



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP/YOI Rochester

**For reporting year
1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024**

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Contents

Introductory sections 1 – 3	Page
1. Statutory role of the IMB	3
2. Description of the establishment	4
3. Key points	5
 Evidence sections 4 – 7	
4. Safety	8
5. Fair and humane treatment	12
6. Health and wellbeing	17
7. Progression and resettlement	20
 The work of the IMB	
Board statistics	23
Applications to the IMB	23

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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

Rochester is a category C resettlement prison for both adult and young adult men; it has an operational capacity of 766¹. Prisoners are held in nine residential units: one is a dedicated drug rehabilitation unit, six are general accommodation, one caters for prisoners with enhanced incentive scheme status and includes the incentivised substance-free living unit, and there is a newly opened wing of rapid deployment single cell accommodation for 60 prisoners on a street-based design (known as pods). This has improved facilities for selected incentivised prisoners. There is a separate care and separation unit (CSU). One wing has been allocated for first-night accommodation for all incoming prisoners.

The prison has four Edwardian-built wings, which are challenging to maintain. The four newer wings have continual ventilation and heating problems. Maintenance is provided by Gov Facility Services Limited (GFSL). The majority of cells are double occupancy. The grounds are spacious with each wing being a separate stand-alone location. The open location of the prison gives plenty of opportunity for fresh air and outdoor activity.

As a resettlement prison, the regime is intended to give prisoners training through a structured sentence plan, in order to prepare them for release and ensure resettlement back into the community. Rochester actively engages with prisoners to address their offending behaviour and offers opportunities to engage in behavioural programmes, training, education and work, linked to employment where possible. Increasing the links to real employment vacancies is a continuing aim.

Substance recovery at the prison is operated by Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust through Change, Grow, Live. Healthcare support for prisoners is provided by the Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust healthcare team, with an in-reach service assessment of prisoners thought to be suffering from mental health problems. This service also provides secondary care for those with serious mental illness. Psychological services are also provided under in reach and psychologists do individual assessments, as well as running various groups. Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust are subcontracted and provide a GP service to the prison. The physical wellbeing of prisoners is catered for through well-run gymnasiums, offering competitive and recreational activities. The chaplaincy provides assistance across all faiths. The family services provider, PACT, is involved with visiting arrangements, and more generally there is community support from various external organisations.

The prison was inspected by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) in October 2021, with an HMIP independent review of progress (IRP) in October 2022. An inspection is anticipated during the second half of 2024.

¹ 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

3.1 Main findings

Safety

- Incidents of self-harm have increased, particularly since December 2023, although it is noted that some individuals are prolific self-harmers. There has also been an increase in the number of prisoners arriving at Rochester with a history of self-harming.
- Levels of violence have increased. Analysis shows this increase is related to the transfer of prisoners who, in the past, would not have been considered suitable for a resettlement prison such as Rochester. Levels lessened towards the end of the reporting year. Much of the violence is caused by drug-related debt and intimidation, and, for the first time, gangs.
- In spite of the increases referred to above, the Board's view is that Rochester continues to be a safe environment for prisoners. When monitored, assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) reviews were carried out within required timescales, and provision for safer custody is good.
- The large open footprint of the prison makes it easy for illicit items to be thrown over its fences, and the use of drones delivering such items has been seen for the first time. The Board has noted the efforts the prison's security department has been making to deter this, and the use of search dogs has been particularly successful this year.

Fair and humane treatment

- The Board has noted many positive conversations between prisoners and staff, and believes prisoners are being treated fairly and humanely. While there has been an increase in young prisoners from a minority ethnic background, the Board has not seen any evidence they are being treated unfairly.
- The majority of wings at the prison have a failing infrastructure and are just about meeting an acceptable level of accommodation. There is a continuing issue with vermin. A new wing of rapid deployment cells was completed successfully and is providing a good standard of accommodation.
- The Board's judgement is that adjudications are being conducted correctly, the conclusions reasonable and the outcomes just and fair. Good order or discipline (GOoD) reviews are undertaken within required timescales.
- Arrangements for the handling of prisoners' property has improved, and while the Board continues to receive many property related applications (written representations to the Board), the majority of these relate to property lost on transfer.

Health and wellbeing

- Healthcare arrangements are commensurate with community NHS provision. However, the Board continues to receive many applications from prisoners expressing dissatisfaction with the service provided by primary healthcare. Mental healthcare is satisfactory and drug recovery arrangements are good.

- There is good provision for exercise. The Board is pleased to see The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme has continued at the prison – for both staff and prisoners. Softer skills are also being catered for through singing, art, bee-keeping and gardening.
- The appointment of a Muslim chaplain, after a long period without one, has given support to Muslim faith prisoners. The chaplaincy deals considerably with all prisoners – irrespective of their faith background.
- The introduction of an incentivised substance free living area within H wing has proved most successful, with prisoners buying into this opportunity and good results being achieved.

