



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Northumberland

**For reporting year
1 January 2025 to 31 December 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

2.1 HMP Northumberland (HMPN) is situated in rural Northumberland some 30 miles north of Newcastle. The estate area is extensive, with some buildings being at least 40 years old.

2.2 The certified normal accommodation was 1236 category C prisoners. The average population in December 2025 was 1194.¹ In December 2025, 1112 prisoners classified themselves as White/British, 38 White, 19 Gypsy or Irish Traveller, 22 Asian/Asian British, 16 Black/Black British, 15 Mixed and four other. There were 18 foreign national prisoners in the prison.

2.3 The prison comprises 16 residential blocks. There are six vulnerable prisoner (VP) blocks, a 40-place drug and alcohol recovery unit and 10 main blocks. In addition, there is a 20-place block housing men who are able to access release on temporary licence (ROTL), some of whom have category D status. An additional 60 bed unit was completed in 2024 and is designated for prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCSOs).

2.4 The prison has been operated by Sodexo since 2013. The healthcare contract has been delivered by Spectrum since April 2020.

2.5 Services for prisoners nearing release are organised by the Probation Service. Volunteers and staff at the North East Prison After Care Society (NEPACS) continue to support prisoners' families.

2.6 During the reporting year, problems with the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) in various parts of the prison continued including the education block, some workshops, the reception area and some houseblocks. Work has been ongoing to rectify the problems and the majority of this was completed in the first 6 months of 2026.

2.7 There is ongoing building work being carried out to build an additional small secure unit which will house an additional 240 prisoners. This is likely to be completed in 2027.

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

Whilst the prison performs well compared to similar prisons in terms of levels of violence and self-harm, we have not seen any reduction in the levels from last year and the figures for both self-harm and violence have remained largely the same.

Fair and humane treatment

The prison has worked hard this year to improve prisoner accommodation and facilities.

Health and wellbeing

Positive work is being undertaken to improve prisoner access to healthcare.

Progression and resettlement

The prison has continued to work on ensuring that prisoners undertake purposeful activity in the form of education, training or work, despite the disruption caused by RAAC to education and training facilities. The prison has taken steps to improve pre-release planning, and the appointment of a strategic housing worker has improved housing outcomes for those released from prison.

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- The prison has employed a strategic housing worker which has improved housing outcomes for prisoners leaving the prison. However, the prison has not received the funding for this post, which other prisons have received. Accordingly, the post is currently unfunded. Will the Minister confirm that funding will be provided for this post?

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- What financial planning is in place to account for the planned expansion of the prison estate at HMP Northumberland over the next year, and the associated increase in operational costs?

TO THE DIRECTOR

- Is there a strategic plan in place to address the increase in staffing required as the prison population expands?
- Given the ageing population, what plans are in place to ensure staff receive the specialist training required to care for elderly prisoners, including those with dementia?

3.3 Response to the last report

	Main areas for development identified in 2024	Progress since last report
<i>TO THE MINISTER</i>	What measures can be implemented to ensure mental health support is available in a reasonable timeframe to prisoners who require it?	There has been an improvement in prisoners accessing appropriate mental health provision.
<i>TO THE PRISON SERVICE</i>	What action can be taken to ensure any remaining RAAC issues are dealt with swiftly?	The mitigation programme started in April 2025 and it is anticipated that most of the affected areas will reopen in 2026.
<i>TO THE DIRECTOR</i>	What are the plans to improve progression for prisoners so that they can move into work on release?	In October, the prison launched an employment strategy to deliver an end-to-end journey that begins when the prisoner enters the prison and ends when the prisoner is released.

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

Since the change of location in 2024, the prison reception area now appears to be well settled. What at first sight seems to be quite chaotic, turns out to be well ordered and well controlled. The Board have observed arriving prisoners being carefully managed. The Board noted the positive attitude of staff in reception with new arrivals, which was polite and welcoming.

A similar system was observed during prisoner induction, in Block 5. At induction new arrivals have a total of 12 sections to go through either in the unit or in locations around the prison. Again, there appears to be careful organisation of all the prisoners going through all the stages. Ideally prisoners will complete all the stages within two days and not stay in the unit for more than five days so that they go to an appropriate wing as soon as possible.

