



# **Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP/YOI Thorn Cross**

**For reporting year  
1 May 2024 to 30 April 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 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**

HMP/YOI Thorn Cross is a men's open prison (HMP) and young offender institution (YOI) situated on the outskirts of south Warrington, in Appleton Thorn, Cheshire. The operational capacity is 429<sup>1</sup> (the maximum number of prisoners that can be held without serious risk to safety, security, good order and the proper running of the prison). The prisoners are housed in eight units for category D prisoners nearing the end of their sentence. This also includes those serving life and indeterminate imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentences (with no set release date) who are nearing parole. The objective is successful rehabilitation into the community and, therefore, reducing reoffending. The establishment has several workshops on site, with opportunities for training and rehabilitation.

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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**

- Thorn Cross remains a safe establishment, with low levels of violence and no incidents of self-harm.
- Illicit items continue to be brought in and found at Thorn Cross, with steroid misuse being a concern.
- The number of assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) documents, used to support prisoners who are at risk of self-harm and suicide, and challenge, support and intervention plans (CSIPs), used to support and manage prisoners who pose an increased risk of violence, have increased. This is largely due to a proactive approach from the senior management team, who encourage staff to use CSIPs as a supportive measure.

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

- Relationships observed are positive and supportive.
- Accommodation is of an acceptable standard, with provision being made for men with specific needs.
- The kitchen is inadequate for the size of the prison.

##### **Health and wellbeing**

- Health provision is good, as reflected by the consistently low levels of complaints.
- Prisoners have good access to GPs, dental services and additional services such as podiatrists and opticians.
- Support available for those with drug and alcohol dependency is excellent.
- Mental health support remains a priority and has been rebranded 'wellbeing' to reduce any stigma. Nevertheless, engagement challenges remain.

##### **Progression and resettlement**

- There is a strong rehabilitative culture across all areas of the prison.
- Education and training provision is tailored to the needs of the men.
- There has been a notable increase in the number of men working in the community.

#### **3.2 Main areas for development**

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

- What plans are there to reduce the number of men serving imprisonment for public protection sentences? (7.3.2)

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

- When will the coverage provided by CCTV be improved? (4.5.4)
- What plans are there to replace the Sycamore course with another restorative justice programme? (5.5.2)

- What is being done to reduce the number of men who arrive without their medication? (6.1.8)
- A new building was almost complete when it had to be demolished because there were so many faults with it. What lessons have been learnt to prevent this happening again? (7.3.4)
- What plans are there to introduce in-cell phones? (7.4.3)

### **TO THE GOVERNOR**

- How is the work of the unit for men serving long sentences to be evaluated? (5.1.2)
- What plans are there to ensure there are adequate numbers of skilled cleaners? (5.1.4)
- Are the current arrangements for prisoner consultation through consultative committees and the Queensland meeting as effective as they could be? (5.3.2)
- What plans are there to increase the opening hours of the gym in the evenings and at weekends? (6.5.4)
- What steps have been put in place to ensure that men are not incorrectly released? (7.3.3)

### **3.3 Response to the last report**

<b>Issue raised</b>	<b>Response given</b>	<b>Progress</b>
To look again at the re-sentencing of IPP prisoners.	Re-sentencing is not taking place, but the sentence has been reformed by bringing to end the licence period earlier for those prisoners.	1,742 licences were terminated automatically on 1 November 2024 and approximately 600 are being referred to the parole board to consider termination as part of the provisions of the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024.
To develop more robust ways of monitoring building projects.	Problems with the OMU building were identified through assurance processes that are in place.	No additional assurance processes have been put in place, so it is unclear how this will be prevented in the future.
To ensure that body worn video cameras (BWVCs), with a pre-record function, are used in every instance where force is used, and that the footage continues to be reviewed as part of ongoing training.	BWVCs have been fully embedded, and use is routinely monitored. Footage is viewed as part of the use of force (UoF) committee and learning/training points taken.	BWVCs used for all incidents of UoF.