Progression and resettlement

- The lack of probation officers at the prison has greatly impacted negatively on how prisoners are progressed towards release. In addition, the various early release initiatives have produced considerable additional work for the offender management team, who are dealing with its repercussions, despite the lack of additional resources and the absence of a team of on-site probation officers.
- Education, skills training and behavioural programmes offer prisoners an opportunity to gain more life-skills. However, lack of trainers impacts on delivery of these services and affects a prisoner's ability to follow their sentence plan.
- The Board's view is that more activity for prisoners is required, and it supports the prison in its aim to provide more meaningful occupation.

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- While noting the Minister's comments from last year, the Board is still aware of the limitation of suitable bail accommodation in the South East. The Board retains its view that re-offending rates cannot be reduced unless there is support for all prisoners who have completed their sentence or are being released on home detention curfew (HDC). The Board urges the Minister to look into this further, and to see how more accommodation can be provided.
- The introduction of the early release schemes, while understandable given the pressures on the prison estate, have had repercussions for those staff managing this change. In particular, the lack of probation officers, both in the community and within the prison, is a serious problem. What is being done to address this?

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- The introduction of volumetric control of property does not seem to be working. As a prison from which prisoners are released, Rochester regularly receives property in excess of the volumetric control number. This in turn has to be sorted and stored, and is a time-wasting exercise for all concerned. The Board believes it should be implemented more rigorously.
- Many of the buildings at Rochester continue to deteriorate and, in the Board's view, are barely meeting acceptable standards of accommodation. It would be useful to learn if Rochester is still part of the Long-term Prison Estate Strategy – as the Board's continuing view is that it should be completely redeveloped.

TO THE GOVERNOR

- While there has been some improvement in cell-checks when a prisoner is moved to the CSU, there is still an ongoing problem with loss of the individual's property in these circumstances. The Board understands a new policy for a prisoner's property is now in place, and will be looking closely to see if there is some improvement.
- The provision of escorts for all kinds of prisoner movements has been an ongoing issue for some time – causing delays to activities and missed healthcare and other appointments. The Board is asking for a form of controlled freeflow to be considered.

3.3 Response to the last report

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
To the Minister		
Lack of suitable HDC accommodation	New commissioned rehabilitative services (CRS) accommodation contracts being reviewed	Still insufficient accommodation provided.
Insufficient IMB membership impacting on how Board members can carry out their monitoring role	IMB Secretariat working on way to improve recruitment and the vetting service.	Improvement in recruitment this year through national campaigns. Also, speedier vetting clearances
To the Prison Service		
Standard of prison buildings	Problem acknowledged	60 additional rapid deployment cells completed at Rochester, but accommodation is still deteriorating and only just at an acceptable standard
Property on transfer	Referred to Property Policy Framework	No progress – property exceeding the quoted controls still arriving with prisoners

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

4.1.1 The Board is satisfied that both functions are working well, with appropriate healthcare checks being undertaken. R wing continues to be a dedicated entry wing, providing informative induction briefings and a good first-night process.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

4.2.1 There was, sadly, one death at the prison in the reporting period. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) have investigated and their report is awaited. The prison is currently awaiting the Coroner's Prevention of Future Deaths report and Regulation 28 report, which will identify all the issues the prison needs to address. An inquest into a prisoner's death in 2022 was held in January 2024. Recommendations from the subsequent PPO investigation and the inquest for the 2022 death have been implemented. A further inquest from 2023 is still outstanding.

4.2.2 Self-harm has increased during the reporting period, particularly during the period December to March. In March, the number of incidents was 46, involving 23 individuals, which is the highest reporting figure at Rochester since July 2019. Of the 23 individuals, nine prisoners had self-harmed more than twice. A key trigger for these nine appears to be hopelessness, along with more manipulative motivations such as requesting vapes and wing/cell moves. Interestingly, of the nine, none are on the caseload for their mental health or neurodiversity needs. The Board has also noted that during this reporting period, the number of arrivals at the prison with a history of self-harm has increased by 14%.

4.2.3 Assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) reporting was regularly examined by the Board, and a sample of reviews attended. ACCT numbers remain unchanged, at roughly 20 per month. Ligation incidents continue to rise, but the numbers across the months are uneven, with six recorded in January but 11 recorded for February. While there is no common trend, the Board notes many are related to debt. The Board recognises that commendable swift action by prison officers has on many occasions prevented attempts by prisoners at self-inflicted death.

4.2.4 A new policy of restricting razor blades at the prison was introduced in March 2023, with replacement blades only been given out on an exchange basis. The Board will monitor closely if this change has any impact on self-harm numbers. The integrated approach to safeguarding continues with complex case reviews, but the Board notes that attendance from mental healthcare at these reviews has been erratic.

4.2.5 The team of trained Listeners continue to do good work at the prison.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

4.3.1 The Board's view is that there is more violence at Rochester than in previous years. Much of this is believed to be gang-related, and there is a rise in the number of assaults using weapons. A total of 238 violent incidents were recorded. Analysis of this shows that for the first five months of the reporting period, violence was at

previous levels. However, the opening, in January, of the 60 rapid deployment single cells wing (I wing), filled by trusted Rochester prisoners, enabled other prisons to transfer a range of prisoners who, in the past, may not have been deemed suitable for Rochester. This action was due to pressure on prison estate numbers. 82% of the 238 violent incidents occurred from August onwards. The last two months have seen some slight improvement, but there is no doubt about the impact this influx of prisoners has had across all areas of the prison. It could be argued that Rochester is not resourced adequately for such prisoners. Drug-related debt and the subsequent bullying and intimidation remain significant elements of life at Rochester.

