



# **Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Huntercombe**

**For reporting year  
1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024**

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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**

2.1 HMP Huntercombe is a category C prison for adult male foreign national prisoners. It stands in a rural location, with limited access to public transport, outside the village of Nuffield, between Henley and Wallingford.

2.2 Its operational capacity (the maximum number of prisoners that can be held without serious risk to safety, security, good order and the proper running of the planned regime) is 520<sup>1</sup>, split between seven residential units, with a mixture of single and double cells, and a segregation unit, comprising five cells and one special accommodation cell (where furniture, bedding and sanitation have been removed in the interests of safety). A total of 40 of those spaces are in rapid deployment cells, which are not built to category C security specifications and are, therefore, only available to specially risk-assessed prisoners. HMP Huntercombe was originally established as a World War II detention facility; since then, the buildings have been added to and extended in order to provide a secure and improved environment for its present use.

2.3 The prison complex includes educational facilities, an indoor gym, outpatient healthcare facility, workshops, gardens, sports pitch, exercise yards, a visits hall, a cafeteria run by Clink Charity with prisoners, and a multi-faith sanctuary.

2.4 Education is provided by Milton Keynes College (MKC) and healthcare by Practice Plus Group (PPG), which subcontracts other healthcare services, such as dentistry, physiotherapy and podiatry. General maintenance is provided by Gov Facility Services Ltd (GFSL), which has an office and works hub on site.

2.5 The implementation of the extended early removal scheme (ERS) programme and consequent rapid churn of men transferred to Huntercombe have had a significant impact on every aspect of the prison during 2024.

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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**

#### **3.1 Main findings**

##### **Safety**

- From its observations, the Board considers the prison to be a generally safe environment for prisoners.
- The Board remains concerned about the level of illicit items and drugs that are entering the prison and the number of prisoners who appear to be under the influence of known and unknown substances.
- In August 2024, the prison experienced a significant increase in drug taking and resources had to be reallocated at short notice to cope with this (paragraph 6.1.10).
- The Board has been concerned about the increase in assaults during the reporting year. Incidents of violence occurring by prisoners on staff increased from nine (2023) to 40 (2024) and of these, three serious assaults were recorded (paragraph 4.3.2).
- Board members have observed and monitored force used on prisoners and have been assured in all but one case that it has had been carried out appropriately (paragraph 4.4.4, 4.4.5).
- It is of concern to the Board that one cell in the segregation unit has been out of action for most of the reporting year, due to delays in getting replacement parts for the door (paragraph 5.2.3).

##### **Fair and humane treatment**

- The Board believes that, in general, prisoners are treated fairly and humanely.
- The Board is pleased to note that the prison has started a window replacement programme (paragraph 5.1.1).
- The issue of a failing central heating and hot water system across the estate continues to be unacceptable. This issue has been reported in the last five Board annual reports. The hot water system is not fit for purpose (paragraphs 5.1.2, 5.1.3).
- The new kitchen opened during 2023. However, the kitchen is not functioning as intended, which means the prison is not benefiting in full from the money that was spent. The contractors who put the kitchen in are no longer in business and any warranties that existed expired in July 2024 (paragraph 5.1.5).
- The Board is disappointed that the fortnightly key working is only achieved approximately 50% of the time (paragraph 5.3.2).
- As reported each year and again in 2024, there continue to be problems associated with property coming into Huntercombe. In reference to complaints that involve lost property in transit or during transfer, the Board once again points to the lack of volumetric control that exists when prisoners are transferred between prisons, meaning that the system is simply overloaded. This was referenced in the annex, in the Minister's response to the Board annual report in 2022. Two years later, the Board sees little evidence that this has made any difference at all. The current unreliable handwritten property cards are an example of part of a system that does not help easy resolution of problems and needs changing (paragraph 5.8.1, 5.8.2, 5.8.3, 5.8.4, 5.8.5).

## **Health and wellbeing**

- The Board reported in 2022 and in 2023 that part of the healthcare building was not fit for purpose. By the end of this reporting year, it is still not ready for occupation. Staff have had to reduce the amount of care that can be provided during the construction period (paragraph 6.1.4).
- The Board is pleased to note that staffing in both general healthcare and in mental healthcare has improved considerably this year. This has resulted in a lack of space to undertake clinical care, particularly in mental health care, which requires confidential space. This is something that the Board is very concerned about (paragraph 6.1.9, 6.2.1 and 6.2.2).
- The issue of delayed mental health transfers was raised by the Board in the 2023 annual report. In 2024, two prisoners transferred to mental health hospitals on 17 January 2024 and 7 March 2024. One of these patients was transferred on day 134 following referral and the other on day 30 following referral, both breaching the target 28-day timeframe, for reasons beyond the control of the healthcare team (paragraph 6.2.6)

## **Progression and resettlement**

- The Board has been pleased to observe that the education provision has been running more smoothly in the reporting year (paragraph 7.1.2).
- As the Board reported in 2023, the offender management unit (OMU) has again been working under extreme pressure. This was due to changes in sentence calculation across the service (paragraph 7.3.4, 7.3.5, 7.3.6).
- The Board noted an increase in applications from prisoners about sentence management (paragraph 7.3.9).
- The Board is disappointed to note the limited opportunities for men at Huntercombe to undertake programmes to prepare for their release or undertake release on temporary license (ROTL) (paragraph 7.5).

