



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

**For reporting year
1 March 2024 to 28 February 2025**

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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 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

HMP/YOI Low Newton, near Durham, opened in 1965 as a remand centre, with four wings holding young men up to 21 years of age and a discrete wing for women of all ages on remand and sentenced.

The prison was re-roled as a women's closed prison in 1998 when it was refurbished. It now consists of seven residential wings, with general prisoner-use areas, such as, for example, healthcare, education, gym and workshops.

One wing is for the induction of new prisoners. Another houses prisoners taking part in programmes designed to address mental health and personality disorders, in a psychologically informed planned environment (PIPE) pathway.

A third wing, which opened in 2022, consists of 24 individual modules within an outdoor area for low-risk prisoners who are judged ready for greater autonomy. A fourth wing is for prisoners serving longer sentences. Two other wings have recently been merged into one and this, plus two further wings, are for general purpose. There is a small care and separation unit, or CSU, where prisoners are segregated, with capacity for three prisoners.

HMP/YOI Low Newton holds women of all ages from 18 years upwards and includes those on remand and those who have been sentenced. It also includes women serving short sentences, those serving licence sentences and also restricted-status (high security) prisoners.

At the time of reporting, 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, known as the operational capacity, is 298¹.

The actual number of prisoners increased significantly during the reporting year to times when the prison was full and unable to take more prisoners, although this has not been the case now.

Most cells are single occupancy, with a small number of double occupancy cells. Adult prisoners and young offenders are integrated, and risk assessments are carried out before it is decided on which wing a young offender should be located.

Significant changes have been made to the senior management team during the reporting year. The team is developing the strategic view of the Governor, who was appointed in early 2024. There is an incentivised regime, offering substance-free wings and extra social activities to support rehabilitation, which is being further developed and is described in the body of this report.

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

- The Board believes that the prison is a reasonably safe environment for both prisoners and staff, although there have been a number of assaults in the reporting year.
- Severe mental ill health has been the main cause of many instances of self-harm and assaults.
- From the Board's observations, body worn video cameras (BWVCs) are used consistently and provide evidence in most adjudications.

Fair and humane treatment

- The accommodation is kept clean and recent improvements include carpets on the stairs, curtains and modesty boards in cells.
- The Board has seen improvements in transport services into the prison.
- Board members regularly observe constructive relationships between prisoners and staff.

Health and wellbeing

- The Board continues to be concerned about the significant number of prisoners with mental health problems and the need for some to be in quiet conditions in the care and separation unit.
- The healthcare team publishes monthly waiting times for various services and clinics, which are displayed on each wing.
- More evening activities have taken place, and more activities are being planned.
- The charity, Junction 42, continues to provide stress management through art and creative activities and the gym offers wellness sessions, via referral by the mental health team, and over 55s sessions.

Progression and resettlement

- Literacy is encouraged across the prison and each wing has a bookcase and books. Two charities regularly provide books to the library and Board members have seen how well they are received.
- The Board is still concerned about short sentences preventing meaningful work being done with some prisoners.
- Although it appears that accommodation on release is slightly easier to find this year and resettlement boards work towards every prisoner having accommodation, it is still the case that some are released without accommodation and are often recalled.

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- For some years, the IMB at HMP/YOI Low Newton has raised the issue of women presenting with severe mental ill health and challenging behaviour. Given the disruption this creates, the resources required to manage them and the toll this

takes on everyone around them, when can we expect that they will be re-directed to a more suitable environment, where assessment and treatment can be provided before they experience further deterioration?

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- For over two years, the IMB at HMP/YOI Low Newton has closely monitored transport of women into the prison. Since December 2024 and the appointment of a new Operations Governor, who was prepared to follow up on the Board's concerns, we have seen a marked improvement in how and when women are transported and in what condition. This has taken a sustained focus on the part of the staff and IMB members. Can we now expect that the improved level of service will continue and that women will be transported in decent and humane conditions?

TO THE GOVERNOR

- The last year has seen some welcome and necessary changes to the culture and regime in the prison. Now that the senior management team is entering a period of reflection and evaluation, will the Board be kept updated about areas of success and those areas where further work is needed?

3.3 Response to the last report

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
To the Minister		
Why so many severely mentally ill women continue to be sent to prison?	Liaison and diversion services provide a report to the court so that officials can make informed sentencing decisions. The MoJ is working with the Department of Health and Social Care to introduce a Mental Health Bill.	There has been an improvement in staffing in the healthcare team, which is working to implement the recommendations of the National Women's Prisons Health and Social Care Review.
To the Prison Service		
Funding for and installation of a body scanner.	The Body Scanner Policy Framework only applies to adult males. There is significant work at a national level to submit to the Minister to consider use in the women's estate.	The prison is supported by the regional dedicated search team and ad hoc support from the northeast area drug dog team, which is considered adequate to provide a safe environment.
How to improve custodial transport services.	There has been an overall improvement in performance. Use of hybrid vehicles allows for greater flexibility.	The prison has been monitoring late arrivals and ensure provision for women who arrive late, including health screening.

