



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Huntercombe

**For reporting year
1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025**

Published July 2026



Contents

Introductory sections 1 – 3	Page
1. Statutory role of the IMB	3
2. Description of the establishment	4
3. Key points	5
 Evidence sections 4 – 7	
4. Safety	8
5. Fair and humane treatment	11
6. Health and wellbeing	17
7. Progression and resettlement	20
 The work of the IMB	
Board statistics	26
Applications to the IMB	26

All IMB annual reports are published on www.imb.org.uk

Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. Statutory role of the IMB

The Prison Act 1952 requires every prison to be monitored by an independent board appointed by the Secretary of State from members of the community in which the prison is situated.

Under the National Monitoring Framework agreed with ministers, the Board is required to:

- satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody within its prison and the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release
- inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom authority has been delegated as it judges appropriate, any concern it has
- report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

To enable the Board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have right of access to every prisoner and every part of the prison and also to the prison's records.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that states designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMB is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

2. Description of the establishment

2.1 HMP Huntercombe is a category C prison (these are training establishments holding prisoners who cannot be trusted in open conditions but are unlikely to attempt escape, with a focus on rehabilitation and preparation for release) for adult male foreign national prisoners. It stands in a rural location, with limited access to public transport, outside the village of Nuffield, between Henley and Wallingford in Oxfordshire.

2.2 Its operational capacity (the maximum number of prisoners that can be held without serious risk to safety, security, good order and the proper running of the planned regime) is 520¹, split between seven residential units, with a mixture of single and double cells, and a segregation unit, comprising five cells and one special accommodation cell (where furniture, bedding and sanitation have been removed in the interests of safety). A total of 40 of those spaces are in rapid deployment cells, which are not built to category C security specifications and are, therefore, only available to specially risk-assessed prisoners. HMP Huntercombe was originally established as a Second World War detention facility; since then, the buildings have been added to and extended in order to provide a secure and improved environment for its present use.

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

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

2.5 A new Governing Governor started in October 2025.

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

- From our observations, we believe the prison is a generally safe environment for prisoners.
- The Board is concerned about the 27% increase in prisoner-on-prisoner assaults during the reporting year, rising to 65 incidents in 2025 from 51 in 2024 (see 4.3.1). Each individual case has been handled appropriately by staff.
- Throughout the reporting year, prisoners have found to be under the influence of illicit substances. Ambulances have been called on several occasions, resulting in hospital admissions.
- Incidents of self-harm by prisoners have increased, from 63 in 2024 to 73 in 2025 (see 4.2.2).
- Board members have observed and monitored force used on prisoners and are satisfied that it has had been applied appropriately.
- Batons have been drawn on one occasion but not used, while Pava incapacitant spray has been drawn on four occasions and used on two occasions (see 4.4.1, 4.4.2, 4.4.3).
- The Board monitored an incident at height (on the roof) in October 2025 and was satisfied that the prisoner was treated fairly and with respect.

Fair and humane treatment

- The Board believes that, in general, prisoners are treated fairly and humanely.
- As highlighted in our previous report, we are pleased to note that the prison has started a window replacement programme, but we are disappointed that it is not yet complete. In addition, during 2025, we became aware of the poor outcome of a ventilation survey in the cells. (see 5.1.2)
- The issue of a failing central heating and hot water system across the estate continues to be unacceptable, in the Board's view. This issue has been reported in the last four Board annual reports and there is still no permanent solution. (see 5.1.1)
- During 2025, part of the offender management unit (OMU) building was condemned, so staff had to work in restricted conditions. (see 5.1.3)
- During the reporting year, the prison received an external audit report on the key working function, which identified many of the issues that the Board had also observed. We are disappointed that key working staff are regularly reassigned to cover other areas of work. (see 5.3.2).
- As reported in previous years, and again in 2025, problems persist with property arriving at HMP Huntercombe. In complaints relating to property lost in transit or during transfer, the Board, once again, highlights the lack of volumetric control that exists when prisoners move between prisons, leaving the system overstretched. This issue was noted in the annex to the Minister's response to the Board's 2022 annual report; however, three years later, the Board sees little evidence that this has made any difference at all. (see 4.1.4, 5.7.1, 5.8)

- The Board was disappointed to be told that the Sycamore Tree programme (a restorative justice course that helps prisoners understand the impact of their crimes on victims and encourages responsibility and rehabilitation) had been withdrawn across the prison estate. (see 5.5.4)
- The Board noted that staff effectively identify prisoners who are statistically over-represented in several areas and activities; however, follow-up strategies require further development. In the Board's view, the management of discrimination reporting is good, although too many cases are still being referred to the complaints process.

Health and wellbeing

- The Board was pleased that the new healthcare building was completed in 2025, but disappointed that it took most of the year for the healthcare team to be able to move in due to lack of phones and information technology access. (see 6.1.4)
- Staff have had to reduce the level of care that they are able to provide during the extended construction period. (see 6.1.4)
- The Board will continue to monitor access to suitable clinical space for mental health staff working with prisoners. (see 6.3.1)
- The Board is disappointed that the football pitch remains out of use by prisoners at the end of the reporting year and hopes that this can be rectified during 2026. (see 6.5.5)

Progression and resettlement

- The Board has been disappointed to observe that the education provision has been reduced during the reporting year. (see 7.1.1, 7.1.2, 7.1.3)
- We hope that, in 2026, there will be increased opportunities for prisoners at Huntercombe to engage in meaningful activity, including gaining qualifications. (paragraph 7.2.12)
- The Board has noted in its two previous reports that the OMU has been operating under significant pressure, largely due to service-wide changes in sentence calculation. This reporting year has seen a further increase in workload, with additional sentence recalculations required. Pressures at Huntercombe are exacerbated by prisoners arriving close to, or beyond, their early release scheme (ERS) date, alongside a high turnover of prisoners. (see 7.3)
- As the Board noted in 2024, it remains disappointed by the limited opportunities for men at Huntercombe to undertake programmes to prepare for release or to access release on temporary licence (ROTL). (see 7.5)
- The Board commends the use of Stoic (a programme to help prisoners manage emotions and behaviour), Getting Court (which helps young people learn about court procedures and prison), and Geese Theatre (a drama-based intervention that encourages reflection and behaviour change).