<p>To reduce the number of staff who are overdue control and restraint (C&amp;R) training.</p>	<p>Almost 90% of staff have now completed C&amp;R training.</p>	<p>94% of band 3 staff and 100% of band 4 staff have been trained.</p>
<p>To monitor any benefits to the men and the prison from the introduction of the incentivised substance free living (ISFL) unit.</p>	<p>Swab testing takes place twice a month, with very few positive results. These men later give negative results following a period of additional support and intervention.</p>	<p>Positive results remain low (1% in March 2025).</p>
<p>To provide better facilities for those men who wish to cook their own meals and allow men to use the kitchen facilities on unit 8.</p>	<p>A food review is taking place. Facilities for men to cook for themselves on unit 8 should soon be in operation.</p>	<p>Health and safety advice is still being sought. The kitchen on unit 8 is now open.</p>
<p>To improve the completion of adjudication records, especially where the sanction given falls outside those recommended.</p>	<p>New tariffs are set and published. The Deputy Governor completes a 10% quality assurance of all adjudications.</p>	<p>Monitoring shows an improvement in documenting when there is a departure from tariffs. Additional guidance is provided for cases that are not proceeded with.</p>
<p>To establish a planned programme of decoration for residential units.</p>	<p>An action plan has been created. The Regeneration Team has increased staffing from men and staff. A programme is in place for redecoration and renovations of units.</p>	<p>The inside of three units have been decorated, along with other measures, e.g. new carpets.</p>
<p>To interrogate the data collected by the equalities action team more thoroughly and use it to inform future planning.</p>	<p>Trends are looked for within all data, and where there are areas of possible concern, these are scrutinised by the safety and equalities team.</p>	<p>More work to be done to improve sharing of data.</p>
<p>To continue to reduce the number of men who do not turn up</p>	<p>Do not attends (DNAs) have reduced, and further work is being completed between healthcare and</p>	<p>The DNA rate remains around 13%.</p>

for their healthcare appointments.	residential managers to ensure notices of appointments are given out in a timely fashion.	
To develop mental health provision.	This is still in development. Mental health is now known as 'wellbeing'.	There has been a positive effect on engagement.
To improve outcomes for those following English and maths courses.	Additional staff support, increased use of mentors and out-of-class workbooks have been provided. 'English through Employment' is now being delivered.	Increase of 2% in outcomes. Staff support continues.
To develop more opportunities for men working in the community to work in construction /painting and decorating.	This has been identified as a priority. Some construction companies are now providing employment for the men, some of whom have secured jobs on release. More construction courses are planned.	Links have been created with two big construction firms. The scaffolding course continues and some men have been able to secure work through their own contacts.



## Evidence sections 4 – 7

### 4. Safety

#### 4.1 Reception and induction

4.1.1 During the reporting year, the prison has seen a significant fluctuation in the population, largely due to the Early Release Scheme, with an increased number of weekly inductions for new prisoners in the latter part of the year. A review has been completed by the prison to improve the first impressions of the prisoner journey.

4.1.2 Induction arrangements have been reviewed and improved to aim for closer monitoring of the men in their first few weeks. New arrivals continue to mainly be placed on unit 6. This allows close monitoring and support to be provided to ensure prisoners can adjust to open conditions. With the development of a new 'deep custody' unit, appropriate prisoners are sometimes placed directly there. From unit 6, the men will then move to unit 7, again in double rooms, where they remain for up to three months.

4.1.3 Prisoner feedback regarding the induction process is generally good and many men report they are content and pleased to be at Thorn Cross.

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

4.2.1 There have been no incidents of self-harm during this reporting year. The number of ACCT (assessment, care in custody and teamwork) documents opened remains relatively low, but there has been an increase this reporting year. Thorn Cross has had a significant increase in the use of CSIPs (challenge, support and intervention plans), which has been attributed to an increase in training for staff and because staff are encouraged to open them as a supportive measure. During the reporting year, 21 CSIPs were opened (3 x bullying; 3 x behaviour; 15 x support).

Period	May 22-April 23	May 23-April 24	May 24-April 25
Number of self-inflicted deaths	0	0	0
Number of self-harm incidents	1	0	0
Number of deaths in custody	0	0	0
Number of ACCTs opened	1	1	5

4.2.2 No deaths in custody have occurred at Thorn Cross since 2020. A Coroner's Court hearing was completed at the end of October 2024, following a death in custody in 2019. No failings were identified from the establishment and the cause of death was not ascertained. Staff training appears good, with eight members of staff ACCT assessor trained. Enhanced Risk Meetings and Safety Intervention Meetings (SIMs) run weekly, while a tripartite meeting, jointly covering safer custody, security and drug strategy, is held monthly. This meeting has a clear agenda and action plan and allows efficient information sharing and communication.

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

4.3.1 Although there has been an increase in the number of reported violent incidents, the level remains very low. There were no incidents of self-isolation. A prisoner forum has been held, which reported that the establishment was a safe environment. This supports the Board's own observations.