To the Governor		
Improving prisoners' access to healthcare and mental health support.		Healthcare now monitors waiting times.
Improving the Board's access to adjudications.	Different times and locations have been tried, with varying levels of success.	Recent months have shown improvements, and members are now monitoring adjudications regularly.

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

For over two years, the Board has had concerns about the conditions in which women are transported to the prison, reported weekly in monitoring reports. There has been a catalogue of incidents, ranging from verbal abuse from men being transported in the same van, cross-decking at other male establishments (removing women from the original transport in a sterile area and applying double handcuffs to move them onto another van for the onward journey to HMP Low Newton) and journeys taking six hours from a departure point only a few miles away, with some women arriving in a very distressed state. Often arrivals are late in the day, with the potential for a compromised induction and staff needing to stay after shift finishes to complete inductions for these women. Board members observe reception when we make monitoring visits to be updated on recent arrivals.

Board members have attended meetings with GeoAmey, the company responsible for prisoner transport, armed with this information but have been unsuccessful in achieving any change. With the appointment of a new Operations Governor, who has taken the matter very seriously, there is now a daily log of receptions and any incidents during the journey. They have been prepared to challenge the received wisdom as to what can be achieved, and the last three months of the reporting year have seen marked improvements. A report is presented to IMB Board meetings each month. The Board will continue to closely monitor future developments in this area.

The early days in custody team is a critical part of the first few days.

Reception is designed to create a smooth entry, with staff interviewing women and recording any concerns or risks of harm. Community and safety representatives meet new arrivals in reception and ensure they have a hot meal and shower. They also help to complete required information.

Welfare checks are conducted hourly overnight. The following morning, information is given on the Samaritans and Listeners scheme. Listeners are dedicated volunteers who perform a role contributing to safety.

Support in the early days is given by family workers and family support workers.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

In February, there was a death in custody, which was referred to the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). Support was offered by the chaplain, care team and trauma risk management (TRIM) practitioners to all involved. Likewise, Board members made a point of maintaining contact with any prisoners and staff affected by the death.

The following breakdown shows the number of assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) plans (used to support prisoners who are at risk of self-harm and suicide by developing a care plan) in the reporting period:

Mar 24	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24	Jul 24	Aug 24	Sep 24
32	21	28	27	34	19	35
Oct 24	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25		Total
33	29	25	28	26		337

There has been a fall in the number of prisoners supported by ACCTs this year which, at 337, is 24 below the previous year's total of 361.

Over the reporting period, there were no identifiable trends, as the number of ACCTs is stable, at an average of 28 per month. The reasons for a prisoner being supported by the ACCT process vary, from low mood and acts of self-harm (including low-level cutting) to mental health issues and more serious ligature use.

Some of the women supported by an ACCT are inextricably linked to both the use of force and incidents of violence.

A Board member frequently observes the weekly safety intervention meeting (SIM) and has evidenced that ACCTs are closely monitored by the safety team and relevant multi-disciplinary personnel. Good teamwork seems to exist where individuals' progress is discussed. Plans and action points are formulated, and outcomes are reviewed at the next meeting. This process ensures consistency and quality of care prevails.

In addition, the IMB also monitors ACCTs by observing individuals' ACCT documents and engaging with prisoners, following up when a need is identified.

The table below shows the number of incidents of self-harm:

Mar 24	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24	Jul 24	Aug 24	Sep 24
55	88	108	101	85	102	109
Oct 24	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25		Total
103	59	34	75	80		999

There has been a significant increase in the number of incidents of self-harm, from 704 deliberate self-harm incidents last year to this year's total of 999, an increase of 295. This appears to be closely linked to the poor mental ill health of many women.

The average number of incidents per month increased, from 59 in the last reporting period to 83 this year. However, during the last third of the year, this average has fallen to 62.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

The table below shows a breakdown and analysis of the acts of violence incidents in the reporting year:

Month	Assaults on staff	Prisoner-on-prisoner assaults	Fights
Mar 2024	5	1	2
Apr 2024	5	3	0
May 2024	10	6	0
Jun 2024	4	3	5
Jul 2024	11	4	4
Aug 2024	15	4	4
Sept 2024	5	6	0
Oct 2024	6	2	0
Nov 2024	1	0	0
Dec 2024	1	0	0
Jan 2025	4	2	0
Feb 2025	14	5	0
Total	81	36	15

There were 132 violent incidents during the reporting period, which was three more than the corresponding period last year. The number of assaults on staff, at 81, was the same as the previous year's level. Prisoner-on-prisoner assaults increased from 26 to 36, year-on-year. The number of fights fell, from 22 during the reporting year to 15 this year.

There were four months (May, July, August and February) when the number of assaults on staff went into double figures. This is attributed to repeat offenders – four individuals, on average. This cohort of violent prisoners has required staff to use control and restraint methods to prevent more serious injuries being sustained by both staff and prisoners.

When incidents are captured by body worn video cameras (BWVCs), the Board has evidenced that the control and restraint method has been proportionate. It is the Board's view that habitual acts of violence are down to a small number of individuals and that these women have complex issues, are unpredictable and do not respond to help that has been offered. The staff efforts in patience and understanding are commendable, in the Board's view.

