



Debriefing paper for the inspection of

**HMP Swaleside**

by HM Inspectorate of Prisons

1<sup>st</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> December 2025

This paper represents the material presented at the full inspection debrief by HM Inspectorate of Prisons. The material and assessments are indicative only and may be changed at the discretion of the Chief Inspector after due reflection during the report production process or on the discovery of additional evidence. Inspected bodies will be offered the opportunity to correct factual inaccuracies as part of the publication process.

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# Healthy prison assessments

## **Outcomes for prisoners are good against this healthy prison test.**

There is no evidence that outcomes for prisoners are being adversely affected in any significant areas.

## **Outcomes for prisoners are reasonably good against this healthy prison test.**

There is evidence of adverse outcomes for prisoners in only a small number of areas. For the majority there are no significant concerns. Procedures to safeguard outcomes are in place.

## **Outcomes for prisoners are not sufficiently good against this healthy prison test.**

There is evidence that outcomes for prisoners are being adversely affected in many areas or particularly in those areas of greatest importance to the well-being of prisoners. Problems/concerns, if left unattended, are likely to become areas of serious concern.

## **Outcomes for prisoners are poor against this healthy prison test.**

There is evidence that the outcomes for prisoners are seriously affected by current practice. There is a failure to ensure even adequate treatment of and/or conditions for prisoners. Immediate remedial action is required.

# 1. Leadership

**Our judgements about leadership take a narrative form and do not result in a score.**

- Following a protracted period of temporary leadership, a substantive governor had recently been appointed. Her dedication and approach were widely supported by staff. She had made an honest assessment of the prison's considerable challenges and set immediate priorities to improve safety, security and stability.
- HMPPS and local leaders had failed to tackle violence, the overall rate of which had almost doubled since our last inspection and was now the second highest of all adult male prisons for the period November 2024 – October 2025. This followed a prolonged period of decline across most functions of the prison and none of the concerns we raised at our last full inspection had been fully addressed.
- HMPPS had failed to solve chronic staffing problems that had hampered the running of the jail. Although the full quota of officers had been recruited, less than three-quarters were currently available for operational duties and the prison often had to rely on staff sent from other jails. A shortage of operational support grades limited, for example, searching on entering the prison, and there were far too few probation staff to meet the needs of the high-risk population. The prison also struggled to recruit operational middle managers.
- In response to a national directive, leaders had introduced a restricted regime which they told us was designed to make the prison safer and was temporary. However, staff and prisoners were not sufficiently prepared for its implementation, leading to an increase in instability and men in crisis.
- The new published regime allowed about half the population only 30 minutes unlocked on most weekdays. This was marginally improved by leaders during our inspection, but it remained wholly insufficient and inhumane.
- Leaders had also curtailed access to and time in activities under the new regime. Popular activities that improved employability had ceased as a consequence of HMPPS cuts in education delivery.
- The capability of the offender management unit (OMU) continued to be affected by longstanding staffing shortfalls and frequent changes in leadership.
- The governor had reorganised her senior team with some new appointments and rotation of roles. She had well-developed plans to address weaknesses through coaching, support and challenge.

- The senior team and managers were not sufficiently visible on wings to support the largely inexperienced group of officers, although development and coaching for custodial managers was now being offered.
- Leaders were not using data sufficiently to assess performance and drive improvements.
- The governor had recognised longstanding cultural problems within the prison and had plans to challenge them.

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## 2. Safety

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

### **Early days in custody**

- In our survey, a quarter of prisoners told us they needed protection on arrival and only 57% felt safe on their first night, both of which were worse than similar prisons.
- Early days arrangements were unsafe. In 2025, six different prisoners had been assaulted or stabbed on their first night. No information about risks or gang affiliation was recorded on Nomis during reception and induction processes.
- The low numbers of weekly arrivals meant that reception and induction processes were delivered in a bespoke way. Peer workers were used effectively.
- Arrivals after 5pm got a basic service and went directly to their cells with few checks.
- Prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCoSOs) had the best induction experience, with good support from experienced Insiders and well-prepared cells.
- All new arrivals faced a poor regime that gave little opportunity to familiarise themselves with prison life.