## **3.2 Main areas for development**

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

- The Board understands that the work required to update the heating and hot water system at Huntercombe is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. The Board has reported this issue in each of its reports for the last three years. Will the Minister confirm when all the community at Huntercombe can expect to receive a consistent supply of hot water and heating? (paragraph 5.1.2, 5.1.3)
- When will the Ministry of Justice provide replacement parts for a broken door in the segregation unit at Huntercombe? (paragraph 5.2.3)
- When will the Ministry of Justice provide Huntercombe with a new arrangement for maintenance of the kitchen equipment? (paragraph 5.1.5)

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

- When will the Prison Service ensure that all prisons follow the agreed procedures for all issues? The Board has reported on failures in prisoner property management and management of foreign national prisoners as two examples in this reporting year (paragraph 5.8, 7.3.10).

- As the Board has reported each year since 2021, there remains significant issues about prisoner property at transfer between prisons. As the prisoners' property policy framework is obviously not working for prisoners, what is the Prison Service planning to do to look after prisoners' property in a more effective way? (paragraph 5.8).

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

- When will the Governor be able to provide appropriate clinical space for mental health therapeutic work? (paragraph 6.2.1, 6.2.2).
- Will the Governor review the available spaces and processes for allocating prisoners to access meaningful activity while they are at Huntercombe? (paragraph 7.1.10, 7.1.11, 7.2.1, 7.5.1).

## **Evidence sections 4 – 7**

### **4. Safety**

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

4.1.1 The reception area is bright and clean, with two holding rooms enabling the interview processes to be conducted in private. Healthcare has a dedicated room. There are two induction orderlies who help to interpret, alongside the use of the Big Word translation service, (which provides interpreting by telephone) and generally help with arrivals. There are welcoming signs and booklets in a variety of languages, a hearing loop facility and colourful information posters.

4.1.2 The Board notes that volumetric control is still repeatedly ignored by sending prisons, which is frustrating for both prisoners and staff. This is particularly relevant for those prisoners who will be deported and will have a luggage limit and is also a storage issue for the prison.

4.1.3 On arrival, there is an amnesty for illicit items, which is not often used by the men, but all are body scanned. In the reporting year, there were 1189 scans (2023: 1060), of which 51 were positive (2023: 115), 1066 negative (2023: 935) and 72 inconclusive (2023: 10). If positive, the men are put into the segregation unit and rescanned the following day. A further 13 reception staff have been trained in the use of the body scanner and in interpreting the results

4.1.4 Men are transferred to the induction wing, where they are well managed and supported by staff and peer supporters, their needs having been identified from the initial interview process. Induction takes place for around 2 weeks before the men transfer to the appropriate wing. Staff take into consideration age, vaping preferences, race and religion when allocating the men, as they may share double cells.

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

4.2.1 There were no deaths in custody in the reporting year.

4.2.2 Incidents of self-harm increased in the year from 36 in 2023 to 63. Food refusals also increased from 13 in 2023 to 38. Staff acted professionally and with care towards these men who have support from mental health, healthcare and the safer custody team (who identify and support prisoners who are at risk of harm to themselves).

4.2.3 Most Listener (prisoners trained by the Samaritans to provide confidential emotional support to fellow prisoners) call outs were for immigration issues.

4.2.4 There were 112 assessments, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT, used to support prisoners who are at risk of self-harm and suicide) plans opened this year, which represents an increase of around 25% from the previous reporting year. The Board is concerned that 5 prisoners transferred from other prisons on open ACCTS.

4.2.5 The safer custody team focuses on individuals considered at risk and there are weekly safety intervention meetings (SIM) and quarterly safer prison meetings that Board members regularly attend as observers.



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

4.3.1 The Board has been concerned about the increase in prisoner on staff assaults during the reporting year.

4.3.2 The board recognises that violent incidents, in general, are on a downward trend but are concerned about the significant increase on the previous year in violence occurring by prisoners to staff from nine to 40. This was mainly due to men being held in the segregation unit who had significant issues. There were three serious assaults recorded. Prisoner on prisoner assaults remained about the same, but there were four serious assaults, compared to two last year. Figures for fights have decreased from 21 to 13 in this year.

4.3.3 Staff work hard to investigate and identify perpetrators of violence and bullying with the use of close circuit television (CCTV) and body worn cameras (BWC). There is a weekly SIM meeting where the most violent men, with high violence in prison estimator scores (vipers) are discussed with wing staff, governors and other agencies, with decisions and outcomes recorded.

4.3.4 The challenge support and intervention plans (CSIP), used to support and manage prisoners who pose an increased risk of violence, continue to work with and manage prisoners who have violent behaviour problems. In this reporting year there were 232 referrals, which is a decrease on the previous year of 320.

4.3.5 Staff are supported by the safer custody team. There has been a focus on improving relationships between staff and between staff and prisoners. Staff are participating in reflective practice, where analysis of situations and staff reactions to situations are discussed, with the aim of improving decisions that affect prisoners. Work to develop an empathetic community to reduce the likelihood of resorting to violence is ongoing. There have also been staff-prisoner workshops developed in the year.

### **4.4 Use of force**

4.4.1 The Board has observed staff showing great composure and skill when dealing with violent prisoners, trying to talk with them when they are in an agitated state before using force. There are regular reviews to assess these incidents by viewing CCTV and body worn footage, which a control and restraint (C&R) officer attends. A Board member also attends when possible as an observer.

4.4.2 The number of planned interventions (a deliberate, prearranged action or strategy aimed at managing a situation where the use of force may be necessary) has significantly increased from 74 in 2023 to 177 in 2024 and unplanned from 22 to 52. This reflects the nature of the prisoners being transferred into Huntercombe during the year.

4.4.3 There were six batons drawn in the reporting year compared to two in the previous year. Of the six times, a baton was only used on a prisoner once. There was no use of PAVA incapacitant spray in the year, although it was drawn.

4.4.4 Board members have observed and monitored a sample of cases when force is used on prisoners and have been assured in all but one case that it has had been carried out appropriately.

