



Report on an independent review of progress at

## **HMP Elmley**

by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

16–18 February 2026



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## Section 1 Chief Inspector’s summary

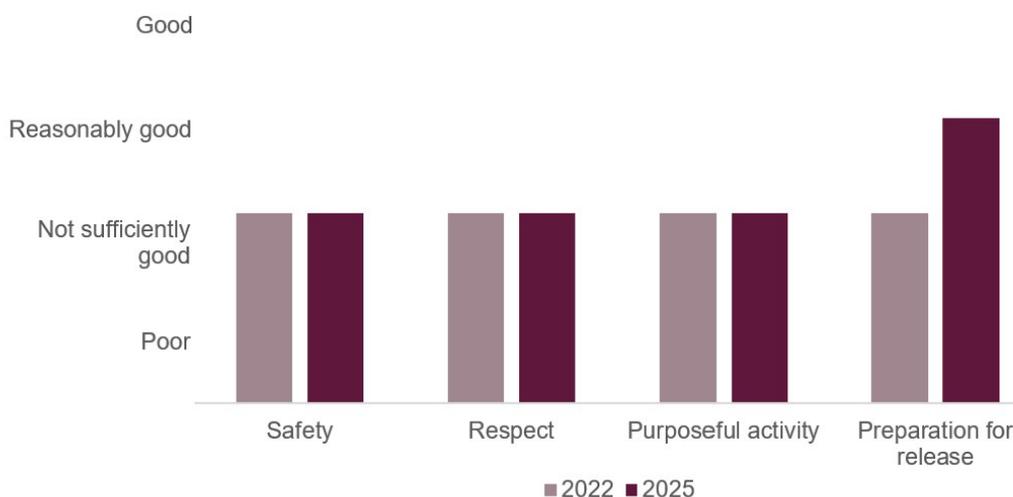
1.1 HMP Elmley is one of three prisons on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. It is a reception prison which serves the local courts and, at the time of this visit, held just over 1,000 adult male prisoners.

### What we found at our last inspection

1.2 At our previous inspections of HMP Elmley in 2022 and 2025, we made the following judgements about outcomes for prisoners.

**Figure 1: HMP Elmley healthy prison outcomes in 2022 and 2025**

Note: rehabilitation and release planning became ‘preparation for release’ in October 2023.



1.3 In 2025 there had been some improvement in our test of preparation for release, but outcomes in safety, respect and purposeful activity remained not sufficiently good. We found that the care for prisoners who arrived late at Elmley was not good enough and safety was undermined by the widespread availability of drugs. Relationships between staff and prisoners had deteriorated and the living conditions were not good enough. In addition, Ofsted identified several weaknesses with education, skills and work, including weak quality assurance of teaching, little support for reading and a lack of personal learning plans for prisoners.

### What we found during this review visit

1.4 This visit follows up seven of the concerns raised at our inspection in March 2025. The cohesive leadership team led by the governor had responded well to the inspection. It was creditable that they had focused on the practical matters that were within their control. As a

result, they had made reasonable or better progress in five areas while progress was insufficient in two.

- 1.5 Leaders had worked well with local police to improve their response to the trafficking of drugs. In the absence of a national solution to the threat of drones, managers had focused on responding more effectively to intelligence, installing more effective window grilles and improving their support for prisoners who misused substances.
- 1.6 The governor had also been successful in improving living conditions. Two hundred cells and eight shower rooms had been refurbished and work to improve flooring had started. There was also a well-developed plan to close the worst accommodation on houseblock 5.
- 1.7 The senior team were focused on improving staff-prisoner relationships. They had made progress but staff shortfalls caused by delays with national security vetting put this progress at risk.
- 1.8 Ofsted found that quality assurance of teaching was now more effective and the head of education, skills and work was using this to drive improvements. The governor had implemented a more effective strategy to improve the promotion of reading and support emergent readers. However, there remained a considerable backlog of personal learning plans and those that were in place were of poor quality.
- 1.9 There was less progress in addressing the poor support for late arrivals from court. We continued to find instances of prisoners being locked in cells before a full first night interview had been carried out.
- 1.10 The governor and his team had successfully addressed many of our concerns in a difficult operating environment. The introduction of new education contracts delivering far fewer hours than previously had led to the loss of staff and had created uncertainty. Staffing levels were deteriorating and, if this could not be rectified, the progress made would be impossible to sustain.

