



## **Unpacking prisoner property: A hidden source of conflict and complaint**

A key findings paper by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

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# Introduction

On our visits to prisons, one of the most frequent complaints from prisoners is their frustration with being unable to get hold of their property. After transferring to a new jail, there are often long delays with getting property out of storage and different prisons often appear to interpret the rules differently about what is permitted. Being able to access photographs or cards from family and friends matters a great deal to prisoners as well as, more practically, being able to get clothes, shoes and books. Some prisons appear to be able to process property quickly and efficiently while others frequently lose items or there are long delays before it can be got out of storage.

This short paper explains the rules and expectations for property and sets out areas in which things so often seem to go wrong.

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## Section 1 Background

- 1.1 When someone arrives in prison, reception staff make a record of all personal belongings the prisoner brings with them, including the clothes and shoes they are wearing. For the duration of their time in prison, this property will be managed according to the HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Prisoners' Property Policy Framework 2022.
- 1.2 The policy states that if rules are applied fairly and property is managed with care, prisoners should feel respected and perceive authority as legitimate, therefore reducing the likelihood that they will misbehave or become violent.

How HMPPS looks after prisoners' possessions may be symbolic of how we look after the people in our care. A prisoner's property is likely to mean more than just what an item's specific use is, or its monetary value. It may hold personal significance, particularly for those in prison who have few possessions. Having one's own possessions, and having some choice about these, may enable feelings of autonomy, and in a small but potentially significant way enable people to have even a small space of their own while they are in prison.

Prisoners' property is managed efficiently, effectively, consistently and with care and respect, recognising the potential personal and emotional significance of items.

### **HMPPS Prisoners' Property Policy Framework 2022**

- 1.3 This section sets out some of the main elements of the framework.

### **In possession and storage rules**

- 1.4 Prisoners' belongings will be either kept by the prisoner, stored at the prison, or stored off-site at the National Distribution Centre (NDC). National policies determine that valuable personal items such as phones, keys and wallets will be kept on site, but not in possession. This means the prisoner does not have access to these belongings but should be able to get them back easily when they are released.
- 1.5 Local incentives schemes also determine what prisoners are allowed to keep in their cell. Property can be a key incentive for prisoners and as well as the minimum list of items they are allowed, governors can choose additional items for those on standard and enhanced levels (or above) to motivate and reward good behaviour. Governors also have discretion in relation to money and articles received via post for prisoners.

- 1.6 In HM Inspectorate of Prisons' Expectations – the criteria against which we inspect – we provide a list of indicators that can demonstrate prisons are storing property correctly.

Prisoners' property held in storage is secure, and prisoners can access it on request.

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

- Prisoners can receive parcels subject to security and volumetric control considerations.
- The amount of property held in possession and storage takes account of individual needs.
- The list of possessions that prisoners are allowed to keep is adequate to meet the needs of the population.
- Prisoners' valuable property is routinely security marked before it is issued.
- Medical items, including dentures, glasses, and hearing aids, are not removed from prisoners without well-evidenced security concerns.
- All property is returned to prisoners on release or transfer.
- Prisoners are fairly compensated for clothing and possessions which are lost or damaged in storage.

### **HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Expectations**

## **Volumetric control**

- 1.7 HMPPS limits the property a prisoner can have either in possession or in storage. This is known as volumetric control and the amount a prisoner can have must be in line with this allowance. Both in-possession and stored property must fit in two boxes, with certain items exempt from the limit.

A prisoner's total property, where held in possession or in storage, must fit into two standard size volumetric control boxes (a volumetric control box is 70cm x 55cm x 25cm and has a maximum weight of 15kg per box) plus half a volumetric control box for consumable items. In addition, the following items are permitted:

- all legal papers
- religious texts and artefacts
- reasonable adjustment/disability aids
- reasonable amounts of items that support transgender prisoners to live in the gender with which they identify
- items held in possession for the care of babies
- one set of clothing
- bedding
- one musical instrument
- posters etc

- one birdcage.