4.4.5 In the one case referred to in 4.4.4, senior prison staff referred the case to the external team who had used force in a potentially dangerous way and have followed up with the team leader.

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

4.5.1 During the reporting year, the prison was particularly challenged with a supply of a potent strain of illicit drugs (paragraph 6.1.10).

4.5.2 The tampering of vapes with drugs also contributed to increased incidents of men being reported under the influence. Alcohol fermentation was also an issue.

4.5.3 There were four unconfirmed sightings of drones. with none reported since July. There has been an increase in throw overs.

4.5.4 The dedicated search team officers visit periodically or on request and staff work hard to find drugs, phones, sim cards and weapons. There were 987 security intelligence reports for drugs during the year. The number of requested cell searches was only achieved in one month during the reporting year. However, 233 items were removed from cells.

4.5.5 On visit days, all visitors are searched and procedures followed during these visits. Non legal mail that has been positively identified as having drugs is now opened and a photocopy given to the prisoner. In addition, drug dogs are regularly used (paragraph 6.5.6).

4.5.6 Mandatory drugs testing tests and random tests were observed to be carried out in line with the policy.

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

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

5.1.1 The accommodation in Huntercombe is generally clean and tidy. Association areas on wings are well organised. Whilst the aging infrastructure provides constant challenges, it is noted that the issue of broken cell window mechanisms reported in 2023 is now slowly being resolved with the government facility services (GFSL) having finally sourced replacement parts and a process of window renovation has begun.

5.1.2 The issue of a failing central heating and hot water system across the estate continues to cause frustration. This issue has been reported in the last five Board annual reports. At the end of the reporting year, it is still unclear when work will start. There are eight temporary boilers and five fuel tanks on site that have been there since November 2022. These are not only unreliable but cost a huge amount of money to hire and to run and are also a potential safety risk. The Board will continue to press and monitor this issue of poor infrastructure until work begins, and a new functional system is in place.

5.1.3 A knock-on effect caused by the aging hot water system is that showers on the wings and the gym are unreliable and often out of order. This causes tremendous anxiety amongst prisoners as they only have a limited time to shower in the day and queuing up, as an example, for just two working showers on a wing with up to 70 men, is unacceptable. Problems are logged correctly and in a timely fashion by wing staff and works try and fix the issues as soon as they can, but the fundamental problem remains: the hot water system is not fit for purpose.

5.1.4 The Board was pleased in 2023 when the new kitchen for the prison was finally opened as it provided a more varied menu, better food and educational opportunities for prisoners. Given the available budget, which is an allocated daily amount of £2.70 per prisoner, the prison continually manages to offer a varied and balanced diet that meets all requirements. The prisoners have noticed that the food quality has improved, and that portion sizes are slightly bigger than when the old kitchen was in service.

5.1.5 However, the kitchen is not functioning as intended, which means the prison is not benefiting in full from the money that was spent. The contractors who put the kitchen in are no longer in business and any warranties that existed expired in July 2024. During 2024, two deep fryers, dishwashers, two Vario cookers, the roof vent cleaning system and multiple hot water boilers were not working properly or were entirely non-operational. The Board believes that the prison is waiting for the Ministry of Justice to pass over maintenance of the kitchen to a third party after the failure of the original contractor. The implication of this decision not having been taken is that as more appliances break down, alongside the ones that are not functioning, the prison will find it increasingly difficult to provide the meals that it has to each day. Additionally, lack of functionality will increasingly impact the prison's ability to offer menus dedicated to religious festivals throughout the year.

5.1.6 The self-cook kitchen on Rich wing was opened in 2024 and was welcomed by prisoners. It provides prisoners who are on this enhanced unit (where prisoners have extra privileges due to good behaviour) with the ability to cook their own food, socialise and be positively engaged during association.

5.1.7 During the year the Board has monitored the serveries on each wing. There is adequate supervision on all wings and in the main, the serveries are well organised and efficient. Communication between serveries and the kitchen is good if food that has been ordered has not been delivered. The men serving the food are trained and the standard of cleanliness is good.

## **5.2 Segregation**

5.2.1 The segregation unit at Huntercombe provides five separate cells, one of which can be used for constant observation. During the reporting year, there have been occasions when all the cells were occupied and, at such times, prisoners who are deemed to warrant segregation have been housed in segregation conditions on the wings.

5.2.2 Whenever possible, IMB members visit the segregation unit to speak to prisoners. There is a concern, however, that for the second year running, the main segregation unit exercise yard continued to be out of bounds for use by prisoners. This is because it has been used as a pipe duct for the temporary boiler that is providing heating and hot water to the unit. Until this area is cleared, prisoners in the unit only have a very small area in which to exercise each day.

5.2.3 It is of concern to the Board that one cell has been out of action for most of the reporting year, due to delays in getting replacement parts for the door.

5.2.4 Communication between staff in the segregation unit and the Board has been good in 2024, with the statutory requirement being followed that Board members are informed when prisoners are admitted to the unit.

5.2.5 During 2024, 148 prisoners passed through the segregation unit, of whom 26 were prisoners who were held more than once. In 2024, the average length of stay was eight days (compared with 6.7 days in 2023) and the longest stay in segregation for one prisoner was 89 days, albeit this was over three admissions.

5.2.6 The adjudication and review processes conducted in the segregation unit were regularly observed by members of the Board and were seen to be consistent and professionally managed. There was also regular attendance by staff from supporting departments such as healthcare.

5.2.7 The Board considers that the segregation unit is being well run by the staff, who are often working in difficult circumstances.