**Charlie Taylor**

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

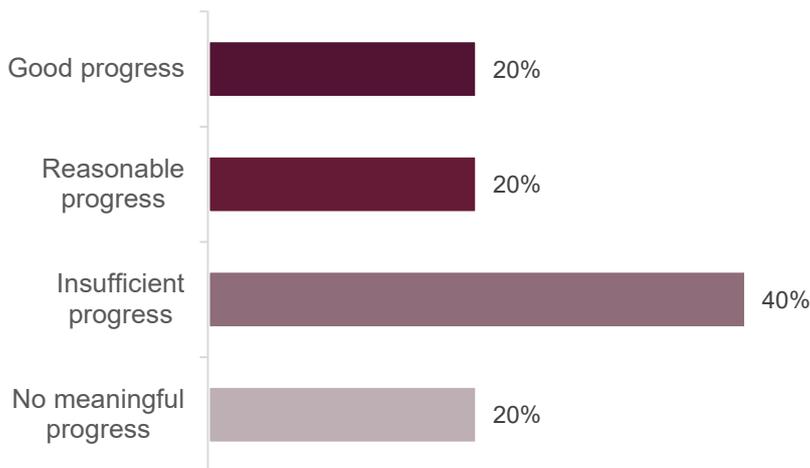
February 2026

## Section 2 Key findings

- 2.1 At this IRP visit, we followed up four concerns from our most recent inspection in March 2025 and Ofsted followed up three themes based on their latest progress monitoring visit to the prison.
- 2.2 HMI Prisons judged that there was good progress in two concerns, reasonable progress in one concern and insufficient progress in one concern.

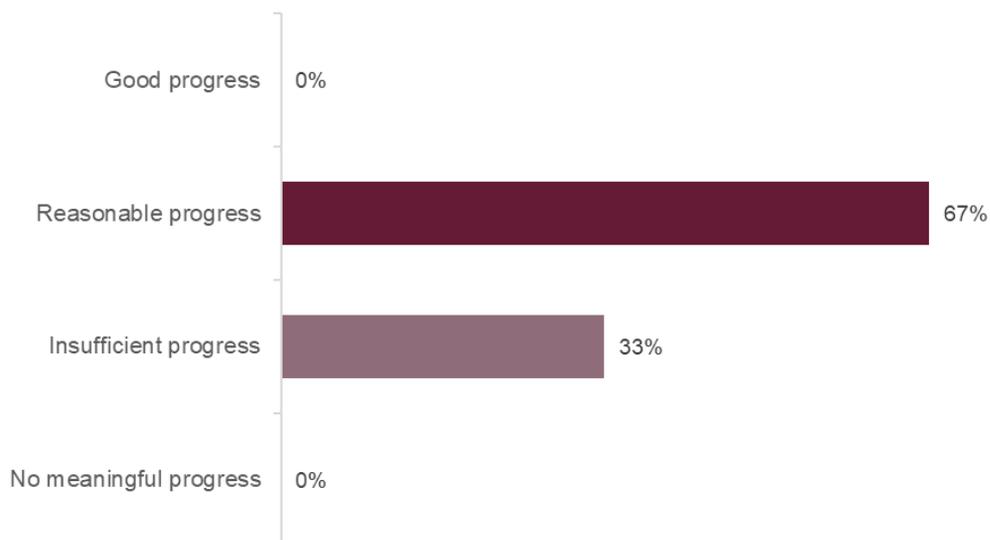
**Figure 2: Progress on HMI Prisons concerns from 2025 inspection (n=4)**

This bar chart excludes any concerns that were followed up as part of a theme within Ofsted's concurrent prison monitoring visit.



- 2.3 Ofsted judged that there was reasonable progress in two themes and insufficient progress in one theme.

