



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Swaleside

**For reporting year
1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026**

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

2. Description of the establishment

HMP Swaleside is a category B training prison for men, on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent.

It was opened in August 1988 as part of a group with HMPs Standford Hill and Elmley. On 1 April 2017, it became part of the HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) long-term high-security estate (LTHSE), designed to hold prisoners who pose the greatest risk to public safety if they were to escape.

The certified normal accommodation, or CNA (which is the number of prisoners a prison can hold without being overcrowded) is 1,112¹ in single cells over seven wings (A wing remains closed). The CNA includes the care, separation and reintegration unit (CSRU, for segregating prisoners) and the healthcare unit. The operational capacity (the maximum number of prisoners deemed able to be held without serious risk to safety, security, good order and the proper running of the prison) is 922.

At the end of April 2026, of the 760 held at the prison, the majority were category B prisoners.

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

Background to the report

In last year's report, the Board noted that HMP Swaleside was suffering from high levels of violence, excessive drug use and prisoners' concerns for their safety. In December 2025, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) had an unannounced inspection of HMP Swaleside and noted high levels of violence, assaults, drugs being brought in by drones, related debts and gang rivalry, issues with staff shortages and the introduction of a new safety regime. They also criticised HMPPS as there had been no permanent Governor at the prison for over a year. A new Governor took up her post in July 2025 and has reorganised the senior leadership team (SLT) and brought 'well-developed plans', according to HMIP, to address the issues. Stating that it was a 'prison in disarray', upon conclusion of the inspection, HMIP invoked the Urgent Notification (UN) process, used when inspectors identify serious and immediate concerns about the performance of a prison. This resulted in an action plan, extra resources, scrutiny and funding². The chief inspector commented in the related press release that it was the worst inspection he had had in his five years in the role.

The IMB's role is to monitor not inspect, so this report should not be considered an update on the progress on the UN and the related action points. However, HMIP's categories of leadership, safety, respect, purposeful activity and preparation for release do overlap with the IMB's monitoring areas of safety, fair and humane treatment, health and wellbeing, and progression and resettlement, particularly regarding prisoners' outcomes. The IMB report covers the period from 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026 and therefore encompasses the period before, during and after the HMIP inspection. In the Board's view, the impact of measures taken following the UN is starting to have an impact on prisoners' safety and wellbeing, which is particularly benefited by the drop in the number of prisoners from 879 (at time of HMIP inspection) to 760 at the end of April 2026.

Yet again, staff continue to play a critical role in the operation of the prison, particularly through the quality of staff and prisoner relationships. In September 2024, the number of uniform staff with less than one year's experience had dropped close to 50%. This had an impact on the running of the prison, conduct, safety and violence. As the year progressed, these officers gained valuable experience and became an increasingly established part of the workforce. However, this position was undermined by the government's decision to remove prison officers from the skilled worker visa route. That was despite the dangerous and valuable job prison officers perform. Had no action been taken, 90 officers at Swaleside would have lost their visa status by the end of August 2026, with a significant impact on staff morale. Following intervention by the Prisons Minister, and recognition of Swaleside as one of the prisons most affected, an exemption was granted in December 2025 until the end of 2026. The Board welcomes this decision and hopes that it will be extended. Nevertheless, staffing pressures remain a concern, with 51 officers due to leave Swaleside by August 2026 at the end of temporary deployments. This is particularly significant given the prison's longstanding recruitment challenges; in 2023,

² Full UN report: <https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2026/03/Swaleside-web-2025.pdf>

Swaleside was operating with 84 fewer officers than required, which had a substantial impact on the delivery of the regime.

2026 IMB annual prisoner survey

In April 2026, the Board again sent an annual IMB survey out to prisoners on topics such as accommodation, food and safety, and the response rate was 57%. The final question was 'free text' (which allows respondents to provide answers in their own words) on any issue prisoners wished to raise. While a negative bias would be anticipated, the comments reflect a consistent pattern of serious concerns about safety, the prison regime, staff conduct and living conditions. Many prisoners describe the establishment as unsafe, frightening, and poorly managed, with repeated references to violence, drugs, weapons, corruption and fear for personal safety. There are also frequent complaints about excessive time locked in cells, limited association, lack of purposeful activity, restricted access to gym sessions and limited rehabilitation opportunities. Several comments express frustration and hopelessness, with prisoners describing the prison as dirty, poorly run and mentally damaging.

A recurring theme throughout the feedback is dissatisfaction with staff-prisoner relationships and the perceived inconsistency of the regime. Respondents refer to poor communication, disrespectful attitude from staff, lack of support and concerns that positive behaviour is not recognised nor rewarded fairly. There are also repeated complaints about poor food quality or quantity, dirty wings, insufficient healthcare and mental health support. A lack of visible staff presence, including SLT on the wings, remains an issue. While a small number of comments acknowledge feeling settled or express gratitude, the dominant sentiment across the responses is one of frustration, mistrust, and concern about the overall prison environment. On balance, the Board believes that responses, whilst not satisfactory, are somewhat less confrontational than last year.

In such a challenging environment, the Board commends the senior leadership team (SLT), officers, service providers and administrative staff for their efforts in operating the prison.

3.1 Main findings

Safety

- Gang affiliations continue to affect the prison. This includes both affiliations with external gangs, particularly county lines networks, as well as the emergence of groups newly formed within Swaleside. Monitoring and responding to these evolving associations places a continual demand on security resources.
- Last year, the estimated use of illicit substances based on the results of random drug testing (positive and refused) was over 50% of the population. In the first four months of 2026, 29% of drug tests were positive and 10% were refused by prisoners. While this represents an improvement, levels of illicit substance use remain unacceptably high.
- Violence increased further, with Swaleside recording the second-highest rate of staff assaults in male prisons nationally and the second-highest assaults

overall. A new safety regime since December has improved the situation, but not sufficiently, in the Board's view.

Fair and humane treatment

- While there are ongoing maintenance issues with the flooring, showers, heating, hotplates and other parts of the estate, the prisoners benefit from all cells being sole occupancy.
- The impact of the new safety regime has seen an improvement in safety, but at the expense of time out of cell, especially for non-workers. Again, too often movement has been delayed or cancelled, due to a shortage of staff. Staff in the care, separation and reintegration unit (CSRU, for segregating prisoners) have been recognised by the Prisons Minister on a visit for understanding the prisoners' needs. However, again, the Board is concerned about the appropriateness of these cells for prisoners with severe mental health issues, particularly where they are used for extended periods or as constant-watch accommodation.
- At the very heart of staff-prisoner relationships are key work sessions. From a pathetically low level, sessions have started to improve in quantity. More importantly, these are now being regularly quality assured.

Health and wellbeing

- Missed hospital appointments are an issue due to a lack of appropriate transport, lack of officers and prisoner refusals. Non-emergency appointments could be better planned and prioritised. Medical appointments in the prison are often abused by prisoners and not attended by prisoners, affecting effective use of healthcare resources.
- Prisoners' mental health continues to be a major concern. While the InReach team do their best to manage, there are not enough staff to cope with the caseload.
- The time limits for assessing and transferring prisoners to secure or specialist mental health care units continue not to be met.
- The specialist addiction unit is achieving positive outcomes, with a number of prisoners successfully completing courses. This progress is reflected in the planned placement of prisoners from other prisons within the LTHSE on the drug recovery wing (DRW).

Progression and resettlement

- As a category B training prison, Swaleside is not set up to accommodate a large number of releases. In the first four months of this year alone, over 6% of the prisoners were released.
- Continuing from last year, the offender management unit's (OMU) staffing is well below capacity. To this insufficient situation is added a moving of the 'goal posts'. Under fixed-term recall 56 (FTR56) provisions and the Sentencing Act 2026, the prison could be required to manage up 109 releases (15% of the August population) releases over the 12 months from October. Introducing these substantial legislative changes to an understaffed, overworked department, which continues to rely on paper-based processes, raises significant concerns about its capacity to manage the additional workload effectively.

- The sheer magnitude of these releases places further pressure on the probation team and other related services, increasing the challenge of managing an already highly pressured system.
- 75% of prisoners complete education courses, a figure that may have been higher had it not been for the disruption caused by the transfer out of prisoners from H wing.

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- Following on from SDS40, FTR56 and the Sentencing Act are producing enormous strain on the OMU and probation, with the potential for 15% of prisoners to be released over the next 12 months (from 1 October). As before, as a category B training prison, HMP Swaleside does not have the ability to double as a resettlement prison. Furthermore, it destabilises Swaleside for those prisoners not released so soon. How does the Minister propose this process is managed?
- As mentioned in our previous report, attempts to combat the incursion of drones nationally have not been successful. At HMP Swaleside, sightings have increased, despite the new grilles and, subsequently, an anti-drone structure, which were both compromised soon after installation. What will the Minister deploy across the prison estate to help combat the ever-increasing sophistication of organised crime gangs (OCGs)?
- While the experience levels of staff have improved over time, and the extension of the right-to-work visas is welcome, staffing challenges remain significant. New officers on initial deployment, alongside sickness absence, resignations and retirements, have contributed to severe staff shortages, necessitating the introduction of a revised regime. The Board welcomed the Minister's visit following the UN and his focus on organisational culture. However, how can a positive culture be created without Governor involvement in the recruitment process and the steadiness provided by a stable workforce?
- The reduction in education provision has severely curtailed the availability of courses. Not only has this impacted rehabilitation, but it has also had a knock-on impact for all prisoners, creating regime restrictions. Will the Minister commit to adequately funding education provision locally and nationally?

