Easier said than done: resolving prisoner requests

A key findings paper by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

March 2025

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Introduction

Unlike in the community, prisoners are almost entirely reliant on others to complete even the most basic tasks. Be it washing clothes, calling family, arranging a health care appointment, or checking their cash balance, all of this is, for prisoners, mediated via other people, primarily prison officers.

HM Prison and Probation Service expects prisoners to be able to deal with many of their day-to-day requests informally with officers on the wings. Every prison must also have a formal applications system to help prisoners to resolve matters. However, in our inspections of closed prisons, we frequently report on the frustrations for prisoners caused by difficulties and delays in trying to get even simple requests resolved.

On the face of it, and to those unfamiliar with prison life, prison application systems may not seem especially important. Yet key issues currently plaguing the prison estate, including violence and self-harm, are, in some cases, extreme and devastating outcomes to originally much smaller problems. At one prison recently, for example, prisoners told inspectors that very high levels of violence were caused by drugs and debt, but also frustration at the failure of staff to deal reliably with even their most basic requests.

One way that prisoners experience the culture of a prison, and particularly the behaviour of its staff, is through the effectiveness of application systems. This review shows that, whatever system is in place, many weaknesses persist, and these are often aggravated by poor practice.

Greater use of technology, including the rollout of in-cell laptops, has generally been a positive step, allowing prisoners to not only make applications, but also to stay in touch with their loved ones and keep up to date with news within the prison. Wing-based kiosks or in-cell laptops tend to provide better transparency than paper-based systems, and an audit trail of when requests are submitted and responded to, but even these systems have problems.

In this review, more respondents at establishments using electronic than paper systems said that applications were usually dealt with promptly, but the quality of some replies was poor. The benefits of in-cell laptops were hampered by the introduction of some unhelpful rules about how often applications could be submitted and the amount of detail that could be included.

There was no significant difference in the perceptions of prisoners using paper or electronic systems about whether applications were dealt with fairly. Interestingly, fewer respondents at prisons with electronic systems said it was easy to make an application (65% compared with 71% with paper systems). This was likely to have been caused by restricted regimes, which meant prisoners were unable to access wing-based kiosks regularly enough, severely limiting the benefits of the improved technology. Foreign national prisoners, and those with low literacy levels or learning difficulties, faced particular challenges in using either system.

Very few leaders had taken action to understand the importance of making the applications system work effectively. While the importance of staff-prisoner relationships is generally recognised, it is much less evident that leaders and staff understand their vital role in resolving prisoner problems, either informally on the wings or through a formal, written process. This understanding would go a long way towards reducing prisoner frustrations and making prisons safer, more productive places.

Charlie Taylor
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
March 2025

Section 1 Background

1.1 One of the consequences of imprisonment is that prisoners do not have the same freedom to complete day-to-day tasks and access services as they would have in the community. Their ability to get things done is almost entirely reliant on others. In the first instance, prisoners can try to resolve requests informally with officers. However, this is not always as straightforward as might be expected. A lack of access to technology, limited freedom to move around the jail to speak to those who may be able to resolve their queries and variable levels and quality of staff interaction, can mean that prisoners feel they must opt for more formal routes.

1.2 All prisons have a formal applications system that prisoners use to submit questions or queries that they would like to get resolved. Examples of applications are requesting additional toilet rolls for a cell, asking to make an appointment to speak to staff in another department and applying for specific courses or prison jobs.

1.3 In our Expectations, we highlight the importance of making sure prisoners are able to resolve their requests easily and quickly:

Staff and prisoners are encouraged to resolve requests informally; when this is not possible prisoners understand how to apply for available services and can do so easily.

The following indicators describe evidence that may show this expectation being met, but do not exclude other ways of achieving it.

- Staff and prisoners are encouraged to resolve requests informally, before making a formal, written application or complaint.
- Prisoners know how to make applications and can do so confidentially.
- Staff help prisoners to make applications, as requested.
- Prisoners do not have to make repeated applications for services they access or receive on a regular basis.
- Prisoners receive timely responses to their applications which are fair, respectful, easy to understand and address the issues raised.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 'Expectations'

1.4 This paper looks at how well the applications systems work in closed prisons holding men and women. We have not included open prisons where prisoners have more freedom to move around the establishment and approach staff directly for assistance.