4.3.2 A total of 99 weapons was found during the year, compared with 55 the previous year. Currently, favourite weapons are heavy items inside a sock, sharpened plastic cutlery and metal objects which appear to have been obtained by prisoners damaging the fabric of their cell. There is good analysis of the statistics provided and subsequent action taken forward. Challenge, support and intervention plans are effective, for example, in the identification of ring leaders, who are then transferred out or relocated to another wing; and it is anticipated this action is seeing a fall in violent incidents.

4.3.3 In spite of the statistics given above, the Board retains the view that Rochester continues to be a safe environment for the prisoners living there. When visiting wings, the Board continues to note the atmosphere is unthreatening, with groups of men chatting amiably with each other and with staff.

4.3.4 The Board visits the relatively few prisoners who are self-isolating, and checks that arrangements to support those who are doing so are appropriate. While access to exercise for isolating prisoners is offered, it is not always taken up.

4.4 Use of Force

4.4.1 Use of Force (UoF) data shows an increase from the previous year: 453 spontaneous incidents (342 last year) and 107 planned incidents (67 last year). It should be noted that several of the recorded incidents relate to the same prisoner. For example, in March, 58 incidents are recorded, but it relates to 52 individuals, with one involved in three incidents. Pava (a synthetic pepper spray) has been drawn on three occasions, but used only once. Batons were also drawn on three occasions but were not used. The Board always comes in to attend an incident once it is notified about it, as well as those which happen while members are on rota duty. Its view is that UoF during incidents is commensurate with the incident, and the individual involved is given full warning before it takes place.

4.4.2 UoF monitoring and evaluation happens weekly, and the IMB observed these reviews regularly. During the year, the standards coaching team attended the reviews and provided useful feedback. The use of body-worn video camera coverage is much better, with the introduction of the 30 second pre-record facility being activated nationwide (where, on activating the body camera, the previous 30 seconds is also recorded to better record the build-up). The usefulness of CCTV coverage was shown during a concerted in-discipline event on B wing – when a prisoner at adjudication who was questioning his charge, was clearly shown coverage of how intimidating and aggressive his behaviour had been during the incident. While no UoF was actually used, the warnings being given by the officer displayed good practice and consequently the prisoner changed his plea.

4.4.3 The majority of prisoners involved in UoF are in the 26-34 age group. In general, UoF is commensurate with the ethnic mix at the prison, although the Board notes that in March this was not the case, with a disproportionate number of minority ethnic prisoners involved. This is the first time the Board has noted this, and will monitor the data closely next year.

4.4.4 The National Tactical Response Group (NTRG) were called to the prison four times during the reporting year, compared to five last year. It is worth noting that one was a response to a report of firearms at the prison. Although none were eventually found, it was the appropriate response to the information received by the security team. The Board attended all incidents, and observed that appropriate action was taken by the NTRG.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

4.5.1 The openness of the Rochester site presents the greatest challenge for the security team in its effort to stop illicit substances and mobile phones coming into the prison. This year there was a further increase in throw-overs to 52 (27 last year.) There is no pattern to the timing or location of when these occur. Another change is the number of reports of drone sightings. There have been 15 reports of drone activity in the reporting period, whereas these did not feature in previous years. This suggests drones are becoming a new threat in bringing illicit items into the prison. All incidents of throw-overs and drone activity are referred to the police.

4.5.2 The amount of drug-laced paper appears to have reduced. The use of Rapiscan has successfully identified 30 items, which have tested positive. This includes Rule 39 solicitors' letters as well as those sent in by personal contacts. The Board has monitored this function, and it is working well. The barcode system on Rule 39 letters does appear to have had a positive impact, but there are attempts to circumvent the system by re-using old barcodes which have already been scanned on false Rule 39 letters. Impregnation also occurs on personal clothing items being sent in, such as socks, underwear, etc, so these are also checked.

4.5.3 There is now a zero-tolerance policy toward visitors who are indicated by the search dog. They are denied entry and issued with a warning letter. During the reporting period there were 52 occasions when the search dog made an indication. The Board regularly monitors the searching of visitors, and our view is that is done fairly and considerably.

4.5.4 Intelligence-led searches continued to be a successful way to find contraband, particularly with the use of search dogs. Fermenting liquid (known as 'hooch') remains a concern, with an average of 11 finds per month (the same as last year). Each find can consist of many litres of liquid. The resulting drunkenness accounts for many of the assaults made on staff. Mobile phone finds are also averaging at around 11 per month, but it has been noted there are a higher number of smart phones being found rather than the smaller micro-phones. A new development is the number of WiFi-enabled devices being found on wings, which suggests prisoners are able to use their phones to link up to devices which give access to the internet.

4.5.5 It is generally believed that the increase in illicit substances and mobile phones coming into the prison is directly related to an increase in prisoners associated with serious crime, who would not have been transferred to Rochester in the past (paragraph 4.3.1 also refers).