### **Promoting positive behaviour**

#### **Encouraging positive behaviour**

- Swaleside had the second highest rate of assaults of all adult male prisons in the last 12 months, and the highest rate of assaults against staff.
- The rate of serious assaults on staff and prisoners had increased by 78% since our last inspection. Violence against staff had increased by 122%.
- In our survey, 75% of prisoners said that they had felt unsafe in the prison, and 43% said they currently felt unsafe. A third of prisoners said that they had been physically assaulted by another prisoner, which was significantly worse than similar prisons.
- Staff, many of whom lacked experience, were often not confident in challenging poor behaviour and there was a lack of order and control.
- Serious assaults were not investigated sufficiently, and learning was not being used to try to prevent further incidents of violence.

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- There was little to motivate positive behaviour; the current regime was overly restrictive and prisoners perceived it as a collective punishment.
- There was not enough oversight or support for the high number of those isolating for their safety. The new regime had not built in time unlocked for this cohort.
- There was a perception by prisoners that poor behaviour was the only way to be heard or to get their issues resolved.
- We found examples of violent incidents not being correctly reported or investigated.

## **Adjudications**

- There were not enough consequences for poor behaviour.
- There had been 3,650 adjudications in the last year, and 230 were currently adjourned. The high volume and delays contributed to the ineffectiveness of the process.
- Over 720 adjudications had been sent to the police, and 87 were still being dealt with by them.
- There was no process for rehabilitative adjudications, which was a missed opportunity considering the high levels of substance misuse.

## **Segregation**

- During our inspection, leaders were unable to provide us with any data relating to segregation and we could not be assured that the required governance was in place.
- We were concerned that the average length of stay appeared to be far too high.
- Several prisoners within the unit had been segregated for too long, and there was no tangible exit plan to move them on.
- The regime was limited, with only a shower and half an hour of exercise each day. Some prisoners had been given basic work to complete while in their cells which allowed them to earn some money, which was positive.
- Reintegration planning was in the early stages of implementation, and the recent introduction of a psychologist to the unit was a positive step.
- Prisoners spoke positively about staff on the unit, and several told us that they preferred being segregated due to better regime consistency than on the wings.
- We found men segregated on the wings without proper authorisation.

## Use of force

- The rate of use of force had increased by 87% since our last inspection and was above the average for similar prisons.
- Governance was weak. Weekly scrutiny meetings only reviewed 25% of incidents and these sometimes lacked sufficient challenge. Only 65% of incidents had body-worn video footage.
- In the sample we reviewed, we observed some poor practice, in particular with regards to control and incident management. Only 52% of staff had up-to-date training.
- Records showed PAVA had been used on 61 prisoners, compared to once prior to the last inspection. Inquiries into the use of high-level interventions lacked rigour.
- Monthly strategic meetings had not taken place for three months and leaders had not explored any emerging themes or disproportionality.
- Documentation to justify the use of special accommodation lacked sufficient detail.

## Security

- Drugs and the illicit economy were impacting the safety, stability and security of the establishment.
- The random mandatory drug testing rate was 34% (April 2025 to October), but leaders reported that the number using illicit drugs may well be closer to 50% due to a number of prisoners refusing to be tested.
- Drones were still the main route of ingress for illicit items, including drugs and weapons. Replacement of windows and higher specification grilles, and installation of anti-drone wire had been agreed, but there was not yet a date for this work to commence.
- While the incentivised substance free living unit (ISFL) and the drug recovery wing (DRW) provided a better environment, there were not enough incentives on offer to motivate prisoners to stay drug-free.
- Leaders had worked hard to address the concerns found in a recent security audit, including improving intelligence processes.
- Staff shortages had impacted the use of enhanced gate security, but regional resource was being used to improve searching in other areas.
- There was good inter-agency working to attempt to address the risks posed by organised crime and corruption.