## HMPPS Prisoners' Property Policy Framework 2022

### Transfers and release

- 1.8 Only items within the volumetric control allowance (and items which are exempt from it) should accompany a prisoner on their transfer. Each bag should weigh no more than 15kg and be sealed and secured. The property card should be checked before and after the transfer by both establishments, and the bags should be checked against the Person Escort Record.
- 1.9 Excess items must be forwarded to the new establishment within four weeks of the prisoner transfer. The sending prison is responsible for recording and funding the property transfer and must notify the receiving prison once it has been dispatched. Prisoners are also able to give excess property away to other prisoners, hand it over to family members on visits, or have it stored locally in the prison or at the NDC.

### Concerns show many failings

- 1.10 Since May 2021, our inspection surveys have included a question about whether prisoners can get their stored property promptly, if needed. Annual analysis shows that less than a quarter report being able to access it promptly. This low figure, across multiple inspection years, highlights a systemic problem.
- 1.11 In a 2024 thematic report, the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) detailed the importance of dealing effectively with prisoner property, both within the prison and when someone is released. It found that self-harm and violence could be triggered by the loss or damage of personal property. Poor access to their stored property can lead to frustrations being directed at staff or poor behaviour by the prisoner.
- 1.12 Prisoners must submit a formal application to access their stored property. In our key findings paper 'Easier said than done: resolving prisoner requests', we found that frustrations with the process, including delays in requests being dealt with and poor perceptions of fairness, affected staff-prisoner relationships.
- 1.13 Prisoner property has consistently been the most common complaint category investigated by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). The PPO's 2025 learning lessons bulletin on complaints investigations reported that in the annual report year 2023–24, complaints about personal property made up 27% of the total.
- 1.14 Both the IMB and the PPO have also identified that variation in local policies or facilities lists can exacerbate feelings of frustration and resentment. In an analysis of 5,610 property complaints from 2019–24, the PPO found that when prisoners were transferred to a new

establishment, items that were previously permitted were sometimes confiscated.

- 1.15 Items important to some minority groups are exempt from volumetric control, and this can contribute to feelings of inequity. The discrepancies in allowances between prisoner groups can be perceived as discrimination and favouritism, which can affect prisoner well-being and staff-prisoner relationships.
- 1.16 The IMB has found that on release, prisoners often realise that valuable items are missing. The PPO also receives complaints that identification, phones, wallets, and keys are lost during prisoners' time in prison.
- 1.17 We carried out a review of our prison inspection reports published between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025. We also completed an analysis of our prisoner survey findings for the same period, which included a statistical analysis of responses to closed questions and a thematic analysis of the comments made in open questions. The next section sets out our findings.

## Section 2 HMI Prisons' key findings

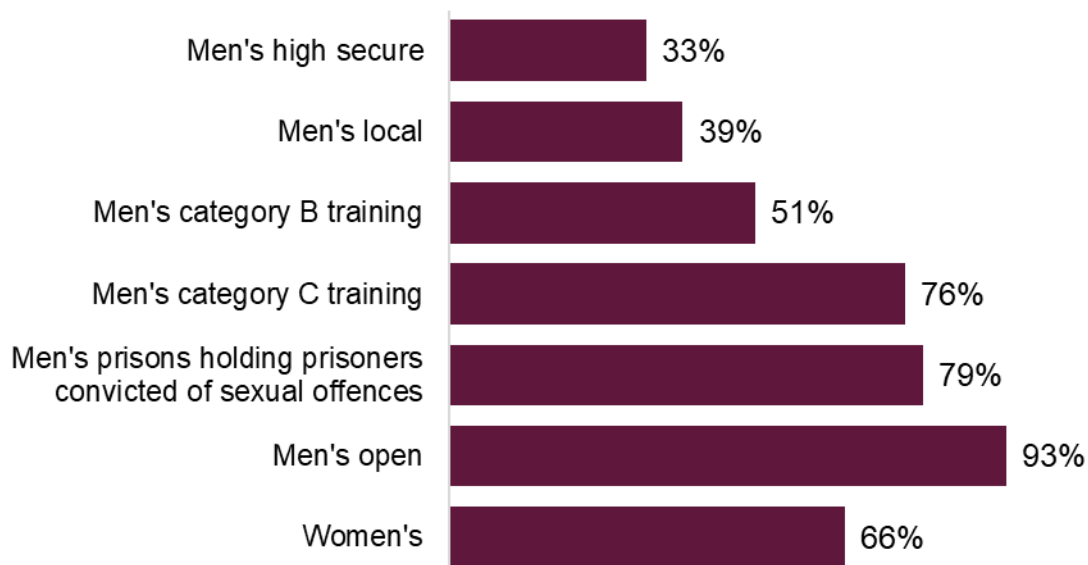
2.1 HMI Prisons inspection reports and prisoner survey responses from 2024–25 highlighted persistent issues in the management and accessibility of prisoners' property across multiple establishments. This caused ongoing frustrations for prisoners.