Period	May 2022 – April 2023	May 2023 – April 2024	May 2024- April 2025
No. of incidents of bullying	0	0	3
No. self-isolating for own protection	0	0	0
No. of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults	2	1	4
No. of assaults on staff	0	0	0

### 4.4 Use of force

4.4.1 The use of force continued to reduce significantly since the 2022-2023 reporting year. Most instances involved the use of rigid bar cuffs (23 out of 25) whilst escorting prisoners where there may have been a risk of abscond. There has been an increase in use of force for non-compliance, which will need to be monitored for any further increase.

4.4.2 Control and restraint, plus PAVA (an incapacitant spray) training has improved significantly this year, with over 97% of staff up to date with training.

4.4.3 There are now 42 body worn video cameras (BWVCs) available to staff. A minimum of 14 are carried each day, with all band 3-5 staff required to carry one.

Period	May 2022 – April 2023	May 2023 – April 2024	May 2024- April 2025
Total number of use of force incidents	82	52	25

Number of uses of force to prevent abscond during escort	81	52	15
Number of uses of force due to non-compliance by a prisoner	1	0	4

## 4.5 Preventing illicit items

4.5.1 Improving detection and disrupting the supply of illicit items have remained key intelligence objectives. There has been a drive to improve the quality and quantity of Intelligence reports from staff over the past 12 months and to increase the number of reports that have been supported by staff training sessions.

4.5.2 Mandatory drug tests (MDTs) continue within the establishment. Reception MDTs were introduced as a new initiative in January 2025. All men have an MDT within 48 hours of arrival. This is partly to highlight drug usage from sending prisons and to allow Thorn Cross to offer prompt drug support to any prisoner testing positive. The number of MDTs performed this reporting year has fallen, despite the addition of reception testing. This is because testing numbers were reduced from 10% of the prison population to 5% this year. The percentage of positive tests has risen and although the cause for this is not certain, the prison population crisis may mean that men are being transferred before they are ready for open conditions.

<b>MDTs</b>	<b>Number of tests May 2023- April 2024</b>	<b>Number of positives May 2023- April 2024</b>	<b>Number of tests May 2024- April 2025</b>	<b>Number of positives May 2024-April 2025</b>
Reception tests- Introduced January 2025	N/A	N/A	89	21
Random tests	336	45	260	43
Suspicion tests	65	31	39	28
Risk tests	178	21	108	19
Test totals	579	97	496	111

4.5.3 Cocaine and cannabis were the most widely detected drugs on MDTs, with ketamine starting to be found. Intelligence reports, along with drug finds, suggest that steroid misuse is highly prevalent. In April 2025, a steroid awareness and 'clean' training day was held in the gym foyer, in conjunction with The Hepatitis C Trust.

Positive drug testing is assessed on an individual basis and a personalised assessment forms the basis of action. Support is widely offered through drug and alcohol support services. An incentivised substance free living (ISFL) unit has been open for just over a year, which aims to aid men with a history of drug use to remain drug free.

4.5.4 Illicit items continue to be found on a regular basis from a combination of ad hoc finds, targeted searches from intelligence reports and random searches. Mobile phones and drugs are regularly found on site, with most findings being in communal areas on units. There have been numerous requests from the prison over the last 18 months for the number of CCTV cameras to be increased.

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

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

5.1.1 Nearly all the accommodation is of a good standard and is predominantly single occupancy. On arrival, men are placed in a double cell, which the Board continues to feel is too small. Fortunately, they are seldom there for longer than a month and although they usually continue having a shared cell on another unit, it is much larger. One unit has 44 single rooms, each with its own ensuite and heating and was introduced during Covid, with planning permission for 12 weeks. This has never been extended and, with retrospective planning permission refused, it has to be removed by 2026-27. There are plans in place to increase capacity from pre-Covid levels and although this expansion has been talked about for two years, not a single spade has been dug into the ground.

5.1.2 In addition to the incentivised substance free living unit opened in the last reporting year, another unit is now dedicated to men who are nearing the end of lengthy sentences and who are likely to find the transition to release more problematic. There are plans to provide bespoke provision for veterans. The pressures on the prison population have meant that the prison rarely has spaces.

5.1.3 The 'Regen' team is a group of skilled prisoners who carry out various maintenance tasks throughout the estate.

5.1.4 The units are usually clean and tidy. Cleaners are poorly paid, so the men often leave that job for better paid ones or, as the number of men working in the community increases, they obtain work outside the prison leading to a shortage. Some men have volunteered to keep their unit clean, but a longer-term solution needs to be found. Some units have started to look tired on the outside.