The safety team responds quickly to individuals who pose a threat to fellow prisoners and staff by implementing the challenge, support and intervention plan (CSIP) process, which creates specific plans and objectives for each prisoner. Progress is reviewed at well attended safety intervention meetings.

4.4 Use of force

The table below shows the number of incidents when force has been necessary:

Mar 24	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24	Jul 24	Aug 24	Sep 24
13	24	53	25	23	25	13
Oct 24	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25		Total
25	7	5	42	49		304

The total number of incidents during the reporting year was 304, an increase of 24 over last year's total of 280. The main reasons for use of force were to prevent prisoners self-harming and non-compliance by refusing a direct order. Ligature was frequently used as a method of self-harm, as was low-severity cutting.

Several prisoners were categorised as prolific offenders by being involved in five or more incidents where use of force was necessary. This was highlighted during the final two months of the reporting year when two prisoners, whose violence in prison estimator (VIPER) ratings were high, accounted for most instances where force was necessary. One of these two prisoners was responsible during January and February 2025 for 45% and 48%, respectively each month, of all incidents where use of force was needed.

The effective use of BWVCs has significantly improved over the previous year where inconsistencies were evident. This year, 90% of all use of force incidents were captured and recorded at an early stage, which helped to establish the need to apply the necessary force. Prison management is striving to capture every incident.

At the weekly use of force (UoF) review meeting, which also acts as a development meeting for staff training, needs are identified and ongoing training is carried out and has been effective.

The Board member whose area of special interest (ASI) is safety frequently observes the weekly meeting and has evidenced the development and upskilling during the meeting attended by a multi-disciplinary team. All UoF camera footage is reviewed and helps create tailored scenarios for control and restraint (C&R) refresher courses. The safety

team collaborates with experts to ensure a trauma-informed approach for women with neurodivergent needs and mental health issues. This meeting seems to have positively impacted UoF delivery, increasing staff confidence in de-escalation and low-level C&R techniques. A Board member also observed vicarious trauma training (which equips those working with traumatised individuals with the knowledge and skills to recognise, manage and prevent secondary trauma) with some staff and is pleased to note that staff need is being met in this regard.

The Board has evidenced and is satisfied that, with all the incidents where the need for UoF was established, prisoners were given opportunities to comply, proportionate UoF was applied, and de-escalation took place.

Clear evidence shows that the number of prolific and repeat self-harmers accounted for a substantial number of incidents.

Number of incidents by prolific self-harmers:

Mar 24	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24	Jul 24	Aug 24	Sep 24
36	74	74	73	60	88	77
Oct 24	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25		Total
78	28	11	75	80		754

This demonstrates the effect that prolific self-harmers have on the overall number of self-harmers.

Number of prolific self-harmers per month – prolific being defined as five or more acts of self-harm in that period.

Mar 24	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24	Jul 24	Aug 24	Sep 24
3	5	5	6	5	7	6
Oct 24	Nov 24	Dec 24	Jan 25	Feb 25		Total
6	3	2	3	4		55

This concentrated group of individuals have complex mental health issues and there is often a need for them to be in a more suitable establishment than prison. However, from the Board's observations, the staff on site provide the best treatment and support they can and are to be commended on their efforts.

The prison's safety meetings, both weekly and monthly, are well attended. Solutions appear to be sought and tailored to individuals who are at risk and for all who are vulnerable, interventions take place and progress is monitored. ACCT quality assurance is active in monitoring vulnerable prisoners.

The safety team's strategic alignment with security and drug strategy departments is designed to help prevent harm and violence and create as safe an environment as possible.

In the Board's view, the prison needs to address two key development areas:

- (i) Whilst significant progress has been made on capturing incidents of use of force and violent assaults, it needs to record each and every one.

- (ii) The number of prisoners who are self-harming has increased substantially year-on-year. The Board would like to see this trend reversed.

The Board can substantiate, through observation and systematic monitoring, that HMP/YOI Low Newton has faced a major challenge from a small cohort of prisoners who are prolific in acts of violence and self-harm, which require use of force intervention.

The Board is satisfied that safety in HMP/YOI Low Newton is prioritised by the Governor and the senior management team and is cascaded down to all staff.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

The IMB routinely visits the wings as part of its monitoring regime and considers them to be mostly clean; orderlies (trusted prisoners who take on work to provide services that contribute to the running of the prison) undertake daily cleaning duties, and laundry workers work diligently to ensure all laundry is washed, dried and returned in a timely manner.

Most of the cells are single occupancy but some have been supplied with bunk beds for double occupancy; it has not been necessary to introduce double occupancy cells during the reporting year. As part of the prison priorities, work is underway to improve the decency of the cells as part of the lived experience.