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- The Board understands that the work required to update the heating and hot water system at Huntercombe is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice.

This issue has been raised in each of the Board's reports over the past four years. The Board, therefore, seek a clear and definitive timetable from the Minister for when all those at HMP Huntercombe will receive a consistent and reliable supply of hot water and heating? (see 5.1.1)

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- As requested last year, when will the Prison Service ensure that all prisons consistently follow agreed procedures for all issues? The Board has, again, identified numerous areas where this is not the case, including the management of prisoner property (see 4.1.4, 5.7.1, 5.8).
- As the Board has reported each year since 2021, there remains significant issues about prisoner property at transfer between prisons. As the Prisoners' Property Policy Framework is obviously not working for prisoners, what is the Prison Service planning to do to look after prisoners' property in a more effective way? (see 5.8)

TO THE GOVERNOR

- When will the Governor undertake a review and set out a clear plan, including timescales, to bring the football pitch back into use for the prisoners? (see 6.5.5)
- Will the Governor continue to review the available spaces and allocation processes, and set out actions to ensure prisoners have consistent access to meaningful activity while they are at Huntercombe? (see 7.2)

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

4.1.1 The reception area is bright and clean, with two holding rooms enabling the interview process to be conducted in private. Healthcare also has a dedicated room.

4.1.2 There are two induction orderlies (trusted prisoners who help support the running of the prison), who assist with arrivals and provide informal interpreting, alongside the use of The Big Word translation service (which offers interpreting by phone). The use of The Big Word is under review by the prison to take account of technological advances.

4.1.3 There is a clear and user-friendly booklet that is provided to new arrivals, as well as colourful wall signs and materials in languages other than English, plus a hearing loop facility.

4.1.4 The principal area of concern for the Board is that volumetric control of property for incoming prisoners is still repeatedly ignored by sending prisons, which continues to be frustrating for both prisoners and staff. This is particularly notable for prisoners who will be deported and have a luggage limit. These excess volumes create a significant storage problem at Huntercombe, which would be a relatively minor problem if other prisons followed the correct procedures. This issue was reported in the Board's 2024 report, and the Board sees little progress being made.

4.1.5 On arrival, there is an amnesty for illicit items, and all arrivals are X-ray body scanned for illicit items. In 2025, 1243 (1189 in 2024) scans were carried out, of which 33 (51 in 2024) were positive; 1,115 (1066 in 2024) were negative; and 95 (72 in 2024) were inconclusive. If positive, the arriving prisoner is placed in the segregation unit and rescanned the following day.

4.1.6 Following arrival, men are transferred to the induction wing, where the Board has observed that they are well managed and supported by staff and peer supporters, with their needs identified during the initial interview process taken into account. Induction typically lasts around two weeks, after which men are allocated to an appropriate wing. Allocation takes account of factors such as age, vaping preferences, religion and race, particularly where men are required to share a double cell.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

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

4.2.2 Incidents of self-harm increased from 63 in 2024 to 73 in 2025, with the number of individuals involved being 36 (also 36 in 2024). The Board noted that staff acted professionally and with care towards these men, who have support from healthcare, the mental health and the safer custody teams who identify and support prisoners at risk of harm to themselves.

4.2.3 A total of 102 assessments, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) plans (used to support prisoners who are at risk of self-harm and suicide) were opened in the year (112 in 2024). Eight prisoners were transferred from other prisons on open

ACCTs (five in 2024), which remains a cause for concern for the Board and places additional demand on case management. The rate of Huntercombe opened ACCTs has fallen from 22.4 per 100 in 2024 to 20.4 per 100 in 2025.

4.2.4 There was an 18% reduction in the number of food refusals (31 in 2025; 38 in 2024), representing 6.2 per 100 prisoners in 2025 (7.6 per 100 in 2024).

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

4.2.6 The safer custody team has identified key drivers and contextual pressures, noting that, as a foreign national prison, many men are held far from home, face the prospect of deportation and may struggle to maintain family contact. These pressures can be reflected in seasonal peaks, such as at Christmas, as well as in a more general sense of hopelessness and frustration. Levels of drug use, debt and gang-related issues appear to remain relatively low.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

4.3.1 Violence fell slightly in 2025, with 84 incidents recorded compared with 91 in 2024. Notably, assaults on staff decreased significantly, dropping from 40 to 19 - a 53% reduction. However, prisoner-on-prisoner assaults increased from 51 to 65, representing a 27% rise. All incidents were recorded and investigated, and 234 referrals were made under the challenge, support and intervention plan (CSIP) process (used to support and manage prisoners who pose an increased risk of violence).