5.1.5 We have previously reported on how the quality of the food is impacted by the size of the kitchen: it is too small for the current capacity, let alone for the planned increase. Some of the equipment is old. A new kitchen is promised before any extra men are accepted and although different options have been discussed for some time, no one has yet decided how this will be achieved. Some of the food trolleys are in a poor state of repair and it is unclear who has the budget for their maintenance. After some time with staff in temporary positions, permanent appointments have been made, thus stabilising staffing. There are sufficient menu choices, and the menu is reviewed at suitable intervals, incorporating suggestions from the men.

5.1.6 There are some men working outside the prison who are leaving and/or arriving outside of the usual mealtimes and the provision that is made for them is often inadequate. Men who have been returning from work in the evening have been told they can buy a hot meal before their return but they cannot bring the food into the prison. There have been instances where the men have had to eat their dinner on the minibus whilst travelling back to the prison. This is unsatisfactory and it is pleasing to see that, towards the end of the reporting year, men have been allowed to bring their meal into the prison to eat in a more dignified setting with dining/association rooms remaining open.

### **5.2 Segregation**

5.2.1 As an open prison, Thorn Cross does not have a care and separation unit (CSU), where men may be held for several days. Instead, there are four cells at one

end of unit 6. The men who are placed in them are returned to a closed prison, usually within four hours.

5.2.2 Training has been given to all adjudicators to try and ensure that similar outcomes are reached in similar cases and that better records are kept. Regular scrutiny shows that the training has had some effect. Where adjudicators feel it is in the interests of justice to depart from the suggested sanction, the reasons for this are being better documented

5.2.3 The number of adjudications has risen from 230 in 2022-2023 to 435 in 2023-2024 and to 518 in 2024-2025. This is a worrying trend, with most adjudications being for possession of phones and drugs. There have been improvements in the reporting of security concerns and more intelligence-led searches. The number of men returned to closed conditions, however, has fallen from 79 in 2022-2023, 107 in 2023-2024 to 57 for the reporting year 2024-2025. Some staff attribute the rise in adjudications to more men arriving who have not been thoroughly tested in closed conditions and are not ready for the freedoms and implicit trust of an open prison. The reluctance to return many men indicates that the prison is willing to work with the men to improve their compliance.

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

5.3.1 Interactions between the men and the staff have been observed on a weekly basis: they are invariably constructive, polite and frequently good humoured. There is a strong rehabilitative culture that runs through Thorn Cross and the relationships observed reflect this.

5.3.2 During the last reporting year, the Prison Council was replaced by consultative committees for the different functions of the prison, e.g. residence, safety and equality. A quarterly 'Queensland' meeting is held, with the Governing Governor present, which addresses any outstanding matters remaining unresolved after consultative committees. The men have told the Board that they don't know who their representatives are at these various meetings and some of the representatives have spoken to us and reported that meetings seem to be called at short notice, making preparation difficult. It is difficult to locate agendas and minutes of these meetings both for the Board and for the men. Men are asked for their views in several ways (such as food surveys, for example), but the formal structures appear somewhat haphazard.

### **5.4 Equality and diversity**

5.4.1 Meetings used to be held for each of the protected characteristics, but they were poorly attended. The Governor lead for equalities has changed yet again, has merged the separate meetings into one and has set out the dates for these meetings for the 2025 calendar year.

5.4.2 Data seen by the Board, showing the time taken to be approved for Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) and for the men having paid work in the community, show no significant difference in terms of ethnicity.

5.4.3 Black History Month saw a variety of events, as did International Women's Day and LGBTQ+ History Month.

5.4.4 Men can report incidents of discrimination via a reporting form (DIRF). Two were received in the reporting year: one regarding race and the other concerning religion.

## **5.5 Faith and pastoral support**

5.5.1 The Chaplaincy is housed in a bright and welcoming environment that comprises a multi faith room, a chapel and meeting rooms. The Chaplaincy arranges many services and events throughout the year and supports many men, irrespective of faith.

5.5.2 For many years, the Chaplaincy has provided the 'Sycamore' course, based on the principles of restorative justice, which has proved successful and popular. This course has now had its funding removed by the Ministry of Justice. The Governing Governor supported the final cohort to complete the programme.

5.5.3 Ramadan was celebrated with additional prayer sessions and food being prepared by the men and available at sunset. These efforts were well received by the men.