### Property on arrival

2.2 Analysis of the data collected in our surveys showed that too few prisoners received their personal property within a few days of arriving at the prison. In adult prisons, only 63% of prisoners reported getting their personal property. In addition, there were differences based on the type of prison: 93% of prisoners in men's open prisons said they got their property within a few days, but only 33% in men's high secure prisons said the same.

**Figure 1: Prisoners in men's high secure prisons were least likely to report that they were able to get their personal property within the first few days.**

Adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons survey data 2024–25

2.3 Regime restrictions, risk management practices and individual prison resources contributed to this disparity. Local prisons face particular challenges and prisoners often find it difficult to get their property within the first few days or get access to their items held in storage. Frequent movement of prisoners in and out of these jails, which receive individuals directly from court, often at short notice, mean property storage systems are under constant strain, and misplaced items or processing delays have become common problems.

2.4 In high secure prisons, enhanced protocols require more thorough searching and processing of personal property, which can mean that

prisoners have to wait longer to be given their in-possession property after they arrive.

During our inspection of Long Lartin, a high secure prison which only receives prisoners transferred from other prisons, we found that leaders had responded constructively to prisoners' concerns about delays in being given their in-possession property and they had begun to develop ways to streamline the process.

- 2.5 In our inspections of open prisons, we found progress in identifying and working to address the root causes of property issues on arrival.

Having seen an increase in prisoner arrivals, Kirkham had switched from contractor-led transfers to using its own prison transport vehicles, collecting most prisoners from their sending prison. This reduced the risk of property loss and the time spent waiting for it to arrive.

At Kirklevington Grange, property was processed immediately and prisoners were allowed to take permitted items with them to their residential unit.

- 2.6 Some prisoners said they waited up to three weeks to receive their belongings.

'Reception is constantly struggling to issue prisoner's prop. Mostly due to not being available to scan incoming prop. But also, due to ops [operational] staff being cross deployed away from reception. Regularly prisoners are waiting 10 to 21 days to receive property.'

Prisoner survey, Garth, November 2024

- 2.7 Staff shortages and frequent cross deployment of reception officers to operational duties were often identified in our reports as key contributors to delays in the issuing of property or giving prisoners access to their stored property.
- 2.8 Discrepancies in property policies across different prisons also led to confusion and inconsistent prisoner experiences. Reports of lost or mismanaged property highlight the need for better tracking and accountability. Although some prisons – notably Garth – collected relevant data on backlogs and complaints, which was a positive step in tracking the problem, its use to inform improvements was inconsistent.

'The restrictions on clothing and personal effects that are applied when first arriving at the prison from other prisons. It appears to us excessive to "confiscate" books, letters, emails etc from new arrivals when they have come from other prisons?'

Prisoner survey, Humber, April 2024

At Lewes we found that, following feedback from the prisoner consultation group and wing forums, additional staff had been deployed to address delays in parcel and property collection, resulting in the clearance of most backlogs during the inspection week.