1.5 In our inspections of closed prisons, we frequently report that prisoners are frustrated with the difficulties and delays they face in trying to resolve even simple requests.

1.6 Perceived choice and autonomy are crucial for individuals' psychological functioning and are linked to higher quality of life (van der Kaap-Deeder, et al. 2017). Prisoners often tell us that the inability to get simple requests dealt with is detrimental to their emotional and mental well-being. In particularly concerning cases, frustration at simple requests going unanswered has contributed to prisoners harming themselves, as we found at Manchester when we inspected last year.

1.7 Research has highlighted that a perceived lack of control over the things that affect people's lives can have a negative effect on their motivation (Bandura 1977). Our inspections find that this can lead to poor behaviour among prisoners, including rule breaking, violence, a lack of willingness to make changes to their behaviour, and disengagement with sentence planning and other work to help reduce their risk of reoffending.

1.8 HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) recognises the importance of meeting the daily needs of prisoners and has produced guidance for staff in the form of a prison service instruction: PSI 75/2011 Residential Services. This sets out that:

1.15: Effective application procedures must be in place, be easy to access, easy to use and provide a timely response. It is important that prisoners feel safe from repercussions when using these procedures and are aware of the appeal procedure.

3.1: Establishments must have an applications process. An application provides an opportunity for staff to listen to a prisoner's problem, to give advice and to deal with straightforward matters quickly. The applications system is an intermediate process between simply speaking to an officer on the one hand and invoking the formal complaints procedures on the other. It can be highly effective in meeting needs or settling grievances relatively informally and at an early stage.

Applications will normally be received and dealt with by residential staff. […] dealing with a request […] quickly, fairly and comprehensively at this stage should mean fewer formal complaints later on, and prisons should consider what level of management involvement or oversight is necessary to maintain quality.

The essential elements of a local applications process are:

- Applications must be heard daily, wherever possible in a room or office out of hearing of other prisoners.
- Both oral and written applications must be accepted.
- A brief record of the application and the outcome must be held by residential staff.

- Prisoners must be kept informed as to what action is to be taken and when.

- Establishments must take into account the needs of prisoners who may find it difficult to make a written or verbal application in the normal way, for example because of literacy or language difficulties.

Establishments may find it helpful to provide written application forms for prisoners to use to make applications and requests, alongside the oral application process. Prisoners should be encouraged to use the applications system to try and resolve any issues they wish to raise unless covered by another instruction i.e. complaints. If a form is used, copies should be made freely available.

HMPPS PSI 75/2011 Residential Services

1.9 To examine the extent to which the prison service is meeting these instructions, we carried out a review of our reports on inspections of closed prisons conducted between 1 October 2023 and 30 September 2024. We also completed an analysis of our prisoner survey findings for the same period, which included statistical analysis of responses to closed questions and a thematic analysis of the comments made in the open questions.

Section 2 Key findings

Officers often failed to deal with prisoners' requests informally

2.1 As is evident in our Expectations and HMPPS guidance, the optimal method for dealing with prisoner requests is to do so informally, mainly through assistance from officers on the wing.

2.2 A shortage of available officers was a common problem in many of the prisons we inspected, which often meant much less time out of cell for prisoners due to the delivery of a restricted day-to-day regime. Where there were fewer officers on the wings, they were likely to be busier and had less time to assist with requests from prisoners. It also meant that key work, whereby prisoners are allocated a prison officer to guide, support, and coach them through their custodial sentence, was not being delivered as intended, closing off a key potential route for getting assistance with basic requests.

2.3 Even when officers were available, we often reported that they congregated in offices, rather than making themselves available on the landings. This limited the opportunities for prisoners to ask for their assistance and had the potential to lead to perceptions that staff were not interested in helping.

2.4 These views were often voiced in our surveys, with many prisoners expressing negative views of staff, describing them as unreliable, uncaring, dismissive or rude.

