

Stakeholder Hearing 7 Independent Monitoring Board (IMB)

Represented by: John Thornhill JP (President, National Council of Independent Monitoring Boards) and Val Meachin (Chair of the IMB at Stoke Heath)

Background

Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) are created by statute and attached to every Prison Service establishment in England and Wales and every Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) in the United Kingdom. The purpose of Independent Monitoring Boards is to provide independent oversight, on behalf of Ministers and the general public, of the treatment and care of prisoners and immigration detainees.

They have a statutory power to enter the prison or removal centre and hear complaints, and report to the Justice Secretary any matter which they consider necessary to report. They report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison or removal centre has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

Operation of IMBs in prisons

The IMB has a statutory duty to monitor what is happening, fairly, justly and humanely. Each prison will have between 10 – 20 IMB members, who visit regularly, determined by a weekly rota. Times for visits vary and this will include weekends and evenings, prisons encourage the IMB to visit during weekends and evenings.

Each board sets out its own arrangements but John Thornhill (JT) is looking to develop a national framework to ensure the whole range of areas and key events are visited. IMB members write a rota report identifying any issues that need to be picked up, they follow up on applications to see them and review new applications. Typically, there are around 20 applications to see the IMB in any week. IMBs follow up on the detail of the application with senior staff and if necessary will escalate a matter to the governing governor.

IMB members draw keys and have the right to enter anywhere.

The IMB role is to monitor not manage.

Applications to see the IMB may relate to anything from bullying, property or staff issues and all have to be dealt with appropriately. Prisoners are sensitive to where they speak to IMB members and may not want to be within earshot of staff.

IMB members will be present for the following reasons / events:

- Rule 45 Review (Holding in Segregation for Good Order and Discipline or own protection)

- Serious Incidents
- Incidents at Height
- Various prison meetings.

On appointment, new IMB members are attached to a mentor and provided with a range of support and training. Within nine months they are required to attend a formal national Foundation course and continue induction training in their own Boards—. Individual professional development training is encouraged and the IMB is looking at a consistent approach to mental health training, to provide understanding of the broad issues. Also, training on common issues for particular groups such as young adults and women is being considered.

Local issues may be reported to regional meetings and in turn may be reported up to national meetings, this is a mechanism for identifying trends.

All members of the IMB will have areas of specialism.

The IMB is making a report to the Minister detailing their current concerns. The IMB are in favour of the use of mobile phones, as are currently available in some private prisons, to reduce bullying and queues for phones. They are also in favour of self-service kiosks being available to prisoners to facilitate the management of some aspects of their personal life. This might lead to increased self-esteem and a feeling of having some control. The IMB has raised the need for philosophical questions to be asked about how prisoners are to be held and that there is a need to get behind the reality of what we want to happen in our prisons.

Some IMB now monitor in pairs as they don't feel safe. This is because they feel there are not enough staff members available to manage an incident.

Safer Custody

JT considers the most pressing issue concerning deaths in custody that the Review should consider is the failure of successful document transfer with a prisoner, particularly from the juvenile estate. The transfer of the ACCT document is also very important.

The use of a First Night Centre for assessment of vulnerability is important so that the young adult can be located appropriately; young women can be particularly vulnerable. Gang culture may also be an issue and staff will need to know if someone is a member of a gang; there should be better information shared about this where it is available. The IMB is looking at how they can better support prisoners in the first week.

“Benchmarking” and “Fair and Sustainable” are having an impact on all prisoners. There are fewer officers on the wings and prisoners are spending more time locked in cell. This heightens stress levels and there are not enough staff to support the young adults and respond to their issues. Also, if there is only one member of staff around it is obvious to all the other prisoners when a young adult is talking to a member of staff, which might cause problems.

There is now a lack of Personal Officers and the IMB have heard that this has an impact; where can a distressed young adult go to? When someone is vulnerable, feeling alone, and possibly bullied, then they need to have one to one contact.

Chaplaincy play an important role in supporting prisoners and spotting issues but continuity of care is needed; proper handovers between staff may help with this.

There has been a reduction in education and purposeful activity, which is particularly a problem for 18 – 21 year olds who need stimulation.

IMBs monitor effectively, but they don't have anyone with whom to raise concerns about individual prisoners who are not on an ACCT due to a lack of staff, particularly lack of Personal Officers. The IMB are beginning to see a gap between what is ideal and reality.

It is not unusual for there to be only one officer on a wing or landing. The IMB no longer see groups of staff with groups of prisoners interacting and feel that the ratio of staff to prisoners is "unfair and unsustainable" and prisoners experience a lack of personal contact. IMB hear that officers are saying that they are not feeling safe.

Most prisons have safer cells and a prisoner will be put in one if needed but there are not enough of these cells and they are not always 'in use'.

ACCT

The majority of prisoners who kill themselves are not on an ACCT. Officers won't know if there is a problem with a particular prisoner if they don't have any information about them.

Officers are very responsible and they know if they need to open an ACCT. There needs to be more training on improving the quality of the process.

Some prisoners feel there is a stigma to being on an ACCT, which have a bright orange folder and follow the prisoners to all activities etc. Some prisoners like to be on an ACCT and will try to use it to get into healthcare or move prison due to issues such as debt; this doesn't usually work.

Staff and culture in prisons

The atmosphere in a prison may vary day to day. Sometimes something may not 'feel' right. Currently, prisoners sometimes say that they don't feel safe. The different staff professions may have a clash of cultures but that has always been an issue, which is heightened in a prison or Immigration Removal Centre where levels of stress are heightened. Staff are working hard to manage this on a religious and cultural level for prisoners.

The loss of experienced staff has had an impact; IMB consider that some staff are irreplaceable. The staff prisoner age differential is important, with new staff often being the same age as the young adult prisoners.

Gangs can be part of this issue. When a prison identifies a gang issue they will try and keep prisoners separate. The Prisoner Escort Record (PER) should identify any gang membership details.

The IMB think it is too early to tell if there is any impact from the changes to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, but they have noticed that opportunities to be on the Enhanced level have reduced. They expect that Standard level will be the norm going forward, which is what the Minister wanted.

There may be a tension between 'care' and 'control'. Staff need to find out what the catalyst is for the unacceptable behaviour. This is where the loss of mature staff shows; younger staff may need to be trained to look for the issue, and with fewer officers they don't have the time to find out what the problem is.

Staff working in segregation have more time with prisoners and are always talking to them, and showing care and concern.

18 – 24 Year old Characteristics

There isn't enough activity to occupy young minds. If they have ADHD or are dyslexic this can be a particular problem. If they are in segregation, there is nothing to do, and nothing is available to offer them. No account is taken of how to accommodate the needs of the individual.

The key things for this age group are:

- Ensure enough activity; they are less vulnerable if they have a distraction. If they stay alone in their cell, then they are more inward looking this can make them more vulnerable;
- Continuum of monitoring through to the end of the sentence;
- Monitor who the young adult is mixing with, who is the peer group; this can be 'make or break' for young people;
- Mechanisms need to be there when issues are identified so that remedial action can be taken, although being pro-active to prevent things happening is better than cure;
- Liaison between education, purposeful activity and the wing;
- The young person needs to feel valued.

Mixing young adults with older adults could be positive because older prisoners could fulfil a parental role, which could in part mitigate some of the need for Personal Officers. On the other hand, there may be more limited opportunities for success for young adults, as all the highly valued roles and jobs may go to older prisoners.