The prison is now delivering a structured programme of social activities designed to support rehabilitative outcomes for women. Activities are intended to play a key role in dynamic security and contribute to a safer environment by fostering positive staff and prisoner relationships. Through meaningful engagement, social wellbeing is promoted and there are opportunities to encourage personal growth, stability and a sense of community in the prison. The canteen has had an area refurbished where some of these activities can now take place; prisoners have been involved in the refurbishment and contributed to decisions about the refurbishment and planned activities. The Board will continue to monitor these activities to evaluate their effectiveness and outcomes. The IMB has discussed with Governors how the prison intends to evaluate the success of these activities in the coming year.

The wing made up of modular units, which is for low-risk women and prisoners coming to the end of their sentences, continues to be popular and acts as an incentive for the women. Relationships observed by the IMB between staff and prisoners and between prisoners are positive. Several regular activities have been established and maintained such as 'knit and natter', leading to an improved living experience. Some wing staff support these activities.

The outdoor environment remains popular and is well used, weather permitting. The planting of flowers is refreshed seasonally, which adds to the pleasant environment.

Monthly meetings of the prisoner consultative committee (PCC), attended by wing representatives and the Governor, provide an opportunity to raise issues and work together to reach solutions. When these are observed by the IMB, there is evidence of good working relationships with prisoners on the PCC who hold officers to account for progress on issues in an informal and constructive atmosphere.

There is a shop where prisoners can buy personal items, including some clothing, if they have the money. Prisoners help to run the shop, known as Rags to Riches, and are observed to take an active part in identifying opportunities for improved sales across the year. The IMB regularly visits the shop and witnesses positive working relationships.

If a prisoner arrives at Low Newton with little in the way of clothing, they are given items from the stock of donations in reception.

There is also a café, open to staff and prisoners, known as R Café. This has been the subject of much discussion with the IMB over the reporting year, as there was much unmet potential, resulting in workers not having a good learning experience. The Governor agreed to refurbish the café, and it now operates on a tuck shop basis, with orders being delivered to the wings. The stock varies and has improved to include a range of snacks

and special offers. The prisoners working in the café were instrumental in its reincarnation and are to be congratulated.

Prisoners help prepare the food for other prisoners in the kitchen. They are trained in food safety and undertake a wide variety of activities; kitchen work can provide a basis for a career when released.

The kitchen manager surveys the prisoners, asking for their opinions about the food and other matters such as portion sizes, whether more healthy foods should be provided and suggestions for future menu choices. There is a well-established 'food group', which meets regularly, and there is a book where prisoners can add their comments. This is seen regularly by the Board; when last read by the IMB, there were many positive comments, using adjectives such as 'delicious' and 'fantastic' to describe the food.

IMB members visit the kitchen on each monitoring visit and find the food varied and of fair quality. When tasted, the food is found to be enjoyable. There is significant evidence of positive relationships in the kitchen, with prisoners enjoying the work.

The food offer is varied and caters for vegetarians and vegans. Prisoner concerns over the size of tea packs were taken seriously and are being monitored. The kitchen works with colleagues across the prison in order to meet the dietary needs of prisoners, with the healthcare unit also having some input.

During the reporting year, Ramadan was celebrated, with input from prisoners and the chaplaincy team. Other celebrations, including, for example, Easter, Black History Month and Diwali, were all catered for.

5.2 Segregation

The care and separation unit (CSU) consists of three cells. Recent efforts have been made to improve the environment, with the unit having been painted internally and externally with murals on the exercise yard walls. Prisoners are held here as punishment for as short a time as possible - rarely for more than 14 days, more often up to seven days.

The CSU is also sometimes used as a quiet area to give support to vulnerable prisoners. Data seen by the Board show that use of the unit increased, from 29 prisoners over 489 days (in 2023-2024) to 40 prisoners over 880 days (in 2024-2025). On each occasion, one prisoner has accounted for a significant number of days: 100 days in 2023-2024 and 208 days 2024 -2025. In each year, most prisoners in the unit fell into the 30-39 years age group.

During the reporting year, the CSU has housed several longer-term and more challenging prisoners

There is a core of allocated and trained staff who have experience in dealing with prisoners who present with challenging behaviour, often having to cope with prisoners with complex mental health needs. Staff are seen to work hard at building a rapport with prisoners and encouraging them to improve and control their behaviour. The staff are to be congratulated for their resilience and dedication.

IMB members are informed of all moves to the CSU and, where possible, visit that person as part of a monitoring visit. Subsequent good order or discipline (GOoD) reviews (where it is determined if the prisoner should remain segregated) are conducted by a Governor and attended by the relevant members of staff, including a healthcare representative, with all necessary information available.

Reviews that IMB members have been able to observe during the reporting year have been conducted fairly and in detail, with prisoners given ample opportunity to present their views.

Prisoners who are awarded cellular confinement at adjudication (reviews held to determine whether a prisoner has breached prison rules) but who cannot be accommodated in the CSU, due to its limited capacity, are located on landing cells. They are still managed by the CSU staff. Each case is risk-assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Board members make every effort to observe adjudications when making monitoring visits. Working with the Governor, arrangements have been reviewed and IMB attendance at adjudications, for monitoring purposes, has increased over the last half of the reporting year.

Monthly adjudication statistics are reviewed by members at Board meetings.

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships

Relationships between staff and prisoners are observed to be good; this is evident on monitoring visits undertaken by Board members.

