which – if the team was fully staffed – could cause problems. A recent meeting with wing representatives discussed the mental health team, its role and how to expand knowledge, particularly to new reception prisoners. The PIPE unit is receiving referrals from other establishments, which is seen as positive.

ABL Health are commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement to deliver independent patient engagement within the north of England prisons, involving prisoners in the design, delivery and procurement of prison healthcare services.

Twenty-six prisoners at Low Newton were involved in a study about self-harm and violence. The prisoners made the following service suggestions, some of which have been implemented and the mental health team is exploring others:

- Posters and notices signposting and identifying the mental health team on every wing.
- Mental health and empathy awareness training made available to staff.
- Maintain confidentiality of ACCT documents in transit.
- Wider variety of content in distraction packs, to include arts and crafts.
- Possibility of mental health champions on each wing.
- More Listeners available on each wing (the prison has maintained and increased the provision of Listeners over a reporting period and holds a fortnightly support meeting with the local branch of Samaritans. Listeners and Samaritans attend the monthly safer prisons meeting).
- Posters identifying Listeners and other wing reps on each wing.
- Listeners and safer custody reps to wear distinctive T-shirt or armband.
- Increase volume of vape oil allowed to be ordered on canteen.
- Mental health team to make regular contact with prisoners on its waiting list either face-to-face or via in-cell telephone.
- Arrangement of mental health support services in the community on release.
- Peer-led mental health groups, coping strategy and meditation classes.
- Prisoners to be included more in reviews of their ACCTs.

#### **6.4 Social care**

The prison has two dedicated social care cells, one on E wing and the other on I wing.

Social care assessments are completed on receipt of a referral. Where a social care need is identified, Durham County Council is contacted, and a social worker visits the patient to complete a further assessment and fulfil any social care requirements on an individual basis.

#### **6.5 Time out of cell, regime**

The Board has not been able to monitor this systematically during the year but, based on its rota visits each week, believes that the prison's policy of moving out of the Covid regimes to one in which time out of cell is more limited than previously is sensible. However, during the year the biggest negative factor for time out of cell was the continuing staff shortage, which meant that often wings had to be locked down for a morning or afternoon, with only prisoners in education or work able to leave their cells.

#### **6.6 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation**

Low Newton has been selected for a six-month trial for dual diagnosis in collaboration with the clinical and non-clinical drug and alcohol recovery team (DART), mental health team, and healthcare. Dual diagnosis usually refers to the occurrence of a mental illness alongside substance misuse. Workers from two charities (Free! and Kickback Recovery) attended a recent DART meeting. The prisoners requested more such meetings as the lived experience shared by the workers resonated with the prisoners' own experiences.

The prison is carrying out a phased introduction of Buvidal, which is a monthly depot-type injection to replace daily methadone doses, in line with community roll-out.

## 7. Progression and resettlement

### 7.1 Education, library, vocational training, work

The education department, via the Novus advice team, continues to provide induction, assessment and allocation activity, with learners being able to access the virtual campus on the internet during induction and throughout their sentence to aid resettlement.

Covid restrictions continued until April 2022, which affected opportunities to conduct assessments and meant that learners took longer to complete qualifications. Classroom learning recommenced, and attendance gradually increased from 52% in April 2022 to 94% in November 2022 and 81% in January 2023.

Repairs to the roof of the department resulted in temporary closure during December 2022, but learners have still completed qualifications, as listed in **Table 5** at Annex B.

When learners have completed courses, there is 100% success in gaining qualification or accreditation: 264 achievements have been recorded in this reporting period.

Novus contracts for the provision of education were renewed in April 2023 with some variations. The prison has made regime arrangements for attendance at education sessions to be prioritised, and this will need to be monitored by the Board.

There are four Open University (OU) learners who are soon to complete their degrees; subjects range from the Roman Empire to reading and studying literature. Each learner is provided with a laptop and library time, with a Novus member of staff being the point of contact for handing in assessments and distributing information and work from the OU.