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- HMP Swaleside reached a crisis point, with unacceptable violence and safety leading to a UN in December 2025. What is the rationale for only having an acting Governor for over a year?
- As mentioned in last year's report, the length of time spent in the care, separation and reintegration unit (CSRU) by a number of prisoners remains too long and far exceeds regular recommendations. During this year, the situation in the CSRU worsened, with a quarter of the cells rendered unusable due to prisoners damaging bespoke fittings. When will the Prison Service invest in long-term, indestructible cell furniture for the CSRU?
- While noting last year's response, the continued reliance of HMP Standford Hill on the kitchen at HMP Swaleside for the preparation of its food continues

to cause major issues, as has been stated in previous annual reports. What will the Prison Service do to address the ongoing issue?

- Despite the fall in the population at the prison, the facilities are inappropriate to properly care for those with severe mental health issues. The Board notes the responses last year, but when will the Prison Service increase secure units nationally?
- Again, there remains a lack of sufficient constant-watch cells (which are specially designed cells used to accommodate prisoners who require continuous observation because they are at immediate risk of self-harm or suicide). During periods of heightened need, capacity is inadequate. At one stage this year, seven prisoners were on constant watch, with only two such cells available. Your response last year was 'suitable available cells would be used', but standard cells do not provide a safe environment for continuous observation. When will the capacity at Swaleside increase to an appropriate level?

TO THE GOVERNOR

- Last year, the Board noted that 25% of disciplinary incidents did not result in prisoners being placed 'on report', as some officers can feel intimidated about potential consequences. Why does prisoners' non-compliance with prison rules, including dress standards and vaping restrictions, continue to be evident on the wings?
- Staff and prisoner relationships have been damaged by the low level of key work sessions. A new quality assurance process is welcomed by the Board. When will the number of sessions improve to the recommended level?
- The continued prevalence of drugs, mobile phones and other illicit items, which the prison continues to assess as posing a 'serious risk', is not acceptable and has implications for the safety of prisoners and staff. What steps is the Governor taking to reduce their availability and ensure a safe prison environment?
- Similarly, scanning and searching at the gate is erratic. What proposals are there for improving monitoring a major potential source of ingress?
- Attendance at purposeful activity is extremely poor, with only around half of allocated places filled. What steps are being taken to improve attendance and ensure prisoners consistently engage with the prison's regime?
- The Board is concerned that an increasing number of prisoners are due to be released without adequate preparation under the Sentencing Act 2026. How does the Governor plan to address this issue?
- The relentless theft of stock by prisoners from the DHL workshop continues. What will the Governor do to prevent the thefts, especially with the proposed change in prisoners working in DHL?

3.3. Main areas for attention noted in the report 2024-2025

Issue raised	Progress since last report
To the Minister: 1. The Board reiterates its concern about imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentences, which have no set release date. The Board notes the Minister's response last year, that resentencing could result in prisoners being released without licence supervision. However, not resentencing is punishing them for their behaviour, which has undoubtedly been impacted by the uncertainty of IPPs that were abolished in 2012, with the government stating that they were 'not defensible'. When will the Minister review resentencing?	1. Limited progress
2. Attempts to combat the incursion of drones nationally have not been successful. At HMP Swaleside, sightings are down but contraband is up, so it appears that drones are no longer being successfully detected. What specific, advanced technology, such as that used by the military, will the Minister deploy across the prison estate to help combat this problem?	2. New grilles were compromised shortly after installation. New anti-drone cage was compromised the same month as installation.
3. Despite SDS40, the population pressure persists. Again, as a category B training prison, Swaleside does not have the ability to double as a resettlement prison. Also, the pressure on spaces means some prisoners are being inappropriately sent to Swaleside. How does the Minister propose to address these two issues?	3. Despite the falling prison population, Swaleside continues to house category C prisoners.
4. The inexperience of staff is compounded by the limited training they receive. This is not sufficient to commence employment. What steps will the Minister take to involve Governors in the recruitment process, and what is the rationale for the exclusion of Governors from the process?	4. Staffing decisions and impact continue to be taken centrally, not by the Governor.
To the Prison Service:	
1. The Board shares the concerns expressed by the senior leadership team (SLT) that there have, again, been deaths in custody during the year, especially as only two were, apparently, due to natural causes. What specific, actions are being taken to prevent further fatalities and improve prisoner safety?	1. Sadly, the current reporting year includes deaths in custody, apparently from 'unnatural' causes.

2. Again, the length of time spent in the care, separation and reintegration unit (CSRU) by a number of prisoners remains too long and far exceeds regular recommendations. The Board notes the response last year about exit strategies, but there has been no improvement. What actions and strategies have been implemented to reduce the time prisoners spend in the CSRU, why have these failed and how does the Prison Service plan to ensure an improvement?	2. A continuing issue during this reporting year, due to the lack of spaces in mental health secure units.
3. While noting last year's response that contractors had entered administration, the continued reliance of HMP Standford Hill on the kitchen at HMP Swaleside for the preparation of its food continues to cause major issues, as has been stated for years. What will the Prison Service do to address the ongoing issue?	3. Remains an issue.
4. The Board notes the increase in trained mental-health staff, but the number of cases is combined with the inappropriate facilities to properly care for those with severe mental-health issues. When will the Prison Service increase secure units nationally?	4. The situation remains unchanged.
5. In our 2023-2024 annual report, we stated that the situation with body-worn video cameras (BWVCs) needs to be rectified, so that all staff can be issued with cameras. The prison response was that there are enough BWVCs for operational staff, but the Board believes non-operational staff need to have the opportunity when they come into contact with prisoners. Again, we ask when will the issue be rectified?	5. The Board still holds this view.
6. Again, there is a lack of sufficient constant-watch cells during times of crisis. The Board noted the response last year that in-patient department cells were being considered, but no decision appears to have been made and G wing's cell has been intermittently out of action. When will a decision be made?	6. The situation remains unchanged.
7. The Board is concerned about the number of adjudications that are being remanded and prisoners not attending. This undermines the effective running of the prison. What are the reasons for the high number of remands and non-attendances and what actions can be taken to address them?	7. A significant improvement has happened with adjudications.

TO THE GOVERNOR:	
1. For the majority of the reporting year, violence was ranked as a 'serious risk' by the prison. Yet, up to 25% of prisoners are not placed on report, or BWVCs activated, as officers can feel intimidated about potential consequences. What support will staff be given?	1. Training support has improved
2. Staff and prisoner relationships have been damaged by the huge influx of inexperienced staff. Will the Governor reassure the Board that the recent recovery in key work sessions from a low base will be matched with quality assurance?	2. Key work sessions are quality-assured.
3. Drugs, mobile phones and other illicit items being recorded at 'serious risk' is not acceptable for the safety of prisoners and staff. What steps is the Governor taking to ensure a safe prison environment?	3. This is still a concern.
4. Too much time has been lost in movement to meaningful vocational work and/or education in the reporting year. How will the Governor address this issue?	4. This is still a concern.
5. The Board remains concerned that prisoners are being released from Swaleside without proper support. How does the Governor plan to address this issue?	5. The number of releases is excessive for a category B prison.
6. The relentless theft of stock by prisoners from the DHL workshop has not been addressed. What will the Governor do to prevent the thefts?	6. This is still a concern.

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

Reception is the location where discharged and incoming prisoners are processed. This is no first night unit, as prisoners arriving at Swaleside are arriving from elsewhere in the prison estate and will be placed on the induction wing (D), or on wing with the prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCoSOs). Since reception is the location of the prison's body scanner, it is also used to examine prisoners being transferred between wings when they are suspected of carrying concealed items.

A recanting (transfer of prisoners from other prisons to Swaleside) in the previous reporting year was reversed in 2025/6. The prison population of close 950+ fell to 879 when HMIP visited in December 2025 and further to 760 by the end of the reporting year. This partly reflects the commencement of the decant (transfer of prisoners to other establishments and units) of PCoSOs from H wing. Consequently, reception has been more than usually busy with discharges, especially in 2026, though the IMB has not been receiving property-related complaints from leaving prisoners.

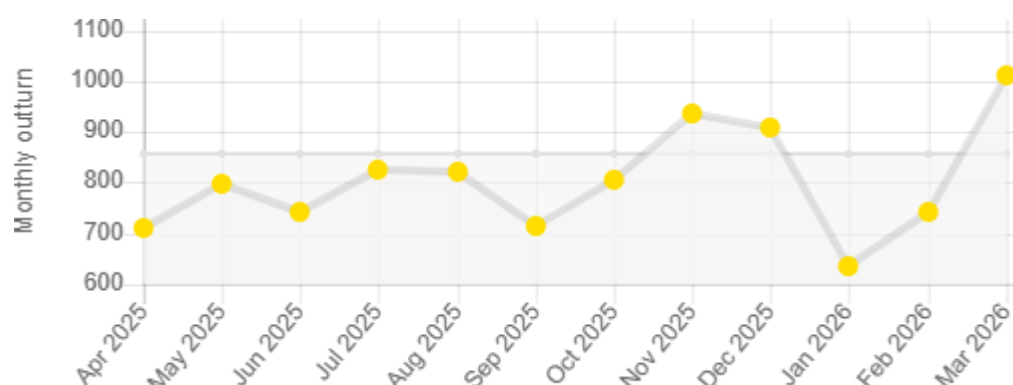
Reception suffers from lack of staff in the prison. Under the current plan, officers are re-allocated away from reception to help with the operating the daily regime. This shortage of officers has led to slow processing of incoming property and parcels. Also, too often, cells on wings have not been cleared and documented by wing staff after transfers, which means property is received late by reception.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

Regrettably, self-harm is ever present. In the main, it involves a small number of prisoners and is often related to prisoners' requests for vapes or changes in the regime. Unlike some CSRUs, Swaleside allows the use of vapes (though this arrangement is due to change), which results in a disproportionate level of self-harm. The number of self-harm incidents can vary from month to month and tends to be concentrated amongst certain prisoners.