Board members can see that wing staff have good knowledge of prisoners and are happy to share and advise when necessary. This is particularly helpful when visiting prisoners supported by an assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) plan.

Staffing changes or shortages can affect this, especially when cover staff are on duty, but this year has seen a significant drop in such incidences.

The Board member who monitors most of the monthly safety meetings and reports back to the Board continues to find that there is in-depth knowledge of the prisoners who are of concern and are discussed in detail at the meetings.

Whilst there have been some lockdowns, usually due to staff shortages, there have been fewer in this reporting year. They do, however, affect the opportunity to build and maintain effective relationships and, for some prisoners, can impact negatively on their mental health and general wellbeing.

5.4 Faith and pastoral support

The prison has a chapel and a multi-faith team of chaplains, led by a managing chaplain. The chapel is a light, airy room and is also used for meetings and celebrations of prisoners' achievements.

The prison population is predominantly of declared Christian or no faith, but there are also small numbers of other faiths, including Muslims and Pagans. Board members regularly meet chaplains going about their tasks on the prison wings.

Interactions observed by Board members between chaplaincy and prisoners is always positive and the team seem to be well received.

5.5 Incentives schemes

The incentives scheme is always under review to help improve prisoner behaviour and attitudes. The aim is to reduce the necessity to take things away from prisoners who do not comply and, instead, deny access to the better things available to prisoners on the standard and enhanced levels of the scheme. In the Board's view, the scheme is working well.

To this end, work is being done to improve the offer available to prisoners, such as group and evening social activities, increased association time and better accommodation (see description above).

A prisoner put on the basic (bottom) level of the incentives scheme, for example, might not have their TV removed but would not have access to the 'nicer' options that help improve prison life.

5.6 Complaints

At each of the monthly Board meetings, the Board receives a comprehensive set of data on complaints received by the prison during the month. This identifies the category of complaint; how many complaints were made by each wing; and which prisoners submitted the most complaints.

The report identifies any developing trends, which can be further interrogated; there are no concerning trends in the data. Board members use this data to compare its own observations and for a further, in-depth look at prison complaints, selecting, for example, one category of complaint or those made by one prisoner.

The IMB has started to review Comp 1 (ordinary complaint) forms to ensure compliance with policy and procedure. This review includes meeting with prisoners; thus far, most reports are dealt with within the statutory time limit of five working days.

5.7 Property

Reception continues to deal with prisoner property, but the Board does receive a limited number of applications about personal items, most of which are re-directed to reception. Prisoners are encouraged to speak to wing staff in the first instance.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

Health and wellbeing are at the heart of the Board's monitoring function at Low Newton. Board members are confident in engaging in discussions with prisoners about their wellbeing and, where necessary, will signpost them to appropriate support from across the prison.

The Board has formed positive relationships with both prisoners and officers, which helps the members to successfully progress issues concerning health and wellbeing. Prisoners and staff raise issues with the Board as necessary.

The new Governor and the senior management team (SMT) have introduced several new measures aimed at improving the general wellbeing of prisoners. These include such things as curtains and chairs in the cells and improvements to the internal environment. There are regular evening events to which prisoners on the enhanced level of the incentives scheme are invited. It is envisaged that prisoners who are subject to adjudications would have these evening privileges withdrawn.

Over the reporting year, healthcare staff retention has been at 97%. From December 2024 to February 2025, they retained 100% of staff. There are open vacancies for three registered general nurses and three healthcare support workers. However, there is access to regular bank staff, which ensures the shifts are covered.

In a recent healthcare survey conducted by the prison, 90.2% (37/41) of patients rated their experience of the healthcare service as either 'good' or 'very good'.

A patient handbook has been developed in consultation with a wide variety of prisoners, a copy of which will be given to new prisoners. It sets out the healthcare services available in the prison and how to access them. It also details what prisoners should expect at their health screening and provides space for prisoners to write notes, reminders and do puzzles. In addition, it explains what to expect on release.

Board members had some reservations during the year after hearing concerns about patient care raised by prison staff. However, now that a stable staff team is in place, the Board will continue to monitor and follow up any issues with the healthcare manager, with whom we have a very good working relationship.

Board members visit the healthcare unit on nearly every monitoring visit. There are usually several prisoners receiving in-patient care at any one time. Where possible, Board members try to engage with the prisoners, but this is not always possible, and they are not always responsive. Usually, prisoners are in-patients because they have serious mental health or behavioural issues. It seems to be the exception for a prisoner to be in the healthcare unit with what might be called general physical health needs.

Towards the end of the reporting year, palliative care has been provided for a terminally ill prisoner. Macmillan nurses attend her regularly, as do other professions in the prison, and opportunities for her friends from the wings to visit her have been arranged. Board members visit the prisoner on each monitoring visit.

6.2 Physical healthcare

The healthcare unit has some residential cells and facilities such as waiting and examination rooms. The unit is cleaned by prisoners, who seem to be proud of the work that they do. Outpatient services such as a GP, dentist or optician are provided on a regular basis, and the Board has no concerns about waiting times.