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

5.3.1 The Board considers that there is a positive relationship between staff and prisoners on all wings. In 2024, there were nine applications made to the Board about bullying, of which seven referred to staff. The Board will monitor this closely in 2025, particularly as complaints to the prison about staff have decreased slightly from 10% (100) in 2023 to 8% (88) in 2024.

5.3.2 All prison officers are allocated a key worker shift and are assigned up to five prisoners each. The aim is to meet each prisoner every two weeks but, unfortunately, due to shift patterns, holidays and illness, the fortnightly frequency is only achieved approximately 50% of the time. It is important to note that prisoners

considered as high risk or vulnerable are seen more often than this average and are prioritised if shift patterns necessitate a change of meeting schedules.

5.3.3 Key worker meetings are held privately in wing offices or cells. Each officer is allocated 90 minutes per prisoner, per meeting, to include pre-meeting reading, the meeting itself and note writing.

5.3.4 Quality-control checks, undertaken by wing custodial managers, are in place to ensure the productivity and usefulness of the key worker meetings.

5.3.5 Board members attend as observers at the prisoner council which is held monthly and gives prisoners a chance to raise collective concerns with senior prison staff.

## **5.4 Equality and diversity**

5.4.1 Huntercombe, as a prison for foreign national individuals, contains numerous diverse national and minority ethnic groups. The Board continues to monitor issues around diversity and equality within the prison and considers that in general the staff handle these issues sensitively and consistently. Staff take any such issues seriously and the Board's opinion is that the prison handles these well, with prisoners' views being heard more frequently at meetings.

5.4.2 With the opening of the new multi-faith centre and the new kitchen facilities, the prison has improved its provision for religious activities and menu options, so better respecting religious commitments and dietary preferences.

5.4.3 Discrimination incident report forms (DIRFs) are the mechanism by which prisoners can formally complain to the prison if they think they have been mistreated in a discriminatory way. The prison has an equality, diversity and inclusion officer and maintains a categorisation of the nature of the DIRF applications, and the number received, as well as whether or not these applications were upheld. The Board has no concerns regarding the fairness of the DIRF process. All DIRFs were previously scrutinised by an independent person but are now reviewed by a member from the HMPPS area management team.

5.4.4 The total number of DIRFs submitted in the reporting period from prisoners was 42 (2023: 56), of which 11 were deemed not to fit the criteria for a DIRF, so were converted to a complaint. A total of 31 (2023:20) were processed as DIRFs, of which two were upheld and three partially upheld.

## **5.5 Faith and pastoral support**

5.5.1 The team of 12 multi-faith chaplains and volunteers under the supervision of the managing chaplain looks after the pastoral needs of 85 different nationalities at Huntercombe, which has 13 different categories of religious affiliations.

5.5.2 The chaplaincy offers compassionate support, encouragement, respect and a safe space for all prisoners of all faiths. There are worship opportunities, study groups or prayers offered on six days each week (1,800 hours per month in 2024). In an average week, around 110 prisoners of the Muslim faith attended Friday prayers, while 147 men attended acts of Christian worship.

5.5.3 The new multi-faith centre opened in 2024. The space is used by all faiths and has allowed an enriched program of worship, study, music groups and structured

courses. Sycamore Tree courses (a volunteer-led programme that teaches the principles of restorative justice) were run twice in the year, with 24 men achieving accreditation standards; the course now has a waiting list. A carol service was held in December with three choirs of staff and prisoners. The service had a positive impact on morale and helped to improve prisoner relationships.

## 5.6 Incentives schemes

5.6.1 The incentive scheme is explained to prisoners when they arrive at Huntercombe, that they are expected to keep to the rules, take part in work and other activities, show a commitment to their rehabilitation and help others. It is a scheme which is used to positively manage behaviour and to encourage prisoners to abide by the rules. Negative behaviour or not engaging means that privileges are removed.

5.6.2 The scheme is perceived by men to be geared towards punishment rather than rewarding good behaviour. The complaints to the prison support this focusing on the process being applied fairly and consistently and the difficulty in getting positive entries on their prison record.

5.6.3 There are two enhanced wings at Huntercombe, one of which is for specially risk assessed prisoners as it is not built to category C levels. This gives the men a relaxed atmosphere and small community experience.

5.6.4 During 2024, the prison has been revising the incentives scheme policy, but the work has not been completed within the reporting year.

## 5.7 Complaints

5.7.1 Complaints in 2024 rose to 1,156 from 1,005 in 2023. Of these, 273 related to issues over property; this is 24% of the total, an increase from 21% last year. Of the 273 complaints on property, 173 refer to property missing from transfers to/from other prisons. The Board is concerned about outstanding property and valuables when men are due to be deported.

5.7.2 Of the 1,156 complaints received by the prison in the reporting year, 24% were responded to later than the target response time, a rise from 11% in 2023. It is not possible to identify a single reason for the late responses to prisoners' complaints, but often the process on property complaints is delayed when other prisons must be contacted.

5.7.3 Each week, four complaints are randomly selected for quality assurance purposes and examined by one of the senior management team.

Type	Number	%
Total number of complaints	1156	
Stage 1 complaints	1013	88
Stage 2 complaints	73	6
Confidential complaints	70	6
<b>Most Common Complaints</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
Property	273	24
Residential	123	11

Financial/Cash	117	10
Staff	88	8
Incentives Scheme	85	7
<b>Response time</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
On time	866	75
Late	275	24
Outstanding	15	1

## 5.8 Property

5.8.1 As reported each year and again in 2024, there continue to be problems associated with property coming into Huntercombe. Problems with prisoners' property going missing create stress, and when personal items are lost, this stress turns to anger and frustration.