> "It's hard to ask anyone of them even for basic needs like toilet paper, etc."
> **Prisoner survey, Bedford, November 2023**

2.5 At many prisons, officers working on the wings were new to the role, and during several inspections, including Wandsworth, Highpoint, Rochester and Woodhill, prisoners suggested that getting simple requests dealt with was difficult because officers lacked some basic knowledge and experience.

2.6 Prisoners also told us that when officers were temporarily moved to a prison, they often did not know the local procedures and did not have time to develop trusting relationships with prisoners.

2.7 At our inspection of Peterborough, which holds men and women in two separate sites, we found relationships between staff and women remained strong and supportive. However, officers were frequently redeployed from the men's prison to work at the women's site, and some of them were less familiar with working with women. This meant they could not always deal with issues or answer simple requests promptly or fairly, which women described as frustrating.

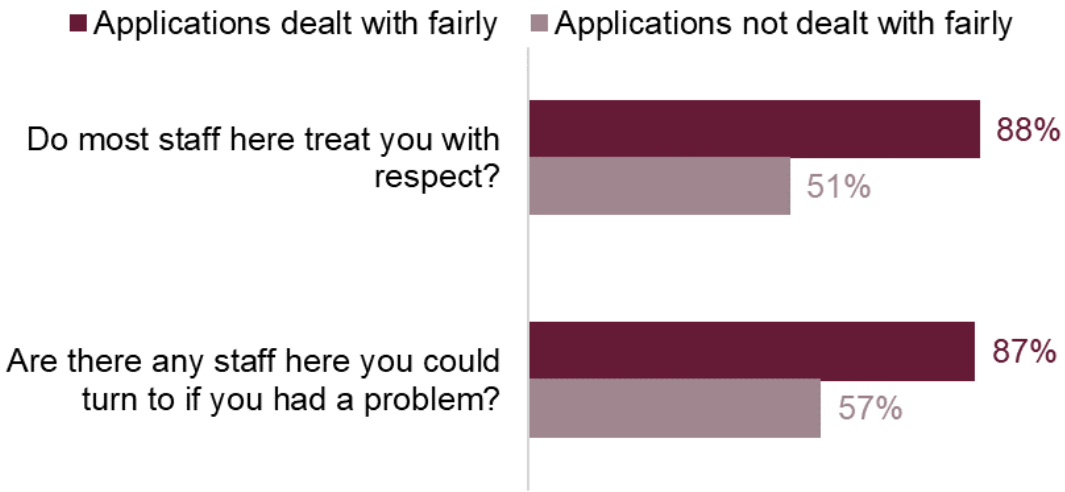
> "It [applications] needs to improve, staff need to be bothered to help us and not procrastinate. Staff need to reassure us certain queries have been fulfilled. Things that can be done on the same day by simply making a phone call or going to that department, when they aren't doing anything needs to be done." **Prisoner survey, Peterborough women's prison, November 2023**

2.8 Studies have found that prisoners' perceptions of respect can be demonstrated by staff 'sorting things out' or 'getting things done'. Interestingly, positive perceptions do not necessarily rely on getting a favourable response, such as permission to do something. Prisoners were more interested in an unambiguous response that they perceived had been arrived at through a fair decision-making process. (Hulley, Liebling & Crewe 2012, and Fitzalan Howard, F., Box, G., & Wakeling, H. (2023).

2.9 Among respondents who said that applications were dealt with fairly, 88% of prisoners said that most staff treated them with respect, and 87% reported that they had a member of staff they could turn to if they had a problem, compared to 51% and 57% for prisoners who did not report that applications were dealt with fairly.

Figure 1: Prisoners who reported that applications are dealt with fairly had more positive perceptions of their relationships with staff.

Men's and Women's closed prisons, HMIP inspections conducted October 2023 – September 2024.



Source: HMI Prisons inspection survey

At Rye Hill, management oversight of everyday systems and processes, including induction, applications and allocation to activities, ensured that they worked effectively. This eliminated the day-to-day friction we usually find in other establishments and gave staff and prisoners the time to develop good relationships.