The following observations were noted as a result of our monitoring:

1. A suggestion was made that having a scan on arrival at the prison was both unnecessary (as they will have been scanned on departing the remitting institution) and potentially harmful. While there may be some validity in this, it is probably necessary for the security of HMP Northumberland and risk of harm is minimal.
2. A concern was expressed that the 'induction/assessment booklet' that is completed with new arrivals, is overly lengthy and onerous. It is 23 sides, however not all pages need to be completed for every prisoner and reception staff are well versed in using the document, so can easily establish which sections are relevant. There is, however, a valid concern that all the substantial text given to the prisoner is unlikely to be absorbed immediately even by those who do not have literacy issues.
3. Another concern expressed was that the treatment of transgender prisoners aggravates other prisoners. An arriving transgender prisoner was observed being given priority at all the stations in Reception and had additional input with a meeting with an existing transgender prisoner and a discussion with a senior member of prison staff. We appreciate that this is a difficult area for the prison but potentially it could be given some consideration.
4. In the reception area, the Board were told by some Insiders (Prisoners who are trained and selected to provide information and peer support to newly arrived prisoners, particularly during reception and induction) that if you arrive at the prison on a Thursday, it may not be until the following Tuesday that you commence Induction. This was not supported by our conversations with induction staff who advised that prisoners proceed to the full induction process as quickly as possible.
5. A delay in the induction of prisoners was confirmed as an issue over the Christmas period. Due to the closure of various units at that time, some elements of the induction process could not take place, resulting in some prisoners remaining in the induction unit for up to three weeks.
6. Short staffing in Block 5. We were told that the daytime allocation of staff for Block 5 should be six but often the actuality was four. This made it difficult for

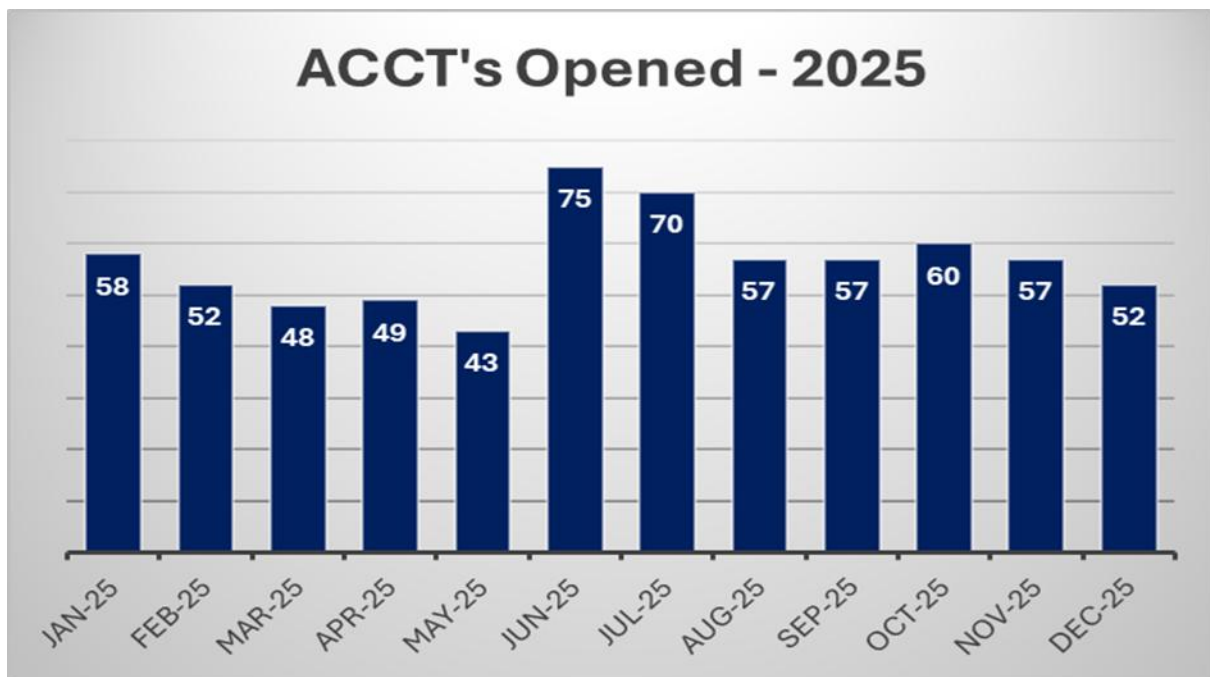
staff to deal appropriately with prisoners subject to Induction when they were on the wing.