## Suicide and self-harm prevention

- Levels of recorded self-harm were consistently high and there was no coherent local strategy to reduce them. The number of men in crisis had risen following the introduction of the restricted regime.
- There were too many reasons why men would fall into crisis, including very little time out of cell, very high levels of violence, easy access to illicit drugs and basic needs going unmet. Many prisoners told us that they were unable to progress in their sentences and felt hopeless.
- There were not enough interventions to support those struggling.
- There had been two self-inflicted deaths since the last inspection, and three non-natural deaths. Although the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) had highlighted serious concerns about Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) entries being falsified, planned assurance checks had not been carried out.
- Most serious acts of self-harm were not investigated to learn lessons. There had been an exceptionally high number of cell fires and not enough work to understand the causes.
- Some men we spoke to felt cared for, but ACCT care plans did not always capture the key issues that were driving self-harm. Mental health workers often did not attend case reviews.
- Arrangements for constant supervision were unsafe.
- Access to Listeners had deteriorated since the last inspection.

### 3. Respect

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

#### **Staff-prisoner relationships**

- Staff were subject to high levels of violence in the course of their duties, and many told us they were burnt out and demoralised.
- Relationships between prisoners and staff on most wings were distant, although we did observe some more positive interactions.
- In some instances, we observed prisoners being openly disrespectful to staff.
- Prisoners expressed frustration around getting basic needs met, which was compounded by the very limited time they had unlocked to complete domestic tasks or resolve their issues.
- Middle managers were not sufficiently visible on landings to provide support and guidance to staff as they delivered the daily regime.
- In our survey, more prisoners said that their key workers were helpful than at similar prisons (59% compared with 39%), which was positive, though the quality and frequency of key work was insufficient.

#### **Daily life**

##### **Living conditions**

- Some outdoor areas were littered which exacerbated the issues with vermin.
- Most communal areas were dirty.
- Too many cells were in a poor state of repair. For example, we saw widespread graffiti, fire damage, broken furniture and damaged flooring. Cells on F, H and D wing's 3 landing were generally better.
- Showers were dirty, mouldy and poorly maintained.
- The maintenance department worked hard to manage repairs and return out of action cells to use. A refurbishment programme involving prisoners had just started.
- Only 12% of prisoners in our survey said cell bells were answered within five minutes; leaders did not carry out any local assurance checks.

##### **Residential services (catering and shop)**

- Many servery areas and food trolleys were dirty and poorly maintained.

- Food service was not well supervised; only 19% of prisoners in our survey said they had enough to eat.
- For most, the evening cold meals were served at cell doors, which was not respectful.
- Most self-cook facilities were filthy and in a poor state. Access to these areas were inconsistent and limited further by the new regime.

### **Prisoner consultation, applications and redress**

- Consultation arrangements were underdeveloped. The prison council had restarted in August but had been held infrequently since then. In our survey, only 45% of prisoners said that they were consulted, compared with 62% at our last inspection.
- Processes for managing complaints were reasonably effective, although forms were often unavailable on the wings. Most complaint responses we reviewed were courteous, but some dismissed prisoners' concerns without sufficient investigation.
- While it was positive that prisoners had access to secure laptops, which enabled most applications to be processed digitally, prisoners routinely described not having basic requests met.
- Leaders had increased the provision of video-link legal visit slots, and there was now sufficient capacity to meet demand.

### **Fair treatment and inclusion**

- Leaders had not promoted fair treatment; the culture did not enable or nurture an inclusive ethos. Staff and prisoners reported tensions and cultural differences that had not been sufficiently addressed.
- There had been hardly any consultation with minority groups which left leaders poorly sighted on their experiences. This was compounded further by a lack of data analysis to identify and address any disproportionality.
- Prisoners from several groups reported to us that they felt unfairly treated.
- Discrimination incident reporting forms (DIRFs) were not freely available, and some prisoners waited months for a response. Investigations were generally inadequate and there was no quality assurance.

### **Faith and religion**

- Despite their efforts, shortages in the chaplaincy team limited their ability to provide pastoral support.

- Staff and prisoners told us that lateness to corporate worship was a persistent issue.

