

Press release IMB 2023 National Annual Report Embargo 00.01 22 May 2024

Independent Monitoring Board reports significant concerns as population crisis adversely affects all aspects of prison life

In her first year as National Chair of the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB), Elisabeth Davies brings together the findings of IMBs across both the prison and immigration detention estates in the 2023 IMB National Annual Report, published today (22 May 2024).

IMB members are the eyes and ears of the public, appointed by ministers, undertaking a vital role in the scrutiny of places of detention. While the functions of the establishments they monitor are different, cross-cutting issues have been found that impact all those deprived of their liberty. Detailing both new concerns and those repeated from previous years, this release focuses on findings from across the adult prison and youth estates.

Still recovering from the pandemic, the Prison Service faced a new crisis: a rapidly expanding population, with an increase of over 5,200 people during 2023 alone. The consequences of this on the already-diminished provision for effective rehabilitation of those held within these facilities is significant. IMBs reported the following:

High numbers of people at risk of suicide or self-harm in prisons and an increase in disorder and violence in the youth estate.

IMBs had widespread and serious concerns about the safety of those detained, mostly due to prison overcrowding. Improvements were reported as needed to safeguard prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm.

- At Wetherby YOI, girls self-harmed repeatedly, with staff often resorting to using force in an attempt to keep them safe.
- Dartmoor IMB raised concerns about the quality of ACCT reviews (the process which supports prisoners at risk of self-harm), with care plans lacking detail.
- Weapon carrying was a central concern of YOI IMBs, with children reportedly carrying weapons because they felt unsafe.

Prisoners being shifted around the estate wherever there was room, which often resulted in inappropriate placement.

This affected the stability of prisons, prisoners' confidence in the system to progress them, and their chances of successfully resettling back into the community.

- Over-18-year-olds were held in young offender institutions (YOIs) to free up adult prison places, which YOI IMBs believe contributed to a lack of stability and risked the safety of younger boys.
- Due to a lack of alternative provision, prisoners with severe mental health needs were often segregated in care and separation units (CSUs). At HMP Buckley Hall, cellular confinement punishments were sometimes suspended due to a lack of space in the CSU, impacting on the prison's ability to maintain discipline.
- Many Boards highlighted the difficulties prisoners faced accessing progression opportunities, with High Down IMB describing the 'frustration and hopelessness' these prisoners felt.
- Prisoners serving imprisonment for public protection sentences (IPPs) faced particularly significant obstacles to progression, with a large proportion of these individuals held in prisons that did not offer the courses they needed for release.

A continued lack of regime and purposeful activity affected both adults and children alike.

Widespread staff shortages contributed to significantly low time out of cell for many prisoners, leaving them bored and directionless. Spending too long with nothing meaningful to do impacted prisoners' mental health and wellbeing.

- IMBs noted regime cancellations because of staff training, high levels of staff sickness, and officers being redeployed from their core duties.
- Severely restricted regimes were particularly common for vulnerable prisoners and those self-isolating or segregated on wings. Separated boys at Cookham Wood YOI regularly received less than two hours a day out of room.
- The IMB at Doncaster linked the frustration caused by regime cancellations to a heightened risk of self-harm.
- Education provision was insufficient across the YOI estate and children continued to receive fewer hours and less choice than those in the community.

A physical state of disrepair across the prison estate and some YOIs.

Some prisoners were kept in conditions described as inhumane, sometimes without access to basic sanitation.

- While the physical state of Victorian buildings was particularly dire, these issues were also seen in more modern prisons. The IMB at HMP Five Wells, built in 2022, reported significant design faults with the prison leading to poor airflow, uncomfortably hot temperatures and unusable low mobility cells.
- At HMP Winchester, prisoners were able to dig through internal cell walls using plastic cutlery.
- An absence of in-cell sanitation, with serious consequences for hygiene and dignity, was reported by IMBs at HMPs Coldingley, Isle of Wight, Grendon, Long Lartin and Bristol.
- The physical environment was especially unfit for elderly or disabled prisoners. IMBs at HMP Lancaster Farms and HMP Dartmoor reported instances of prisoners who were not physically able to climb onto the top bunk sleeping on the floor.

Elisabeth Davies, IMB National Chair said:

“As the eyes and ears of the public, the value of local IMBs monitoring places of detention is clear. Yet over recent years their concerns have often gone unaddressed, with Boards posing the same questions over and over again to ministers. During 2023, over 37,700 visits were carried out by local IMBs, providing direct evidence to ministers on where change needs to occur for prisons to provide effective rehabilitation and, in turn, protect the public, something they are currently failing to do. Existing capacity and crowding pressures are forecast to increase and will only exacerbate the concerns highlighted in our 2023 National Annual Report. It is time that ministers saw the value of the IMB members they have appointed and start listening to what is being reported to them from prisons across England and Wales.”

Information for Editors:

Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) monitor fairness and respect for people in custody to confirm it is fair, just and humane. IMBs are made up of independent public appointees and operate in every prison and Immigration Removal Centre. For more information about IMBs see www.imb.org.uk.