5.8.2 In 2024 the prison received 273 complaints about property, which is a 26% increase year on year and represents 24% of all prison complaints. In the same period the Board received 36 applications (prisoners' written representations to the IMB) from prisoners (an increase of 41% from 2023), with a staggering 76% of these relating to property that seems to have been lost in transit or did not follow prisoners from previous prisons. This total figure of 34 applications to the Board and 273 complaints to the prison suggests that regardless of previous annual reports, little has improved.

5.8.3 In reference to property complaints that involve lost property in transit or during transfer, the Board again points to the lack of volumetric control that exists when prisoners are transferred between prisons. This occurs even though in September 2022 HMPPS implemented a new policy framework to address such problems. This was referenced in the annex, in the Minister's response to the Board annual report in 2022. Two years later, the Board sees little evidence that this has made any difference at all. In addition, there is a lack of consistency across the prison estate, with different couriers being used who have different rules as to how much property they are prepared to take, adding further confusion to the chaos.

5.8.4 It is pleasing to note that Huntercombe adheres to the national framework regarding the facilities list. This relates to the property each prisoner is allowed to take to his cell on arrival. Prisoners arriving at Huntercombe often have excess property that must go into bulk storage, which is held on site in cramped facilities.

5.8.5 The issue of property is in sharp focus at Huntercombe, as many prisoners are deported at the end of their sentence and request all their property before they leave the country. Any disputes with other prisons from where they may have come therefore need resolving. The current unreliable paper-based property cards, written by hand, are just one example of part of a system that does not help easy resolution of such problems and needs changing.

## **6. Health and wellbeing**

### **6.1 Healthcare general**

6.1.1 Healthcare at HMP Huntercombe is provided as an outpatient service under contract by Practice Plus Group (PPG). There is no inpatient provision. All other services, such as general practitioners (GPs), dentists and physiotherapy are provided as subcontractors to PPG.

6.1.2 The provision of primary and secondary mental health is provided by Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust (OHFT).

6.1.3 From its observations, the Board considers that PPG and OHFT have an effective and harmonious working relationship at HMP Huntercombe.

6.1.4 The healthcare team moved out of its previous, significantly inadequate, accommodation at the end of February 2024 and has been accommodated in temporary accommodation since then, while new accommodation has been constructed. Service delivery was reduced at this time in agreement with NHS South East due to accommodation pressures and the team's capacity to deliver all clinics. This has been disruptive for the team and the delay in the provision of new, suitable accommodation over a period of more than two years has been unsatisfactory, as was highlighted in the Board's report in 2023. It is anticipated that the team will occupy newly constructed accommodation in March 2025.

6.1.5 A partnership board exists, comprising the commissioner of healthcare, PPG, OHFT and the Governor representing the prison. A representative of the Board is usually in attendance to observe these meetings.

6.1.6 In relation to the provision of services, good GP cover contracted for 3 days a week has been maintained and other external services work to timeframes similar to the community. There is high demand for physiotherapy, the optician has no waiting list, and the podiatrist has a very small waiting list and holds regular clinics.

6.1.7 On receipt of a request for an appointment, every effort is made to provide a nurse clinic appointment within two weeks and, where necessary, a GP appointment within a month. Every effort is made to reduce these periods where there is urgency and also to arrange blood testing prior to a GP appointment, where this will provide a more meaningful GP appointment for the patient.

6.1.8 During the reporting year there has been a significant improvement in staffing levels, which are currently at approximately 84%. Use is made of agency and bank staff to backfill vacancies and training, and some of those staff have been at Huntercombe for a long time.

6.1.9 A consequence of the improvement in staffing levels is that working space for patient services is inadequate; this is currently under discussion with prison management. The numbers through reception at the prison have increased significantly: in the period February to April 2023 the number of patients received and discharged was 246; in 2024, the figure was 474. Demand for subcontracted services has increased to reflect this increase in prisoner throughput, as well as receiving prisoners earlier in their sentences than in previous years.

6.1.10 In August 2024 the prison experienced a significant increase in drug taking and resources had to be reallocated at short notice to cope with this. There were 22



'code reds' (a code for blood/burn related medical emergencies), 111 'code blues' (for breathing/collapses) and 33 ambulances called. There was increased demand on the nursing team to see prisoners affected by the increase in drug consumption who had been placed on a designated wing area under segregation type conditions, so that they were removed from any influences and could be closely monitored. The Board recognises the prison's quick decision that was made to keep these men safe. Some eventually returned to their wing, but some wanted to stay on so that they were removed from temptation and threats.

6.1.11 Healthcare continues to address recommendations made by EPIC (Empowering People Inspiring Change, a contracted external group with some members with lived experience) in their patient perspective report dated September 2022 and steady progress has been maintained. Reports on progress are shared with the partnership board.

## **6.2 Mental health**

6.2.1 The mental healthcare team (MHT) is accommodated separately from the general healthcare team. There is inadequate space to accommodate members of the team to provide mental health care clinics on a satisfactory basis. The result of this lack of space is that it is very difficult for the MHT to provide patient services in appropriate conditions, including that of confidentiality.

6.2.2 There has been a significant improvement in staffing levels (close to 100%), involving in particular the recruitment of several members of the psychology and psychiatry service. This has enabled the establishment of a psychology pathway in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines to use therapies to treat mental health issues, in particular, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex trauma symptoms, which are particularly prevalent at HMP Huntercombe. However, the provision of these services is challenging in the light of the accommodation issues (paragraph 6.2.1).

6.2.3 The upsurge in drug taking (paragraph 6.1.10) did not appear to contribute to a notable increase in workload for the MHT and affected prisoners who were already patients of MHT were seen on the designated wing where appropriate.

6.2.4 After referral, patients are seen within 48 hours for urgent cases and five days for routine cases. Urgency is determined by the mental health nurse reviewing the referral and is based on clinical need and risk.