The new regime that started on 1 December 2025 was brought in to enhance the safety and security of both prisoners and staff. However, the resulting reduction in time out of cell appears to have increased frustration among some prisoners. HMIP noted during their inspection that the published regime allowed 44% of the population only 30 minutes unlocked on most weekdays. The Board has noted that self-harm incidents may reflect prisoners' distress in coping with restrictions or changes to the regime, even where the issue prompting the behaviour might appear relatively minor. After a decrease in January, which coincided with a number of prisoners being transferred to other establishments under emergency national operational arrangements, the rate has unfortunately climbed.

Self-harm rate per 1,000 prisoners (the number of self-harm incidents that occurred for every 1,000 prisoners in the population, which can include the same prisoners committing multiple instances of self-harm):



The Board is sad to report five deaths in custody during the reporting year, with all, except one, apparently due to natural causes. All deaths in the previous reporting year were fully investigated by the Prison and Probation Ombudsman.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

Violence continues to be ranked as a 'serious risk' by the prison, and safety as a 'significant risk'. In its inspection of the prison, HMIP noted that 'violence was very high', with assaults against staff the highest in *all* male prisons over 12 months. Actual assaults are only part of the picture, as threats to staff and other prisoners and weapons add to the total; for example, there were 235 'violence considerations', which include potential situations, in March 2026. Prisoner-on-prisoner assaults have trended down from their peak, but are unchanged since the introduction of the safety regime in December. This is particularly concerning, as over 20 prisoners with challenging behaviour were transferred to other establishments under emergency national operational arrangements in December 2025, and a prison population of over 100 less prisoners is likely to create less room for conflict. A restrictive regime, with less time out of cell, combined with the cancellation of purposeful activity sessions, contributes to boredom and frustration among prisoners. At the same time, the continued prevalence of the illicit economy creates debts and conflicts that can lead to violence and intimidation. These issues are linked both to external criminal networks, including county lines activity (for which Swaleside has one of the highest nationally), and to newly created gangs that have emerged within Swaleside. The Director of HMPPS LTHSE estimates that there are 950 organised crime groups (OCGs) operating across the LTHSE.

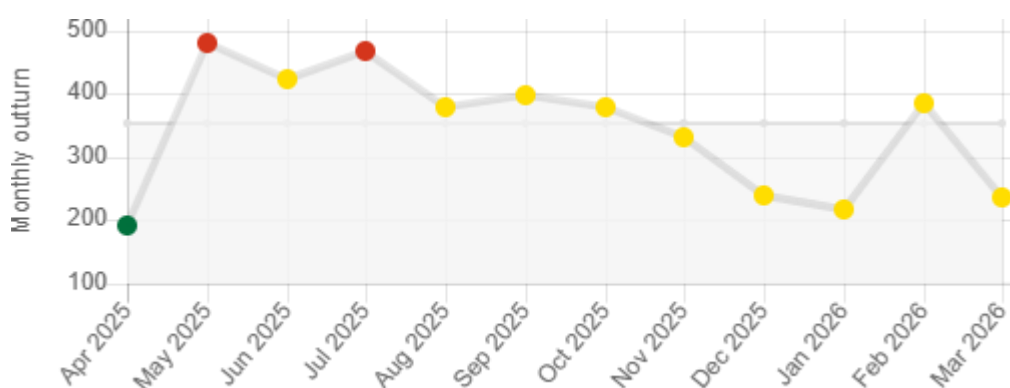
From an excessively high level during the summer of 2025, the prisoner-on-staff assault rate has halved. Clearly this is welcome, especially as officers in the LTHSE are twice as likely to be assaulted as those in the wider prison estate, according to the Directorate. It suggests there have been improvements in staff confidence and expertise in handling prisoners, as well as a beneficial impact of the regime change.

The national standards coaching team was at Swaleside for 16 weeks in 2025, teaching, and supported all aspects of an officer's role, via a weekly topic. Encouragingly, they reported that the voluntary take-up by officers was the highest in

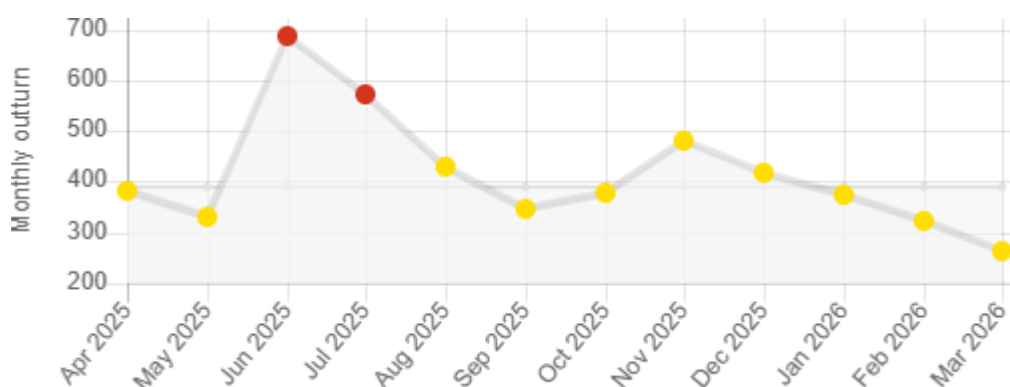
any of their 50+ prisons they had visited to date. That reflects very well on the new officers, but also highlights the lack of sufficient training during induction.

Typically, 20-30 prisoners are self-isolating at any given time. With staff shortages, this creates a regime issue, so time out of cell is normally on a best-efforts basis per wing. Management believes that the reason a prisoner isolates is often due to fear for his safety and is linked to drug debts incurred.

Prisoner-on-prisoner assault rate per 1,000 prisoners:



Prisoner-on-staff assault rate per 1,000 prisoners:



4.4 Use of force (UoF)

While many IMBs nationally have reported concerns relating to racism in the use of force, the IMB found no evidence of this happening at Swaleside, based on the information available to us.

With the stability in officers after the recruitment surge in the previous year, a greater proportion have received training in the use of force. 198 officers took part in a refresher control and restraint (C&R) course and 163 in spontaneous protection enabling accelerated response (SPEAR) training this year.

The weekly UoF meeting has had its name changed to UoF development meeting, reflecting its enhanced focus on scrutiny and learning, rather than a simple change in title. It is normally chaired by the deputy Governor, and the IMB has been encouraged to observe as often as possible to add independent scrutiny. As observed by the IMB, this has allowed incidents to be escalated to a formal

investigation where appropriate, while also recognising good practice through positive feedback to staff. Coupled with the training, this process is leading to greater confidence by officers in using force appropriately.

There were 1,000 use of force incidents during this year, up by 63 on last year, despite the lower prison population. 85% were spontaneous and 15% planned. Body-worn video cameras (BWVCs) were used in two-thirds of occasions. The use of BWVCs remains inconsistent. Limited storage and charging capacity, together with the pressures of attending morning briefings, can result in officers not collecting cameras before commencing duty. This is a risk for both prisoners and officers alike. If BWVCs are not used, it is possible that the police are less likely to take the matter further, as there is no recorded proof. In the last month, PAVA (an artificial incapacitant spray, similar to pepper spray) was drawn on 56 occasions and used in 73% of those incidents. The IMB has seen no data for tracking the numbers of staff assaults resulting in sickness absence.

From the Board's observations, the UoF appears to be broadly proportionate to the prison population's ethnic profile. Many of the prisoners involved have mental health needs or are neurodivergent. The main reasons for UoF ranked by number of occasions are a failure to locate back in their cell, prisoner-on-staff assault, self-harm and prisoner-on-prisoner assault.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

Mobile phones and other illicit items are ranked as a 'serious' risk by the prison and drugs as a 'significant risk'. For example, there were 68 illicit finds in February 2026.

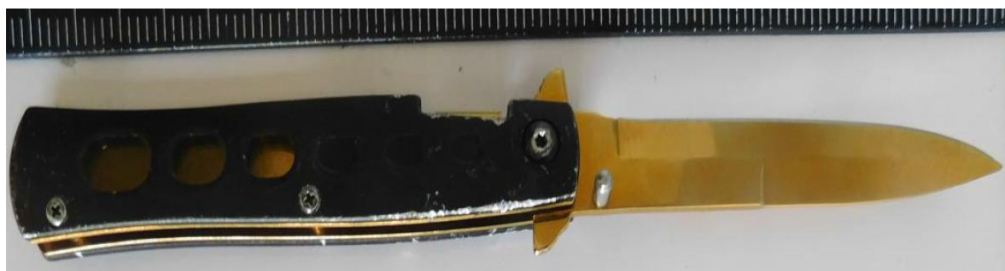
A random sample 5% of prisoners is regularly chosen for mandatory drug testing on a monthly basis. When refusals to provide a sample, which may indicate an attempt to avoid a positive result, are considered alongside positive test results, the estimated prevalence of drug use last reporting year was over 50% of the population. In the first four months of this reporting year, 29% of drug tests were positive. In addition, 10% of prisoners refused to take the test, despite the risk of a sanction. While this represents an improvement, the level of drug use remains unacceptable. Cannabis and synthetic cannabinoid ('spice') are the most in evidence. Although synthetic cannabinoids are much harder to detect, the use of cannabis has risen significantly, despite being traceable for 28 days. The trade in illegal substances also contributes to high levels of debt, intimidation and violence, creating risks to the safety of prisoners and fear.

With this extremely high level of usage, in the Board's opinion, this may be due to prisoners not being challenged and/or searched enough by staff; cell searches not being effectively carried out; and communal areas, such as the gym, library, chapel, kitchen (especially kitchen trolleys), not being monitored successfully. According to prison intelligence assessments, OCGs may be linked to some of this activity, including the supply of illicit items. The high value of drugs within prisons provides a strong incentive for such activity. Prison intelligence estimates that the value in prisons could be a hundred times the street value.