4.3.2 Violence remains predominantly non-weapon related, spontaneous and concentrated at similar times and locations. The safety team endeavours to manage risk through dynamic security and conflict management measures, maintaining awareness of potential prisoner-on-prisoner harm. This includes targeted hotspot controls, rapid mediation and continued CSIP engagement.

4.3.3 Violence is primarily associated with prisoners aged 25 to 39.

4.3.4 Work continues to strengthen relationships between staff and prisoners. The Board observed an appropriate relationships workshop, which was positively received by both staff and prisoners.

4.4 Use of force

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

4.4.2 There were 137 planned use of force (UoF) interventions (a deliberate, prearranged action or strategy aimed at managing a situation where the use of force may be necessary) in 2025, down from 177 in 2024, while unplanned interventions have doubled, from 52 in 2024 to 110 in 2025. In the Board's view, this reflects the nature of the prisoners being transferred into Huntercombe during the year.

4.4.3 Batons have been drawn on one occasion in the reporting year, compared with five in the previous year, but it was not used. Pava incapacitant spray was drawn on four occasions and deployed twice.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

4.5.1 There were five reported incidents of 'throw-overs' in 2025, where individuals from outside the prison threw packages containing illicit items over the walls for prisoners to retrieve.

4.5.2 The dedicated search team visit parts of the prison on an intelligence-led basis to search for drugs, phones, SIM cards and weapons.

4.5.3 Prisoners have been found throughout the year under the influence of illicit substances, requiring ambulances to attend on several occasions.

4.5.4 On social visit days that the Board observed, visitors were searched and procedures followed. Non-legal mail that has been positively identified as containing drugs is now opened. Drug-detection measures, including a testing machine and operational dogs, were used 234 times to identify drugs and other illicit substances.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

5.1.1 The prison has continued to operate on a system of eight temporary boilers while a new ring main has yet still to be installed. Outcomes for men on the wings have been very poor, with repeated failures in heating and hot water. On one of our monitoring visits in February, we received 18 individual applications (prisoners' written representations to the IMB) from Patterson wing complaining about the constant failure of the showers. Men on the segregation unit were unable to access hot showers over one weekend in December. In March, following heating failure in some cells on Mountbatten wing, men told the Board that they were they were sleeping in jackets and woolly hats.

5.1.2 In addition to plumbing problems, there have been ventilation issues in the cells. The Board spoke to two men in a stifling hot cell where the heating was on full but the windows could not be adjusted. The window vent mechanisms are slowly being replaced across the whole prison, with approximately 80 out of 360 completed by the end of the reporting year. Ventilation from the extraction vents in the cells during the very hot summer was totally inadequate in removing stale air. An air quality report found that not one cell met the minimum requirement of around 24 litres per second on air flow. Men on Fry wing said they had used wet towels to help keep cool over one weekend in July. This is not humane treatment. Men in double cells are allowed a fan, but on Rich, there are limited sockets so men have to decide between fans/DVDs and their TV. Prisoners reported that fruit goes off in their cells very quickly. Plans to trial an upgrade to the ventilation system on one wing have been discussed, but there had been no action by the year end.

5.1.3 Elsewhere in the prison, the extension to the offender management unit (OMU) building was condemned, forcing displaced staff to be accommodated in the remaining space. The replacement administration block for healthcare was finally operational in the last quarter of the year, following many months of delay and, in the Board's view, demoralising conditions for healthcare staff.

5.1.4 The Board became aware in June of a significant number of men who had not had a response to their applications about additional clothing parcels. Some men come to Huntercombe with very little clothing. Although the system can be misused by some, staff response times for others were sometimes poor, and the criteria for future parcel requests had not been clarified by the end of the reporting year.

5.1.5 In our 2024 report, the Board highlighted issues with maintaining kitchen equipment following the collapse of the original contractor. By the end of 2025, the majority of issues had been resolved; however, the kitchen had still not been formally handed over to the prison under the contract.

5.1.6 The kitchen offers catering training at Levels 1 and 2. The Level 2 course can be completed in two weeks, which is beneficial given the increased turnover of the population. Completions for the year were 78 at Level 2, 9 at Level 3, and 3 at HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control points) Level 3 with distinction (see 7.2.8).

5.1.7 In August, due to health and safety considerations, men on all wings (except Cadbury and Rich, which have fridges) had revised canteen sheets, with refrigerated food removed together with some rice and pasta items that are not suitable for microwave cooking. Pre-cooked rice was provided as an alternative. It is likely that these alterations contributed to complaints from the men about portion sizes. On a monitoring visit in September, the Board was shown a letter signed by 42 men from one wing complaining about portion sizes from the kitchen, particularly of rice and pasta. Following excessive food waste, rice portions had been reduced (although substituted with a better-quality rice). By October, long grain rice was back on the daily menu. During May and June, there was a supply issue with chicken on the bone, with the substitute diced chicken not popular with the men.

5.1.8 New menus with revised food symbols translated into six languages were available from May, with an emphasis on freshly cooked food. The Thursday home-made pizza is particularly popular. Food forums have not run all year but are planned for 2026.

5.1.9 From April 2025, the prison was required to manage food waste separately from other waste. Larger bins on the wings have been provided and from January there will be a trial on Fry wing for a food pot in each cell for food waste.

5.2 Segregation

5.2.1 The segregation unit at HMP Huntercombe, where men are kept apart from the rest of the prison population for safety, security or welfare reasons, provides five separate cells, one of which can be used for constant observation. During the reporting year, there have been a few occasions when all the cells were occupied and, at such times, prisoners who were deemed to warrant segregation have been housed in segregation conditions on the wings.