**Figure 3: Progress on Ofsted themes from February 2026 progress monitoring visit (n=3)**



## Notable positive practice

2.4 We define notable positive practice as:

Evidence of our expectations being met to deliver particularly good outcomes for prisoners, and/or particularly original or creative approaches to problem-solving.

2.5 Inspectors found one example of notable positive practice during this IRP visit, which other prisons may be able to learn from or replicate. Unless otherwise specified, these examples are not formally evaluated, are a snapshot in time and may not be suitable for other establishments. They show some of the ways our expectations might be met but are by no means the only way.

### Example of notable positive practice

- a) Consultation with prisoners was a strength, meetings were structured and well attended by senior leaders and prisoners' views led to meaningful actions. See paragraph 3.15

## Section 3 Progress against our concerns and Ofsted themes

The following provides a brief description of our findings in relation to each concern followed up from the full inspection in 2025.

### Safety/Early days in custody

**Concern:** Prisoners often arrived at the prison late in the evening following long waits at court.

- 3.1 Prisoners continued to arrive late in the evening and prison data showed that 65 had were late to custody in 2025. This figure remained lower than at comparable establishments but was still of concern to leaders. Most delayed returns arose from late finishes to court cases, limited availability of vehicles for transfers and redirections from other prisons. In addition to the late arrivals, sometimes many prisoners arrived near the 8pm lock out. This meant staff were sometimes unable to process them quickly enough to ensure they all received appropriate support before they were locked in a cell on the induction unit. The governor had plans to increase the use of video link to try to reduce late returns from court.
- 3.2 Leaders recognised the impact of late arrivals and had revised several procedures. They continued to provide the Bus to Bed peer support scheme offering support for prisoners in reception and on the induction wing. Leaders had also introduced a first night assessment and an induction booklet that gave prisoners essential information about their early days at Elmley. However, prisoners who arrived on the induction wing after 10pm did not receive a full first night assessment and a much shorter checklist was completed before they were locked up on their first night.
- 3.3 Leaders had established monthly meetings with service providers to understand operational challenges more clearly, but this had not led to measurable improvements.
- 3.4 We considered that the prison had made insufficient progress in this area.

### Safety/Security

**Concern:** Illicit drugs were readily accessible and leaders were struggling to stem the ingress routes.

- 3.5 Leaders had made notable progress in disrupting the supply of illicit drugs. A range of initiatives had been introduced which were starting to

have a measurable impact. At the last inspection, the mandatory drug testing positive rate was high at 29%. This had reduced to 20% which was lower than in other reception prisons and was continuing to fall.

- 3.6 Physical security was improving. Approximately 100 cell windows had been replaced with more robust designs that were harder to bypass for the receipt of illicit items. Work with the drug strategy team had also been strengthened, with stronger leadership in tackling drug misuse.
- 3.7 Partnership working with the police had improved considerably and had resulted in six arrests and the successful prosecution of a member of staff for trafficking. The local police had also supported the prison's response to drone activity. Although the prison still lacked the technology to deter drones physically, contingency plans enabled officers to respond quickly, and leaders described the police response as prompt and helpful.
- 3.8 Oversight of prisoners central to the illicit economy had strengthened. A multi-agency approach ensured that intelligence was used more effectively to identify and disrupt their activity.
- 3.9 Suspicion testing was not taking place, but plans were in place to resume it. The most common drug detections remained cannabis and psychoactive substances, with frequent misuse of prescribed medication. Some medication hatches were not supervised robustly, an issue that leaders had started to address.
- 3.10 We considered that the prison had made good progress in this area.

## **Respect/Relationships between prisoners and staff**

**Concern:** Relationships between prisoners and staff had deteriorated. Assaults on staff and use of force against prisoners had both increased and prisoners from ethnic minority and Muslim backgrounds had particularly poor perceptions about their treatment.