- 2.9 Our survey data also highlights variations in the experiences of different types of prisoners. In the men's local prisons inspected in 2024–25, fewer remand and unsentenced prisoners received their personal property in their first few days (35%), compared with sentenced prisoners (45%).
- 2.10 With limited access to funds or belongings, remand prisoners often resort to borrowing from others to meet basic needs, and this can quickly spiral into debt. Prisoners due to attend court may be unable to access non-prison clothing, such as smarter attire, and attending court in prison-issue clothing can undermine their confidence and sense of dignity. Our survey data indicates that those awaiting trial or sentencing faced disproportionate challenges in accessing essential belongings, potentially contributing to greater vulnerability and distress.
- 2.11 Prisoners serving indeterminate sentences (ISP) – either imprisonment for public protection (IPP) or life sentences – also faced barriers, with only 58% saying they got their property in their first few days, significantly fewer than other sentenced prisoners (71%).
- 2.12 Of the 882 ISP prisoners who completed the survey in 2024–25, 31% were held in high secure jails. These operate under stricter security which can mean it takes longer to issue property. ISP prisoners also tend to experience more transfers between prisons, increasing the risk of property being lost or delayed. This can heighten stress and undermine stability, particularly for those already managing the uncertainty of their sentences.
- 2.13 The survey data also highlights a significant difference in access to property for prisoners with additional vulnerabilities, especially those who may require more support to navigate prison systems. Those who said they had a disability were less likely to report that they got their property in the first few days (59%) compared with those who did not (66%).
- 2.14 There are often delays in processing disability aids in reception. This can result in prisoners being left without equipment for extended periods, affecting their ability to navigate the prison environment,

participate in regime activities, or communicate effectively. For example, a prisoner without access to their glasses may struggle to read legal documents, complete applications forms, or engage in education programmes.

'I have been waiting over three weeks for my glasses from reception it is now becoming a health issue as my sight is blurry, and I am getting headaches. I have raised this issue, but nothing has been done.'

Prisoner survey, Winchester, 2024

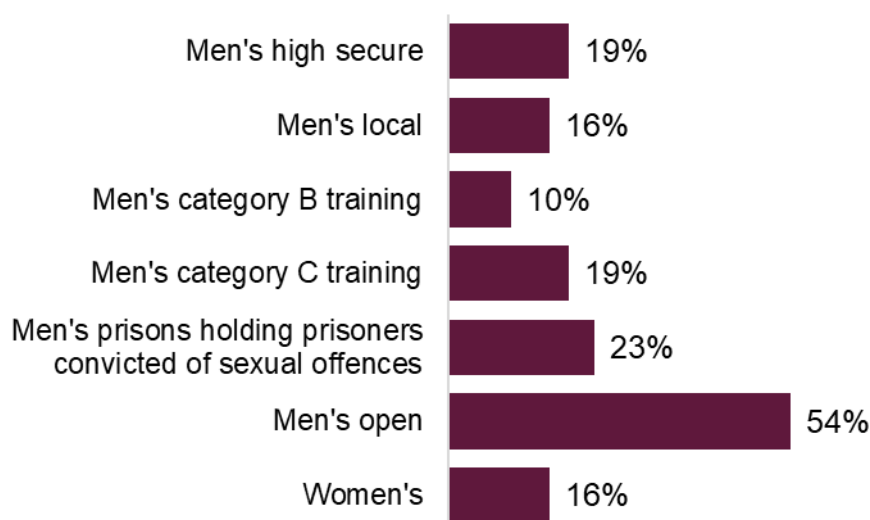
2.15 Additionally, prescribed medication brought into prison by new arrivals cannot pass through security and is typically removed, pending assessment and reissue by prison-based health care services. Mobility assistance devices such as walking sticks must be checked for security reasons and may be replaced with prison-issue alternatives. While necessary for safety, these processes can be disorienting and distressing, especially if replacements are delayed, unsuitable or unfamiliar. For prisoners with disabilities, the temporary loss or substitution of essential aids can significantly impact their independence and well-being.

## Access to stored property

2.16 Access to stored property is similarly inconsistent across prisons. Just 22% of prisoners reported being able to get access to their stored items promptly when needed. This figure also varied widely by prison type: 54% of prisoners in open prisons reported timely access to stored property, while this was only 10% in category B training prisons.