5.2.2 During the reporting year, a constant watch cell opened on Howard wing.

5.2.3 Whenever possible, IMB members visit the segregation unit to speak to prisoners. The Board was pleased that one of the unit's two dedicated exercise yards, which had been out of use for most of the previous year, was brought back into operation during the reporting period.

5.2.4 Communication between staff in the segregation unit and the Board has been good in 2025, with the statutory requirement being followed that Board members are informed when prisoners are admitted to the unit.

5.2.5 During 2025, 133 prisoners passed through the segregation unit compared with 148 in 2024; of these, 21 (2024: 26) were held more than once. The average length of stay in 2025 was five days, down from eight days in 2024, and the longest single stay was 53 days.

5.2.6 The adjudication process (a disciplinary hearing held when a prisoner is alleged to have broken prison rules) and the review process (which checks whether a prisoner still needs to be kept separated from the main population) conducted in the segregation unit were regularly observed by members of the Board and were seen to be consistent and professionally managed. There was also regular attendance by staff from supporting departments such as healthcare.

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

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

5.3.1 The Board observed that there are generally positive relationships between staff and prisoners. The prison continues to further develop this area and uses a range of initiatives, including a workshop on improving communication. The aim of the half-day session is to build better relationships between staff and prisoners. It started in September 2024 and is run by three officers once a month. Prisoners and staff take part in games and role reversals for different scenarios to gain a better understanding of each other's viewpoints; these are then discussed. Feedback from prisoners has been positive. While some staff have been slower to adapt, there has been a general improvement in staff practice. A total of 74 officers and 72 prisoners have taken part in the workshop during the reporting year.

Reflective practice forms part of regular wing training and staff development. An incident or situation that has happened is discussed to see how it could have been handled better. Sometimes, two wings get together to share their different experiences.

Representatives from each wing form the prison council, which meets twice a month: the first meeting is held without staff present, and issues raised are then taken forward to a second meeting. The canteen supplier, DHL, visits quarterly to answer concerns and requests. Members from other departments attend as required and respond to questions, which they have in advance.

5.3.2 Key workers have dedicated time to undertake the role and the Board has noted that they are often the first to be redeployed to other duties. Along with annual leave and illness, the monthly targets are regularly missed.

Each officer is allocated up to five prisoners, who should be seen every two weeks. However, with redeployment, detached duty, night shifts, holidays and absences due to sickness, this did not happen in the reporting year. Priority was given to high-risk and vulnerable prisoners to ensure that contact was kept. New prisoners should be allocated a key worker within two weeks.

The prison has recognised that there are inconsistencies with the standard of key worker reports. Training mainly relies on 'buddying' with another person, which leads to varying outcomes. The expectation is that officers should contact the OMU and the resettlement team prior to a meeting so that they have current information about the prisoner. This is not always achieved.

In September 2025, there was a remote audit by offender management in custody (OMIC), which confirmed what the prison had already identified as needing improvement. The prison has been working within national policy, the audit recommended that 'a local key work policy should be developed to define staff roles, responsibilities, recording requirements and quality assurance processes'. Work on this has already begun.

5.4 Equality and diversity

5.4.1 The quarterly diversity and equality meeting in the prison effectively identifies groups of prisoners who are statistically over-represented in the data for a variety of prison activities. In 2025 these were:

- Young adults on proven adjudications and on the basic regime (the bottom level of the prison's incentives scheme);
- Black men on the basic regime, intelligence-led searching, segregation, complaints, and suspicion mandatory drug testing (MDT)
- Muslim prisoners on the basic regime, adjudications, segregation and suspicious MDT.

5.4.2 The Board has observed that the quarterly meetings are poorly attended, with limited discussion and few action points to explore any rehabilitative options from the data. This has been acknowledged by the senior leadership team and, from the new year, heads of departments will be actively encouraged to take more ownership.

5.4.3 Many prisoners with limited English rely on trusted peers for support. Diversity representatives reported only occasional instances (e.g. Vietnamese and Farci) where suitable support from another prisoner was not available. Translation support from The Big Word was augmented with 10 laptops that provided a more user-friendly experience, but these were withdrawn. There is no record in the prison of The Big Word usage.

5.4.4 There were 48 discrimination incident report forms (DIRFs) submitted by prisoners (compared with 42 in 2024). Of these, only 25 were progressed as DIRFs, with the balance being converted to prison complaints. Following investigations, three DIRFs were upheld. From the Board's observations, record keeping is thorough. Only four prisoner DIRFs were responded to late, and the Board believes that the tone of the responses was good. Quality assurance was undertaken both by the head of department and through independent scrutiny by EPIC (empowering people, inspiring change). This supported the Board's own observation of a high proportion of DIRFs being rejected, suggesting that the submission criteria are not sufficiently well understood by prisoners.

5.4.5 Staff members submitted nine DIRFs, with the majority relating to ethnicity. Eight were upheld. This number looks out of line compared with those upheld for prisoners, but the Board has no evidence to suggest that this is anything other than coincidental.

5.4.6 Festivals were celebrated. For example, for Black History Month, there were quizzes, leaflets and puzzles, poster competitions and an inspiration board. There was also a small section on WayOut TV (an in-cell channel with educational content). Other activities included a regular LGBTQ+ coffee evening and Roma and Traveller community group morning.