- 3.11 Staff-prisoner relationships continued to be adversely affected by staff shortfalls, sickness absence and frequent redeployment. Although we observed polite interactions, and some prisoners confirmed this, staff were often hurried and did not have the time or capacity to engage meaningfully with prisoners. Staff were also frequently positioned away from the landings, observing from central points or wing offices, which did not help the development of positive relationships. Staff recruited from Commonwealth countries were valued across the prison, and both staff and prisoners we spoke to expressed their gratitude for the support these staff provided.
- 3.12 The pressures on staff prevented the delivery of a consistent and predictable regime, and this continued to undermine relationships. In addition, the regime management plan was not always used in a way that maximised time unlocked for prisoners, contributing to inconsistency across the residential units.

- 3.13 Key work (see Glossary) remained underused. Leaders had focused on improving the quality of sessions, but too little key work was delivered. This was a missed opportunity to provide more meaningful support to prisoners.
- 3.14 Assaults on staff had remained at the same level as at the last inspection and leaders had not identified the underlying causes. Challenge, support and intervention plan (CSIP, see Glossary) investigations continued to lack depth, which made it difficult to understand the reasons for incidents or to take effective action to reduce them. The level of use of force was similar to other reception prisons and occurred principally for refusals to locate or to prevent harm. Investigations into the circumstances leading to use of force still lacked sufficient analysis.
- 3.15 Consultation with prisoners had improved. Prisoner forums and monthly meetings chaired by the governor were well attended. Records showed that prisoners' views were captured and that meaningful actions were taken as a result. Prisoners who participated told us that the meetings were useful for resolving practical matters.
- 3.16 We considered that the prison had made reasonable progress in this area.

## Respect/Daily life

**Concern:** Many prisoners lived in poorly maintained cells containing broken flooring and lacking furniture. Most shower facilities were poor.

- 3.17 Since our last inspection, leaders had implemented a long-term plan to improve and maintain the prison infrastructure. In the last 10 months alone, over 200 cells had been painted and equipped with new furniture. At the time of the inspection, only 15 cells were out of action, including five in the care and support unit.





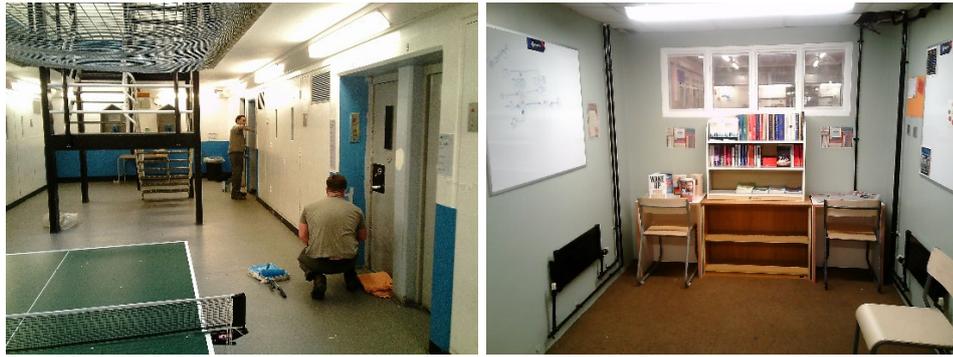
**Cells before (left) and after (right) refurbishment**

- 3.18 Existing contracts with service providers had been renegotiated to improve the flooring around the prison. Work was in progress with priority given to cells.
- 3.19 The condition of first night cells had improved and essential items were now provided.



**First night cell, house block 1**

- 3.20 The introduction of two prisoner-supervised clean, rehabilitative, enabling and decency (CRED) teams had led to an improvement in communal and cellular areas. They had been deep cleaned and painted, and the teams had improved and fitted out shower areas, serveries, landings and rooms used by Listeners (prisoners trained by the Samaritans to provide emotional support to fellow prisoners) and the Shannon Trust (charity that supports prisoners to learn to read). Prisoners spoke of their enthusiasm for this employment and the sense of worth gained from making improvements. Relationships between staff and prisoners in these teams were exceptionally strong, trusting and motivational.



**CRED painting (left), and Shannon Trust reading room (right)**

3.21 Leaders had refurbished eight communal shower areas and further funding had been acquired for an additional shower to be refurbished. Prisoners spoke positively about the changes and their willingness to keep their cells clean, reflecting the governor’s ethos of improved conditions leading to a safer environment.