## **5.6 Incentives schemes**

5.6.1 The 'ambassador' scheme has been introduced, which aims to reward men beyond the enhanced level of the incentives scheme. Almost all the men who arrive at Thorn Cross have achieved enhanced status. To attain ambassador level, the men must go above and beyond and be actively serving the Thorn Cross community through voluntary work. After a slow start, 15 men had achieved this by the end of the reporting period.

## **5.7 Complaints**

5.7.1 Nearly all complaints are answered within the set time and replies are actively chased when this doesn't happen. Replies to the complaints are courteous and in appropriate language. Most complaints continue to be about concerns over Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). It often remains the case that men are reluctant to put in a written application to the IMB or through the prison's complaints process, in case it is held against them. This has been a long-standing perception, although there is no evidence to support this.

## **5.8 Property**

5.8.1 Men who are returned to closed conditions leave the prison quickly and there isn't enough time to gather their property and send it with them. The Board remains of the view that it still takes too long for a prisoner's property to follow them. The men's property is stored safely and is accessible when they are on ROTL.

## **6. Health and wellbeing**

### **6.1 Healthcare general**

6.1.1 In April 2024, Practice Plus Group (PPG) took over from GMMH (Greater Manchester Mental Health) as the new healthcare provider. From the Board's observations, the quality of healthcare service provision under PPG continues to be good. This is evidenced by the very small number of complaints (only three over the reporting year) and the consistently positive responses on feedback forms (from 84 patients, 94.1% reported a positive experience during last quarter).

6.1.2 A tracking database has been developed to monitor patient experience at Thorn Cross more closely. The healthcare team are provided with monthly feedback.

6.1.3 Bi-monthly health forums provide a face-to face option for men to voice their concerns or needs around provisions. These feed into plans for service improvements.

6.1.4 The mental health provider remains GMMH. Drug and alcohol rehabilitation has been rebranded SMS (Substance Misuse Service) and amalgamated with the healthcare centre. Time for Teeth still provides dental services.

6.1.5 Staff cover has varied throughout the year, with regular agency staff used to fill vacancy shortfalls to minimise any impact on clinical services.

6.1.6 The local delivery board reliably meets every quarter to assess and evaluate provision. Actions are robustly followed up. The meeting includes representation. Despite being invited to every meeting, the health and justice commissioning manager and local authority lead have not attended in recent times.

6.1.7 Pharmacy services, including medication reviews, are shared with HMP Risley. This means prisoners benefit from access to a pharmacist, or pharmacy technician, five days a week. Medicines are administered in a safe and confidential manner, but dispensing queues can be lengthy. To mitigate this, a TRAKA-type dispensing system with secure lockers is being considered.

6.1.8 The number of men being transferred without medication is increasing (five or six cases per month). These situations are typically resolved quickly to minimise impact on the men (through use of taxis, etc). However, this trend is worrying and is being closely monitored by healthcare management.

### **6.2 Physical healthcare**

6.2.1 Despite the prison population increasing, PPG has reduced weekly GP sessions from five to four. To mitigate the impact of this on GP wait times, an advanced nurse practitioner (ANP), who can prescribe, has recently been appointed. A nurse triaging system was also introduced this year to improve efficiency and help with waiting times. Urgent cases are seen immediately. However, prison population pressures and expansion plans will ensure that pressures on waiting times remain.

6.2.2 In addition to the GP and nurses, men have access to a range of additional health professionals including a physiotherapist, dietician, podiatrist and optician. Further services include ultrasounds, diabetic retinal screenings, X-rays and abdominal aortic aneurysm screening.



6.2.3 Under PPG, healthcare nurses administer the Substance Misuse Service medications. Targeted recruitment and training have ensured this is working well for the men. Effective communication with the offender management unit ensures new receptions are monitored to avoid any issues with late arrivals.

6.2.4 This year has seen a welcome initiative to increase staff numbers trained in Naloxone (a medication used to reverse an opioid overdose) delivery, including 'train the trainer' sessions. Nasal Naloxone is now available on every unit, and this has already proved life-saving during a drug-taking incident this year when a prisoner was found unresponsive. Unit supplies are promptly re-stocked after use. Men to whom it applies are offered a Naloxone kit on release.

6.2.5 Non-attendance at appointments (DNAs) remain a constant challenge for management and impacts on wait times due to re-booking (DNA rates have ranged from 22% to 13% this year). Research suggests men forget or are late for appointments. Management remains committed to improving DNA rates, ensuring timely notice of and chasing up of missed appointments. The impact of the increasing number of men working in the community on DNA rates is acknowledged and healthcare liaises with the reducing reoffending team in this regard.