4.5.6 Mandatory drug testing: random drug testing resumed in April 2023 as the prison opened up after Covid. 428 tests took place during the period. Suspicion testing had continued throughout lockdown, and 48 tests took place in the reporting year. Prisoners found to be diverting their prescribed medication are immediately taken off their medication which is reviewed as soon as possible by the GP. Methadone is prescribed by a separate team now, although still part of the Oxleas healthcare provider. However, the person who does the methadone prescribing comes into Rochester from the Maidstone and East Sutton Park prisons. At the time of writing this report 80 prisoners were on regular methadone.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

5.1.1. All the wings (with the exception of the new I wing) require constant physical maintenance. The Board's view is that all wing buildings have an infrastructure which is failing and are meeting a minimal standard of acceptable accommodation. The A wing mould issue continues to be of concern, although prisoners now address this themselves through painting over it. Additionally, A wing continues to have a problem, with a leaking roof. There are also leaking roofs at the library and education buildings, and despite best endeavours by the Governor, repair work for all roof problems remains outstanding, partly due to contractual issues.

5.1.2 There has been no progress to address the issue identified by the last HMIP inspection about privacy for toilets located in cells, once again despite best efforts by the prison.

5.1.3 Vermin continues to be an ongoing challenge at Rochester, with prisoners making barriers across their cell door thresholds in an effort to keep the mice out. The Board notes that cleanliness is generally good on wings, but some prisoners do leave out food, such as crumbs around toasters, which attracts mice.

5.1.4 The Board was concerned about the conversion of some single occupancy cells on H wing into double cells (for which they had not been designed). In particular, it flagged up issues relating to the size of the additional bunk, which the Board identified as being unsafe. This was successfully addressed.

5.1.5 The accommodation provided in the pod system for I wing is very good, and, in the Board's view, a successfully implemented project.

5.1.6 Catering: the kitchen continues to provide good quality meals, and all dietary requirements are being met. The Board notes that meeting these dietary requirements creates a considerable impact on the allocated food budget, but this is managed well. This is evidenced by the Board receiving just five applications about food during the reporting period.

5.1.7 Canteen: this is working well. Applications to the Board relate to refunds occurring when a prisoner transfers between prisons and items are lost or not delivered. The Board raises again the issue that while prices have increased, the allocated wages for jobs at the prisons has not. Consequently, this is an ongoing issue for those prisoners without private means. There remains an identified link between canteen delivery day and self-harm/violence with debts being settled and pressure to give up items.

5.2 Segregation

5.2.1 The Board notes this has been a challenging year for the care and separation unit (CSU), with prisoners either remaining in CSU for long periods of time (because they are difficult to transfer) and also dealing with an increase in the number of dirty protests. As commented last year, some prisoners are still committing an offence to gain access to the CSU and escape from the drug and debt culture now prevalent at the prison.

5.2.2 The Board attends, with few exceptions, all good order and discipline (GOoD) reviews. In last year's report, the Board noted that attendance by healthcare representatives to the reviews was ad hoc – often providing a written statement rather than attending in person, which is not compliant with the PSI. Fortunately, there has been an improvement in the attendance by healthcare representatives to these reviews during the reporting year; the Board continues, however, to monitor this closely.

5.2.3 The Board is raising again that on several occasions, the 42-day time limit for segregation was exceeded when a prisoner's status was changed to category B. This not the fault of staff at Rochester, but a reluctance to accept these transfers by receiving prisons (in part due to the increase in the prison population). This is unacceptable. It is unfair on a prisoner who remains in segregated conditions, when it has been identified that he should be moved, and who, in turn, often causes difficulties for the CSU staff.

5.2.4 Having an experienced cadre of officers working in the CSU enables a skilled approach when dealing with prisoners who are often difficult to manage. While there have been some changes to staff, the CSU team continue to perform their difficult task well. The Board commends past and present CSU teams for their professionalism and patience.

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

5.3.1 While on paper Rochester has a full establishment of officers, due to temporary promotions, high levels of sickness and other absences there are often shortages of staff. In addition, many are inexperienced, with the overwhelming majority of prison officers having less than five years' experience, and around 100 with less than two years' experience. Ideally, the Board would like to see the allocated number of officers at Rochester increased, so that there is greater flexibility to cover the frequent absences which occur.

5.3.2 There is a continuing difficulty with escorts, and the Board has noted the current system is not working well. Freeflow has not resumed since Covid lockdowns, and escorted moves create delays in movement around the prison, which is frustrating to both prisoners and staff. If possible, the Board would like to see a form of controlled freeflow returned.

5.3.3 Revised key-working arrangements were introduced during the year. While the Board has witnessed some good examples of key-working, it is unclear how successful this is, as when asked many prisoners seemed unfamiliar with the scheme.

5.3.4 While the Board has seen a change at Rochester in relation to the number of violent incidents which are taking place, the general atmosphere is still positive and unthreatening. The Board has observed good interactions between staff and prisoners. This was noted by the standards coaching team, which spent about six weeks working at the prison during the autumn.

5.4 Equality and diversity

5.4.1 The chart below based on March 2024 figures, outlines the current ethnicity and mix of adults and young adults at the prison.