The recently appointed learning and skills manager oversees prisoners working towards Chartered Institute of Waste Management (CIWM) level 1 qualification, and if they may not be able to complete the full 12-week course, small units are available to accredit learning to date. It is hoped that achieving a cleaning qualification may lead to some employment opportunities on release.

Similarly, it is hoped that qualifications in textiles, manufacturing operations, painting and decorating, and horticulture will soon be available, with staff currently undertaking qualifications to facilitate delivery. This is part of the prison's wish to widen the education and training provision from being mainly subjects traditionally associated with women. However, for some subjects, implementation will depend on the availability of capital funding for facilities which are limited at present. The Board will be monitoring progress as funding has not yet been confirmed.

The gym is offering a full-time physical education course which includes Active IQ in physical education, level 1 football coaching (a twinning project with AFC Sunderland), emergency first aid, manual handling and lifting awareness, and British weightlifting. It is hoped to run three courses a year. It is encouraging to note that one previous learner is now employed by AFC Sunderland working with youngsters at risk of offending.

Further unaccredited courses take place in the PIPE and Primrose units, acupuncture and yoga with DART, remedial gym for prisoners referred by healthcare, wellness sessions and over-45s sessions in conjunction with Age UK. Given the high levels of stress and poor mental health amongst prisoners, it is hoped that improvements may be achieved for some prisoners.

During the reporting year, the Board has been concerned that the well-stocked library provision has not been used as fully as it might be. However, Novus has recently employed a part-time library assistant and it is hoped that this will facilitate reading activities across the prison.

Recent assessment scores show 109 learners at pre-entry, entry 1 and entry 2 literacy, and 108 at those levels in mathematics, out of a total of 255 assessments.

The Shannon Trust currently has two trained mentors working with seven mentees, but again further training is being planned. The learning and skills manager hopes to have a mentor on every wing soon to assist with literacy matters. The prison is trying to identify poor readers from reception so that assistance may be offered promptly.

The charity Junction 42 offers, amongst other activities, art and craft sessions and is encouraging entries in visual art, writing, design or music for this year's Koestler Awards.

## **7.2 Offender management, progression**

The offender management unit (OMU) is consistently helpful to Board members who are following up issues relating to particular prisoners. More generally, as part of its work on progression it offers the following courses:

- Thinking Skills Programme (accredited)
- Freedom – addressing domestic violence
- Working with Anger

A neurodivergence support officer has been appointed from May 2023. It will be interesting to monitor the impact of this initiative.

The OMU manages the programme for prisoners released on temporary licence (ROTL) to undertake jobs during the day and then return to the prison at night. For a prison with around 260 prisoners, the number of ROTLs at any one time, typically around three, is low - although they are normally paid posts, which is good. This number was higher pre-Covid and recovery has been difficult, some previous employers having been lost to the programme. There are also evident bureaucratic obstacles, and of course the prison always needs to ensure the safety of both prisoner and public. The Board will be monitoring ROTL levels in the new reporting year.

## **7.3 Family contact**

This is an important aspect of life for many prisoners and over the reporting year it has been possible to improve post-Covid availability of visits. Video calls continue to be available, as well as phone calls to an approved list of numbers. However, it was

disappointing that a bid for funding of a new video-link suite failed due to its high cost compared with projects elsewhere.

The Board has received a few applications relating to family contact being withheld, but upon investigation there have been security concerns, sometimes for the prisoner's own wellbeing.

#### **7.4 Resettlement planning**

This is a core function of the Prison Service. It is directly related to the Prison Service's objective 'to reduce crime by providing constructive regimes which address offending behaviour, improved educational and work skills and promoting law-abiding behaviour in custody and after release'.

Accommodation workers see every prisoner on admission to identify likely needs. Within 12 weeks of release, they will complete a resettlement plan and make the relevant referrals to the community to try to make sure each prisoner has somewhere safe to live. A wide range of interventions is provided, but areas of concern are finding appropriate accommodation and dealing with mental health issues.