6.2.6 Successful transition on release is supported, with healthcare registering a prisoner with a GP prior to release and providing a minimum of seven days' medication to take with them.

6.2.7 Dental services provision is very good, as reflected in men's positive feedback, with no complaints recorded this year. DNAs are high, but waiting lists remain short (typically 9-12 days). The dentist works two days a week and a hygienist works one day a week. Men are encouraged to register with a dentist before leaving and are given an information leaflet explaining how to do this.

### **6.3 Mental health**

6.3.1 The drive to improve mental health provision, awareness and engagement continues. Representatives from the mental health team now attend the SMT (senior management team) meetings and sessions have been provided to improve staff awareness.

6.3.2 To reduce stigma, mental health has been re-branded as 'wellbeing'. The mental health team are now based on a unit rather than in healthcare and operate an 'open door' policy. The team link up with Induction, the Chaplaincy, Education and the offender management unit, as well as visiting units to promote the support offered. The men on the new Deep in Custody unit, for men approaching the end of long sentences, have been asked what support they would like.

6.3.3 The Mental Health team have visited Buckley Hall to see which aspects of their provision could be introduced at Thorn Cross. As a result, external providers, 'Intuitive Thinking' and the 'Big Life Group', now offer group-based interventions five days a week, such as the Sleep Well group, ADHD group and Mindfulness group.

6.3.4 Peer Mentors and Health and Wellbeing Champions support the work of the Mental Health team and Healthcare by collating patient experience surveys, distributing calendars and newsletters, raising awareness of services amongst the men and helping with health promotion events. Healthcare is delivering a Health and Wellbeing event in June.

6.3.5 Nevertheless, engagement challenges continue. The mental health team acknowledges that alongside perceived stigma, men may be prioritising getting employment over their mental health and/or hold misconceptions that asking for mental health support would result in a transfer back to closed conditions.

6.3.6 During our visits, men often tell us that they are experiencing problems with their mental health (anxiety, depression, etc.), yet the caseload for the mental health team does not reflect this and remains steadfastly low. Take-up for group wellbeing sessions is slow. One-on-one and drop-in sessions are better attended and preferred by the men.

6.3.7 Wellbeing information boards are visible on each unit and are regularly updated to keep them fresh and engaging. Varied and purposeful wellbeing activities are offered including well-being walks, art groups, chess clubs, film nights, bingo and coffee mornings.

## **6.4 Social care**

6.4.1 There have been two referrals: one for a visually impaired prisoner and the other for a man with hearing difficulties. The visually impaired prisoner is well supported by a peer carer and is grateful for the independent living afforded to him in his accommodation, whilst the hearing-impaired prisoner has been seen by social services and had equipment provided to support him.

6.4.2 The response time for Social Services is six months, so healthcare works hard to provide additional assistance in the interim (such as phone provision).

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

6.5.1 The prison's grounds are an asset, always well-tended and colourful throughout the year. Men are appreciative of this and report that it promotes their wellbeing. Prisoners enjoy the plentiful opportunities to exercise around the estate and are regularly found walking/jogging around the estate paths or simply sitting outside enjoying the attractive environment. The men have their own key to their rooms and their units are unlocked for most of the day.

6.5.2 The gym is popular and invariably busy. It acts as an incentive for good behaviour. Equipment is used heavily, so is often awaiting repair. There is a well-advertised rota system in place to ensure fair access for all. However, men are now restricted to one session a day to prevent overuse and to encourage a strong work ethic. A neurodiversity session is now offered in response to neurodiverse prisoners reporting feeling uncomfortable when using the gym.

6.5.3 PE staff offer many and varied activities throughout the year, including weight management and healthy lifestyle sessions, running clubs, circuits, team and racket sports and Park Runs, 'wellbeing' walks, veterans' sessions and fundraising charity events such as a recently held charity football match.

6.5.4 PE staff are visible and readily available throughout the working day. However, due to staffing restrictions, there is reduced gym access and activities at weekends and in the evenings. As the number of men working in the community increases, men are looking to use the gym at weekends and in the evenings and are frustrated by the restricted offering.

6.5.5 The sports field is used for various sporting activities throughout the year, although its use can be impacted by waterlogging in wet weather and hardness in dry weather. The grant for the successful twinning project with Wigan Athletic Football Club has ended, but it is hoped that funding can be found elsewhere. Links are being built with Warrington Wolves.