	No. of residents	% of residents	White British	All other ethnic groups combined	% White British	% All other ethnic groups combined
Total population	758	100.00%	498	260	65.70%	34.30%
Adults	633	83.51%	430	203	67.93%	32.07%
YOs	125	16.49%	68	57	54.40%	45.60%

There has been a significant increase in the number of YOIs at the prison (compared with 59 for the same period last year), with a small increase in the ethnic mix. The Board received 10 applications relating to diversity issues, which interestingly is one less than last year, when there were fewer minority ethnic prisoners. The Board has been monitoring the discrimination reporting system; the number of reports being received is still low, for example: three in December 2023, and 13 in March 2024. All of these are from prisoners complaining about racism by staff. The Board has encouraged prisoners who have raised issues around race and religion to take these forward with the diversity team, but a general reluctance to do so remains. The perception amongst prisoners remains that it is not worth submitting a discrimination report.

5.4.2 Adjudications are monitored to support the equality strategy and Lammy recommendations. Proven outcomes are in line with the ethnic mix at the prison.

5.4.3 There are very few prisoners over the age of 65 at Rochester, and the Board has noted that issues affecting elderly prisoners or those with impaired mobility are considered appropriately. The number of prisoners who are self-declaring a disability remains steady at around 35%. (NB: Many prisoners declare more than one disability.) Using indicative figures from March 2024, 134 prisoners self-declared a mental illness (compared with 139 in 2023, and 150 in 2022). 82 declared a learning difficulty such as dyslexia and 20 a learning difficulty including autism. This is an increase from last year, but it should be noted that the figures fluctuate across the reporting year. The Board has monitored those prisoners who need special accommodation due to a disability and are satisfied that needs are being properly addressed. During the reporting year, the Board became concerned about a prisoner with a hearing difficulty whose needs did not seem to be catered for and we raised this with the Governor.

5.4.4 Care-experienced prisoners: as with last year, around 10% of prisoners have declared they are care experienced. Care-experienced prisoners continue to feature more prominently in incidents of self-harm and violence. The Board has not seen any progress on initiatives to work specifically with care-experienced prisoners, although it is aware the newly appointed neurodiversity support manager has plans to take this forward.

5.4.5 *Foreign national prisoners*: as of March 2024, there were 40 foreign national prisoners – a small increase from last year. They are from 24 different countries. The Board retains the view that foreign national prisoners are treated fairly and given appropriate assistance where necessary.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

5.5.1 The Board notes the one-to-one care provided by the chaplaincy team is of a high standard and commends their work and the care they show in dealing with some troublesome and troubled individuals. After a protracted period without a permanent Muslim chaplain, one has been appointed. Sycamore Restorative Justice courses have run throughout the year, and are rewarding and beneficial to those who complete the course.

5.6 Incentives schemes

The current system continues to work well, and it is understood by prisoners and staff. The Board has sample checked some of the incentives scheme warnings and negative entries, and these were managed correctly.

5.7 Complaints

5.7.1 The complaints team have logged 1659 complaints during 2023, which also covers complaints to DHL (the provider of purchased items to prisoners) and to other prisons. In addition, a further 808 were returned to prisoners for a range of reasons, such as being unsigned, abusive, etc. Of the 1171 complaints directly for Rochester, 293 were upheld, 688 rejected and 190 partially upheld. Comparative data is showing that complaints are in line with the ethnic population mix at the prison. The numbers do not include DIRFs (complaints related to diversity or equality issues) or healthcare complaints, which are handled separately. The number of complaints is down on the 3177 received last year. The number of applications received by the Board is 660, the same as last year, although there was a decrease towards the end of the reporting period.

5.7.2 While property and issues related to DHL continue to be high, the Board notes that for the first time, complaints relating to offender management have increased, and this most likely relates to the difficulties in contacting probation officers and completing sentence plans.

5.7.3 Taking into account the complaints which are rejected, the small complaints team will have handled 2467 complaints from prisoners in 2023. Of the complaints relating to Rochester, 92% are replied to on time. This decreases to 72% for replies from other prisons and DHL. The Board's view is that the complaints team works effectively and efficiently. The Board has regular dealings with the team and they are always helpful.

5.8 Property

5.8.1 While property continues to be a major issue for the Board to deal with, the process is now being managed more effectively. The Board received 162 property related applications this year, compared with 215 last year. As in previous years, many applications relate to property which has gone missing during transfer. The Board always encourages prisoners to initially follow the complaints process rather than take it forward in the first instance. The property office team are always helpful

to the Board. The Board also notes that prisoners have been observed to be treated with consideration and understanding by the property office staff when asking about missing items.

5.8.2 The amount of property prisoners are still able to have, despite the storage allowance of three bags, continues to cause problems. Rochester, being a prison where the majority of incoming prisoner have already acquired many items, has to manage these excessive amounts. The shelves in the property office are often full. Items not taken home by prisoners on release are donated to charity.