The healthcare unit has continued working closely with North East Prison Aftercare Society (NEPACS) to offer a robust process for families and carers. This is to make services seamless and provide relevant information and/or guidance, so families and carers remain a big part in the recovery/rehabilitation of the patients.

The healthcare unit has rolled out menopause clinics, developing a new patient booklet and working with the woman to help understand menopause in a prison setting.

Low Newton has been part of the Buvidal (a medicine used to treat dependence on opioid drugs such as heroin and morphine) roll out. Patients have benefited from this and are now requesting a change from methadone to Buvidal. This has seen an increase in compliance and avoids patients having to attend a local pharmacy to wait for methadone.

The prison has almost finalised its patient booklet. This has been done in partnership with the patients.

6.3 Mental health

The IMB engages well with members of the mental health team (MHT) and is supported when making enquiries. Collaboration with other stakeholders in the prison is a key feature of the work undertaken by the MHT.

Board members have had concerns for the past year about the number of prisoners presenting with severe mental ill health or severe behavioural issues. The healthcare unit or the CSU often proves to be the most appropriate place to locate them, as they provide quiet environments with caring staff who work as a team in dealing with the various issues with which they are presented.

Caring for severely ill prisoners requires all staff to work together to achieve the best possible outcome. The CSU and the healthcare unit now have a dedicated team of discipline staff, who have developed expertise and liaise with healthcare staff and the MHT. Some prisoners still require a move to a mental health bed in the community and waiting times for such a place have been lengthy.

Towards the end of the reporting year, the Board has noted that some prisoners are beginning to feel aggrieved that so much of staff time is spent supporting severely ill patients. These prisoners have been advised to collate their complaints and the Board will continue to monitor the situation.

It is clear that the prison is still, at times, being used as a place of safety for individuals with mental health needs.

Board members are also concerned about the necessary resources that may or may not be available in the community to support women who are released with such severe issues or in distress. Prisoners often voice concern to Board members about their worries over having no accommodation to go to. They also note worries about going to a hostel, which they fear may undo the work done in the prison on their recovery.

6.4 Social care

Later on in the reporting year, the prison developed a palliative care service for those prisoners who do not wish to use such services in the community.

Board members have noted the positive way prisoners support each other in times of crisis. They are supported by staff who, we note, are extremely knowledgeable about the prisoners and any issues they may be having.

6.5 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

The drug and alcohol rehabilitation team (DART) continues to offer a wide range of services each week at Low Newton. Prisoners working with the team are allocated their own co-ordinator, who provides individual support.

A Board member regularly observes the multi-disciplinary drugs strategy meetings and has noted close working relationships among the various departments. Whilst drugs' finds and positive drugs' tests continue, every effort is made to identify the substance and encourage prisoners into substance-free living. To this end, the prison has two incentivised substance free living (ISFL) wings, which fit with the new strategic vision of rewarding women for good behaviour rather than removing items. DART trains staff volunteers in the use of Naloxone (a treatment to reverse opioid overdose) and is extending this training to the families of prisoners. All prisoners are offered Naloxone on release and are referred to recovery services in their home areas.

In keeping with the prison's strategic vision, a drugs amnesty took place in December, when items were collected in complete confidence and securely disposed of.

6.6 Soft skills

The charity, Junction 42, continues their long-time association with the prison and offers creative arts and in-cell activities. They provide support in building social skills and confidence and in dealing with mental health issues. The charity provided 1400 distraction packs for World Mental Health Day, Christmas, International Women's Day and International Friendship Day. They worked with 174 course participants in workshops and in cells.

This year, a curating team from Low Newton, supervised by Junction 42 staff, put together an exhibition of art and poems from all the regional prisons and secure units, which have been submitted to the Koestler Awards for arts in criminal justice.

The exhibition, Almost Home, ran from mid-February to May 2025 in the Baltic arts venue in Gateshead. Board members have attended and were impressed both by the individual works and its curation. It was being well received in this prestigious venue. In the reporting year, HMP Low Newton won 18 Koestler Awards, including two platinum, one each of gold, silver and bronze, plus several highly commended awards. The prison has achieved Platinum Award status for the second year running and two pieces of work will feature alongside 200 pieces nationally in the Southbank exhibition in London.

A new trauma-informed yoga group with HOPE, a fledgling group partnering with psychology department, is starting. It will be interesting to for the Board to monitor this initiative over the coming year.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

The head of learning, skills and enterprise oversees all activities falling into these categories. Quality improvement group meetings take place on a regular basis to monitor provision. 'Learning walks', which are undertaken by senior education staff, ensure that all provision is in line with inspection and contractual requirements and that training needs are identified. The local education manager, employed by the contractor Novus, has been in post since October 2023 and oversees classroom activities.

Board members regularly visit the education department and engage with learners, who are positive about their experiences. Courses are offered in English and maths, ranging from Pre-entry Level up to Level 2. There was concern that, in the early release scheme in October, some prisoners missed completing qualifications both academic and vocational. But work is underway to mitigate this and ensure that prisoners who start a qualification can complete it before their release.