6.2.5 There is daily interaction between MHT and healthcare in relation to handovers where any patients of concern, medication and other issues are discussed.

6.2.6 MHT had two prisoners transferred to mental health hospitals on 17 January 2024 and 7 March 2024. One of these patients was transferred on day 134 following referral and the other on day 30 following referral, both breaching the target 28 day timeframe, for reasons beyond the control of the MHT.

## **6.3 Social care**

6.3.1 There is a memorandum of understanding with the local authority and PPG has been commissioned to deliver social care when needed.

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

6.4.1 The physical education team currently has vacancies for 1.5 staff and activity has remained at a high level.

6.4.2 Prisoners have access to the gym for varying periods, depending on their incentive scheme status.

6.4.3 Various courses are available to prisoners, such as level two or three gym instructor, leading to level three personal trainer and spinning instructor.

6.4.4 Sporting and recreational activities are available to prisoners, including football, badminton and volleyball.

6.4.5 The prison physical education department runs a Stoic programme, which was developed by a member of the Huntercombe physical education department, and which now runs in other prison establishments. The prison has provided 316 men with a 16 session Stoic course that is highly structured and provides a framework for training in emotional resilience consistent with and complementary to evidence-based psychotherapy. It teaches men to understand that they can determine how they react to a given situation and how to do so with a particular focus on events that might otherwise trigger an angry and potentially violent response. There is a workbook to support this work. Preparations are in hand to rollout Stoic materials for formal Stoic training for staff in 2025.

6.4.6 Some prisoners have taken part in the Boats not Bars scheme (a rowing course delivered to prisoners to reduce reoffending), gaining new skills and participating in a sporting opportunity outside the prison.

6.4.7 The team is actively involved in partnerships with 25 schools in several counties through the Getting Court programme. This initiative emphasises to young people, some of whom are already out of mainstream schooling, the consequences of offending and invite pupils, where appropriate, to reassess their behaviour and enable them to make better lifestyle decisions. This is extremely important work and those involved are to be commended for their commitment and dedication.

## **6.5 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation**

6.5.1 The prison's drug and alcohol recovery team (DART) is employed by Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and sees all new arrivals during their induction week.

6.5.2 DART has on average 80 prisoners on its caseload providing therapy and work strands to prisoners. The written material provided to prisoners is substantial and of good quality. A practical problem is that some material is written in English only and several prisoners neither speak nor read English.

6.5.3 The DART team is fully staffed but there is a significant shortage in working accommodation (paragraph 6.2.1).

6.5.4 During the upsurge in drug consumption in August 2024 DART participated actively in the initiative. Team members had to reallocate their time to meet exceptional demand, but steps were taken to ensure that the team was not overwhelmed. This period did, however, have an impact on DART time in relation to seeing other clients due to the number of assessments required.

6.5.5 The Board is concerned that DART has reported that on occasion, clients leave the prison with minimal warning and appropriate material needs to be put in place (which can often only be done with external input) to facilitate a hand over to the appropriate external body so that support can be provided to the client on leaving the prison.

6.5.6 There has been an increased detection of drugs within the prison. The active and passive search dogs have been in the prison on 231 occasions.

6.5.7 DART produces a regular newsletter that is sent to all prisoners. The contents point out the significant health and other risks involved in consuming hooch. It also outlines the support available from both DART and especially trained prisoner peer supports to prisoners who might be inclined to use illicit alcohol or drugs.

## **7. Progression and resettlement**

### **7.1 Education, library**

7.1.1 Milton Keynes College (MKC) is the principal education provider. The contract is due for renewal from 1 April 2025. Overall interaction between MKC and the prison appears to be positive, supported by the appointment of two new HMPPS posts towards the end of 2023.

7.1.2 For most of the year the education facility operated with good levels of cover, a clear improvement over 2023. However, in the latter half of the year a vocational tutor went part time and a further member of staff is scheduled to leave in early 2025. Courses offered by MKC are in line with the contract and provide up to 84 places on a weekly basis for most of the year. Classes were, for the most part, full but early releases and some security restrictions prevented some prisoners from achieving their goals.

7.1.3 The library has run well during the reporting year. In line with the contract, the library is open on weekdays. Staffing issues have been resolved and a variety of book clubs have been restarted. The free flow system around the prison has also helped prisoner movement, making it easier for prisoners to get to sessions on time.

7.1.4 The amount of stock lost from the library has increased as more prisoners are released early and the increased flow of prisoners through the system means that an increased amount of time is spent on inductions. However, the staff have coped well with the increased volume and there is ample funding available for new stock. According to the prisoners with whom the IMB has spoken, the view is that the range of materials available throughout the year has improved.

7.1.5 The Shannon Trust reviewed the provision of services and set a plan for redevelopment in 2024. Personnel from the Shannon Trust visit the prison four times a year and provide a single training session for new mentors who are prisoners required to have at least level 1 language and literacy skills. On average there are at least 6 trained mentors operating within the prison at any time. Each mentor can see approximately eight mentees during a day for approximately 20 minutes each. At the end of 2024 there were 11 mentors seeing an average of 45 mentees. Unlike other prisons, Huntercombe allocates mentees from their needs recorded at induction. These men are allowed to 'opt out' after an initial session but would be listed as a 'refusal' if they refused to start. A quality audit picked up some problems with the mentors and as a result turnover of these became quite high, further disrupting the learning experience.

7.1.6 During 2024 a numeracy training plan, "Count Me In" was started with the Shannon Trust. This will be rolled out fully in 2025.

7.1.7 MKC continued to provide the information, advice and guidance mentoring course. The flow through the course ensures a steady supply of mentors with up to eight people being trained at any time.