2.10 In our thematic 'Time to care: what helps women cope in prison?', we reported that women held officers who fulfilled simple requests, or made special efforts to assist them, in high regard.

"If she says she will do something then she will do it, helped me to get a job." **Time to care: what helps women cope in prison?**

2.11 The potential to improve staff-prisoner relationships through helping prisoners with requests was evident in some of the positive comments made by prisoners:

"Staff are very good to us and they do try to resolve things." **Prisoner survey, Bure, October 2023**

Not enough time for prisoners to get their requests dealt with

2.12 Limited time out of cell meant that prisoners were often forced to make choices between tasks such as showering, cleaning their cell, spending time in the open air or – where they were available – using wing-based application and information kiosks when they were unlocked.

2.13 However, when all of the prisoners on a wing were trying to complete the same tasks at the same time, it was no surprise that some struggled to access wing-based application and information kiosks during their time out of cell. In our surveys, far fewer respondents who said they had less than two hours out of their cell on a typical weekday also said that it was easy to make an application (53% compared with 75%). For example, one prisoner noted that:

"Not out cells enough can't get anything done canteen and showers 25 min to do both is a joke especially when there's loads of people to use three kiosks." **Prisoner survey, Durham, May 2024**

2.14 Where time out of cell was good, we found prisoners were much more able to resolve day-to-day issues informally with staff and had less need to resort to the formal applications system, such as at Rye Hill.

"Staff on this wing are brilliant – deal with issues straight away." **Prisoner survey, Rye Hill, September 2024**

Paper application systems were not working

2.15 Most of the prisons we inspected had a paper-based applications system, with forms – such as health care applications – meant to be readily available on the wing. However, forms were not always freely available and prisoners said they had to ask staff for them, which undermined confidentiality.

2.16 Prisoners were expected to detail their request on the form and hand it to staff. In many prisons, a tear-off receipt was meant to be given back to the prisoner but, in practice, this rarely happened, which meant the prisoner had no evidence of handing it in.

2.17 We spoke to prisoners who struggled to complete paper-based applications, due to their literacy level or learning disability, such as dyslexia. One prisoner noted the need for:

> "Better staff and kiosk as paper app is very hard for people with learning difficulties and dyslexia." **Prisoner survey, Brixton, June 2024**

2.18 Prisoners for whom English was not their first language could also find it difficult to complete the form. In many cases, they had to rely on one of their peers to complete it for them. In our surveys, fewer respondents who said they were foreign nationals said it was easy to make an application (61% compared with 70%).

2.19 At some prisons receipt of an application was logged, but in almost all cases there was no system to record when, or even if, prisoners got a reply. On one inspection we saw applications that had been left in an office for over a week without being sent to the relevant department.

A pile of unanswered paper-based applications

2.20 At one establishment with a population of more than 700, prison data suggested that only 2,409 applications had been submitted in 12 months, a figure so low as to be scarcely believable.

2.21 Even when applications were sent to the relevant department, prisoners told us that they often waited too long for a response. In the survey we carried out at Brixton in June 2024, one prisoner summed up his frustration:

> "Application process, it takes weeks to get a reply if you're lucky. Change numbers on prison pin – takes months to do." **Prisoner survey, Brixton, June 2024**

2.22 Our inspections identified applications where it was clear prisoners needed a request to be resolved quickly before a fixed deadline, for example, asking for clothes for an imminent court appearance. However, they did not receive a reply for several weeks, by which time it was too late.

2.23 Tardiness when responding to requests could be interpreted by prisoners as a lack of respect. It could also lead to anxiety and/or frustration, especially when the request related to issues as important as where a prisoner would be living on release.

2.24 We often heard from prisoners that applications were rejected for seemingly spurious reasons and that staff used these reasons to justify not dealing with the request. For example:

> "Things take way too long to sort out. Even the most simple thing takes three days (sometimes more) just to arrive at the correct dept. If things (even the smallest thing) is wrong the app is sent back to the start again." **Prisoner survey, Full Sutton, March 2024**

2.25 We inspected seven prisons where prisoners had to submit applications on paper. Of these, five were unable to provide any data on the timeliness of replies.