The Board has been unable to conduct the annual resettlement planning survey. It hopes to be able to do so in the next reporting period. However, based on its interaction with prisoners, the Board has been concerned that a small minority are still released with no clear housing availability. This is traumatic for the prisoner and heightens the risk of reoffending. This issue is not solely in the hands of the prison because of the outside contract for provision of suitable accommodation. The north-eastern regional IMB chairs meetings have had presentations about changes being made to arrangements, and the Board hopes that these will achieve a situation where no prisoner is released without housing arrangements being settled beforehand. The Board would also like to see better planning of release times for prisoners who must travel to homes a long way from Durham (eg to Cumbria or in the south of England).

## The work of the IMB

The Board was able to recruit more members during the reporting year. A priority was to achieve a better gender balance and there were three female members at the end of the reporting year. However, two of the Low Newton members are still dual boarding, being also members of IMBs for other prisons in the area. This, together with a recent resignation and impending retirements, means that the Board will be seeking new recruits in the national campaign taking place in spring and summer 2023.

The Board decided during the reporting period to implement rota visit reports based on thematic categories, rather than geographical areas, from April 2023. It also considered moving to a two-person per week rota, but this has been deferred for the time being in favour of informal doubling-up.

### Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	6
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	10
Total number of visits to the establishment in reporting period	208

### Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous year	Current year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	1	0
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	1	4
C	Equality	0	0
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, library, regime, time out of cell	5	8
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	4	2
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	3	2
F	Food and kitchens	0	1
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	10	9
H1	Property within the establishment	5	1
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	3	7
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogue(s)	0	0
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, recategorisation	2	1
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	9	2
K	Transfers	0	6
L	Miscellaneous, including complaints system	2	22
	<b>Total number of applications</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>65</b>



## **Annex A: List of service providers**

Education and library services	Novus; Foundations for Change
Healthcare	Spectrum Community Health

## Annex B: Tables

**Table 1: Age breakdown of prison population at 28 February 2023**

Age range	Number of prisoners
18-21	2
22-29	40
30-39	108
40-49	78
50-59	25
60-69	7
70 and over	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>262</b>

**Table 2: Recorded self-harm Incidents**

Month	Number of recorded incidents
March 2022	16
April	22
May	27
June	30
July	40
August	36
September	39
October	21
November	37
December	43
January 2023	33
February	54
<b>Total</b>	<b>398</b>

**Table 3: Recorded incidents of violence**

Month	Assaults on staff	Prisoner-on-prisoner	Fights
March 2022	3	1	5
April	0	1	0
May	4	1	0
June	3	1	1
July	7	4	3
August	1	2	0
September	1	1	0
October	1	1	0

November	1	1	0
December	3	1	1
January 2023	5	1	3
February	11	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>

**Table 4: Recorded use of force**

<b>Month</b>	<b>Guided holds</b>	<b>Control and restraint</b>	<b>Personal protection</b>
March	8	6	0
April	3	5	1
May	7	7	0
June	14	4	2
July	9	6	0
August	3	6	2
September	4	4	3
October	11	6	0
November	5	5	0
December	4	4	0
January 2023	7	10	1
February	1	28	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>9</b>

**Table 5: Qualifications completed by prisoners**

Barista skills  
 Customer services  
 Employability and professional development  
 Financial awareness  
 Food safety in catering  
 Introduction to culinary skills  
 IT user skills levels 1 and 2  
 Passport to enterprise and employment  
 Physical health and wellbeing  
 Preparing to set up in a new business  
 Diploma in beauty level 3  
 Diploma in hairdressing levels 2 and 3  
 Essential digital skills  
 Functional skills mathematics and English entry levels 2 and 3, levels 1 and 2  
 NVQ in beauty therapy general level 3  
 NVQ diploma in food production and cooking  
 NVQ diploma in hospitality services  
 NVQ diploma in professional cookery level 3



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