Swaleside had been identified as one of the prisons in the LTHSE most at risk of drone incursion. Drone packages typically comprise a mixture of drugs, phones, SIM cards and weapons. Drone detection has improved significantly. For example, 11 were found or sighted in February. The Board continues to encourage consideration

of a range of technological and operational measures to address the increasing use of drones to introduce illicit items into the prison estate, including opportunities to learn from developments in counter-drone technology used in other sectors.

An alternative method for illicit items entering the prison is via the main gate. The prison refers to its arrangements as enhanced gate security (EGS). However, the Board is not able to be present all the time to monitor the extent to which these measures are applied consistently. Through its monitoring, the Board has tracked compliance with gate security procedures. In the first four months of 2026, Board members were neither scanned, nor searched, on a third of occasions. The Board remains concerned about searches at the gate when staff numbers are low, at the weekend and at night.



Lock knives found on Bravo wing



Knife found on G wing



Drone find on F wing; vapes, cannabis and spice find on G wing

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

Most of the wings at HMP Swaleside continue to suffer as a direct result of the continuing and projected long-term shortages of experienced staff. There have been new officers who have joined under the prison officer entry level training scheme (POELTS). Many of these new officers have been recruited following an initiative by the government focusing on West Africa. The success of this scheme is varied and has not been helped by the threat of the removal of work visas from certain categories of officer.

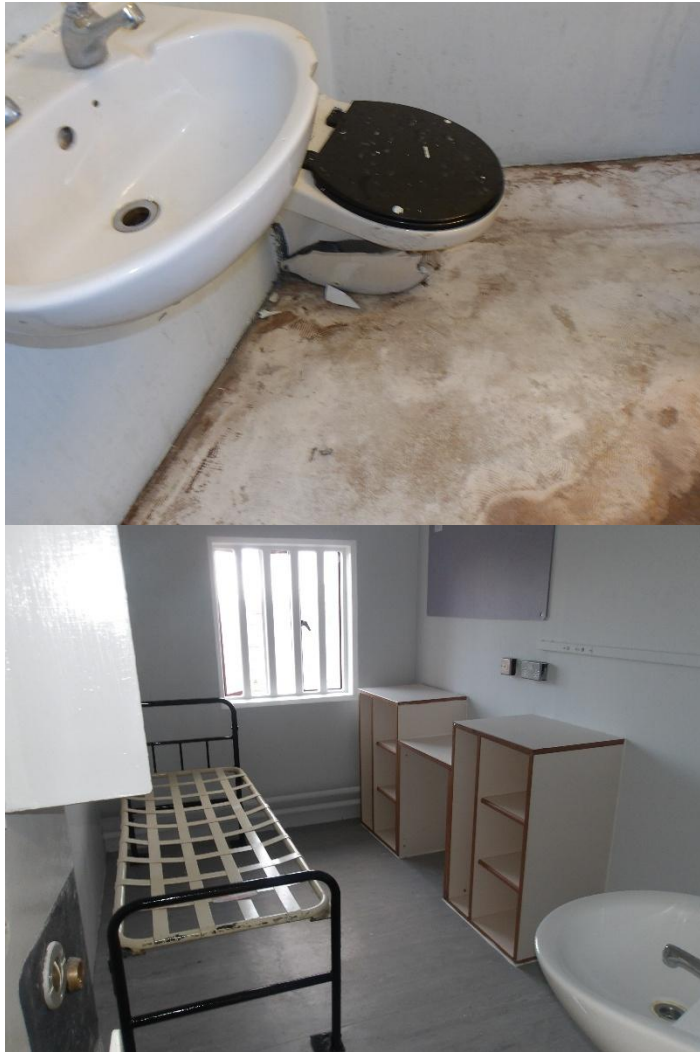
The maintenance of all cells and common areas remains a problem across the LTHSE in general, and HMP Swaleside specifically, with repairs and general maintenance not being carried out on a regular, or even emergency basis, for stained flooring, smashed furniture and fire damage. Through the year the Board has noted a significant discrepancy between the recording of out-of-action cells and the reality on the wings. The Board remains concerned about the inconsistent enforcement of standards on some wings. Instances of prisoners vaping on landings, and obstructing cell observation panels have been observed going unchallenged. There has, however, been some improvement in this area thanks to staff training.

In the winter, heating in the wings is adequate, but the system requires several days to reach capacity, resulting in complaints from prisoners. The high temperatures experienced in summer 2025 again led to widespread complaints of extreme and unbearable conditions in the cells. This situation is exacerbated by the restricted openings of cell windows, whilst being necessary for security.

As a backdrop to the following review of accommodation, after the appointment of a new Governor in 2025, the joint head of residential presented to the IMB of a reset reflecting on drugs, drones, staff confidence, training, prisoner decency and the need for more prisoners to be in purposeful activity. A new 'clean and decent' policy, instituted by the Director of HMPPS LTHSE, has had a noticeable impact in 2026 returning the Swaleside site to a more acceptable standard.

Alpha wing remains closed. Initially, closure was for refurbishment and planned safety improvements. However, the main contractor, ISG, went into liquidation in September 2024. There was some expectation of a commencement in autumn 2025. The situation at the end of the reporting year is that no work has commenced, despite the well-known issues around the lack of prisoner spaces in the estate nationally.

Bravo wing consistently had the highest number of finds. In total, the wing accounts for close to 30% of weapon finds at the establishment over the last 12 months, which may reflect potentially a higher quality of searching carried out on the wing. This percentage reduced in the first few months of 2026, but that could be a reflection of the population being a third lower on the wing when during the period of refurbishment. This rolling refurbishment project continued to Charlie wing before the end of the reporting year. As a consequence, one landing on Bravo wing is largely unoccupied.



B wing before and after refurbishment – March 2026

Due to the weapon finds and the amount of rubbish outside the windows, new grilles were fitted in October. However, by the time of Lord Timpson's response to IMB's last report, 50% of these grilles had already been compromised, with holes made to facilitate drone drops. Due to the ever-present issue of drones, new anti-drone netting was surveyed in February, fast-track approved and installed by the end of April 2026. This is a substantial structure connected to the exterior fabric of the wing. However, within a couple of weeks the netting had been compromised by prisoners on the wing. Improvements are being made; however, in the Board's opinion, the speed with which the netting was breached demonstrates both the determination to circumvent security measures and the profitability of the illicit items associated with OCGs.

At the same time, the IMB has also been observing that the self-cook area was filthy, with many burnt pans and dishes. Mice and other rodent droppings have been seen on multiple occasions. The self-cook area was closed during the refurbishment and not reopened during the reporting year.

On visits, the IMB has found that the Charlie and Delta wings continue to smell of drugs. The wearing of white food-service clothing is largely confined to meal service periods, primarily because there is an insufficient supply available for routine use.

Washing machines and driers have remained broken for several months. On Charlie wing, two proactive prisoners have taken the initiative in devising a system whereby they collect washing from the cells, thus reducing the need for prisoners to go into the laundry room.

Mould in the shower and laundry rooms remains a problem. In both wings, window cages and netting have been installed to deter drones, but these have been damaged quickly after installation. The culture of drug and debt continues to create violence. Staff shortages persist, therefore inhibiting the regime to run as it should.

Echo wing houses the drug recovery wing, of which more details can be found in section 6.5. (UTI) prisoners, found under the influence of illicit substances, were at a high level during 2025. While remaining high relative to other wings, there was a drop after the restrictive regime introduced on 1 December 2025. Subsequently, the rates picked up again, with the suspicion from prison management that prescribed medicines with recognised therapeutic value were also being used as currency within the prison. For example, in March 2026, there were 13 incidents of UTIs on one day, with a further nine the following day. This unusual pattern prompted concerns among wing staff about whether referrals to the wing were being appropriately considered, resulting in a tightening of referral processes. In the same months, a representative from a drug support charity heard that prisoners were being offered interest-free credit over a period of up to three years to purchase illicit drugs, illustrating the extent and sophistication of the illicit economy within the prison.

To differentiate Echo wing from other parts of the prison towards the end of the reporting year, exercise equipment was renewed and there was extensive investment in the garden area as a positive focus for rehabilitation.

In common with other wings, the discrepancy between GFSL recording of out of action cells and wing noticeboards was noticeable. Partly this is the delay in reporting, as in one weekend in January 2026, Echo wing reported 16 cells with flooring issues.

Golf West wing houses prisoners serving life sentences, while Golf South is for vulnerable prisoners (VPs). Prisoners in these two sections require very different treatment, but are managed by the same team of officers.

Last year's trial of housing prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCoSOs) has been stopped. This caused conflict between the prisoners and the broader concern by the Board that some of the referrals to Golf South were inappropriate. For example, one prisoner told the IMB how he had taken matters into his own hands in response to another prisoner's bullying of other prisoners.

On Golf wing, the restrictive regime was associated with increased levels of disengagement and challenging behaviour. Nine ACCTs were opened, which was almost half of the prison's total at the time. Similarly, the number of prisoners on basic status, the lowest level of the incentives scheme, rose to 24 by the end of January, accounting for close to 40% of the prison's total. On Golf South, prisoners refused to be locked in their cells until they received their medication. On Golf West

wing, the younger prisoners are late to be locked up, a pattern also observed on Bravo wing.

Foxtrot wing houses prisoners with some of the most challenging behaviour, with a view to aiding their progression. Consequently, it is staffed accordingly. There is a five-year strategic commitment by the NHS for funding until 2028. The wing has a Psychologically Informed Planned Environment (PIPE) unit. This is a specifically designed residential environment where staff have received additional training in psychological principles to create a safer, more supportive environment. PIPEs are part of the broader Offender Personality Disorder (OPD) pathway, aiming to support high-risk offenders with personality disorders. The Swaleside PIPE is possibly the only 'Provision PIPE' in the UK and at present is running two therapy courses. Applicants can self-refer.