5.4.7 Around 50% of prisoners are identified as neurodivergent (based on self-declaration). By the end of the year, 60% of all staff had completed neurodiversity training, with a higher proportion among operational staff. Each man has a support plan that outlines 'my strengths', 'my challenges' and 'how to support me'. These are a positive feature; however, the Board is unclear how consistently they are referred to by staff, particularly in more pressured situations such as adjudications.

Resources relating to neurodiversity, including self-help books, are available on the wings; however, the Board found them difficult to locate on cluttered shelves. Prisoners also have access to art boxes for use in their cells. There are plans in the coming year to make notices more accessible for prisoners with neurodivergent needs.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

5.5.1 Prisoners have spent an average of 1884 hours per month in the chaplaincy, attending worship and study time. For most of the year, there was a vacancy for a Hindu priest, although provision was covered by a Sikh priest. There was also a vacancy for a Free Church chaplain; however, members were included in other acts of worship and bible study. A Pentecostal group started in August, complementing the work of the popular Sow-Light Trust team (which provides spiritual and pastoral support to prisoners). Language plays an important role in worship: the two Imams collectively speak five languages, and there are no communication barriers between Sikh and Hindu provision.

5.5.2 The bereavement councillor's sessions were fully booked by prisoners (and staff) through the year. The service helps men who have suffered multiple bereavements, both recent and historical, and is particularly relevant for foreign national prisoners.

5.5.3 The chaplaincy team facilitated Sycamore Tree accredited courses focusing on restorative justice. However, courses were withdrawn across the whole prison estate in March, as they were perceived to lack 'evidentially proven improvements for outcomes for men and victims'. The Board considers this to be a loss, and for men at Huntercombe it is one less support programme for them to access.

5.5.4 A prison visitor scheme is active, with two volunteer visitors attending each month to offer support and social contact for prisoners who may otherwise have no social visits.

5.5.5 The ventilation system in the multi-faith centre failed many months ago and is specially felt in the classroom: there seems, however, to be no solution following the collapse of the original provider.

5.6 Incentives schemes

5.6.1 In 2025, the prison produced a new incentives scheme policy. It is a comprehensive guide to the process, including a variety of forms and a log for those on basic. It sets out behavioural expectations and criteria for being considered for enhanced, with a flow chart for managing the process. Prisoners may be placed on a basic (bottom), standard (middle) or enhanced (top) level, which affects the privileges for which they are eligible.

5.6.2 There are two enhanced wings, one of which is designated as super-enhanced and offers additional privileges. These include having a key to their own room and access to outside areas.

5.6.3 Prisoners still report that it is more difficult to gain a positive comment than a negative one. This year, there were 68 complaints (5%) concerning the incentives scheme.

5.7 Complaints

5.7.1 There were 1,274 complaints submitted by prisoners, compared with 1,156 in 2024 - an increase of 10%. The three main areas were: property (269 complaints, 21%; 2024: 273, 24%); complaints against staff (113, 9%; 2024: 88, 8%); and canteen services (212, 17%). Property remains a particular concern for the Board, given the ongoing difficulties in retrieving items, including valuables, from other prisons.

5.7.2 There were 254 late responses (20%), a reduction from 275 (24%) in 2024, and 15 (1%) remained outstanding, the same proportion as the previous year.

5.7.3 Complaints are monitored by the head of the business hub, who quality-assures a sample of 10% of those received.

5.8 Property

5.8.1 As noted in section 4.1.4, there continue to be issues with property coming into Huntercombe. These can cause stress for prisoners and additional work for staff; when personal items are lost, this can lead to increased frustration and, at times, anger.

5.8.2 In 2025, there were 269 complaints about property (273 in 2024) out of a total of 1274 complaints in the whole prison.

5.8.3 As in previous years, complaints relating to property lost in transit or during transfer continue to reflect, to a significant extent, the lack of effective volumetric control when prisoners are moved between establishments. This is despite the introduction of a new HMPPS policy framework in 2022, highlighted by the Board in 2024, intended to address these issues. Three years on, the IMB at Huntercombe has seen little evidence of meaningful improvement. In addition, inconsistency across the prison estate remains a concern, with different couriers applying varying policies on the volume of property they will transport, further compounding the problem.

5.8.4 HMP Huntercombe follows the national facilities list policy, which sets out the property each prisoner is allowed to take to their cell on arrival. Prisoners arriving at Huntercombe often have excess property, which must be placed in bulk storage, creating additional space and administrative pressures.

5.8.5 The issue of property is particularly important for prisoners at Huntercombe, as many are deported at the end of their sentence and therefore seek to ensure that all their belongings are returned to them before leaving the UK.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

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

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

6.1.3 From the Board's observations, it is believed that PPG and OHFT have an effective and harmonious working relationship at HMP Huntercombe.

6.1.4 The new healthcare building was constructed at the end of 2024. However, various works to ensure that the building would function properly were not completed until October 2025, with the building empty for most of the reporting year. The Board was disappointed in the delay and regularly raised it with the Governor, particularly as it resulted in a reduction in some services.

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

6.1.6 Healthcare continues to address recommendations made by EPIC (empowering people inspiring change; a contracted external group with some members with 'lived experience'). Reports on progress are shared with the partnership board.

6.1.7 A space survey was started in the prison following requests from PPG. The report had not concluded at the year end. Minor works were proposed to assist with the ongoing space problems. The lack of appropriate space has affected clinical services.

6.1.8 PPG appears to work towards adopting a community model for care and access to some medication.

6.2 Physical healthcare

6.2.1 In 2025, EPIC reported that only half of patients felt their healthcare needs were being met, and identified a lack of complementary wellbeing services, forums and other social opportunities. The absence of a personal medical plan - available in other prisons - was also highlighted; its introduction could help improve confidence in receiving appropriate care in an emergency. EPIC further reported a decline in patient experience across a number of healthcare metrics.