7. While we did not observe all interactions with newly arrived prisoners, we spoke to some prisoners who were not given any information either orally or in writing about the IMB, and therefore did not know of our presence.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

There was a spike in self-harm incidents in January, June and July, otherwise the figure for the year remained static with a reduction towards the end of the year. There are a wide range of triggers for self-harm with the most prominent being prisoners experiencing poor mental health, stress/frustration and incentive levels. The HMIP inspection in September 2025 noted that the support for those at risk of self-harm was too limited. The prison has put in place an action plan to address this and hopefully we will see a reduction in self-harm incidents in the coming year.





The prison plan to improve the quality of the Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) process used to identify, manage, and support prisoners at risk of suicide or self-harm, and are implementing a revised system of checks on ACCTs which are more thorough and involve a multi-disciplinary approach.

There have been seven deaths in custody this year compared to 10 last year.

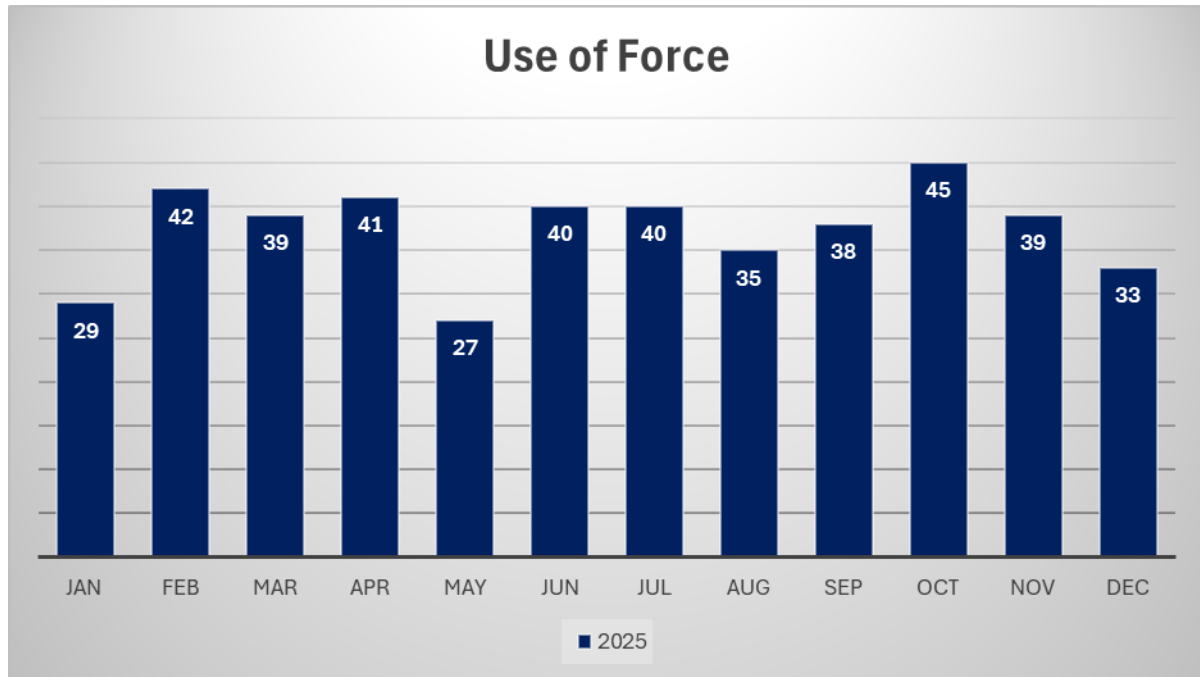
4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

There has been a slight increase in violent incidents this year. The main causes of prisoner on prisoner assaults are linked to bullying and debt caused by drugs or other illicit items. The prison continues to focus on reducing violent incidents.



4.4 Use of force

The use of force (UoF) has remained largely the same as last year. The prison monitors the UoF carefully. It has a weekly review of individual incidents of use of force and then holds monthly and quarterly reviews which consider use of force statistics including location breakdown, day and time of day patterns and staff/prisoner demographics. The underlying causes of UoF incidents are discussed and compliance with policy and reporting standards are monitored. There is also a review of staff training needs. The prison has introduced the use of PAVA, but its use has been very limited.