5.8.3 The Board is again flagging up the following:

- Too many transferring prisoners arrive without their possessions, including family photographs (the loss of which is detrimental to their wellbeing). It is a needless source of frustration for both prisoners and hard-pressed wing staff who are left to deal with the consequences.
- Property loss in the prison usually arises from lack of a cell-check following a disciplinary incident. A prisoner's possessions unfortunately become available to others unless the cell is locked down. The Board has not seen any improvement in this area, and there continues to be a lack of care around securing personal items in these circumstances. It is pleased to learn a new system for transferring property immediately to the CSU will be in place from May 2024, and will monitor this change with interest.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

6.1.1 Healthcare services are provided by Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust. There is nearly always a staffing shortage in both physical and mental healthcare. The Board endeavours to attend all healthcare Board meetings as an observer. Healthcare forum meetings (which include prisoner representatives) resumed this year, but seem to have stopped since January. A key issue remains “escorting”: a) to enable prisoners to attend in-prison medical appointments and b) to attend appointments at hospital or being transferred for treatment to hospital. The Board notes that while best efforts are being made by both the prison and healthcare, this issue is not being resolved. This results in prisoners missing appointments.

6.1.2 The Board has received 103 applications about healthcare issues this year, which is exactly the same as last year. However, it should be noted that applications have generally lessened as the year progressed – i.e. 28 in April 2023, down to eight for March 2024. Applications usually relate to the wait to see the GP, the medication being prescribed and general lack of care. The Board always follows up on healthcare applications and the healthcare staff in both primary and mental health are helpful. The Board has witnessed healthcare staff deal with some anxious and at times very rude and abusive prisoners, with patience and politeness. However, it has been raised by prisoners (and witnessed occasionally by the Board) that some healthcare staff can at times be offhand and abrupt in dealing with prisoners.

6.2 Physical healthcare

6.2.1 The wait to see the GP is about two weeks at present but can be longer. GP visits to the CSU are now working as required. Frustratingly, the GP can also arrive late, which in turn means appointments are missed and a very grumpy and frustrated prisoner is returned to his wing. Anxiety about the waiting times is a common complaint. The position is exacerbated by the current escort system, which can be impacted by lack of available staff, so that a prisoner misses the appointment. Equally, the number of “no shows” for an appointment (i.e. when a prisoner decides not to attend) is still frustratingly common. The Board regularly raises these points with healthcare managers and relevant governors.

6.2.2 Waiting times for the dentist vary between three weeks and six weeks, but they can accommodate urgent appointments more speedily; and for the optician it can be 24 weeks (according to latest Healthcare management figures.) Although there is a long wait for the optician, this does not appear to feature on any applications received by the IMB. The Board has frequently heard prisoners praise both the optician and the dentist, in spite of the waiting times. There are clinics for podiatry, sexual health, physiotherapy, smoking cessation and other various long-term conditions. While there can be long waits for these, the system does seem to be working appropriately.

6.2.3 Urgent care: the on-call system for medical emergencies works well, although attendance by healthcare at some incidents can be delayed at times. The Board notes that, as in previous years, about half the ambulances which are called to the prison are stood down.

6.3 Mental health

6.3.1 The mental health service is provided by Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust in-reach team. They are currently one staff member down. At time of writing, there are 67 prisoners on their books, either receiving treatment or waiting for review. If necessary, prisoners are referred to the inpatient service at HMP Elmley.

6.3.2 In the last report, the Board noted there were 19 prisoners diagnosed with ADHD. This number has increased during the year, in part due to the number of prisoners transferring into Rochester with an ADHD diagnosis in place. A referral system to have a diagnostic interview relating to ADHD with the psychiatrist is in place.

6.3.3 The March 2024 Diversity and Inclusion report noted that 134 prisoners have self-identified as having a mental illness. The senior in-reach nurse has commented that, with over 300 prisoners diagnosed with depression and taking anti-depressants, it would be good to have a primary/mental health team dealing solely with this issue. The Board would endorse this view.

6.3.4 Working alongside in reach are the psychological therapy team, which provide a range of interventions and counselling services. Group workshops have restarted, along with one-to-one sessions. There is a team of three, plus one counsellor. A psychologist is due to join the team, filling a long-standing vacancy.

6.4 Time out of cell, regime

6.4.1 The regime was reviewed at the beginning of the reporting period, and after some initial problems, has settled down. It has enabled prisoners on standard and enhanced incentives scheme status extra time out of cells in the evening.

6.4.2 There are regular gym sessions, and outdoor gym equipment on each wing yard. Rochester's extensive grounds enabled the innovation of introducing a Park Run activity, which is proving popular. Football is back, and popular with the prisoners, and walking football is another well-received activity for older prisoners. The gymnasiums are fully equipped and there is the facility for indoor sports such as badminton and indoor tennis. There have been some changes to the team of prison officers dealing with the gym, with some experienced staff leaving for Border Force. However, those who remain, and their replacements, are enthusiastic, and continue to ensure there is plenty of opportunity for those prisoners who wish to participate.

6.5 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

6.5.1 This has been the second year for the service provider Change, Grow, Live (CGL), The Board is pleased to note that CGL are now providing effective drug rehabilitation services. Rochester has a dedicated drug/alcohol recovery wing (A wing) and it works closely with CGL staff.