The wing has full self-cook facilities, with cookers, air fryers and toasters. The self-cook areas were observed to be very messy. The wing looks after the Swaleside 'farm' which keeps a variety of animals and has regular visits from a therapy dog. All prison activities are available to Foxtrot wing residents, except where there would be contact with vulnerable prisoners. Sports and games have been set up for prisoners, which are popular, with winners gaining rewards.

At Swaleside security's instigation, a full dedicated search operation by a national team was ordered in the middle of the reporting year, the first such exercise for many years. The significant number of illicit items recovered highlighted the ongoing need for robust search activity, and enhanced searching has continued in subsequent months.

H wing houses prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCoSOs) and supplies workers to DHL. In recent years, the wing has been unsettled with two issues. Firstly, if there have been prisoner-on-prisoner assaults on one side, the only alternative is to move one of the prisoners to the other side of the wing. Secondly, the DHL facility has been subject to theft, bullying and debt. The IMB has commented how the lack of searching and officer attendance has let this situation prevail.

However, 2025-2026 has been a year of transition. For many years the IMB has pressed for PCoSOs to be given the opportunity to pursue rehabilitative courses. Even with the introduction of Building Choices, which is 95% relevant to PCoSOs, they were not given the opportunity to participate. Against this background, the transfer of prisoners from H wing to other establishments is a welcome development, as it provides greater opportunities for individuals to access interventions required to progress through their sentence plans.

The kitchen at HMP Swaleside is now fully staffed with trusted prisoners. Initially this work was only available to enhanced (the highest level of the incentives scheme) prisoners, but now some on standard status (middle level) are eligible to apply. As a result, and after security clearance, the pool of suitable prisoners has been much widened, resulting in less stress on the system. Consequently, behaviour has improved, thefts have reduced and prisoners are now well aware that there are consequences for negative behaviour.

The kitchen at HMP Swaleside also provides meals for the category D prison nearby (HMP Stanford Hill), a situation that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, and results in more significant pressures on the kitchen staff. Currently, around 760

prisoners at Swaleside receive three meals per day. A further 450 prisoners at HMP Stanford Hill are also provided for. This is also getting close to the maximum allowed for (464). Meals are provided at a budget cost of £3.12 per prisoner, per day.

In the previous year, concerns were raised regarding an increase in items brought into the kitchen, particularly, prisoners' water bottles, which were suspected of being filled up in the kitchen with liquids other than water. Full searches are now carried out on both entrance and exit from the kitchen, including the use of metal detecting wands and an insistence in removal of any garment with pockets. This has minimised food theft.

The various religious festivals (e.g. Ramadan; Passover; Christmas; Easter, etc.) were well catered for by the kitchen. However, there were occasions when communication between faith representatives and catering staff was not effective. For example, where Muslim prisoners chose not to fast or ceased fasting during Ramadan, changes were not always communicated promptly, which created difficulties in ensuring that the correct meals were provided.

The catering department continues to provide meals that meet a wide range of dietary, medical and faith-based requirements. While this is an important aspect of prison provision, specialist diets can be more costly to deliver than standard meals and place additional pressure on catering budgets, which are not supplemented centrally to meet these requirements. During the reporting year, these additional requirements contributed to significant increased expenditure, creating budgetary challenges for the catering service.

Last year we reported on the poor condition of the serveries at HMP Swaleside, and the probability that any visit by an Environmental Health Officer (EHO) could have resulted in the closure of several serveries, with all the ramifications that this would have on the normal functioning of the prison. Thanks to the dedicated staff at HMP Swaleside, not only have the problems been largely resolved, but in the latest hygiene inspection, HMP Swaleside have been awarded a five star hygiene rating.

Some problems remain with prisoners not wearing appropriate clothing on the serveries. In some instances, the white protective uniforms, once worn, cannot be washed as the washing machines continue to be in a poor state of repair.

The water bath hotplates under the servery have been replaced on some wings after the allocation of some 14 new, servery units. Maintenance of these units is now improved after the awarding of a new contract to outside contractors. Spares for broken equipment are also now readily available, resulting in much less 'downtime' in the kitchen, and as a result, improvements in the availability of all types of meal.

Last year, concerns were raised about the constant issues with the macerators for breaking down waste food. The amount of food wasted this year is down on last year's level, resulting in less being transported offsite, which has been financially beneficial.

Prisoners used to be able to claim specialist food under Rule 35 after consultation with healthcare. The number of prisoners who have specialist meals provided under Rule 35 has been certified. Healthcare has a multi-disciplinary team looking at all applications for F35 medically-based meals. The kitchen will not supply F35 meals

unless, and until, cleared by the head of healthcare. This process is frequently challenged by prisoners and is reflected in applications to the IMB.

In the annual IMB survey to prisoners, several complaints were received regarding the quality and quantity of the food provided at Swaleside. Actual complaints directly to the kitchen via the CMS App system were about two per month, which considering over 2,000 meals per day are provided, the Board believes represents general satisfaction with the food provided.

5.2 Segregation

As with the findings in our previous report, the care, separation and rehabilitation unit (CSRU), where prisoners are segregated, is usually staffed by a dedicated and experienced cohort of officers, who have been observed by the Board to treat prisoners with respect and understanding and attempt to sort out problems quickly and efficiently. From the Board's observations, it is evident that, during GOoD (Good Order or Discipline) reviews, which decide whether a prisoner should remain in segregation, staff carry out these assessments compassionately and try to find the best course of action for prisoners.

As the Board commented last year, the CSRU is almost always at full capacity. However, after the appointments of a new Governor for the unit in the summer of 2025 some material changes were initiated. Previous attempts to keep two cells available for cellular confinement (CC) had proved unsuccessful. This had the knock-on effect of prisoners refusing to attend adjudications (disciplinary hearings when a prisoner is alleged to have broken prison rules), as there is no sanction. Issues include prisoners not wanting to relocate to wings, emergency transfers from wings after incidents, and a perception among some prisoners that placement in the CSRU could facilitate a transfer to another establishment.

With the new Governor, a more structured and disciplinary approach was adopted to address these issues. This resulted in cells being vacated resulting in as low as 11 occupied, which allowed the introduction of CC, even for existing prisoners in CSRU. This progress was halted after extensive damage was carried out to five cells earlier this year. The cell fittings, especially the windows, are bespoke and require external contractors. This means that the cells have been out of action for a period of months, which in turn has impacted on the rest of the prison's disciplinary system. It seems like a false economy by HMPPS to not have uniform fittings in CSRU, with no ceramic items.

The Board remains extremely concerned about CSRU cells continuing to be used for constant watch again in 2025-2026. At the start of the reporting year the number of constant watches across the prison rose as high as seven, also up to six after the new regime in December 2025, but even in April 2026, the unit was again being used for constant watch. The cells are standard, so a clear view of the whole cell cannot be seen through the observation panel. This is especially true when officers have been observed by the IMB sitting on chairs too low to have clear sight. Swaleside has two constant-watch cells. In the Board's view, the lack of capacity across the southeast needs addressing by the HMPPS. The approval and installation for two extra cells are not evident yet.

The impact of prolonged stays in the CSRU on the mental health of prisoners is regrettably an ever-present theme. The Board was concerned to observe that the

longest stay in CSRU for a prisoner at HMP Swaleside with mental health issues during the previous year was 484 days, before transferring to a secure unit. By contrast, this year saw a positive outcome for a prisoner who, after spending 390 days in CSRU, successfully moved to a residential wing. The Board commends the efforts of CSRU staff and the psychology department in supporting this transition.

There have also been transfers to secure mental health facilities during the year. However, the process of securing appropriate placements continues to be lengthy, and delays remain a concern. At the time of writing, one prisoner was still awaiting a decision on a referral for transfer, following an extended period of assessment and consideration.

Last year, the Board noted that privileges were generally greater than at other comparable segregation units in the LTSHE, and most prisoners were typically on the standard (middle), rather than the basic, the lowest level, of the incentives scheme. During 2025-2026, this position changed significantly. By the end of the reporting year, around 95% of prisoners on basic had televisions removed from cells. Vapes continue to be the source of many issues and incidents. Swaleside is an outlier in LTHSE, allowing vapes to be used in the CSRU. While this has been a source of discussion over the past year, no concrete decision had been taken by the end of our reporting year.

As referenced in previous reports, the CSRU runs and coordinates adjudications across the establishment. The reintroduction of standardisation meetings to review and improve the process has been welcomed. The Board also notes that the Governor's use of the Tarrant Principle to challenge applications for legal representation, where appropriate, has helped reduce delays and improve the timeliness of adjudications.

Of the 1,645 adjudications in the first four months of 2025, 37% have been proved and 17% passed on to the police. However, nearly 600 cases have been dismissed, remanded, or not proceeded with. Last year, the Board noted a concern amongst wing officers that adjudications would not be dealt with swiftly and fairly. With the lack of cellular confinement (CC) in the prison, around 200 prisoners are refusing to even attend adjudications, as there is no fear of sanctions. Inevitably, this is having a knock-on effect on prisoners' behaviour and staff and prisoner relationships. The offences for which adjudications are held:

- Violent/threatening behaviour: 620
- Disobeys an order: 204
- Under the influence (of drugs and/or alcohol): 68
- Unauthorised article: 496
- Damage to property: 170
- Absents himself: 41

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

At the end of the reporting year, total potential staffing was unchanged at 258, but actual 'boots on the ground' were a mere 215. Of these 215, 16 are 'acting up' and a further 55 are not fully active. The main reasons are 28 staff sicknesses, 10 suspensions and 12 unrestricted duties. This impacts the daily operation of the regime and results in activities often being cancelled, with particular impact on purposeful activity. Reassuringly the pipeline of potential new officers has almost

doubled in 2026. The Board very much hopes that the officer cohort will be successfully replenished, despite the excessive length of the vetting process.