4.5 Preventing illicit items

The prison takes positive action to reduce the supply of illicit items into the prison which includes photocopying mail, increased use of the body scanner, targeted operations on known hotspots and points of entry. The prison now has a Rapiscan machine which will support supply reduction by testing items in the prison and those received from the community. Positive mandatory drug testing rates fell to an average of 24.08% in the year ending October 2025. The recent inspection by HMIP noted that the prison has one of the lowest positive MDT rates of any Cat C prison.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

The prison has recognised that a significant amount of prisoner accommodation and houseblock communal areas are outdated and need improvement. A plan to improve houseblock environment is ongoing.

On the main estate houseblocks 1, 2, 3, 4 and the Gateway recovery unit have been, or are in the process of being, refurbished. On houseblock 7, a prisoner interview room/quiet space has been created and there has been an upgrade of facilities for prisoners including cooking and recreation. Houseblock 8 is now an Enhanced Unit. A self-cook kitchen has been installed. There is a new external area with a poly tunnel to allow prisoners to cultivate fresh produce.

The accommodation on the VP estate, except for Alnwick house, a new build facility, is largely outdated and could be significantly improved with a new build. That said, a great deal of work has been put into improving the environment and prisoners are rightly proud of the initiatives they have been involved in, to both improve and maintain the quality of accommodation.

The flooring in all the older residential blocks is showing its age.

Where possible, colour schemes have been introduced to reduce the institutionalisation of the environment. This, along with a range of house plants and new attractions, such as the pet care area and chicken coops, offers prisoners the opportunity to live in an environment more in line with possibilities on release.

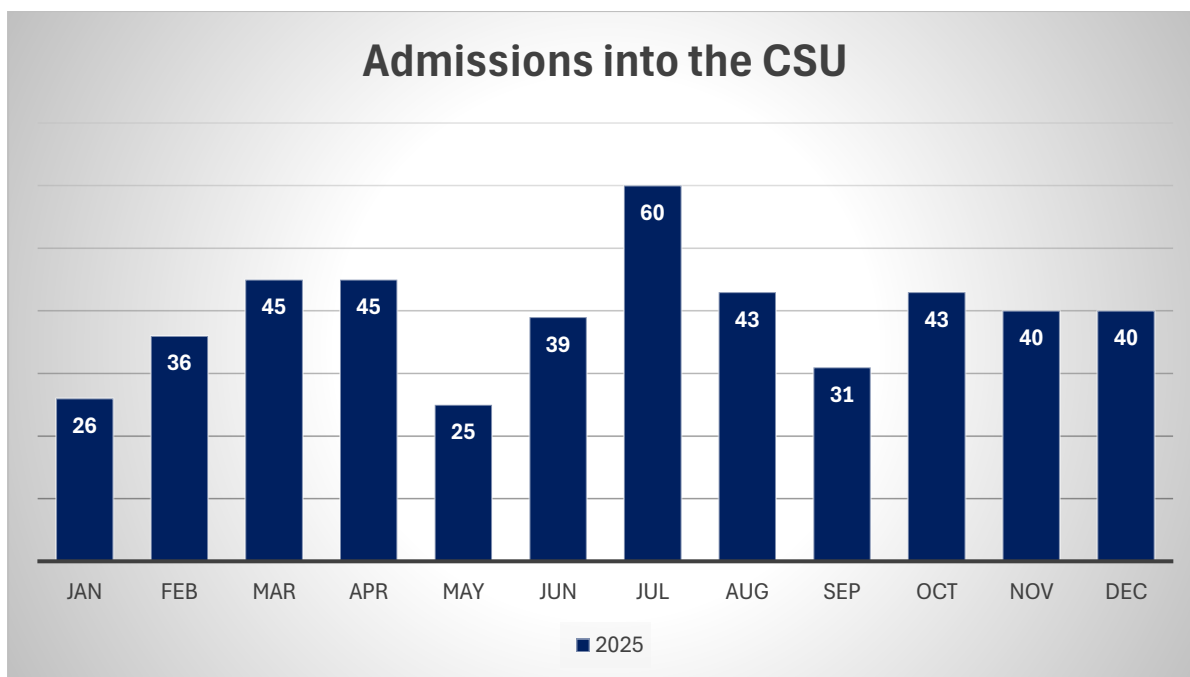
Cells on all the house blocks are clean, tidy and well respected by prisoners.

Alnwick House is a modern, new build facility where prisoners have open access to their accommodation and grounds. There are cooking facilities, gym equipment and very well maintained (by the prisoners) gardens.