7.1.8 The prison has continued to use work orderlies to cover gaps in provision and the use of teaching assistants has increased.

7.1.9 The verification offered by City & Guilds and Gateway continues to be checked annually by the awarding bodies, with no recommendations for 2024. There continues to be monthly review meetings between the prison and MKC.

7.1.10 Distance learning has continued to be difficult. The year started well, with reasonably good numbers of men on courses but changes to funding resulted in fewer men using the distance learning resources.

7.1.11 One of the main problems during the year has been the level of churn in the population. As men have been getting released earlier and are spending less time in Huntercombe, it becomes difficult for them to complete courses. As a result, the prison and careers information and advice guidance (CIAG) provider, Acorn, have been working on new pathway plans. These clarify what the men are expected to achieve and make it easier for them to get to the right activity at the right time. The education provision is also being impacted by the dropping educational standard amongst new prisoners who typically have lower attainment levels. This is, in part, a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and as a result, lower-level activities are having to be introduced.

## **7.2 Vocational training, work**

7.2.1 Overall there was a drop in the number of spaces available across the year, in large part due to the closure of the gardens for much of the year. The prison is hopeful that the numbers can be built back up from February 2025 as building works are completed.

7.2.2 The number of prisoners working in waste management quickly increased from 12 men at the start of the year to 18. No qualifications were offered, and many men only attended for up to three weeks.

7.2.3 WAMITAB industrial cleaning ran with 10 prisoners per session on training for most of the year and a further eight on the work party. Towards the end of the year the closure of the office for a water leak had a big impact on delivery.

7.2.4 In the social enterprise workshop craft services, including t-shirt making, mug printing and craft work, ran consistently with 12-15 prisoners working each morning and afternoon. The plan for the year was to increase the range of products but this was not fully realised. However, leather work was started with some success.

7.2.5 For most of the year gardening continued to be curtailed due to the insecurity of the location and the proximity to the ongoing building work. In the final quarter, up to 12 men were allocated across both garden areas, but there was a lot of inconsistency because of closures caused by the building work. No qualifications are currently offered.

7.2.6 The woodworking workshop continued to run and by the end of year numbers had increased to 12 prisoners per session. Some minor contract work continues to be undertaken, including work for River Island.

7.2.7 In textiles, 15 slots are available for prisoners to produce cagoules, face cloths, pillowcases and duvet covers. As in previous years, there were difficulties with contract supplies. A change of personnel during the year led to a review of the service and a consequent improvement in quality and production levels.

7.2.8 Overall, the kitchens employ 25 workers per session but has experienced difficulties in scheduling these over seven days. They were required to deliver formal qualifications in food safety, which caused some issues during the year.

7.2.9 Wing workers operated as normal during the year and were linked into industrial cleaning to ensure training and assessment of quality of cleaning. The group also included wing painters. There was an average of 10 wing workers on each wing.

7.2.10 The Clink (a charity that organises restaurants in prisons, with food prepared and served by prisoners) has worked well during the year. Earlier instructional challenges have been ironed out and the change of focus has worked well. NVQ qualifications for prisoners on a hospitality pathway are being delivered. This area employs up to 10 men at any point in time and they have progressed well.

7.2.11 Therapeutic art sessions were ceased during 2024 due to a lack of funding and replaced by a multi-skills arts-based development programme. This includes art, pyrography (wood-burning), calligraphy and wood turning. This has been well received by prisoners.

7.2.12 Prisoner records have been improved during the year with the development of progression in workshop documents that record evidence of prisoner skills development. The completion of these documents is being maintained and audited with the support of orderlies from the learning and skills department.

7.2.13 The poor attendance that was evident in the first half of the year has been largely resolved and attendance levels by the year end were much stronger. Part of this has resulted from improved interactions with the prison officers. However, an ongoing issue has been a change in attitudes and expectations from new arrivals, coupled with lower levels of educational attainment. During the year, the average attainment level dropped nearly one full level. Meanwhile, many complained about pay levels and questioned the need for community service or basic education.

7.2.14 There was no OFSTED visit during the year.

### **7.3 Offender management, progression**

7.3.1 The anticipated outcome of foreign national prisoners transferred to HMP Huntercombe is that the majority of those of interest to the Home Office will ultimately be deported to their country of origin.

7.3.2 During 2024, the average monthly roll was 491 and through the reporting year a total of 407 were deported, this representing a monthly average of 34. This was a return to pre-Covid-19 numbers and a big increase on the preceding years' total deportation numbers of 2023 (218) and 2022 (230).

7.3.3 The increase in the number of deportations was partly attributed to a recruitment drive by the Home Office to increase the number of case workers, which helped speed up the Home Office's triaging stage.

7.3.4 Another aspect of the increase was the introduction in February of 2024 of the end of custody supervised license (ECSL) which initially reduced the sentence of those men permitted to remain in the UK by 18 days; on 8 March 2024 this was increased to 35 days and then increased again on 23 May 2024 to 70 days.

7.3.5 The above initiative was then abandoned and replaced with standard determinate sentence 40% (SDS40, a temporary early release scheme to tackle the ongoing overcrowding crisis in prisons, allowing certain prisoners serving 'standard determinate sentences' to have a reduction in their sentence from 50% to 40%) on 10 September 2024. This also increased the early removal scheme, (ERS, which allows foreign national prisoners to be deported from the UK before their sentence is finished) for those eligible to a maximum 18 months prior to their conditional release date (CRD).