There are 80 prisoner places available, with a snapshot of one month (July 2024) showing attendance at 83%. There is outreach provision for hard-to-reach English and maths learners, with a caseload of nine learners at a time. February's annual supportive review detailed that behaviour and attitudes as extremely positive, as well as wider skills and reading skills development of learners. The focus in education is in the development of an understanding of extremism and radicalisation.

A workshop called 'Write on the Tyne' is running in the education department. It is based on mental wellbeing and the aim is that prisoners will have their work published.

Initial assessment levels are shown below, again highlighting the need to address literacy and numeracy issues for this population. To this end, there are now eight prisoner mentors from the charity, the Shannon Trust, to assist with reading.

Prison population	274					
Initial assessment level	English	%	Maths	%	Digital	%
Pre-entry	6	2%	5	2%	0	0%
Entry Level 1	14	5%	13	5%	0	0%
Entry Level 2	49	18%	59	22%	0	0%
Entry Level 3	80	29%	121	44%	0	0%
Level 1	67	24%	36	13%	0	0%
Level 2	31	11%	21	8%	0	0%
Level 3 and above	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
No score	27	10%	19	7%	274	100%

The library is at the forefront of the promotion of literacy across the prison. A book club is being organised on the wing housing longer-term prisoners. If successful, it will be rolled out to other wings.

The library provides a wide selection of books for all wings to keep and share between learners. This allows everyone the opportunity to have access to books, even if they cannot access the library.

The charity, First Nighters, delivers books on a regular basis. This ensures that everyone coming into the induction wing has access to a book. Their stock is also topped up regularly from library wing stock.

'Bistro Books' in the education department gives learners who attend education the opportunity to borrow books. From the Board's observations, communication between the library and the education department is excellent and tutors always provide feedback regarding book requests and suggestions from learners.

Library staff closely monitor attendance to identify any problems and report this to the Governor and the senior management team weekly. A library report is also produced monthly, which provides feedback on loans, the number of visitors to the library, stock checks, incentives and challenges.

There is a weekly reading group session in the library. This is for readers who are progressing through the Shannon Trust. Several learners, who have since left, made excellent progress in terms of their confidence and ability.

The charity, Borderline, is a huge support to the library. Learners frequently write, asking for books and Borderline is happy to help.

The enrichment calendar is used to help plan events and incentives. Displays over the past year have included Holocaust Memorial Day, World Book Day, Women's History Month and International Women's Day.

Work parties, including waste management, gardens, industrial cleaning services (ICS) and the enterprise workshop have their own designated library slot and attend regularly. This is proving to be very popular with learners and allows them more opportunities to exchange books and enjoy quiet reading time.

7.2 Vocational training and work

The workshop team has been looking for orders to replace the Ocado contract, which has come to an end. They have attended several fairs, both locally and in London, to find companies prepared to place orders. Interest has been shown by companies but no contract has yet materialised. Prisoners are working on hessian bags, dog coats and accessories to be sold in local farm shops.

The gym continues to be popular, offering a range of courses. Recent qualifications in the gym so far this year (2025) include a Level 1 group of six women who have each achieved Level 1 Fitness and Physical Activity, Level 1 in Emergency First Aid at Work and Level 2 in Manual Handling.

The Level 1 to 3 gym courses include a first aid qualification. These courses help equip prisoners for future employment. Staff strive to ensure that women will have sufficient time to complete their course before release.

Staff training in First Aid at Work and Emergency First Aid at Work has also been delivered to staff.

Two women completed the Level 2 Personal Trainer qualification and have now progressed to Level 3. One of the women is now a full-time gym mentor.

Completing the Level 3 Personal Trainer qualification has enabled one prisoner to set up her own business following her recent release, and she has already attracted 10 clients.

7.3 Offender management and progression

Staff continue to identify poor literacy skills and can refer prisoners to appropriate help.

A Keywork steering group takes place on a regular basis and completions are reviewed each day at the morning briefing, which the IMB regularly observes. This allows for trends to be identified and challenged. In the three months to the end of the reporting year, 1235 sessions have been delivered; sessions are delivered on a bi-weekly basis.

The prison has also prioritised the quality of sessions being recorded on the digital prison system (DPS) by implementing the CRISS (check in, review, implement, summarise and set tasks) model and providing ongoing support and guidance to staff. As a result, the offender management unit (OMU) has drastically improved its score on the performance hub capacity and has almost reached women's estate expectations.

Although numbers remain small, there are release on temporary licence (ROTL) opportunities for some prisoners, and the prison continues to seek more such places. Of particular interest to the Board has been the introduction of a ROTL post for a prisoner to drive other prisoners to their place of employment. On return, she works with NEPACs staff in their premises until it is time to return to collect the other prisoners. The prison has placed an enormous trust in this prisoner and in making the position work. Board members regularly speak to the driver who is always enthusiastic about her role and is proving to be a credit to the establishment.

Over the reporting year, there have been 861 receptions into HMP/YOI Low Newton and 794 releases. Given the much smaller capacity of the prison, these figures would seem to evidence the revolving door. The table below shows length of stay in the prison, identifying the comparatively high number of short sentences. The Board questions how much useful work can be carried out with this cohort.