The specialist provision for elderly VP prisoners includes in cells showers, giving dignity, especially for those prisoners who are less mobile or who have specific hygiene needs that come with advanced age. Prisoners in this provision keep their cells in immaculate condition and are always keen to show this.

5.2 Segregation

The prison has undertaken a programme of refurbishing the cells in the care and separation unit (CSU). This has made a significant improvement to the condition for prisoners in the CSU. We were also concerned about the poor ventilation in the shower in the CSU and raised this with the prison. The prison has improved the management oversight of the CSU which has improved the quality of care and risk plans. Whilst there are still some prisoners who are held in the CSU due to serious mental health problems, there is evidence that some prisoners benefit from the additional care they receive in the CSU and show an improvement in their mental health. Whilst there is still a shortage of places that can meet the needs of prisoners with serious mental health issues, the prison reports that it has not experienced the same level of problems with prisoners having to remain in the CSU for long periods waiting for a transfer as in previous years. We note that prisoners generally comment positively on the staff who work in the CSU.



5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

The prison has increased its focus on key working and has introduced a key worker newsletter to emphasise the importance of effective key working and the positive impact it can have on prisoners.

Staff relationships are generally good, and this is particularly evident in the VP estate where prisoners are well cared for and live in a safe environment.

There are 546 prisoners in the VP residential units. Typically, 16 staff cover six residential blocks supported by three senior officers and two senior managers.

Staff do not receive specialist training to work in the VP estate but are coached in specific scenarios. Age UK assist with training for working with those who have dementia and expertise is rolled down from experienced colleagues in the offender management team.

From the Board's observations, and conversations, prisoners engage well with the key worker scheme and see it as a really positive activity.

5.4 Equality and diversity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or questioning), intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) prisoners are well supported across the prison. There are currently nine transgender prisoners and one non-binary prisoner. These groups of prisoners have a dedicated peer support worker who has Red Band Status (the highest level of trust). This peer support worker attends the diversity, equality and inclusion meetings. Prisoners who are identified for support under the 'transgender policy framework,' can attend weekly support meetings. Prisoners identify this as a good way of being made to feel accepted and a 'safe space' to air points of view.

New transgender arrivals are met in reception by the prison's transgender lead (or deputy lead). This Sodexo employee will have already attended a local case board

and be familiar with the incoming prisoner's needs. This process facilitates a smooth transition for the prisoner and the prison.

Transgender prisoners are permitted additional clothing parcels or access to their private cash to meet their clothing needs, as well as access to personal items such as cosmetics, wigs and grooming products.

The prison signposts links with community organisations that support transgender people.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

The Chaplaincy team are proactive and visible in the prison. Each prisoner receives a visit from a member of the team within 24 hours of arrival and is given information about the Chaplaincy. Chaplains visit the CSU daily. The Chaplaincy also provides support to prisoners who are dying and their families and to those who have suffered bereavement. Despite the closure of the main chapel due to RAAC, the team have worked hard to ensure that the service is maintained. The team have organised several faith-based events including a Remembrance Day Service.

A dedicated multi-faith centre has been established within the Programmes building, which supports improved faith-based activity.

5.6 Incentives schemes

There are a range of incentive schemes in operation across the prison and of note on the VP estate is the ISFL (Incentivised Substance Free Living) scheme. Prisoners who are part of this scheme have and continue to develop skills in a wide range of areas. A prisoner was delighted to share his experience of creating art work for the unit.

A further project of artistic interest is the 'Windows of Hope,' programme. This programme is facilitated by the Sodexo facilities management team and the deputy head of residence. Prisoners are in the process of creating large scale artwork to display. Again, this is spoken about by prisoners with pride and confidence.

5.7 Complaints

There were a total of 2905 complaints to the prison this year compared to 3638 last year.

5.8 Property

There has been a reduction in the number of applications which concern prisoners' property this year. The main complaint seems to have been about property going missing when prisoners are moved into the CSU. We raised this issue with the Director who assured us that procedures for securing prisoners' property in these circumstances were being improved.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

The Drug Rehabilitation Programme in the prison provides a lot of support for those prisoners who have, or have had, substance abuse issues.

A programme of creative events is being developed built on the strength of the art programme to encourage men to use their time productively and positively. This initiative is prisoner led and is being expanded to include music tuition offer (guitar) and potentially basic language skills.