3.22 Houseblock 5 remained the worst of all the houseblocks. We were told that the houseblock would be closed in 2026 when the new purpose-built houseblock was ready for occupancy.



**House block 7 (new build) exterior (left), and interior (right)**

3.23 Since our last inspection, residential quality assurance had been introduced with custodial managers carrying out weekly checks and the head of functions monthly checks. Despite this, we found a number of cells in need of cleaning with rubbish behind furniture and between the windows and grilles.

3.24 We considered that the prison had made good progress in this area.

## Education, skills and work



This part of the report is written by Ofsted inspectors. Ofsted's thematic approach reflects the monitoring visit methodology used for further education and skills providers. The themes set out the main areas for improvement in the prison's previous inspection report or progress monitoring visit letter.

**Theme 1:** What progress had leaders and managers made to quality assurance arrangements to improve the quality and consistency of teaching, learning and assessment?

- 3.25 Leaders had put in place effective quality assurance processes to monitor and improve the standards of teaching. Leaders used these processes well to ensure that teachers met their quality expectations or were supported to improve through planned interventions. Consequently, the quality of teaching and assessment had improved. Teachers had become more knowledgeable about and skilled at adapting their teaching to take account of prisoners' individual starting points. Leaders' initiatives, such as handbooks to provide teachers with information and strategies to help prisoners overcome barriers to their learning, had increased teachers' confidence and effectiveness in supporting prisoners to make expected levels of progress with their studies.
- 3.26 Leaders supported staff who were new to teaching to complete teaching qualifications, to gain the knowledge and skills they needed to teach well.
- 3.27 Leaders ensured that teachers received mentoring and supervision to develop their teaching skills from an advanced teaching practitioner. Teachers learned how to develop their use of questioning techniques to check what prisoners knew, and to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of prisoners who had a special educational need and/or disability (SEND).
- 3.28 Teachers who needed to improve aspects of their teaching had supportive improvement plans in place. Teachers were provided with opportunities to learn from their peers. Leaders adjusted teachers' workloads to provide them with more time to focus on their areas of improvement.
- 3.29 Leaders had put in place a well-sequenced calendar of quality assurance and monitoring activities to continuously evaluate the quality of teaching. These included visits to lessons by leaders to explore specific themes, such as the promotion of reading strategies and the use of digital technologies. Leaders used these activities well to maintain a close oversight of the quality of teaching.
- 3.30 Ofsted considered that the prison had made reasonable progress against this theme.

**Theme 2:** What progress had leaders and managers made to prioritise the promotion of reading and library engagement and to encourage prisoners to participate actively in reading-related activities?

- 3.31 Leaders had put in place a range of successful actions to increase the proportion of prisoners who participated in reading-related activities. Leaders had adjusted library visit timetables to remove conflicts in prisoners' schedules which had previously prevented prisoners from attending. For example, leaders adjusted timings to avoid clashes with the dispensing of medication and ensured that prisoners from within the prison's dependency recovery unit were able to attend at a more appropriate time.
- 3.32 Leaders had introduced twice-weekly designated reading periods as part of prisoners' lessons in education. Because of this, many prisoners were able to reflect purposefully on the books they were reading and captured their thoughts well in their personal learning plans. However, staff responsible for prisoners attending industry workshops did not promote reading well enough. These prisoners did not refer to or reflect on their reading in their workbooks.
- 3.33 Leaders had taken action to increase the range of reading and writing workshops held within the prison library. Many of these workshops were facilitated by authors, poets and lyricists and this inspired those prisoners who attended to read more and to write for pleasure. Prisoners valued the relevance of these sessions and the practical techniques they learned to help them to plan and structure their own creative writing. Prisoners who wrote short stories for the first time as a result of a workshop were rightly proud of their achievements.
- 3.34 Leaders had established defined reading areas in industry and education spaces to promote reading for pleasure to prisoners. Staff responsible for these spaces took pride in maintaining and refreshing the quality of displays and resources to ensure that they were relevant to prisoners and took account of different religions and faiths.
- 3.35 Leaders had taken steps to measure more effectively prisoners' participation in reading-related activities. However, it was too early for leaders to use this information to fully assess the impact of their actions.
- 3.36 Ofsted considered that the prison had made reasonable progress against this theme.