2.26 Without an adequate monitoring system prison leaders were unable to negate prisoners' claims about the ineffectiveness of the application system. This undermined notions of procedural justice and respectful treatment of prisoners.

> "Officers barely reply to general apps officers took over a month to release my Qur'an from my stored prop." **Prisoner survey, Lewes, February 2024**

2.27 Very few leaders had taken action that showed they understood the importance of making the applications system work effectively. It was not clear that all understood that the applications systems were a key

determinator of how prisoners perceived staff and experienced a jail's culture.

2.28 Some prisons made good use of peer supporters to help prisoners resolve requests and queries, for example, appointing prisoner information desk (PID) workers, whose role was to 'signpost' other prisoners to services, and who usually kept a stock of application forms.

At Brixton, designated prisoner peer supporters stamped and recorded every application before it went to the relevant department and again when an answer was returned. This data was collated daily by managers and any outstanding applications were highlighted to help improve oversight and the timeliness of responses.

Prisoner information desk at Hindley

At Morton Hall, staff made particularly good use of an 'informal resolution log' to maintain a focus on dealing with daily issues that could otherwise cause ongoing frustration among prisoners. For example, the log detailed how staff had resolved concerns with the personal identification number phone system and had reissued lost documents.

2.29 In our survey comments, some prisoners stated they would prefer to have electronic systems, as they felt this would be more efficient and environmentally friendly and allow them a degree of control over their own affairs.

"An electronic kiosk system at Wymott would make life so much simpler for prisoners and enhance their mental health as it would remove the reliance on paper apps and staff help. Prisoners would be in charge of their own affairs much more." **Prisoner survey, Wymott, December 2023**

Is the use of technology helping?

2.30 In 2021 the prison service published its 'Digital, Data & Technology Strategy' that included a commitment to 'Give people in our care the digital tools & technology to support their rehabilitation' by making sure every prisoner in closed prisons had access to a laptop or tablet (Ministry of Justice 2021).

2.31 An evaluation of digital technology in prisons carried out by the Ministry of Justice found that prisoners reported the introduction of laptops was a significant improvement on the paper applications system, and they appreciated the transparency that the technology brought to the application process (Palmer, Hatcher, & Tonkin 2020).

2.32 Several of the prisons we inspected made use of technology to support the applications process. The majority of these had wing-based kiosks that could be used by prisoners to carry out a range of day-to-day tasks such as checking their cash balances, making menu choices and submitting applications.

At Oakwood prisoners were positive about the electronic kiosks that allowed them to carry out many day-to-day tasks, such as instantly adding credit to their phone PIN. The kiosks were also used to select menu choices, buy additional foodstuffs for cooking and submit applications to departments across the prison.

At Nottingham prisoners could make applications conveniently through electronic kiosks on the wings and there was oversight to make sure that they were responded to on time. Prison data showed that, in the last 12 months, around 92% of applications had been responded to within seven days.

2.33 However, there were some problems with the wing-based kiosk model. For example, not all applications could be submitted electronically; at Five Wells health care applications still had to be made using paper forms.

2.34 At Peterborough women's prison a woman who used a wheelchair said it was difficult to reach the height of the kiosk screen and she therefore could not use it. In addition, some departments could not be contacted via the kiosk and some information was not translated into languages other than English. We also found some examples where kiosks had been broken, which limited access further.

Kiosk unavailable

2.35 The prison service has an ongoing programme to roll out in-cell laptops (Launchpad devices). In September 2024 these were available to about 13,000 prisoners in public sector prisons, which equates to just over 15% of the estate (Ministry of Justice 2024).

2.36 The devices allowed prisoners to view notices and information on a range of topics and services at the prison. They also offered greater control of aspects of their lives, such as checking their spending money, staying in touch with their family using the 'email a prisoner' scheme, and contacting their legal advisers by email.

2.37 While the devices provided benefits, there were limitations to their use. For example, there was a limit on the number of characters that could be used in a single application or message to a prison department, which affected the level of detail that could be included in the request and the response. One prisoner said:

> "The most annoying thing in this prison is the application system, they give you 250 words for an app and then tell you to give all info or the app will not be processed, 250 words is not enough." **Prisoner survey, Garth, August 2024**

2.38 Because the devices were always accessible in the cells, prisoners often submitted more applications, even when compared to prisons where there were wing kiosks. At Garth, with a population of 800 prisoners, over 100,000 applications were submitted in 12 months.