## **Health, well-being and social care**

- There were some weaknesses in partnership working with the prison, including prison staff often failing to facilitate external hospital appointments, creating clinical risks.
- DNA rates for health care were exceptionally high, mainly due to regime issues and fears of violence. This extended waiting times and wasted clinical resource.
- Strong clinical leadership was evident across health services.
- Most patients with primary care needs were cared for well by skilled, dedicated and hardworking staff. However, some patients with wounds did not receive the care required, which led to worsening health conditions.
- The inpatient unit was delivering a good standard of clinical care, coordinated by an effective multi-disciplinary team.
- A good range of mental health interventions were provided by a highly skilled, integrated multi-disciplinary team. Referrals to the mental health team had trebled in recent months and the waiting times for psychological therapies were too long. However, patients were prioritised on clinical need and were supported while waiting for these interventions.
- The high number of patients requiring transfer to secure hospital under the Mental Health Act continued to wait far too long for a bed. The longest wait was 711 days, which was appalling.
- Specialist services for men with behaviour associated with personality disorders were exemplary.
- Psychosocial services for clients with addictions were impressive and opiate substitution prescribing was being expanded to better suit the needs of patients in a training prison.
- Social care arrangements were good, but prisoner carers, as at the last inspection, continued to be untrained and unsupervised, which was poor.
- Pharmacy services were good, but too many patients told us they were unable to access their medicines at the prescribed times. Officer supervision of queues was poor and administration of medicines in the segregation unit was unsafe.
- Dental care was good.

## 4. Purposeful activity

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

### **Time out of cell**

- A new regime had been implemented at the start of our visit which severely restricted most prisoners' time out of cell. The rapid implementation of the new regime had led to significant frustration and confusion among staff and prisoners.
- Around 44% of prisoners were not involved in purposeful activity, which was far too high for a training prison. Under the published regime these men could only expect 30 minutes out of their cell most weekdays, which was extremely poor. This was increased to a little over an hour a day during our visit which was still insufficient.
- Prisoners who were working full time could expect to receive around four to six hours unlocked each day, depending on which role they were in. Part-time workers only received around three to four hours unlocked. Our own checks found only 23% of prisoners were off their wings in purposeful activity, and 43% were locked up during the working day.
- Prisoners expressed frustration that the regime did not give them time to complete domestic tasks or exercise outdoors, including those who were working full time.
- Regime reliability was poor. Records over the past three months showed frequent delays to roll checks and prisoner movements, further reducing time in activities and attendance for appointments.

### **Gym and library**

- The gym was running a restricted timetable which offered 14 sessions a week, supplemented by some team sports. It was well staffed and reasonably well equipped, though the showers and changing rooms remained in very poor condition.
- Local data showed that only a little over a third of prisoners used the gym. Sessions frequently ran below capacity, and we were told that prisoners did not want to attend due to fears for their safety.
- The library had a good range of books, magazines and DVDs available, but access was poor for those not attending education. Local data indicated that around 40% of sessions in the previous six months had been cancelled.
- This was mitigated to an extent by a mobile service, with more than 500 book deliveries each month on average.

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## Education, skills and work activities

- Leaders had not corrected most of the key weaknesses in education, skills and work (ESW) identified at the previous two full inspections. For example, they had not arrested the notably poor and declining attendance at ESW activities or the very low level of prisoner engagement in ESW. Leaders had not reduced the high proportion of prisoners who were unemployed or not engaging in any form of ESW. This was made even worse by the new regime which was delaying prisoners' arrival at sessions and significantly reducing the time prisoners could spend on their activities.
- During this inspection, leaders rightly recognised that they had not carefully and fully reviewed ESW data, nor was the available data sufficiently reliable. This meant they could not identify areas of weakness or recognise trends.
- While there were sufficient activity spaces for the Swaleside prison population there was gross under-utilisation of those spaces. The allocations process was not functioning well, with too little staff capacity to meet demand and get the unemployed and disengaged into some form of work or activity. There were far too few activities on offer for the substantial number of prisoners classified as a high security risk. Preferential pay rates helped incentivise prisoners' participation in education, but only to a limited extent.
- The curriculums in education and industries did not meet prisoners' needs. Leaders had reduced the offer in education, which now focused mainly on a core of English and mathematics. They had ended courses which supported employability such as construction, warehousing and catering.
- The education provider, Milton Keynes College, provided education courses that were structured logically and planned well by qualified teachers with appropriate subject expertise. Instructors in industries were mostly well qualified or receiving relevant training.
- Most of the relatively small number of prisoners who stayed to the end of their education course achieved their qualification. Managers were unable to state how many learners progressed into work with DHL, nor did they record well enough how prisoners gained new skills in industries. Instructors did not routinely check the quality of prisoners' work on the wings. A lack of cleanliness in some wings was a danger to health.
- Instructors were not systematically developing prisoners' professional knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for work or preparing prisoners well enough for employment on release. There were limited but innovative opportunities to develop prisoners' wider skills, through events

exploring the spoken and written word, and sessions on philosophy. Such sessions were well-attended, albeit by a small minority of prisoners.