**Figure 2: Prisoners in men's category B training prisons were least likely to report being able get personal property promptly when needed.**

Adult prisons in England and Wales



Source: HMI Prisons Survey data 2024–25

- 2.17 In high secure establishments, property is often held in central storage areas and can only be accessed through formal applications, subject to staff supervision and availability. Meanwhile, open prisons operate a more relaxed regime, where prisoners may have greater autonomy and more regular access to their stored belongings.
- 2.18 Staff shortages can affect the number of personnel available in reception to manage stored property and can also have a wider impact on prisoners' daily regime. Prisoners may have less time out of cell if there are not enough officers to supervise them when unlocked, which limits their opportunity to be taken to reception to access their stored property.

## The impact

- 2.19 These issues can result in high numbers of applications and complaints, indicating systemic frustration among prisoners. Analysis of written survey comments found prisoners often raised concerns about clothing and entertainment-related items such as DVDs, CDs and gaming consoles. Complaints included loss of specific property, delays in receiving clothing on arrival, restrictions on parcels from home and inadequate seasonal clothing.
- 2.20 Comments also mentioned staff failing to follow up on property-related queries and perceived favouritism in how property issues were addressed.

'Stop security nonsense rules stopping us getting items we are allowed to have in possessions, but not being able to get because your face don't fit, while other prisoners have said items.'

Prisoner survey, Rye Hill, November 2024

- 2.21 Prisoners described the ripple effect these issues had on their behaviour and relationships with staff.

'I've been waiting on property taken from my cell by staff for four months including legal documents they violate and do not try to resolve the issues which create more anger which lead to standoffs often on exercise yard.'

Prisoner survey, Deerbolt, March 2025

- 2.22 The inability to purchase clothing due to cost, coupled with limited availability of seasonal and appropriately sized items, contributed to a sense of unfairness, inequity, and poor mental well-being.

‘Allow us to have clothes sent in from home because not everyone can afford to buy new clothes from their prison account. Some prisoners have clothes at home which have sentimental meaning to them whether they were bought by a loved one or a family member or friend who passed away or even clothes that have good memories attached to them.’

Prisoner survey, Long Lartin, January 2025

- 2.23 The loss of or limited access to items like phone books can make it difficult for prisoners to contact their families. Similarly, a lack of access to bank cards can impede prisoners’ ability to manage their finances, including cancelling direct debits and subscriptions that may continue to be taken from their accounts during their sentence. This can mean prisoners accumulate debt or lose money unnecessarily, which can be very distressing and can affect their ability to access accommodation or financial support on release.

‘Reception have lost my phone, bank card and address book.’

Prisoner survey, Hull, September 2024

‘Easier access to my bank details I have been asking for two months and also access to my phone to put on PIN i.e. family/friends.’

Prisoner survey, Forest Bank, March 2025

- 2.24 Our inspections of court custody in 2024–25 found that some prisoners attended court without their valuable items such as house keys, bank cards or other personal ID. This meant those who were released were sometimes unable to access their accommodation and bank accounts.

## Summary

- 2.25 Overall, despite targeted interventions at individual sites, inspection reports and survey data from 2024–25 suggest that there are systemic obstacles. The findings in this paper highlight some of the persistent barriers to property access across the prison estate, which particularly affect unsentenced prisoners, those in high-secure settings, prisoners who consider themselves to have a disability or mental health problem, and those who have been in local authority care. These issues continue to undermine prisoner well-being and trust in the system.

## Appendix I Methodology

This findings paper draws on evidence from 38 inspections published during the annual report period from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025. As part of HMI 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 a comparison of 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 6,281 responses from the adult men's and women's prisons inspected. A comparative analysis was conducted which compared the responses of prisoners who were in prisons of different functions and their experience with stored property. 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% possibility that the difference in results is due to chance.

A 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 HMI Prisons' ethical principles for research activities: [Ethical principles for research – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#).

## Appendix II References

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