As before, the Board remains concerned about the limited involvement of the Governors in the process. Further, by their nature as new recruits, they will be inexperienced and inevitably take time to learn the 'craft' of being a prison officer, which makes the essential staff and prisoner relationship a work in progress.

Two key work sessions are supposed to be delivered over the course of four weeks. Due to staff resource, profiling and constraints of the regime, this has fallen to an unacceptably low level. However, the arrival of two new residential governors has resulted in a return to quality assurance, which the IMB called for in its last report. Sessions are marked on a scale to 1-4 and positive/negative feedback is given, as appropriate. The need for relatively new officers to learn how to conduct an effective key-work session is a further impediment to good staff-prisoner relationships, which continues to destabilise the prison.

In October 2023, UK visa rules were changed to add prison officers to those eligible for sponsorship. This led to a surge in the number of overseas applications: 29% of UK officer applicants in England and Wales were from Africa. The Prison Officers' Association has highlighted that some of these new recruits anticipated accommodation. The Prison Governors' Association noted that 'this has led to some issues about language and communication in some jails', and the Board has noted challenges relating to communication. Some challenges arose when the UK Government removed right-to-work visa eligibility for certain prison officers. This meant that up to 90 officers were due to leave by August 2026, although a temporary extension was later granted until the end of 2026.

5.4 Equality and diversity

From the Board's observations, we find little overall evidence of inequality, and the prison management appears committed to ensuring that any reports of discriminatory action or activity are addressed. Monthly prisoner forums on wings and quarterly for transgender prisoners are both chaired by a governor. While positive, these have been at risk of late cancellation, due to shortages of staff for the regime.

The current population at Swaleside is predominantly aged 30 to 39, followed by those aged 40 to 49 and then 25 to 29. In terms of ethnicity, the largest group is White, followed by Black, Asian and Mixed ethnic groups. Christianity is the most commonly reported religion, followed by Islam. The Muslim population is particularly prominent among young adults.

The number of discrimination incident reporting forms (DIRFs) submitted averages just less than 10 per month in the first four calendar months of this year. Of these none have been fully upheld, though some have been partially upheld. The highest categories are disability and race. While there may be concerns that prisoners distrust the process and therefore may not submit, it should be noted that extensive external quality assurance is conducted.

Data from the national IMB (April 2026) estimated that 50% of the UK prison population are neurodiverse, which compares with 15-20% of the overall population. At Swaleside, it is 73%, but this includes self-diagnosed neurodiversity.

The breakdown of the incentives scheme is 8% on basic, 48% on standard and 44% on enhanced status at the end of the reporting year. At first glance, there appears to be evidence of discrimination within the allocations of incentives, as 21 to 24-year-olds are disproportionately on basic and over 60s are more likely to be on enhanced. However, it is to be expected that age is a significant determinant in being involved in violent behaviour. The Board has not seen evidence of aged-based discrimination.

During the reporting year, the IMB received 15 applications from prisoners under the heading of "Equality", down from 28 last year. The Board has commented before that one member of staff was not sufficient for Equalities. When she was off sick, no data was collated for August to November 2025.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

The chaplaincy team at HMP Swaleside is a valuable support network for the prisoners. Shortly after their arrival they are seen with their personal issues and faith discussed. The team provide ongoing support for prisoners, especially at times of crisis and when they receive sad family news. After the recent recruitment of a full-time Imam and Church-of-England chaplain earlier this year, there are four full time-chaplains, including a Roman Catholic. In addition, there are visiting chaplains representing world faiths – including Free Church, Buddhism, Sikh Hindu, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Recruitment of visiting chaplains for Pagan and Rastafari on the Isle of Sheppey has been a long-term issue.

The team perform weekday and weekend services across the faiths and split between the main and PCoSo wings. Again this year, the late movement of prisoners has proved to be an ongoing issue which has affected services and attendance, even being abandoned sometimes. Another symptom of the shortage of staff to operate a full regime. Furthermore, religious classes are even more impacted than group worship. This is of particular concern as, unlike some other activities, prisoners are particularly keen to attend in groups of up to 20. It is not unknown for over half of the classes to be cancelled in a week. The impact of these cancellations on a prisoners' rehabilitation is not to be underestimated.

Towards the end of April, the largest faith group within the prisoner population was Muslim (246), followed by Roman Catholic (111), Christian (Anglican) (86) and Christian (other) (77). A further 120 prisoners reported having no faith or belief.

RELIGION (as of April 2026)	No. of prisoners
Agnostic	1
Atheist	4
Buddhist	19
Christian - Anglican (incl. CofE & CinW)	86
Christian - Orthodox	3
Christian - Other	77
Christian - Roman Catholic	111
Church of Jesus Christ LDS	4
Hindu	6
Jehovah's Witness	7
Jewish	22
Muslim	246
No Faith or Belief	120
Other Faith or Belief	1
Pagan	15
Quaker	1
Rastafari	12
Satanist	1
Seventh Day Adventist	1
Sikh	6
Total	743

5.6 Incentive schemes

After an extremely lengthy negotiation process involving the Prisoner Officers' Association (POA), a new scheme, Incentives Policy Framework (IPF), has been introduced to replace the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) towards the end of the reporting year. The IPF has more layers of incentives, which allow officers more latitude for sanctions. It has long been a concern that lack of effective sanctions allowed prisoners to act without consequence. Notably, TVs are now removed from prisoners on basic, which are normally around 10% of the population. It is too early since introduction for the Board to comment on the success, or otherwise.

HMIP noted "there were insufficient consequences for poor behaviour and not enough was done to incentivise men to behave well". Prisoners comments in the

IMB survey reflect this – ‘gain more recognition when us prisoners do positive behaviour and gain privileges for our hard work’, ‘good behaviour is not as rewarding as bad behaviour’, ‘stop removing incentives with no notice’, ‘why do some prisoners get away with bad behaviour?’ and ‘there is a lack of incentive for good behaviour’.

5.7 Complaints

The total number of complaints received this reporting year (excluding healthcare and DIRFs) was 4449 compared with 4079 last reporting year, a 9% increase. This level of complaints has been exceeded in many previous years, though the roll was higher. By number of complaints the main issues raised are work/pay, staff issues, recategorisation, IEP, residential, and food.

The prison data supplied confirms that complaints were responded to within targeted timeframes 96% of the time. The complaints department at HMP Swaleside continues to provide a first-class service to prisoners, with few complaints to the IMB regarding delays answering COMP 1 and COMP 2 complaints. Of note, 80% of COMP 2s are rejected, as they do not relate to confidential access, so should not be sent for the attention of the Governor.

5.8 Property

When personal property, particularly items of sentimental value, goes missing, prisoners often become frustrated by the slow progress in locating their belongings. Feelings of hopelessness can develop when they perceive that no one is taking responsibility for finding their items, and this frustration can escalate into anger. Missing property creates unnecessary work for prison staff, increases stress among prisoners and results in compensation claims that are often inflated.

Missing property is a significant and frequent problem when prisoners are transferred from one prison to another. Prisoners are limited to the amount of personal baggage they can take with them on prison transport. The rest of their property follows later. Very often that delay is unreasonably long and, not infrequently, property is lost in transit. The Board recognises that this is a national problem that needs to be addressed by the Prison service. Nevertheless, while the problem has been present for many years, no solution nor progress with the problem has been made. Given the number of PCoSOs being transferred to the Isle of Wight, the Board commends the frequent bus service used to transport prisoners’ excess baggage.

In the Board's view, the volume at which property is lost could be more avoided. Property issues both within the prison and during transfers accounted for 14% of the applications to the IMB. Moving prisoners within the prison frequently leads to claims of missing property. It is important that the processing of prisoners' property is accurately recorded and signed for by the prisoner during the transfer process. When prisoners are moved without prior warning, this is always likely to be a greater problem. In the Board's view, more could be done to address this issue; including the rigorously following correct administrative procedures for handling and tracking prisoners' property.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare: general

Healthcare continues to provide a good service to prisoners, despite huge pressures on resources and staffing levels, especially critical at weekends. The use of agency staff remains high, but the system cannot survive without their input.

Multi-disciplinary meetings are held, which incorporate staff at senior levels from all interested parties. This leads to good communication between the various departments involved in the care of prisoners.

The administration department is well staffed, competent and welcoming to all stakeholders and their commitment to assisting the IMB in health-related enquiries is most welcome.

The lack of suitable transport results in missed appointments, delays and cancellations at outside hospitals. There is also often confusion between operations and security departments resulting in last-minute problems for prisoners and staff. A particular problem is the lack of suitable transport for wheelchair users for clinic appointments. Additionally, there are only two cells with wide enough doors to cope with wheelchairs, despite there being a larger number of wheelchair users in the prison.

The problems with the lifts to healthcare have been resolved since last year's report and they are operating effectively. The long period of not operating resulted in inhumane treatment and prisoners missing care/visits.

6.2 Physical healthcare

The ongoing problem with reduced officer numbers has resulted in large numbers of hospital appointments being missed, due to lack of available, trained, escort staff. This is not the first year in which several appointments on the same day have been missed due to this problem. Unless, and until, the staffing issue is resolved this will, no doubt, continue to be a major issue for the prison population and will impact on health outcomes for prisoners.

This problem of a lack of escorting staff does not only apply to outside appointments. There have been occasions where even internal clinics have been affected by staff shortages. This, along with prisoners' refusing to attend, results in several internal clinics having significant numbers of 'no shows'. Attendance at one session was as low as 8%. In part, this is due to prisoners knowing that if they are in employment, they will still receive pay, even when missing medical appointments.