7.3.6 It is salutary to note that each of these alterations necessitated the need for the offender management unit (OMU) to create revised sentence calculations for the majority of the prisoners and in the case of the introduction of the SDS40, every prisoner held at Huntercombe had to be assessed and their ERS date recalibrated. The degree of these alterations would be a heavier burden for OMUs working exclusively in foreign national prisons due to their entire cohort falling within this remit.

7.3.7 A deportation order (DO) is a primary requirement issued by the Home Office and without which no one can be deported. Once issued, the DO remains on file for the duration of a recipient's lifetime. The Board are aware that in some instances where a DO has been previously issued, possibly several years earlier, the Home Office may not automatically have passed this information on to the Prison Service.

7.3.8 In addition to a DO, an 'annex C' is required as part of the deportation paperwork. This is the document signed by the Governor of their current establishment that shows they are eligible for deportation, and this then forms part of the documentation required by the Home Office. Understandably, some men welcome the receipt of an annex C and others, who do not want to be deported, do not.

7.3.9 The Board noted a considerable increase in applications from prisoners concerned with various aspects of the issuing of annex Cs through the reporting year. It was evidenced by the Board that in some cases, previous establishments had issued an annex C without completing the eligibility criteria fully. For example, if there remains a confiscation order against the prisoner or they are still on the police national computer (PNC) for an outstanding charge.

7.3.10 The OMU at Huntercombe have subsequently uncovered several cases where earlier errors had been made and have then had to rescind an annex C and replace it with an annex D, meaning that the prisoner is no longer eligible for deportation. This causes a few frustrations for both the prisoner concerned and an unnecessary increase in the workload of the staff in the OMU at Huntercombe.

7.3.11 It is hoped that the OMU at HMP Huntercombe will receive a police national computer terminal soon, which would speed up the checking process required prior to the issuing of an annex C.

7.3.12 The Board welcomes a continual decline in numbers from previous years of the foreign national prisoners who had reached their custodial release date (CRD) in 2024 but continued to be held in convicted criminal conditions under immigration powers (IS/91). Through this reporting year the monthly average was four, exactly half of the monthly average for 2023.

7.3.13 This can be attributed to the Home Office detention services moving suitably risk assessed foreign nationals with IS/91s into an Immigration Removal Centre (holding centres for foreign nationals awaiting deportation or decisions on their asylum claims), if not on receipt, as soon as possible following receipt, of an IS/91 status. Immigration bail can be applied for, but a hearing cannot be held until after the custodial release date. This resulted in the number being granted immigration bail, whilst at Huntercombe, dropping from 191 in 2022, followed by 107 in 2023 to 58 in 2024.

7.3.14 During the reporting year, the staff in the offender management unit were at times three Band 3s short of their staffing establishment, which amounted to a 50% shortfall.

## **7.4 Family contact**

7.4.1 The Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) charity hold monthly family days, which are consistently well attended by up to 10 families.

7.4.2 A total of 4,058 social video calls were made by 411 users in 2024, an increase from 3828 video calls by 403 users in 2023.

## **7.5 Resettlement planning**

7.5.1 In 2024, resettlement received 64 applications for unescorted release on temporary license (ROTL), of which 12 men were approved and became eligible, initially, for unpaid work largely in the prison environments. From that number, nine men received paid work in construction and recycling and a total of five qualified for resettlement overnight release. By the end of the reporting year, due to some men being deported or released (paragraph 7.5.3), this figure had dropped to five.

7.5.2 The reasons for refusal ranged from being deemed unsuitable by their prison offender manager (POM), security grounds, impending prosecution, previous breaches and outstanding confiscation orders.

7.5.3 Since October 2023, the maximum early release discount for foreign national prisoners has been altered no less than four times, from nine months prior to October 2023 up to 18 months since September 2024. The extension of the early removal scheme (ERS) to allow foreign national prisoners to be deported up to 18 months prior to their conditional release date has been a disincentive to men who may otherwise have applied for ROTL, due to the application process for ROTL being lengthy and their remaining sentence having been considerably shortened.

7.5.4 Due to the problems of getting men through the ROTL process, currently Huntercombe only has one employer they are still working with.

7.5.5 In addition to the unescorted men on ROTL, there are also a small number of escorted opportunities, such as Boats not Bars where two or three men are taken to Marlow Rowing Club and receive rowing training.

7.5.6 A member of Huntercombe's gym staff has also forged highly successful contacts with several schools and universities to which he takes, on occasion, one or two risk assessed prisoners to address students.

7.5.7 The Board believes that, within the constraints of a very limited budget, the resettlement team and the orderlies work in a proactive and constructive way to



further the opportunities of men in the prison, not only with matters concerning ROTL, but also responding to one stop notices, deportation orders, helping to fill in bail applications and providing clothing when necessary for release. The team also facilitates phone calls to banks, building societies, debt management companies, housing providers, landlords, HMRC, mobile phone contract suppliers and in any way they can to help alleviate worry regarding debt.

7.5.8 Working closely with PACT, the resettlement team support the men in all family related matters including family court, Cafcass (an organisation that advises the family courts about the welfare of children and what is in their best interests), social services and family visits.

7.5.9 Careers information and advice guidance (CIAG) is provided by ACORN and by the end of the reporting year, 95% of the cohort had either a learning and work progress plan (LWP) the digitalised system introduced in September, or a paper personal learning plan (PLP).

## 8. The work of the IMB

### Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	8 (one of whom was on sabbatical)
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	8
Total number of visits to the establishment	276

### Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	10	24
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	12	7
C	Equality	2	5
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	16	12
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	7	11
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	3	3
F	Food and kitchens	2	3
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	21	25
H1	Property within the establishment	11	10
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	22	26
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	9	4
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	41	68
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	8	9
K	Transfers	6	3
L	Miscellaneous	6	12
	<b>Total number of applications</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>222</b>



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