**Theme 3:** What progress had leaders and managers made to ensure that all prisoners had a high-quality personal learning plan which identified their skills, aspirations and learning needs, and was regularly reviewed and updated?

- 3.37 Leaders had not ensured that the quality of prisoners' personal learning plans had improved sufficiently. Too many of the goals set for prisoners by careers advisers did not identify well enough the steps that prisoners needed to take to achieve their aspirations. Advisers did not take sufficient care to ensure that prisoners were participating in, or were on the waiting list for, their preferred education course and/or work role.
- 3.38 Leaders' quality assurance processes had been successful in reducing the very high proportion of planned reviews which were overdue. However, leaders rightly recognised that, despite this progress, too many prisoners had still not received a review within the expected timescale.
- 3.39 Leaders had put in place effective quality assurance processes to scrutinise the quality of the reviews in prisoners' learning plans. Leaders sensibly used risk ratings to assess how well reviews took account of, for example, prisoners' starting points and their learning support needs.
- 3.40 Careers advisers were inconsistent in how they set goals for prisoners. Although a minority of goals were well written, in some instances, prisoners were given instructions rather than goals, such as improving attendance and behaviour, without constructive guidance.
- 3.41 In a minority of reviews, careers advisers set unrealistic and unachievable goals for prisoners. Typically, this was because prisoners were set too many goals at one time, such as a combination of several education, work and behavioural goals with too little consideration to how these could be sequenced over time.
- 3.42 Ofsted considered that the prison had made insufficient progress against this theme.

## Section 4 Summary of judgements

A list of the HMI Prisons concerns and Ofsted themes followed up at this visit and the judgements made.

### HMI Prisons concerns

Prisoners often arrived at the prison late in the evening, following long waits at court.

#### **Insufficient progress**

Illicit drugs were readily accessible and leaders were struggling to stem the ingress routes.

#### **Good progress**

Relationships between prisoners and staff had deteriorated. Assaults on staff and use of force against prisoners had both increased and prisoners from ethnic minority and Muslim backgrounds had particularly poor perceptions about their treatment.

#### **Reasonable progress**

Many prisoners lived in poorly maintained cells containing broken flooring and lacking furniture. Most shower facilities were poor.

#### **Good progress**

### Ofsted themes

Quality assurance arrangements in education were not good enough to improve the quality and consistency of teaching, learning and assessment.

#### **Reasonable progress**

Leaders' efforts to prioritise the promotion of reading and library engagement had not been sufficiently effective in encouraging prisoners to participate actively in reading-related activities.

#### **Reasonable progress**

Not all prisoners had a high-quality personal learning plan which identified their skills, aspirations and learning needs, and was regularly reviewed and updated.

#### **Insufficient progress**

## Appendix I About this report

HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons) is an independent, statutory organisation which reports on the treatment and conditions of those detained in prisons, young offender institutions, secure training centres, immigration detention facilities, court custody and military detention.

All visits carried out by HM Inspectorate of Prisons contribute to the UK's response to its international obligations under the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT). OPCAT requires that all places of detention are visited regularly by independent bodies – known as the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) – which monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees. HM Inspectorate of Prisons is one of several bodies making up the NPM in the UK.

Independent reviews of progress (IRPs) are designed to improve accountability to ministers about the progress prisons make in addressing HM Inspectorate of Prisons' concerns in between inspections. IRPs take place at the discretion of the Chief Inspector when a full inspection suggests the prison would benefit from additional scrutiny and focus on a limited number of the concerns raised at the inspection. IRPs do not therefore result in assessments against our healthy prison tests. HM Inspectorate of Prisons' healthy prison tests are safety, respect, purposeful activity and rehabilitation and release planning. For more information see our website: [Expectations – HM Inspectorate of Prisons \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/expectations)

The aims of IRPs are to:

- assess progress against selected priority and key concerns
- support improvement
- identify any emerging difficulties or lack of progress at an early stage
- assess the sufficiency of the leadership and management response to our concerns at the full inspection.