6.5.6 Despite centre re-accreditation, courses are yet to start that would equip men with qualifications to help them gain employment on release.

## **6.6 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation**

6.6.1 The Substance Misuse Service (SMS), formally Change, Grow, Live, is now managed by the Head of Healthcare and, in the Board's view, continues to provide an excellent service for prisoners. SMS takes referrals from the offender management unit, induction and mandatory drug tests, as well as self-referrals.

6.6.2 Drop-in services and therapeutic groups continue, with evening Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous sessions available twice weekly with Release on Temporary Licence for those attending external groups. Men who struggle to engage in group sessions are offered one-to one support and SMS also runs a drop-in café and chat. Service user forums are held bimonthly.

6.6.3 The core support programme, 'Inside Out for Smart Recovery', has been condensed to ensure maximum suitability/applicability for the open estate. It is hoped that timely referrals will ensure the men can complete this programme before they begin to work in the community.

6.6.4 For those who fit the criteria, the Reconnect service is available to support men 12 weeks prior to release, until six months post-release. Support includes helping with GP appointments and other community-based services. A support worker will be on site and attend discharge boards.

6.6.5 There are two full-time drug and alcohol support peer mentors. Mentors deliver Induction programmes and get involved in other harm reduction initiatives, e.g. running the 'Think before you Drink' stall at Christmas. They enjoy their roles and provide excellent examples of recovery for the men to aspire to.

6.6.6 SMS works closely with the incentivised substance free living (ISFL) unit to support men in keeping clean. Men on the unit who fail drug testing are offered the chance to engage with SMS support.

6.6.7 A total of 14 men are using clinical services to support dependency and are on either Methadone (five men), Buprenorphine (seven men) or Espranor (two men).

## **6.7 Soft skills**

6.7.1 Opportunities to work in the community and various internal roles require men to improve their soft skills. These include customer service skills when working in the concourse café, staff mess and farm shop; communication/presentation skills as prisoner reps at prison forums and meetings, and listening and communication skills as listeners and mentors.

6.7.2 The opportunity to become a Peer Mentor or a Listener is offered across the establishment and is valued by both prisoners and staff. Our observations suggest that Peer Mentors and Listeners continue to enjoy their roles and feel it has

improved their self-esteem, confidence and ease of communication. They often tell us they hope to use skills gained on release.

6.7.3 The SMS courses are based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) principles, building self-esteem and equipping prisoners with cognitive tools to manage negative thought processes around addiction and dependency.

6.7.4 The Wellbeing/Mental Health provision includes group sessions looking at intuitive thinking, emotional regulation and resilience.

6.7.5 The education department offers the men a series of 'life skill' modules aimed at giving men knowledge and confidence in different areas of independent living, including finance and cookery, as well as public speaking and growth mindsets.

## **7. Progression and resettlement**

### **7.1 Education, library**

7.1.1 There are many opportunities for the men to engage in education. The arrival of a new Head of Education saw a review of the provision to ensure it is relevant to the men's needs, particularly in relation to their future employment. Level 2 and 3 courses are available for those men who wish to follow them. A new joinery course has started, and appropriate qualifications are taken in the new bike workshop.

7.1.2 Progress in maths and English, although steady, remains a concern. Although a minority of men arrive with limited basic skills, this is still too many. Some men arrive at Thorn Cross with only a matter of weeks before their release, making any chance of furthering their education almost impossible.

7.1.3 Some men choose not to work and opt instead to study further and take education courses at local colleges and universities. As reported in previous years, a barrier to their learning is only having limited access to the internet in one part of the prison and being unable to email their work to their external tutors.

7.1.4 The library is at the heart of the prison concourse and is well stocked with books and DVDs. It is well used, being open during the day and at weekends. There are regular reading challenges, which prove popular. Jigsaws and board games are also available. A quiet area near the library is now available for the men to just sit and read. The computers are well used for practical assessment training, such as theory for driving tests.

### **7.2 Vocational training, work**

7.2.1 There are good vocational training opportunities, including catering, construction-based learning, horticulture, IT and business. A new joinery course began in the reporting year, which also saw the opening of a bike workshop, where old bikes are refurbished and then donated to charities. Many courses are now offered at City & Guilds Level 1 because, with the drive to have more men working or studying outside the prison, some courses were too long to allow the men to complete them before they began working outside. There are links with many outside employment and training providers. Thorn Cross endeavours to provide employment that enables men to carry on working with the employer on release.