Length of stay: sentenced prisoners only	18-20 year olds	%	Age 21 years and over	%
Less than 1 month	2	0.8%	44	16.7%
1 month to 3 months	1	0.4%	37	14%
3 months to 6 months	0	0.0%	30	11.4%
6 months to 1 year	1	0.4%	32	12.1%
1 year to 2 years	0	0.0%	24	9.1%
2 years to 4 years	0	0.0%	18	6.8%
4 years or more	0	0.0%	19	7.2%
Total	4	1.5%	204	77.3%

There is still concern about prisoners leaving prison with no settled accommodation.

Two Board members observed the first of the early release days in October, in the reception area, and were impressed by the prior planning and organisation to release 23 prisoners on that day. All but one had accommodation; the woman who did not was recalled within a couple of days.

NEPACs hosts the 'departure lounge' in their premises immediately outside the prison and offers all kinds of support to prisoners on release. They can offer transport assistance, often providing comprehensive directions for prisoners' journeys. They have food and clothes bags and, in some cases, phones with SIM cards to offer a starting point for prisoners on release. NEPACs have staff also expressed concern about those who have no accommodation to go to.

Board members visit frequently and are impressed by the knowledge NEPACS staff have of individuals and their needs. NEPACS also has family support workers and play workers to help during social visits and family visits. It is of concern to the Board that two of the staff may not have the funding for their role to be extended beyond March 2025.

7.4 Family contact

A family engagement co-ordinator with NEPACS continues to support family contact, social visits and family days.

The prison family lead has provided an update of the work that is done to support prisoners' families. The Tea Bar in the visits' area has produced profits, which have been reinvested into this support, ranging from buffets for special visits, craft activities, relocation of the at-risk line to ensure that anyone can speak to a person at any time of day and prepared bags for family liaison officers when they need to work with a family during a difficult time. The Board is especially pleased to note Storybook Mums is flourishing, with a chosen book being sent out to children whose mum is recording the story for them.

7.5 Resettlement planning

At the beginning of 2025, the head of offender management and the north east women's lead were tasked with organising an event to look at pre-release and the barriers to reducing reoffending (accommodation, education, training and employment, health, drugs and alcohol). Teams from the prison, probation services and the community attended, along with drug and alcohol services, the police and crime commissioners and out-of-area services. This resulted in an action plan to improve offers and cross-agency collaboration. It will be interesting to monitor the effectiveness of these new and improved relationships over the next reporting year.

The Board continues to have concerns about prisoners serving short sentences and not having the opportunity to engage with any meaningful work or to make appropriate plans for release.

The pre-release team, led by a senior probation officer, has continued the work started 12 months ago and holds resettlement boards, with various disciplines providing input; now, most importantly, the prisoner attends and is encouraged to participate. A Board member recently observed resettlement boards and was encouraged to see that not only accommodation but referral to several community agencies addressing substance misuse and mental health issues were thoroughly discussed; prisoners were encouraged to provide feedback, which they were assured would be read and acted on. Contributions are made by the education and healthcare departments and prisoners will have started the process of applying for a bank account and to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for appropriate welfare benefits.

Apparently, access to accommodation is now a little easier than last year in some parts of the region. The DART team also has access to community referrals and most prisoners with a need to address substance misuse have an appointment with a counsellor.

The resettlement team organises a monthly resettlement market, which can be attended by up to 50 agencies. Some local authorities attend and women can complete applications for housing, which can start to be processed before release. Agencies offering support for substance misuse, women's refuge, training and third-sector agencies attend and will start

the process of working with the women or simply provide a means of accessing support in future.

The Board considers that this comprehensive approach to resettlement is vital to a successful transition into the community and is offering prisoners the best chance to succeed. That said, there are still women whose lives are so chaotic that further offences will be committed and a return to prison becomes inevitable.

Junction 42 has also continued their resettlement and community work facilitating community volunteers and services in prison. This has resulted in 17 gate pickups, 156 prisoners provided with pre-release support and 130 engaged with community supp, leading to 881 hours of community support. Board members regularly visit and see for themselves the effort that goes into the services being provided by this charity.

8. The work of the IMB

Two new members have completed their training and are now operating independently. A further new member joined the Board at the end of 2024. Two members are still dual boarding, which means they are members of IMBs at other prisons in the area.

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	6
Number of Board members at the end of reporting period	7
Total number of visits to the establishment	234

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	2	4
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	3	0
C	Equality	2	2
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	0	4
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	6	3
E2	Finance including pay, private monies, spends	4	2
F	Food and kitchens	6	5
G	Health, including physical, mental and social care	10	9
H1	Property within the establishment	5	3
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	1	0
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	0	0
I	Sentence Management, including HDC (home detention curfew), ROTL (release on temporary licence), parole, release dates, recategorisation	6	1
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	10	11
K	Transfers	1	1
L	Miscellaneous	9	0
	Total number of applications	65	45*

*Three prisoners accounted for 22 of these applications.



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at imb@justice.gov.uk