6.2.2 In 2025, clinical substance misuse service (SMS) dispensing trials were conducted at an earlier time (8am instead of the afternoon), and this change was successfully implemented by the year end.

6.2.3 The room used by healthcare in reception was identified as in need of work to meet cleaning standards compliance.

6.2.4 A new head of healthcare and new head of mental health were recruited during the reporting year.

6.2.5 Complaints relating to healthcare included concerns about epilepsy care and delays in external referrals. The IMB received 29 healthcare-related applications during the year.

6.2.6 The section on healthcare in induction documents for new arrivals was found to be in need of revision.

6.3 Mental health

6.3.1 The mental healthcare team (MHT) is accommodated separately from the general healthcare team. However, there is insufficient space to enable team members to run mental health clinics on a satisfactory basis. As a result, it is very difficult for the MHT to deliver patient services, including therapeutic work, in appropriate conditions, particularly with regard to confidentiality.

6.3.2 The increased churn (the frequent turnover of prisoners due to regular admissions, transfers and releases) has resulted in increased referrals for mental health and drug and alcohol services. This has also affected care clinic provision, as receptions are prioritised.

6.4 Social care

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

6.5 Time out of cell, regime

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

6.5.2 Various courses are available to prisoners, such as Level 2 or Level 3 gym instructor, leading to Level 3 personal trainer and spinning instructor.

6.5.3 Sporting and recreational activities are available to prisoners, including badminton, basketball, indoor cricket and volleyball.

6.5.4 The prison physical education department runs a Stoic programme, developed by a former member of the Huntercombe physical education team, which is now also delivered in other prison establishments. During the reporting year, the prison provided 300 men with a 24-session Stoic course, delivered over six weeks. The programme is highly structured and offers a framework for developing emotional resilience, consistent with and complementary to evidence-based psychotherapy.

The following is an extract from an ex-Huntercombe prisoner that shows how powerful this course can be.

'A few nights ago, I suddenly remembered the course, and everything connected - Stoicism, the lessons, and the changes that began there. Living on the outside now, I see clearly how much it shaped the way I think, act and handle challenges. The gym staff ran the programme with care and consistency, and the work gave me a framework I still live by. If I had learned Stoic thinking earlier, my path would likely have been very different - but I am grateful it reached me when it did.'

6.5.5 The Board is disappointed that the football pitch has been unavailable for use since April 2025.

6.6 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

6.6.1 The prison's drug and alcohol recovery team (DART) is employed by Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust and sees all new arrivals during their induction week. DART comprises five staff members, with around 89 prisoners per month engaging in drug and alcohol recovery services throughout the reporting year.

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

6.6.3 DART ran an awareness week in November 2025 on stigma towards people who use drugs and alcohol.

6.6.4 Some staff are trained to administer naloxone (a medication used to rapidly reverse the effects of opioid overdose), with 15 officers trained as of November 2025

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

7.1.1 Milton Keynes College (MKC) remains the principal education provider, but there was considerable change throughout the year as a new contract was put in place and funding was reduced by 30%. The new contract was originally meant to run from April 1 2025 but was delayed by six months as budgets for the education contract were cut. The prison worked with MKC to try and minimise the impact of the reduced budgets, but the net result has been a reduction in the number of delivery weeks per year and the complete loss of some courses, including painting and decorating.

7.1.2 The reduction in provision came alongside an increase in the number of men who are not interested in engaging with formal education. This has been driven by factors such as shorter sentences, a greater focus on moving prisoners more swiftly through the system and lower educational levels amongst the prison population.

7.1.3 The position was further exacerbated by the fact that MKC had to make a number of redundancies due to the restriction in funding. This, coupled with an increased administration load, resulted in a loss of availability of tutors to cover staff absences. Courses affected included painting and decorating, and IAG (information, advice and guidance) mentoring - which were cancelled - as well as functional English and IT skills, which were reduced to one session each.

7.1.4 Distance learning started the year well but, as the year progressed, numbers dropped. This was in part due to the funding cuts.

7.1.5 The library continued to be open most days and was well used by prisoners. Feedback from the men has been positive and, on most days, it feels like one of the most welcoming spaces in the prison, where they can gather and socialise in a reasonably normal and relaxed atmosphere. While stock continues to be an issue, the men appear to be satisfied with the range of materials available. Notably, the crime genre is the most borrowed.

7.1.6 The number of mentors for the Shannon Trust charity dropped through the year, from 11 to only seven by the end of the year. This means that the average number of learners has dropped to below 60. In the Board's view, the throughput of mentors has been adversely impacted by the cancellation of the peer mentoring course and an increased churn in mentors. However, the 'count me in' numeracy programme has been gaining support.

7.1.7 The prison has continued to use work orderlies to cover gaps in provision, but there was a reduction in the number of orderlies during the year. In our view, this resulted from the increased levels of churn in the population. It was also impacted by the cancellation of the peer mentoring course.

7.1.8 The principal issues impacting education are the same as they were at the end of 2024: higher levels of churn, shorter sentences and lower educational standards. Some steps appear to have been taken to adjust the educational offering to reflect this, but the Board believes that more needs to be done if meaningful and helpful education is to be provided. Progress made in 2025 has not been as significant as the Board would have expected, due in part, to the reduction in funding and a six-month delay in implementing the new contract.