6.5.2 As of March 2024, CGL had 273 prisoners on structured treatment (with care plan objectives, one-to-one and group sessions, and clinical treatment); of these, 78 were on clinical treatment. The initiative for working with the Connecting Communities team, referred to in last year's report, has continued. This helps those on CGL's books who are leaving the prison within three months, preparing them for life outside prison given their addiction. Out of 273 prisoners on structured treatment, 67 of them are currently working with the Connecting Communities.

6.5.3 Most prisoners are referred to CGL during induction, or through self-referral via their wing. In addition, the team chase up prisoners who were found to be 'under the influence'.

6.5.4 To assist with drug rehabilitation, A wing prisoners are kept apart from other prisoners, for example through working at the Ministry of Defence (MoD) workshop, and having separate gym activities etc. They do, however, mix at chapel services and Friday prayers.

6.5.5 Incentivised Substance Free Living (ISFL): this has been a successful innovation, whereby part of H wing was designated for those prisoners agreeing to be substance-free, and incentivised with special activities, such as the opportunities to cook their own food, wider TV choices, and longer time out of cell. This venture has worked well, and has CGL input. It has included individuals who are maintaining and working with CGL about their addictions, but are not engaging in illicit drug use. The Board immediately noted the more relaxed atmosphere on the ISFL area, with good engagement from prisoners who have bought into the concept. The Board considers this to be a successful innovation – although there are plans to widen it to include all of H wing. The Board will be monitoring closely to see if the level of success is maintained in the larger group.

6.6 Soft skills

6.6.1 Choir-singing on Fridays continues with the involvement of outside agencies. Art classes have resumed, and some paintings from a Rochester prisoner were recently exhibited at the gallery in Bluewater Shopping Centre. The Shannon Trust has continued with its reading work.

6.6.2 Bee-keeping is a summer hobby activity for the over-50s prisoners. The aim is still to produce some honey from the Rochester Prison bees, hopefully this year.

6.6.3 The Duke of Edinburgh's Awards scheme, introduced for both young officers and young prisoners (aged under 25), has been very successful. Several have again achieved the Bronze Award. The prisoners' "outside activity" includes camping out on the AstroTurf. The Board is full of praise for the introduction of this scheme. It is such a positive activity, especially as many of the younger prisoners taking part would not have experienced the opportunity to do so given their lives outside prison.

6.7 Neurodiversity

6.7.1 New to the prison this year is the appointment of a neurodiversity support manager, who has made a significant impact on awareness of neurodiversity across all areas of the prison. In particular, she has held briefings with staff to give them better understanding about dealing with the challenging behaviours from prisoners with a neurodiverse condition. There was a prisoner release support event attended by 34 prisoners, which signposted neurodiverse prisoners towards the help they can receive on release. There was also a very successful neurodiverse family visit, which enabled neurodiverse prisoners who had family members with neurodiversity and did not visit because of noise and crowds, to come into the prison in a neurodiversity aware environment. Plans are in place for half of H wing to become a dedicated neurodiversity wing. The Board believes this to be a worthwhile initiative and commends the work being achieved by the neurodiversity support manager during the reporting year.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

7.1.1 Milton Keynes College became the provider from April 2023. It follows a scheme of Education and Skills Pathways, which has worked well. However, the lack of tutors and the turnover of staff working in education has impacted on what can be delivered. The Board has witnessed some very good sessions from the current cadre of tutors working at the prison. Some new learning activities are taking place, such as Velcro darts to improve maths skills and quizzes to engage with prisoners in learning.

7.1.2 Attendance for education works out at about 78% of those who are scheduled to attend. Non-attendance is monitored, and incentive warnings given to those who do not attend.

7.1.3 Library: A good range of books continues to be offered, and a selection of books is available for those in the CSU.

7.1.4 As reported last year, the rainwater leak in the library roof impacted on the service that could be delivered and affects the quality of the books. This was constantly raised by the Board throughout the year with the Governor. A range of various contracting issues has delayed the start of any work, and the Board is pleased to report the roof was finally repaired in spring 2024. It was not fair on the library staff (who have worked there for many years and understand the prisoners well) to be working in such conditions.

7.2 Vocational training, work

7.2.1 As the prison opened up after Covid, more opportunities for work became available. This now includes waste management, industrial cleaning (on wings, etc) gym/segregation orderlies and in food preparation. A wing prisoners work on Ministry of Defence camouflage netting. The new laundry has proved successful, producing more work opportunities.

7.2.2 Vocational training is subject to the availability of trainers. At present, there are courses in welding, windows workshop, brickwork and painting and decorating. There have been courses in Railtrack, which offers employment after release. Campervan conversion was very successful, but a further course has not taken place. For 2024, the employment adviser is actively looking to engage with education to enable more training provision which leads to work opportunities for ex-prisoners.

7.2.3 The excellent stonemason workshop (which is unique to Rochester) continues to provide prisoners, who attend the six-week course, an opportunity to learn a very specific skill from a master stonemason. They are completing a range of memorial plaques, etc, associated with the 150-year anniversary of Rochester Prison.

7.3 Offender management, progression

7.3.1 The Board's view is that the offender management unit continues to provide a good level of performance, as achieved in previous years. Release on temporary licence (ROTL) and home detention curfew (HDC) arrangements work well. The Board would like to acknowledge with thanks the patient help it receives from members of OMU team on the many issues it brings to them through applications.