7.2.2 During the last reporting year, an ambitious target to have 300 men working in the community was set; although this has yet to be achieved, progress towards it has been made. At the start of the reporting year, around 80 men were working in the community. This had risen to 200 at the end of the reporting year (135 in paid employment, 40 in community placements, 10 in education and 15 employed as prison drivers). Understandably, the men are keen to be in the community in paid or voluntary work, and this can affect attendance on education courses.

7.2.3 The reporting year has seen a notable increase in opportunities for the men to undertake voluntary work with charities and environmental projects. A community shop has been opened on the edge of the estate, selling items such as bedding, clothes and home furnishings. The men working in Farms & Gardens continue to maintain the grounds to a high standard. Members of the public can visit the grounds as part of the National Open Gardens Scheme. There are also plans to open a café for the public.

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

7.3.1 The staffing of the offender management unit (OMU) has increased reflecting the ever-increasing workload for OMU staff. This is due to the increase in work placements in the community and the various government early release initiatives. The Governor responsible for the OMU has changed and has continued the initiatives made by her predecessor. Although a third of the Board's applications this reporting year have related to sentence management (8 out of a total of 24), fewer men are raising concerns with us about the time taken to be Released on Temporary Licence (ROTL) and they are more satisfied with their interactions with OMU staff.

7.3.2 At the end of the reporting year, there was a total of 30 men serving a life sentence and five sentenced to an indeterminate imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentence, a combined total of 35. This compares with a combined total of 24 at the end of 2023-2024 reporting year and 21 for the year 2022-2023. This group of men has a network of support within the prison.

7.3.3 Workloads have been affected by the various early release schemes in place during the reporting year. This led to two men being released in error, who were then deemed to be 'unlawfully at large'. This resulted in them being arrested and sent to a closed prison. Thorn Cross then supported the men in their request to return to open conditions. However, staff could not influence the subsequent decision to have days added to their sentences. This was despite none of this being the fault of the two men. One man lost his accommodation and job, the other a place on a prestigious training course. The impact on the men and their families was profound and the Board considered the imposition of added days as unjust.

7.3.4 The new OMU building was due to be ready by early 2025, several months behind schedule. However, the faults with it were so great that the decision was made to demolish it and start again. Although the costs are being met by the contractor, it is unbelievable the building was almost complete before the faults were noticed.

### **7.4 Family contact**

7.4.1 The prison benefits from a large visits hall and lots of outdoor space, which means that visits take place in a good environment. There is a games room, where children can spend time with their relatives. Many men can maintain good family ties through ROTL, but the prison supports and promotes family ties for all men. Prisoners who do not have family contact are identified and supported, as are those whose families live some distance from Thorn Cross, as this can make social visits difficult.

7.4.2 There is a comprehensive programme of themed family days. A timetable of enrichment events take place on Sunday mornings, including sessions for those who are neurodivergent and sessions for Dads to help with homework.

7.4.3 There have been several occasions during the reporting year when men have informed us of problems with the unit phone system. Problems with phones need to be resolved as quickly as possible, as men highly value being able to talk to their families and children, especially in the evenings. Phone calls home promote family ties. There are no phones in the cells, so men rely on shared phones on the unit corridors. Privacy and noise disturbance can be an issue.

## **7.5 Resettlement planning**

7.5.1 The men appeared to be well prepared for their release. They are supported in opening bank accounts, and it is rare for men to be released with no accommodation. The DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) has a worker based in the Employment Hub to support the men who need to apply for benefits. Job vacancies are displayed, with the men guided through the application process. It is unfortunate that prisoners who arrive with only a few weeks of their sentence remaining may not benefit from this detailed planning, nor will they benefit from the rehabilitative culture of the prison.

7.5.2 Men are on a 'pathway' from the time they come to Thorn Cross and this aids resettlement, as does working with national employers. At the end of the reporting year, 60% of the men were still in employment six weeks after release (three with the employer they had worked with whilst in prison) and 60% after six months. Both these figures are significantly above the target set by the Prison Service.

## 8. The work of the IMB

### Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	9
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	5
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	8
Total number of visits to the establishment	179

### Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	2	5
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	0	0
C	Equality	0	0
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	0	3
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	5	0
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	2	0
F	Food and kitchens	1	1
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	4	1
H1	Property within the establishment	0	1
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	2	4
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	0	0
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	18	8
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	1	0
K	Transfers	0	1
L	Miscellaneous	0	0
	<b>Total number of applications</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>24</b>





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