On the residential unit for the elderly VP prisoners there is clear evidence of support with a buddy scheme. This encourages prisoners to use the social areas inside and outside and to actively participate in board games, darts, pool, chess, cooking, various other competitions and the newly launched 'Stars behind Bars' show. All these activities are aimed at preventing isolation and being alert to mental health issues. Prisoners speak with enthusiasm about the wing managers who go the extra mile to create opportunity for engagement. The prison partners with Age UK for some of the delivery of these additional activities.

All the residential blocks have gym equipment which is in very good order and used regularly by prisoners. Regular risk assessments take place regarding use of this equipment.

6.2 Physical healthcare

The healthcare team at the prison have been working with Northumbria Healthcare to break down the barriers to prisoners receiving care. 38% of prisoners do not attend outside hospital appointments even though transport is provided. From the Board's experience and conversations with prisoners, it has been reported that prisoners do not like sitting in public waiting rooms in handcuffs. They are not told in advance that they are going to hospital for security reasons, which means they are often unprepared to leave when required. The team are working toward having more healthcare appointments at the prison to avoid prisoners having to attend external medical appointments. Prisoners are asked when they come into the prison if they want to register with the prison general practitioner, this enables the healthcare team to access their records for more effective treatment. 96% of prisoners do register with the prison GP. The number of prescribers in the prison has gone from one to nine with four more in training.

6.3 Mental health

The Board has observed that mental health support for prisoners has shown some improvement this year.

6.4 Time out of cell, regime

The prison has a core day and those attending work or education in the week are out of their cells for at least six hours a day. Over the summer due to staff shortages there was some disruption to the regime particularly at weekends. The prison managed this by ensuring that prisoners knew what the changes were and that all houseblocks were equally impacted.

6.5 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

The Gateway recovery unit, which supports individuals with substance misuse issues, has undergone an extensive programme of painting and refurbishment. There are plans to provide a self-cook kitchen facility and new furniture. The new standards are intended to ensure decency and provide a sense of pride in the prisoners. The unit provides abstinence-based recovery and delivers structured programmes together with peer support. Work can be continued in the community and Gateway has established a pathway to recovery housing on release in conjunction with probation.

6.6 Soft skills

The main wings and VP estate have their own environmental improvement teams. This is a prisoner led group who take responsibility for programmes of work, recording of improvements and future programmes of work. Skills are taught within the group. Prisoners shared their documents for programmes of work with the Board, and examples of skills training can be seen daily. On one occasion we observed one prisoner training another in the art of 'cutting in' while painting. Another interesting and professional debate focussed on colours and borders. The Board observed prisoners demonstrating that they are fully engaged in both the skills acquisition and the aesthetics of their environment.

The capacity to work in teams, take and give instruction, upskill and use literacy and numeracy skills is evident on all the work carried out by the environmental improvement team.

The introduction of the pet care area on Houseblock 12 and increase in the chicken flock enables prisoners to demonstrate their capacity for care. One beneficiary, 'Robinson' the hamster, seems to be thriving as a result.

The pet care area is also a useful tool for de-escalation skills when prisoners are at risk of self-harm or violence.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

During 2025, there was extensive work taking place across the HMP Northumberland to eliminate RAAC. We recognised the considerable effort being made by the prison management and staff to minimise the inevitable disruption on all purposeful activity and it is to their credit that the areas that were taken out of action have largely been improved during 2025 for readiness in 2026. For example, the main education area has been refurbished to a high level and will be ready in summer 2026, and by April 2026, the physical education gymnasiums will be returned to action with a comprehensive set of newly purchased and installed equipment. The disruption did not stop the purposeful activity programme running, with notable effort being made in education to convert a less than optimum space for lessons and the physical education department making considered modifications to their programme. The education provider, Novus, worked effectively with the prison to make this possible.

In September 2025 the prison was inspected by OFSTED. Provision was assessed as good in all areas, demonstrating that improvements have been made.

The temporary education and library areas on the main estate and on the VP estate are bright and comfortable areas that staff and learners have made into welcoming spaces. Our observations of art and library activities have been encouraging with good learner interaction and engagement shown, this being confirmed in conversation with individuals. The mentors spoken to were positive about their role and those being helped appreciated the support. However, we have raised some questions about the appropriate range of levels on offer and the processes behind the selection of the courses available. Also, library access was quite restricted, and we felt this could negatively affect those needing special help with reading. We had discussions about this with the head of education, work and skills before they left the prison in October 2025. The questions remain and will be taken up with the new staff.