2.39 We found that in some prisons unhelpful rules had been put in place to limit how often prisoners could submit an application, which did not help to improve outcomes for prisoners.

2.40 One prisoner was frustrated with the lack of a response from The Link – a hub where resettlement services were located – and the system prevented him from submitting a further application to that department until after he was due to have been released:

> "The App process is ridiculous with the time limit when you can't re-apply: e.g. I've applied to the link with help for accommodation, I've heard nothing and am released [dd/mm], I can't send another app to chase my accommodation until [dd/mm]." **Prisoner survey, Peterborough men's prison, January 2024**

2.41 The use of electronic systems should allow for better tracking of applications to monitor and improve timeliness. In our survey, significantly more respondents at establishments using electronic than paper-based systems said that applications were usually dealt with within seven days (46% compared with 36%).

> At Oakwood, managers regularly scrutinised the timeliness of responses to applications. Prison data suggested that in the previous 12 months over 99% of the 150,000 applications had been responded to within the target of five days. Our survey also indicated that applications were dealt with more promptly than in other prisons.

2.42 However, of the seven prisons we inspected in the six months to 30 September 2024, two of those where prisoners could use technology to submit applications were unable to provide any data on how many had been responded to and resolved within seven days.

2.43 Data provided by most prisons that used an electronic applications system suggested nearly all applications were responded to within the target timeframe of seven days. However, this was notably different to our surveys, where only 46% of respondents at prisons using electronic systems said applications were usually dealt with within that time.

2.44 While the use of technology to submit applications should mean that prisoners get a prompt reply, this did not influence the quality of responses. We saw several examples where responses, although supplied within the target time, were not helpful, merely acknowledging receipt and undertaking to respond at an undefined point in the future, exacerbating the frustration felt by prisoners.

2.45 In addition, in our surveys, fewer respondents at prisons with electronic systems than at those with paper systems said that it was easy to make an application (65% compared with 71%). This may have been caused by the impact of a restricted regime which meant prisoners were unable to access the wing-based kiosks as often as they should.

2.46 Our surveys also revealed that there was no significant difference in perception from prisoners using paper applications and those using electronic systems about whether the applications were dealt with fairly, which suggested that the use of technology had not addressed previous weaknesses in practice.

2.47 Ultimately the key variable in any application system is the way staff respond to prisoner requests. Whether electronic or paper-based, a system can only reflect the ability and willingness of staff to help prisoners resolve their issues. Too many leaders and staff are not prioritising the need for swift, clear and helpful responses, which can lead to unnecessary and potentially harmful frustration from prisoners.

Appendix I Methodology

This thematic draws on evidence from inspections carried out during the period from 1 October 2023 to 30 September 2024. As part of HM Inspectorate of Prisons' evidence base a representative survey of prisoners is carried out at the start of each inspection. The questionnaire includes structured questions which facilitate quantitative analysis, enabling us to compare groups within the sample, and open questions at the end which allow prisoners to express in their own words what they find most positive and negative about the prison.

Analysis was conducted on 5,431 responses from the adult men's and women's prisons; the responses of prisoners from open prisons were excluded. A comparative analysis was conducted comparing the responses of prisoners who were in prisons that used a paper-based application system to those from prisons where electronic systems such as kiosks and Launchpad laptops were in use. Other groups were also compared, and differences tested for statistical significance. Throughout the report we only refer to comparisons between the two groups when these are statistically significant. The significance level is set at 0.01, which means that there is only a 1% chance that the difference in results is due to chance.

Thematic analysis of the prisoner responses to the open questions at the end of the questionnaire was also conducted. All relevant comments were systematically reviewed by a researcher, and themes identified.

This project was conducted in line with HM Inspectorate of Prisons' ethical principles for research activities: 'Ethical principles for research – HM Inspectorate of Prisons' (www.hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk).

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