This report contains a summary from the Chief Inspector and a brief record of our findings in relation to each concern we have followed up. The reader may find it helpful to refer to the report of the full inspection, carried out in February and March 2025 for further detail on the original findings (available on our website at [Our reports – HM Inspectorate of Prisons \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/our-reports)).

### IRP methodology

IRPs are announced at least three months in advance and take place eight to 12 months after a full inspection. When we announce an IRP, we identify which concerns we intend to follow up (usually no more than 15). Depending on the concerns to be followed up, IRP visits may be conducted jointly with Ofsted (England), Estyn (Wales), the Care Quality Commission and the General Pharmaceutical Council. This joint work ensures expert knowledge is deployed and avoids multiple inspection visits.

During our three-day visit, we collect a range of evidence about the progress in implementing each selected concern. Sources of evidence include observation, discussions with prisoners, staff and relevant third parties, documentation and data.

Each concern followed up by HMI Prisons during an IRP is given one of four progress judgements:

**No meaningful progress**

Leaders had not yet formulated, resourced or begun to implement a realistic improvement plan to address this concern.

**Insufficient progress**

Leaders had begun to implement a realistic improvement strategy (for example, with better and embedded systems and processes), but prisoner outcomes were improving too slowly or had not improved at all.

**Reasonable progress**

Leaders were implementing a realistic improvement strategy, with evidence of sustainable progress and some early improvement in outcomes for prisoners.

**Good progress**

Leaders had already implemented a realistic improvement strategy to address this concern and had delivered a clear improvement in outcomes for prisoners.

When Ofsted attends an IRP its methodology replicates the monitoring visits conducted in further education and skills provision. Each theme followed up by Ofsted is given one of three progress judgements.

**Insufficient progress**

Progress has been either slow or insubstantial or both, and the demonstrable impact on learners has been negligible.

**Reasonable progress**

Action taken by the provider is already having a beneficial impact on learners and improvements are sustainable and are based on the provider's thorough quality assurance procedures.

**Significant progress**

Progress has been rapid and is already having considerable beneficial impact on learners.

Ofsted's approach to undertaking monitoring visits and the inspection methodology involved are set out in the *Further education and skills inspection handbook*, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework>.

## **Inspection team**

This independent review of progress was carried out by:

Martin Lomas	Deputy chief inspector
Angus Jones	Team leader
Esra Sari	Inspector
John Wharton	Inspector
Cliff Shaw	Ofsted inspector

## Appendix II Glossary

We try to make our reports as clear as possible, and this short glossary should help to explain some of the specialist terms you may find.

### **Certified normal accommodation (CNA) and operational capacity**

Baseline CNA is the sum total of all certified accommodation in an establishment except cells in segregation units, health care cells or rooms that are not routinely used to accommodate long stay patients. In-use CNA is baseline CNA less those places not available for immediate use, such as damaged cells, cells affected by building works, and cells taken out of use due to staff shortages. Operational capacity is the total number of prisoners that an establishment can hold without serious risk to good order, security and the proper running of the planned regime.

### **Challenge, support and intervention plan (CSIP)**

Used by all adult prisons to manage those prisoners who are violent or pose a heightened risk of being violent. These prisoners are managed and supported on a plan with individualised targets and regular reviews. Not everyone who is violent is case managed on CSIP. Some prisons also use the CSIP framework to support victims of violence.

### **Key worker scheme**

The key worker scheme operates across the closed male estate and is one element of the Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model. All prison officers have a caseload of around six prisoners. The aim is to enable staff to develop constructive, motivational relationships with prisoners, which can support and encourage them to work towards positive rehabilitative goals.

### **Leader**

In this report the term 'leader' refers to anyone with leadership or management responsibility in the prison system. We will direct our narrative at the level of leadership which has the most capacity to influence a particular outcome.

### **Time out of cell**

Time out of cell, in addition to formal 'purposeful activity', includes any time prisoners are out of their cells to associate or use communal facilities to take showers or make telephone calls.

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