A considerable amount of time and effort is spent by the Healthcare team on assessing prisoners thought to be under the influence of drugs and/or illicit alcoholic 'hooch.' This is a major issue in the prison and it is vital that whenever a prisoner is showing signs of impairment that a Code Blue is called to confirm that the prisoner is under the influence and not showing signs of an underlying medical issue. The daily reports regularly show that wing staff are calling in Code Blues for the attention of healthcare who spend considerable time making observations before confirming that the prisoner is using illicit substances.

The dentist area has been out of action for some considerable time this reporting year, causing a negative impact to the population requiring dental care. This was due to the presence of legionella bacteria in the dental taps. Treatments were curtailed. Minor treatments were, however, carried out using sterile bottled water. It has taken some time to resolve, but the dental clinic is now fully operational and, from the Board's observations, it is working to a high standard.

The distribution of medicines has generally improved. However, there are concerns that some medicines, especially those for pain relief, are being used as payment for drug debts by prisoners. During certain dedicated searches based on intelligence, large quantities of tablets have been discovered in cells occupied by prisoners who should not have access to those drugs. Once again, it is staff shortages that exacerbate the search and distribution of these medicines, as well as monitoring issues at the dispensing hatch.

6.3 Mental health

As a recurring theme, staff shortages continue to place huge pressure on the mental health team. Prisoners now spend more time in their cells due to the new restricted regime, which can only increase pressure on their mental health and, consequently, on the resources of the mental health team.

Several prisoners, including those based in the CSRU, have been transferred out of prison to more appropriate institutions where their mental health issues can be addressed more effectively. Each case is handled on a customised basis and tailored to the individual's needs. As a rule, even prisoners with complex mental health are treated within the establishment, with few seeing services outside the prison.

6.4 Time out of cell, regime

Last year the Board commented on the impact of inexperienced staff on the operating of the regime. With the benefit of hindsight, the regime moving to Core Day 5 in September 2024 proved to be ambitious. In common with many prisons in the LTHSE there was an unacceptable rise in violence and assaults. As directed by the Prison Group Director, Swaleside introduced a more restrictive safety regime on the 1 December 2025. This happened to coincide with the arrival of HMIP for their full inspection. HMIP noted that the new regime only allowed for as little as just over an hour a day out of cell for the 44% of prisoners who were unemployed or retired. This transition was made more problematic, because the prisoners were only given one week's notice. Even then details were not provided and times were still being rescheduled the weekend before. The outcome was a complicated series of timetables, depending on the day of the week. A challenge for both officers and prisoners alike, which was reflected in a 31% rise in self-harm the following week and a more than doubling of ACCTs to 50.

The emphasis of the regime has been to favour those conducting purposeful activity with incentives like extra gym sessions. In turn, it means that those prisoners who are early into long sentences are more likely to be unemployed and left with more time in cell. Moreover, the operating of the regime has not been smooth, particularly due to an insufficient number of officers on the day. Also, the impending departure of up to 51 officers on first deployment means that a new regime for the summer is under consideration.

6.5 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

Echo West wing is an Incentivised Substance Free Living Unit (ISFL), which is paid for from prison funds. Most prisoners on this wing have Enhanced status and are, or have been, free of drugs. Drug testing is neither with the same kits, nor at similarly-timed intervals across the prison. Many testing kits do not identify spice. Prisoners on ISFL are only tested once a month. This drug recovery wing (DRW) is only through referral, which has needed to be tightened up. Success in addressing addiction is hard to measure, but many complete the treatment programme. Across both sides of Echo wing there are the highest number of prisoners Under the Influence (UTI) in the prison, though staff on this wing are more trained to spot and record. The DRW is one of six in the country and is in the process of being opened up to other prisons in the LTHSE.

Echo wing contains the Change, Grow, Live (CGL) service, which supports prisoners who have drug and/or alcohol addiction issues. In total, they interact with around 40% of Swaleside's population. In April alone, 307 prisoners attended 80 treatment groups. Some prisoners inevitably relapse, but can be referred to the Phoenix unit for another attempt to become drug free. This can either happen by self-referral or by staff raising concerns if the prisoner is found to be under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.

While Minister Timpson has said he would like to see NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) in every prison weekly, staff at Swaleside are concerned that participation rates outside Echo wing would be minimal, as prisoners would not want to identify themselves as users. Boredom is a significant contributor to demand for drugs, so the issue is tied into the issues surrounding the operation of the regime and purposeful activity. An ex-addict/ex-prisoner visited Swaleside and encouraged "recovery-informed practice", where recovery is enabled, prisoner-led and a "social contagion of hope" established. In IMB's survey prisoners commented "if you sell drugs you fit in very well", "get rid of the addicts on the main wings" and "why is there no control over access to drugs and use of drugs!!".

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education and library

Education

Despite education being a key component of prisoners' rehabilitation, provision has been cut during the reporting year, especially in courses outside English and Mathematics, leading to redundancies in the education department run by Milton Keynes College (MK). Changes to education provision have impacted the ability to offer both accredited and non-accredited courses, covering such subjects as Food Safety; Health and Safety; Peer Mentoring; Music, and Art, etc. Loss of committed, full-time staff has put considerable strain on the department.

Ofsted inspectors accompanying HMIP's inspection rated the overall effectiveness, quality of education and leadership at Swaleside as "Inadequate". They noted a narrow curriculum, lack of links to sentence plans and poor data management. In addition, Ofsted cited low attendance, which is often as a result of a lack of officers forcing session cancellations. There is a financial incentive to attend educational courses, at both basic and advanced levels. To be able to work within the prison, all residents should have Level 1 Maths and English before being considered for employment, but there are occasions when this requirement is not strictly enforced.

Concerns raised by prisoners include the difficulties of enrolment on certain courses. As a result, an allocation board was formed to look at all applications for work and/or education. This Board is attended by the head of education and skills and the activities hub manager, together with senior staff from across the prison, and takes place weekly. This Board investigates applications for work or education; checks security issues; considers non-associates; gang-related issues etc. If a prisoner is cleared, he will be notified that he is on the waiting list or can be placed on a suitable course. This new initiative has resulted in substantially better allocation for education/activities. A necessary move, as low levels of purposeful activity had fallen from 59% and inactive from 26% of the population in January/February to 53% and 32% in April 2026. Overall attendance vs. planned for education/skills/work of 46% was ranked at 61 out of 94 male prisons for Swaleside in April 2026

Changes in the way that statistics are collated and reported has resulted in difficult comparisons with previous years. Due to the new contract, the only meaningful data available is from September 2025 to March 2026. This shows that there were 248 enrolments, 184 completions and 64 withdrawals. 75% of learners completed their course or passed their exams. The withdrawal number is high, due to the ongoing decant of prisoners on Hotel wing, mainly to the Isle of Wight.

Prisoners with special educational needs are also catered for, with two dedicated specialists and practitioners. Swaleside has a high number of Open University candidates. The provision of the Shannon Trust since August 2021 for non-readers, has been very successful, with prisoners able to join mainstream education.

The IMB commends the dedication of the education staff on the unit, and the support of the prison staff. However, the lack of available staff to escort prisoners is causing immense difficulties for the department. There have been numerous occasions, including very recently, when education and library sessions have had to be cancelled as a result. Not only is this bad for the education of prisoners, due to

associated frustrations and boredom, it also has a knock-on effect on self-harm, violence and assaults. As a result of these staffing issues, prisoners spend even more time in their cells when can only result in an increase in mental health problems, putting even more pressure on the scant resources available in this area.

Library

The library at HMP Swaleside continues to provide a first-class service to prisoners both in the library itself, and to the wings. Data for the current year shows an increase of 5% in stock items; a 16% increase in Outreach items delivered to wings; and a massive 50% increase in prisoners attending via wing sessions.

Prisoners have praised the efforts of the library staff and engage well with them. A number have sent emails to the department expressing their thanks and appreciation. The staff are always looking to improve the library systems and processes and have had several innovative and interesting sessions with the prisoners which has helped many prisoners to overcome anxiety and stress, especially when in the company of other prisoners.

One such innovation is the establishment of a book club on Echo wing. The prisoners themselves select a book to read and then meet up a week later to discuss the contents. This leads to a lively and frank exchange between the prisoners. The books recently discussed cover a wide range of interests and include *The Great Gatsby* and *Harry Potter*.

Such has been the success of this innovative approach to learning it has been recognised by the library receiving the High Sheriff of Kent's Award for services to the community. Further publicity has been achieved via radio; newspapers and magazines. This could be shared within the LTHSE.

7.2 Vocational training, work

Industries

The severe changes to education provision also impacted industry courses, including the types of employment likely to be sought by prisoners on release, e.g. warehousing and construction industries, etc. This decision on financial grounds is not in the best interests of the prisoners being released. The multi-skills workshop, which provided Level 2 City & Guilds approved courses for PCoSOs, as well as the general population, was closed down. This is further evidence of the inequality of provision of purposeful activity for Swaleside's PCoSOs.

The return of an instructor, who had previously been on long-term sick leave and the employment of another, means the Engineering shop has re-opened, picked up some orders and now provides employment with the promise of portable qualifications for up to 10 men. Food Packing is fully staffed and can meet its contractual obligations. The only issue has been the need for an electric pallet truck to aid the movement of stock. This was ordered in November 2025 and is yet to appear.

Even where attendance has been acceptable there is the problem across the workshops of very short shifts. It is not uncommon for the morning shift to last only two hours and the afternoon only one hour.

Cycle repair is going well, despite some logistical problems. Bicycles are sold off to staff as well as to the local community to raise money for charity. The issue here is that men allocated from the unemployed list do not turn up for work and are not being disciplined nor removed from the allocation. Therefore, it does not allow the shop to re-offer the positions. There was one case of an allocated prisoner being already suspended when he turned up.