- Leaders had not ensured that the substantial number of prisoners who were neurodivergent were receiving the support they needed in education, skills and work. While leaders had appointed a neurodiversity support manager, this one person could not meet demand.
- Prisoners were receiving effective careers advice and guidance at the start of their sentences, but not enough support and guidance prior to release.
- Leaders had struggled to implement the prison's reading strategy and what was in place was piecemeal. Leaders were only at the early stages of developing a sustained and systematic development of prisoners' reading skills.

## 5. Preparation for release

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

### **Children and families and contact with the outside world**

- Many prisoners were far from home serving long sentences, and their families faced long journeys and high costs.
- Social visits were delivered well and there was a good range of family days, including some organised by the psychologically informed planned environment unit (PIPE) and ISFL.
- However, about half the population did not get visits and there was very little provision for them.
- It was good to see after-school video visits, but too many booked sessions did not go ahead.
- In-cell laptops made using the email-a-prisoner scheme very easy.
- Some aspects of support had deteriorated since the last inspection. There was little family engagement work, no parenting courses and very few Storybook Dads completions.

### **Reducing reoffending**

- The establishment held a predominantly high-risk and long-term population of prisoners mostly convicted of serious and often violent crimes, including about 25% who were registered sex offenders.
- Many prisoners we spoke to expressed considerable frustration over their lack of progression, describing feeling stuck and having given up hope.
- The OMU continued to be affected by longstanding staffing shortfalls, impacting on the unit's morale, stability, and capability to carry out some of its core functions.
- The chronic shortage of probation prison offender managers (POMs) meant caseloads were high. Contact with prisoners was largely infrequent, predominantly reactive to timebound events and did not drive prisoners' motivation and sentence progression sufficiently.
- Too many prisoners did not have an up-to-date OASys assessment and sentence plan, which hindered their ability to progress.
- Category C prisoners waited far too long to transfer, particularly those convicted of sexual offences.



## **Public protection**

- Most prisoners were assessed as presenting a high risk of serious harm to others and were eligible to be managed on release under multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) because of the serious nature of their offences.
- There were considerable gaps in the prison's management and oversight of public protection arrangements.
- There were backlogs in screening processes, and weaknesses in the identification, implementation, and review of restrictions.
- A public protection steering group, designed to provide senior manager governance and steer of multi-agency risk management arrangements, had only recently been reinstated following a gap of over a year.
- The interdepartmental risk management meeting (IRMM) was poorly attended and did not have sufficient oversight of all high-risk prisoners, but we found evidence of some good communication between individual POMs and community offender managers COMs ahead of release.
- The prison's written contributions to MAPPA panels were often not sufficiently analytical.

## **Interventions and support**

- The well-led programmes team had recently introduced the new suite of HMPPS programmes – 'Building Choices'.
- Managers were sensibly prioritising waiting lists, but this limited the opportunity for many to demonstrate progression.
- Only a small number of prisoners had completed an accredited offending behaviour programme (OBP) since April 2025.
  - The prison did not offer any accredited interventions for prisoners convicted of sexual offences, and very few had transferred to undertake one elsewhere.
  - Some prisoners were released from Swaleside without having had enough opportunity to address their offending related attitudes, thinking and behaviour, demonstrate risk reduction, or learn skills to prepare them for release.
  - The PIPE unit and forensic psychology team worked well to oversee and support a small number of very complex prisoners who were struggling to progress, including some who were serving indeterminate sentences.

## **Returning to the community**

- Swaleside was not a designated resettlement prison and therefore did not receive centrally funded resources to support release planning arrangements.
- However, in the previous 12 months, an average of 13 prisoners had been released into the community each month.

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- The prison had done their best with the resources they had to meet these challenges.
- There were some gaps in resettlement planning arrangements.
- Most prisoners had an address to go to on the first night of release. The majority went to a probation-approved premises as a condition of the license, but 12 prisoners had left the prison homeless in the previous 12 months.

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