

Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB) — written evidence (PRI0027)

About Independent Monitoring Boards

Appointed by ministers under the Prison Act 1952, Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) are an integral part of the independent oversight of prisons. IMB members are a regular presence, visiting the establishment, monitoring the treatment and conditions of prisoners, reporting what they find to those running the prison, and dealing with queries and concerns from individual prisoners. They are unpaid but have statutory powers, granting them unrestricted access. IMBs are part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism set up under the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture (OPCAT).

Evidence

This submission draws from Boards' annual reports, their responses to specific calls for evidence, and monitoring observations made through an internal quarterly reporting process. Where reference is made to information obtained through the internal quarterly reporting process, the name of the prison has been omitted.

Submission

This submission seeks to answer the following questions from the inquiry's call for evidence.

What makes a "good" prison officer from the perspective of prisoners? How do relations between prisoners and staff affect the experience of those in the prison system (staff and prisoners)?

and

What factors contribute to the "culture" of a prison? How are prisoners affected when a prison is badly run?

1. IMBs across all locations and prison functions have reported on the impact of staff inexperience. At Wandsworth, for example, almost 50% of officers had less than one year's experience. Often the staff managing new officers are also relatively new to the Prison Service. Prisoners are conscious of this inexperience and have less confidence in officers' ability to maintain order and action necessary tasks.
2. Prisoners frequently tell IMB members that they cannot get simple tasks done by staff and that staff 'don't know what they are doing', leaving prisoners feeling frustrated and demoralised. This frustration can have a significant negative effect on staff-prisoner relationships, and some Boards believe this has damaged the stability of the prisons they monitor.
3. Prison stability is also affected by some officers' lack of jail craft, which makes enforcing discipline difficult. At Five Wells, for example, some officers struggled to confidently challenge antisocial behaviour such as

vaping in unauthorised areas or using unacceptable terms of address. One Board reported that as a result of the officers' lack of confidence, landings developed a 'Lord of the Flies feel' and prisoners felt they were effectively policing themselves. Additionally, several Boards have reported incidents where force was used (including PAVA spray) because inexperienced officers were unable to de-escalate the situation in a way that a more experienced officer likely could have. Rarer, but of significant concern, were incidents where force was used inappropriately by inexperienced officers.

4. High proportions of newer officers also had implications for the reliability of deployable staffing levels, as these officers frequently had to attend mandatory training. While some Boards noted the positive results of training (at Belmarsh, for example, it had significantly improved staff-prisoner relationships), others raised concerns about the effect that the resultant staff absence had on prisoners. At some prisons, regular lockdowns were scheduled to facilitate staff training – one Board reported this happened on a weekly basis.
5. It is worth noting that over the last few years, even experienced officers have been faced with unfamiliar cohorts and new challenges due to the prison population crisis. Many Boards report that the prisons they monitor have received prisoners earlier in their sentence than they usually would have done, with the result that newer prisoners are often more disorderly and more likely to have complex needs than the prison staff is used to. This was particularly evident in the open estate, where population management tactics such as the Temporary Presumptive Recategorisation Scheme and early release schemes meant that many category C prisoners were 'rushed through' to the open estate, with little preparation for their new environment and limited time or motivation to engage with the rehabilitation and resettlement opportunities that open prisons offer. This has significantly impacted on the culture and stability of many open prisons, such as Sudbury, where the IMB described the unsettling effect of these prisoners. Some closed prisons have also had to contend with significant rises in organised crime group populations or with receiving age groups usually excluded from the prison. This presented new challenges to all officers, who had often developed significant experience and competence in meeting the needs of specific cohorts and had to quickly adapt to caring for prisoners with very different needs and risks, as well as a less stable population. At Deerbolt, for example, the prison was unsettled by the removal of the young adult designation and the arrival of older prisoners. In many cases these demographic shifts contributed to a rise in drug use, bullying and sometimes violence. Churn was also a significant factor; the IMB at Wealstun observed that high churn made it more difficult for staff to build trusting relationships with prisoners. Officers at Rye Hill, on the other hand, were able to build positive relationships with prisoners in part due to the low level of churn, despite the prison being part of the long-term high security estate and therefore ostensibly holding more dangerous prisoners. The Board observed that the priority given to building a long-term community amongst prisoners had created a positive environment and improved outcomes for prisoners.

6. Relationships between prisoners and staff varied widely even within regions and functions. Some Boards, such as Ashfield, reported extremely positively on staff-prisoner relationships. Staff-prisoner relationships were also generally, though not universally, observed to be more positive in the open estate. However, other Boards had significant concerns about strained staff-prisoner relationships. In addition to the inexperience-related problems outlined above, Boards noted that staff shortages often threatened staff-prisoner relationships. In-practice staffing shortages could be observed even at prisons with good on-paper staffing numbers, due to high levels of staff sickness and absence. Challenging environments with high numbers of prisoners with complex needs, such as prisons with significant numbers of mentally unwell prisoners or where drug overdoses were commonplace, could also redirect staff resource to firefighting activities, leaving little time to build relationships. The unavailability of staff frequently led to regime restrictions, which served to heighten tensions between prisoners and staff. At Bullingdon, where staff shortages and low time out of cell were key issues, a May 2024 IMB prisoner survey found that more than three-quarters of respondents felt they had 'not enough' or 'not nearly enough' opportunity to speak to members of staff about how they were doing.
7. Several IMBs drew attention to the importance of clear, effective leadership. One Board described the transformative impact that a new deputy governor had on the leadership culture of the prison, resulting in a more visible and proactive leadership approach and tangible improvements in accountability, such as the number of overdue complaints reducing by over half. Other IMBs described the damaging effect that poor or unstable leadership could have on the operation of prisons.
8. One way in which relationships between prisoners and staff could be nurtured is the use of prisoner councils or similar forums, where prisoners can share their experiences and highlight areas for improvement. Several Boards noted the positive impact of these on staff-prisoner relationships, and commented that it was an important component in a culture of respect between prisoners and staff – particularly senior staff, who prisoners might otherwise not interact with. However, many IMBs reported that these meetings were poorly attended, or frequently cancelled or suspended. At Wandsworth, for example, managers often failed to attend prisoner council meetings, which upset prisoners.
9. Key work was another important method of building positive staff-prisoner relationships. When executed as intended, it ameliorated many of the issues raised in paragraph one, as many low-level issues, such as access to certain services, could be resolved in a key work session. This also reduced the pressure on the complaints' process (in itself a very contentious area, with prisoners often complaining about delayed or inadequate complaint responses). However, it was rare for prisons to successfully deliver high-quality, consistent key work, and Boards widely reported that key work delivery was falling well below targets and that the quality of sessions varied considerably. Some prisoners told IMB members that they did not even know who their key worker was. Ashfield's key work programme,

however, was reported to be exceptionally successful, which likely contributed to the excellent staff-prisoner relationships seen at the prison.

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