7.1.9 Last year, the Board reported that the changing attitudes, behaviours and educational attainment of reception prisoners would continue to cause issues for education in 2025. This has proved to be the case. There continues to be a need for prisoners to be better informed on their journey plan and expectations and the overall objectives of education in the prison need to be reconsidered.

7.2 Vocational training, work

7.2.1 Vocational training appeared to be adversely impacted by staff changes, sickness and resignations across the year. Lack of staff meant that some industries groups had to be closed.

7.2.2 Waste management employed 12 men at the start of the year, but by the end of the year this had fallen to only eight, following the loss of one member of staff. No qualifications were offered.

7.2.3 WAMITAB (Waste Management Industry Training and Advisory Board) industrial cleaning provision increased, but the service has been impacted by a lack of staff availability and, for many weeks during the year, the course did not run. Formal qualifications are not available.

7.2.4 In the social enterprise workshop craft services, including T-shirt making, mug printing and craft work, ran consistently, with 12-15 prisoners working each morning and afternoon. The plan for the year was to increase the range of products, but this was not fully realised due to the resignation of a member of staff and delays in recruitment.

7.2.5 The provision of gardening services was variable throughout the year. Security constraints, the weather and staff losses all appeared to contribute to the reduced provision of services.

7.2.6 The woodworking workshop continued to run but for health and safety reasons was often limited to only ten men. Some minor contract work continues to be undertaken.

7.2.7 Textiles has been the most consistent area of training and production and, for most of the year, the unit achieved its production targets. The plan is to introduce national qualifications in 2026.

7.2.8 The kitchen employs 24 workers per session but has experienced difficulties in scheduling these over seven days. There was an improvement in the second half of the year as the workforce became more stable. (see 5.1.6)

7.2.9 Wing workers operated as normal during the year and were linked into industrial cleaning to ensure training and assessment of the quality of cleaning. There are supposed to be ten workers on each wing, but numbers have fluctuated throughout the year. A growing number of applicants are low-level learners, and this has an adverse impact on the quality of work.

7.2.10 The Clink has worked well during the year. National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) for prisoners on a hospitality pathway are being delivered. This area employs up to ten men, but it has become increasingly difficult to get men through the modules due to shorter sentence times.

7.2.11 Following the curtailment of art provision, the offering in crafts has been remodelled towards pyrography. This has allowed men with neurodiverse and/or additional learning needs to participate, resulting in rehabilitation and more engagement.

7.2.12 In light of the evolving prisoner profile and the policy to increase the pace of deportations, there is a need to remodel the entire industries offering. This would help ensure that men have access to appropriate training and qualifications during their time at Huntercombe, and that a greater number are engaged in meaningful activity.

7.3 Offender management, progression

7.3.1 The anticipated outcome for foreign national prisoners held at Huntercombe is that the majority will ultimately be deported to their country of origin. One of the key roles of the offender management unit (OMU) is to support and facilitate this process.

7.3.2 During 2025, the average monthly roll was 491, with the highest monthly role being 504 (March 2025) and the lowest being 473 (December 2025). This is exactly the same monthly average as 2024.

January	489	July	501
February	496	August	502
March	504	September	489
April	503	October	485
May	503	November	460
June	498	December	473

7.3.3 Towards the end of the year, the population decreased due to changes in the Early Removal Scheme (ERS) and the increased number of prisoners at Huntercombe becoming eligible for earlier removal. This was happening across the whole prison estate in the UK and that meant that those arriving at Huntercombe were those who did not already have flights booked or had been issued with an annex C. In addition to the deportation order, an annex C is required as part of the deportation paperwork. This is a document signed by the Governor that authorises an eligible prisoner's removal under the ERS.

7.3.4 Total deportations from Huntercombe in 2025 by month were as follows:

January	31	July	43
February	24	August	28
March	43	September	47
April	30	October	74
May	36	November	91
June	47	December	44

The monthly average across the year was 45, which is a significant increase on the 2024 monthly average deportation figure of 34. The increase in the latter part of the year was as a result of a recalculation for ERS, which was carried out, together with a decision by the Home Office to expedite deportations.

7.3.5 To continue to improve the checking process necessary for a prisoner to receive his annex C, Huntercombe was hoping to receive a police national computer (PNC) terminal. This had not arrived when the Board wrote its report, although its arrival had been reported as imminent in the 2024 Board report. The OMU now asks prisoners to speak to their legal representatives to ascertain if they have any impending cases so that OMU can start the process.

7.3.6 There have been no releases in error from Huntercombe reported to the Board in 2025. The OMU continues to follow the process set down by HMPPS and makes several checks prior to any release. If there is any doubt at all, Huntercombe will not allow anyone to leave without carrying out checks with the detainee population management unit to ensure that they are correct.

7.3.7 With a high level of prisoner churn, changes to release date calculations and the need to maintain accuracy in all paperwork, the OMU operates under considerable pressure. Although the department was understaffed during 2025, recruitment has been undertaken to address these gaps, and following an often lengthy vetting process (which can take up to six months), the OMU expects to begin 2026 fully staffed.

7.4 Family contact

7.4.1 Family services are undertaken by the Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT). There are two part-time members of the charity's team working at Huntercombe. One of these is part of the Listen to Families project, which creates mechanisms and opportunities for families and carers with a loved one in prison to be heard and influence how healthcare services are delivered and developed.

7.4.2 A total of 4,481 social video calls were made in 2025, an increase of 9.44% from 4,058 calls made in 2024. In 2025, at least one call was made by 84.77% of the prison's population.