7.3.2 Too many prisoners still arrive at Rochester without an OASys assessment. The tracker system identifies those prisoners at a ten week point from their sentencing, by which time OASys and other information should be in place. The Rochester OMU team do their best to reach this target and keep the OASys backlog to a minimum.

7.3.3 The Board has received an increase in the number of applications from prisoners wanting to progress to open conditions, and other issues relating to their sentence plan. A shortage of category D places in the Kent, Surrey and Sussex area means that for some, while they are ready for open conditions, there can be a frustrating wait for some time until there is a vacancy.

7.3.4 However, the impact of the various early release schemes (introduced because of the number pressure across the prison estate) has led to additional work for the OMU team in order to meet the deadlines required. It has been made more difficult because since January there was only a senior probation officer working at the prison, and from March, the prison was without any probation officers (see 7.3.5 below). Eligible prisoners, irrespective of whether they are classified as high, medium or low risk, are being released without some of the pre-release preparation that would normally apply. The Board has concerns that while this does free up prison places, the individuals may not be able to meet the conditions associated with their release.

7.3.5 Probation: unfortunately, there has been a shortage of probation officers working at the prison. At one time, there was just the senior probation officer working at the prison without any supporting team. The Board's view is that this was too much to expect anyone to deal with and raised it with the Governor. The Board has seen evidence that the work delivered by probation officers who were working at the prison was of a good standard. The lack of probation officers has had a negative impact on what can be delivered by OMU in relation to parole board preparation, and other pre-release arrangements.

7.3.6 Offender behaviour programmes: it is good to report that behaviour programmes have resumed and are back on track. The Board's view is that for Rochester, as a resettlement prison, the delivery of these programmes is an important function. Thinking Skills programmes are run regularly, which include group sessions in addition to one-to-one work. The Board has noted the "thank-you" letters received by the team from prisoners, and the positive impact a programme can have on the conduct of individuals back on the wings.

7.4 Family contact

7.4.1 Visits to the prison are run efficiently by PACT. The Board has monitored the searching of visitors, which is done considerately and correctly. Unfortunately, there are occasions when contraband is passed to a prisoner by his visitor, so visits are closely observed by staff. During the year, there is a welcome arrangement whereby fathers are able to meet their children in a less formal setting in one of the gyms. This is always well received by families and an opportunity for fathers to play games etc with their children.

7.4.2 The Board regularly checks with visitors about the booking process and how they are finding arrangements. General feedback is that it is good – although standing outside waiting to be searched on a cold wet and windy day with children

(as there is no cover at the entrance) is always criticised. The Board has raised this with the Governor, but structurally there is little that can be done to avoid this.

7.5 Resettlement planning

7.5.1 All prisoners are seen at 12 weeks prior to release with the offer of assistance with employment, bank accounts, driving licences and identification documents. The Board has monitored this during the year and concludes that the system is working well. However, since January, changes introduced by various early release schemes impacted on these arrangements. It means that some prisoners are leaving without the full supportive arrangements they would have received previously.

7.5.2 Opportunities for employment are being actively sought, and assistance is given with CVs, banking arrangements and other identification requirements. The Board was pleased to see that an employment “fair” was once again being held. Plans are in place to hold similar employed focussed arrangements next year. CXK, the employment advisors, run courses as part of the induction process to identify skill needs and progression plans. PACT CF03 courses cover life-skills, aspects of which are connected with a prisoner’s sentence plan, through group-work and one-to-one sessions. Once again, the Board has received good feedback on the assistance being provided.

7.5.3 While every effort is made to find suitable accommodation for all those leaving, there are still a number of prisoners, who having completed their full sentence, are released without accommodation, to become homeless and vulnerable. The Board retains the view that too many prisoners are released to be homeless.

8. The work of the IMB

For the majority of the working year there were seven members on the Board. Given the Board was working with half its establishment number, it worked on a reduced rota system, as introduced during the pandemic. This enabled the Board to discharge its full statutory duties as effectively as it could, given the circumstances. An experienced Board member sadly stood down this year, due to health reasons and is much missed. This reduced the Board to six from November onwards. There were three newly appointed members, but one left within a month or so. The Board had three applicants from the last recruitment campaign who are awaiting appointment.

The number of applications has remained exactly the same, although it is pleasing to note the drop in those about property. The increase in sentence-related applications reflects prisoners concerns about category D status, lack of opportunity to progress their sentence plan and contact with probation. In addition, there were several serial applicants during the reporting year.

The Board continues to enjoy a constructive working relationship with the management team at Rochester Prison, and the staff in general. The Board once again expresses its gratitude to the senior management team for their openness and willing support to Board during the year.

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	14
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	7
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	8
Total number of visits to the establishment	360

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	14	22
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	12	24
C	Equality	11	10
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	27	33
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	59	52
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	Included above	Included above
F	Food and kitchens	5	5

G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	103	103
H1	Property within the establishment	215	162
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	Included in H1 above	Included in H1 above
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	Included in H1 above	Included in H1 above
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	84	103
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	26	37
K	Transfers	25	17
L	Miscellaneous	70	92
	Total number of applications	660	660



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