The woodworking shop continues its improvement trend, manufacturing cell furniture, planters, coat-hangers, bee hives and benches for the prison estate. It has benefited from investment in machinery, having acquired a new Computerised Numerical Control (CNC) machine, a borer, a vertical CNC, a Beam Saw, a Biomass Burner and a third Spindle Machine in the last year. It no longer has a contract for fire doors, which is outsourced.

Staffing, both prisoners and instructors continues to be a problem. At the time of writing, Zone 4 had no instructors, so was not operating. It has a prisoner capacity of 18, but with no staff it cannot deal with the output of Zone 5 and therefore clogs the system. When there are instructors present then men are still lost to other activities such as gym, counselling and Education. For the two weeks commencing 20 April, a total of 11 hours 8 minutes only were worked and this includes tools down time of 4 hours 20 minutes, and for the following week, as there were no staff, no hours were worked.

Industrial Cleaning continues to be successful, ensuring that the men work towards portable qualifications. This shop utilises peer workers to train staff as well as prisoners.

TV refurbishment is still part of the award-winning national contract along with three other prisons. It produces 37% of the total and could handle 100% if required. Staff are removing TVs from this shop without going through the proper process. It suffers from having only one instructor, meaning that when he is on leave or away for

any reason the shop has to close. In the last financial year it saved the prison approximately £50,000 by re-furbishing existing TVs.

DHL

PCoSOs can apply to be employed at the on-site DHL facility, which packages supplies for several prisons. On arriving and leaving at DHL, prisoners should be properly searched, as well as monitored during the day, as items are open to theft and consumption. Attendance and theft have continued to be the main issues at the DHL facility throughout the reporting year. As reported last year, the schedule for education classes has continued to clash with the DHL attendance. As the pool of available workers was insufficient to complete orders; 600 orders per week were outsourced. By the end of the reporting year, 1400 orders were being fulfilled elsewhere, leaving 3000 orders for DHL Swaleside. At the peak, Swaleside fulfilled 7000 orders per week. The 12-week attendance at the end of the reporting year averaged 50%, fluctuating between 44% and 53% of the necessary 75 workers. This follows last year, when attendance at 58% was the lowest rate nationally. The Board reiterates this is a particular concern, as it is the largest prison facility in England.

Shrinkage remains an issue at DHL. It continues to be accepted by prison management, (in common with other prison DHL facilities), even though the security

governor is concerned about the knock-on effects from sugar being stolen to order for the production of 'hooch'. In turn, this leads to debt, prisoner of violence and assault. Sugar allegedly has a value of £35 per pack on the wings, which is concurrent with a noticeable rise in 'hooch' production across the prison estate. Tradeable items, such as fish tins and chocolate are the main targets. Despite the Board highlighting this issue over recent years, there is scant evidence of searching on the way in, or out, of the DHL facility. Further, it remains staffed by only one officer, who has the impossible task of being in two places at once where he/she can both monitor lunch and search prisoners attending the toilet facilities. Searching is not helped by attendance from the dog team, but left to DST, who have many competing demands on their time. As commented last year, the board remains perplexed by the lack of management response to this criminal activity.

7.3 Offender management, progression

The Sentencing Act 2026 make a changes to the release points for adults. This change is part of a move to an 'earned progression model'. This term is somewhat of a misnomer, as release is automatic. For prisoners serving Standard Determinate Sentence (SDS) where automatic release is usually at the halfway or 40% point, they will be automatically released after serving a third of their sentence. For prisoners serving SDS for violent offences, where the current automatic release is at two thirds, they will be released at the halfway point. For years the Board has highlighted that far too many prisoners were being released without adequate preparation, despite Swaleside being a long-term prison. This trend has continued in the current year with 58 releases in the first four months alone. This puts additional, unwelcome pressure on an under-staffed OMU. With the Sentencing Act 2026, it is currently estimated that 109 prisoners will be released from Swaleside over the coming 12 months from October. To put this in perspective, it is 15% of the prison's roll as of August 2026 and effectively means Swaleside is a long-term prison for short-term releases. Reviewing sentences at Swaleside is a laborious process, with many prisoners having multiple sentences. This is further compounded by a largely paper-based system and, with little effective training when changes are made in Parliament. It is also prone to human error. For example, a prisoner at Swaleside was released with immediate effect, after the OMU recognised a calculation error by another LTHSE prison on a concurrent/consecutive sentence - the prisoner regrettably spent an extra 242 days in custody.

7.4 Family contact

Families play a vital role in prisoners' mental health, in motivating individuals to reform and in building a life after imprisonment. For that reason, contact with families and friends should be consistent, safe and as family friendly as is reasonably possible. On too many occasions that had not been the experience at Swaleside.

The visitor reception facility and the visits hall at Swaleside are of a good standard. However, because the Isle of Sheppey is a remote location, it is difficult to access, especially by public transport. Therefore, reliable start and finish times for visit sessions are an important consideration. However, because prisoners are escorted to the visit hall by prison staff, any unanticipated incident in the prison during the earlier part of the day invariably means prison staff cannot transfer prisoners to the visits hall in time for the 14.00 start. This impacts badly on visitors' travel arrangements.

Following an incident of prisoner-on-prisoner violence last year, staff numbers and vigilance have both been increased during visits, which has made a marked improvement in the conduct observed in the visits hall.

Following an incident where food served in the visits hall café was laced with drugs, prisoners were withdrawn from serving. This impacted visitors waiting time for service, impacting on their time spent with loved ones. Prisoners have now been returned to staffing the café and the situation is much improved.

All prisoners can apply for personal and legal numbers to be approved and added to their PIN account. Prisoners can then make calls privately from their in-cell laptops, which are sometimes monitored. The system generally works well. However, staff shortages in the PIN office very often results in significant delays getting outside numbers registered and approved by the PIN office. This is of particular concern for newly-arrived prisoners, who are keen to inform and reassure their loved ones.

7.5 Resettlement planning

As Swaleside is classified as a training prison, it receives no budget for resettlement functions. This is despite the extremely high number of releases. The employability hub has been recognised as an extremely well-provisioned facility, but it is under-utilised.

At Swaleside, and nationally, there has been a very significant change in programmes. Historically, former programmes, like TSP, Kaizen GV and Kaizen IPV, were focused prisoners' past offending behaviour. This rear-view mirror approach has limited evidence in influencing future behaviour. So, a new suite of Programmes, Building Choices, was introduced to place greater emphasis on developing the skills needed to manage behaviour and reaction to future, triggering situations. This looks at building skills in emotional regulation, healthy thinking, relationships and finding purpose. Through the summer of 2025 Swaleside's staff were trained and a Building Choices High-Intensity group commenced in August 2025 followed by a Moderate-intensity in September. As of June 2026, Swaleside has one High-intensity group running due to complete October 2026, and two Moderate-intensity groups in July 2026. As highlighted for many years, the lack of courses for PCoSOs has been an impediment to progression: Building Choices is not available for PCoSo prisoners at Swaleside, due to the healthy sex component not being taught, though 95% of the rest of the course is applicable.

The completion rate to date is an encouraging 81%. This is impressive, as prisoners need to engage and be self-aware. However, group sizes are modest at eight, so, after the 32 completions and 24 current participants, there are 157 on the High-Intensity waiting list and 234 on the Moderate-Intensity. In addition, 54 are 'out of time', as they did not have sufficient period left in custody to complete the course.

8. The work of the IMB

The Board would like to thank our clerk and her colleagues, and highlight the invaluable support provided. Without the clerk's hard work on our behalf and her cheerful help, our role would be infinitely more difficult.

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	16
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	7
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period (plus one on sabbatical)	4
Total number of visits to the establishment	239
Total number of segregation reviews attended	307

Recruitment continues to be a challenge, as it is nationally. Regrettably, the number of IMB members has continued to fall. A combination of retirement, resignation and ill health has resulted in the number of IMB members falling to four, which compares to 10 during 2022-23. That has meant the number of visits to the establishment has more than halved as an inevitable consequence. The Board is concerned that this impinges on their ability to effectively monitor the prison and prisoner outcomes. This would be even more pressing if the roll was to rise from 760 towards full capacity.

Applications (prisoners' written representations) to the IMB

CMS (custodial management system), a messaging service prisoners can use to communicate via their personal in-cell tablets, was introduced in October 2022. Applications to the IMB can be made either electronically via CMS, or on paper.

Overall, applications to the IMB have fallen 15%, which tallies closely with the fall in the prisoner population. Despite this, there has been a concerning 45% rise in the 'Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying' category. This relates to the high level of prisoner-on-staff assaults during the year. Conversely, the improved adjudication process has seen disciplinary applications fall by two-thirds.

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	Current reporting year (paper applications)	Current reporting year (CMS applications)	Current reporting year total
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	44	9	54	63

B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	51	1	15	16
C	Equality	28	3	12	15
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	21	9	57	66
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	67	14	53	67
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	82	4	40	44
F	Food and kitchens	133	5	43	48
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	98	25	70	95
H1	Property within the establishment	121	22	62	84
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	71	15	48	73
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	47	3	14	17
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	49	15	82	97
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	153	40	182	222
K	Transfers	30	31	42	73
L	Miscellaneous	294	16	107	123
	Total applications	1289	212	881	1093

Annex A

Service providers

- Healthcare services: Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust
- Mental health services: Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust (in-reach)
- GP services: the Medical Centre Group
- Optical services: the Prison Optician Trust
- Education: Milton Keynes College
- Maintenance services: Gov Facility Services Limited (GFSL)
- Support for families at social visits: PACT
- Treatment for drug and alcohol addiction: Change, Grow, Live (CGL)



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