7.4.3 The social video calls are held in the visits hall using ten new laptop computers. In 2025, these laptops replaced tablets and the consensus is they are an improvement because they are easier to use (bigger screen and hands free) and more reliable. Also, they have better battery life, avoiding calls being cut short. On average, the laptops are used by four or five prisoners a day. Privacy and dignity are afforded by use of headsets at a quiet table with soft seating in the visits hall.

7.4.4 The service is considered very important at Huntercombe because it is more likely that a large number of prisoners have family and friends in other countries, making visiting in person difficult, if not impossible.

7.4.5 Evenings and weekends are the busiest times, and as a foreign national prison, differing time zones mean that access to this facility during these periods is particularly important for prisoners. However, for some, the inability to use the facility at a time that aligns with their home country remains a source of frustration.

7.4.6 Overall, seeing and talking to family and friends via the calls is considered a positive experience for prisoners. However, there are occasions when the call has a negative impact, such as receiving bad news or feeling absent and separated.

7.4.7 The prison recognises the significance and benefits of its foreign national prisoners being able to have regular social video calls and has applied for more availability.

7.4.8 Prisoners are eligible for two social visits a month and special family days (10am to 3pm) are held in the visits hall every month. PACT reports there are spaces for a total of ten prisoners and families per visit. Applications are made four weeks in advance to give sufficient time for the prisoners and their named visitors to be cleared by security. In December 2025, 17 applications were received, and it is not unusual for the service to be oversubscribed. There are sometimes late cancellations, leaving spare capacity on the day.

7.4.9 The visits hall is considered a welcoming environment pleasant for the purpose, with a children's play area, colourful murals and comfortable sitting. There is a servery selling hot and cold food, snacks and drinks for cash payment.

7.4.10 In-cell telephony to approved numbers helps prisoners maintain contact with their friends and families. Of the 280 applications (prisoners' written representations) received by the Board in 2025, 15 (5.36%) related to family/visits, including mail and phone.

7.4.11 On a visits day in November 2025, a Board member conducted a walk through from the visitor centre to the visits hall to observe the experience that visitors receive when they come to Huntercombe. Visitors were treated with understanding and well supported, from checking in to entering the prison.

7.5 Resettlement planning

7.5.1 In 2025, resettlement received 47 applications for unescorted release on temporary licence (ROTL) that passed initial screening. This number is a 26% reduction on the 2024 figure of 64. All of these were progressed to their prisoner offender manager (POM) or for external checks to take place.

7.5.2 During the reporting year, there were a small number of applications that did not pass the initial checks and did not progress any further. The reasons for refusal ranged from being deemed unsuitable on security grounds, an impending prosecution or the nature of their index offence (the main offence a person is in prison for).

7.5.3 ROTLs that have been approved in 2025 have progressed to outside gardens or external work placements. In total, 16 prisoners across the year were approved for ROTL, plus an additional one that was for an escorted ROTL for the Boats Not Bars course. Two prisoners who were originally approved for Boats Not Bars were then progressed to full ROTL. These are included in the 16.

7.5.4 In December 2025, Huntercombe had five men on ROTL working outside the prison (four in outside gardens and one working for a waste management company).

7.5.5 There are challenges for Huntercombe in finding prisoners suitable for ROTL. One key issue is that the churn of prisoners is increasingly high, due to the changing nature of the release date calculations as foreign national prisoners are moved through the system quicker. This can mean that prisoners possibly suitable for ROTL are often not in Huntercombe long enough to go through the lengthy application process with their sentence being considerably reduced.

7.5.6 Finding employers in the area willing to help with ROTL is also a challenge. Employers seek reassurance that, if they take on prisoners on ROTL, individuals will remain in post for a reasonable period following the training provided. Sentence reductions (see 7.5.5) limit the extent to which such assurance can be given.

7.5.7 A Board member attended a ROTL assessment board in October 2025. It was clear that such assessment boards take up a considerable amount of staff time in preparation and the one attended was handled very professionally, with empathy and understanding.

7.5.8 ROTL is only one part of the role the resettlement team plays at Huntercombe. Providing clothing for release, support for those going back to countries where they may not have a support structure in place and help in accessing accommodation on release are just a few of the additional roles the department plays.

7.5.9 The resettlement team continues to support prisoners returning to their home countries. Some of these individuals may not have been back for many years and Huntercombe provides access to a series of guides to help. Whilst not every country can be covered, the guides are available via the Home Office Returns Reintegration Programme to 12 countries and via the charity Hibiscus to 17 countries. This charity supports marginalised migrants affected by the criminal justice and immigration systems, enabling informed choices and positive changes via a series of country specific guides giving advice and information about all aspects of their deportation. Another source of support is provided by individual country fact sheets for 32 countries supplied by the German Government department, BAMF.

7.5.10 The resettlement team works on a tight budget and continues to offer constructive and proactive support across the prison. It is a highly valued service by those prisoners able to access it.

8. The work of the IMB

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	8
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	9
Total number of visits to the establishment	302

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	24	47
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	7	5
C	Equality	5	4
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	12	20
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	11	15
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	3	4
F	Food and kitchens	3	6
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	25	29
H1	Property within the establishment	10	21
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	26	28
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	4	16
I	Sentence management, including HDC (home detention curfew), ROTL (release on temporary licence), parole, release dates, recategorisation	68	58
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	9	11
K	Transfers	3	3
L	Miscellaneous	12	13
	Total number of applications	222	280



This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications>

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