Accurate statistics for attendance and completion in Education were not available for the whole year for our independent analysis due to changes in the external contract arrangements and to the internal staffing of education. The statistics provided by the prison for the Ofsted report in November 2025 identified the Education, Skills and Work provision as a significant strength with high attendance rates and strong achievement rates. Our visual assessment when observing education and training was not as positive and we did raise some questions about the appropriateness of some courses for certain individuals. We noted that the allocated education programmes for April to September 2025 averaged around 90% with an attendance average of 75%. This area does need some closer scrutiny.

The new head of education, skills and work and the learning and skills manager have set out clear plans for 2026, that make a wider use of residential peer led activities. This follows the successful use of mentors across the education programme that we have witnessed in PE and in the work training areas like the kitchen. The aim is to enhance well-being, decency, and social responsibility across the wings.

7.2 Vocational training, work.

The observations we have made on training and work at the prison consider the assessments made by Ofsted in September, which made positive findings with respect to education, skills and work provision. There are 19 workshops providing 505 workshop places, 221 education places and 408 other activity spaces.

We have visited various work areas during the course of the year, including the tailor's workshop, bicycle repair shop, kitchens, engineering workshop, tea-packing area and market garden. In all these areas we found the instructors to be well informed and motivated. In most cases prisoners were fully engaged in learning new skills in preparation for release. The engineering workshops, kitchens and market garden are perhaps the most underutilised work facilities on site. The prisoners achieve and display valuable skills but they are unable to achieve vocational qualifications. As an example, in the Engineering workshop there are prisoners who are able to programme computer-controlled machinery but unfortunately without the relevant qualification this skill would probably not be recognised by a future employer. It is recognised that to provide the opportunity for work-based qualifications additional funding would be required.

In October 2025, the prison produced an employment strategy which outlined its approach to employment designed to ensure that every eligible prisoner leaver is equipped with skill documentation and confidence to secure employment on release. Employment planning begins on day one with assessment and skills development and then the delivery of vocational training aligned with the local labour market

7.3 Offender management, progression

The prison runs the Building Choices programme, which comprises a range of strands and levels of intensity to support prisoners' progression. However, the Board has seen that some prisoners have difficulty in accessing programmes that their sentence plans require, either because there is pressure on places or because the prison does not run the mandated course. This hampers an individual's ability to progress.

7.4 Resettlement planning

The prison has made efforts to improve release planning and preparation activities this year. There is a weekly resettlement Board which incorporates a multi-agency approach to discuss those approaching release to identify their needs and share information. The pre-release team meet with every prisoner 12 weeks prior to release to ensure service provision is offered. Events have been held with employers coming in to talk to prisoners about possible employment opportunities. Green King came in and talked about working in hospitality and ran a mocktail session. The prison has worked with two traffic management companies to look at possible employment opportunities for prisoners on release. One conducted six interviews with prisoners who expressed an interest in working in the industry. The feedback for all candidates positive and two candidates were offered a job on release with the company.

The Employment Hub links prisoners with local employers, vocational training programmes and support services. There are exit service workshops covering CVs interviews and disclosure.

7.5 Accommodation on release

Since the employment of a strategic housing specialist in 2024, the prison has continued to improve the percentage of prisoners for whom housing is secured on release. The target is 91.46% and during 2025, the prison consistently exceeded this. Staff have completed a Renting Ready course to enable them to support prisoners manage in rented accommodation.

8. The work of the IMB

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	17
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	7
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	7
Total number of visits to the establishment	124

Applications to the IMB

		Previous Reporting year	Current Reporting year
Code	Subject		
A	Accommodation	3	2
B	Adjudications	3	2
C	Equality & Diversity (inc religion)	1	
D	Education/employment/training inc IEP	8	6
E1	Family/visits inc mail & phone	3	6
E2	Finance/pay	4	5
F	Food/kitchen related	7	4
G	Health related	23	13
H1	Property (with current establishment)	24	10
H2	Property (during transfer/in another establishment)	14	8
H3	Canteen, facilities, Catalogue shopping, Argos	1	2
I	Sentence related (including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, recategorisation, etc)	16	13
J	Staff/prisoner/detainee concerns inc bullying	32	16
K	Transfers	3	6
	Total number of applications	142	93



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