



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP/YOI Bedford

**For reporting year
1 July 2024 to 30 June 2025**

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Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. Statutory role of the IMB

The Prison Act 1952 requires every prison to be monitored by an independent board appointed by the Secretary of State from members of the community in which the prison is situated.

Under the National Monitoring Framework agreed with ministers, the board is required to:

- satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody within its prison and the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release
- inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom authority has been delegated as it judges appropriate, any concern it has
- report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

To enable the Board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have right of access to every prisoner and every part of the prison and also to see the prison's records.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that states designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMB is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

2. Description of the establishment

2.1 Purpose

HMP and Young Offender Institution (YOI) Bedford (to be referred to subsequently as 'HMP Bedford') is a category B reception and resettlement prison for adult and young men that has the following functions:

- to receive prisoners from court, on remand and following sentencing
- to keep remand prisoners until the outcome of their court case
- to risk assess, categorise and allocate sentenced prisoners to a suitable prison to serve their sentence
- to manage and keep safe prisoners serving their sentence in HMP Bedford and to prepare them for release
- to receive prisoners from other prisons to prepare them for release into the local community

2.2 Accommodation and facilities

HMP Bedford has an operational capacity (the maximum number of prisoners that can be held without serious risk to safety, security, good order and the proper running of the planned regime) of 421 (310 being the certified normal accommodation, which is the number of prisoners a prison can hold without being overcrowded)¹. However, one wing was out of use during the reporting period, with the result that the current operational capacity was 389.

It is important to recognise that the prison, in its current guise, was designed for a capacity of 310. It is therefore overcrowded and has been for many years.

2.3 Prisoner characteristics and lengths of stay

HMP Bedford is classified as a category B reception and resettlement prison. This means that when prisoners return from the courts following sentencing, HMP Bedford categorises the men accordingly and some will transfer to a suitable prison whilst others will stay for resettlement work if sentenced to less than 12 months. Prisoners are also remanded to HMP Bedford mainly from St Albans Crown Court. Most of the prisoners in HMP Bedford (between 60% and 90%) are on remand or otherwise unsentenced. Although the prison's key functions of safety, humane treatment, health and wellbeing apply to all prisoners, remand prisoners have different rights (for example, unlimited visits) and different needs (for example, court and trial information rather than sentence planning) from sentenced prisoners. This brings challenges for the prison, and the prison system - we reflect on the issues in this report.

Recalled prisoners (those that have been recalled to prison for a breach of their release licence) make up a significant proportion of sentenced prisoners. In addition, prisoners will often come to HMP Bedford for a short period after sentencing before transfer to a non-reception prison.

¹ Figures included in this report are local management information. They reflect the prison's position at the time of reporting, but may be subject to change following further validation and therefore may not always tally with Official Statistics later published by the Ministry of Justice.

What this means is that HMP Bedford rarely carries out what might be considered the 'normal' function of a prison – that is, holding a prisoner for the length of their sentence. In fact, in January 2025, as an example, only 2% of prisoners came into that category.

Turnover is high, with 2513 prisoners entering the prison between August 2024 and July 2025. This impacts the stability of the prison and its ability to carry out meaningful intervention work.

3. Key points

3.1 Context to this report

Change in the court served

Prior to December 2024, HMP Bedford had for many years served Luton Crown Court, which primarily serves the local area of Bedfordshire. Officers within the prison had, over time, developed a good knowledge of local affiliations, gangs and key individuals. This helped enormously in managing 'non-associations' (prisoners who should be kept apart) and understanding some of the key prisoner interactions.

Since December 2024 the prison has served St Albans Crown Court, which covers Hertfordshire and borders onto north London. Often these prisoners come in with no non-association markers (that is, information about who it would be dangerous to mix with) making it very difficult for the prison to determine where it is safe to locate them.

HMPPS measuring the quality of prisoners' lives (MQPL) survey

Between 17-20 February 2025 the custodial assurance team in the performance, assurance and risk group at HMPPS (HM Prison and Probation Service) carried out an MQPL survey in the prison. The survey received 101 responses, is approximately 25% of the prison's population. The survey measures 13 themes of prison life (for example personal safety, family contact, harmony with staff and personal hygiene) through the scoring of 80 statements. It included provision for free space responses.

In addition to our own findings, this report will draw on the results of the survey and where appropriate illustrate these with prisoners' quotations.

HMIP independent review of progress (IRP)

In 2023 HMIP inspected the prison and found that standards had deteriorated across every healthy prison test. It rated the jail as poor for safety, respect and purposeful activity, and not sufficiently good in preparation for release. This led HMIP to invoke a second urgent notification to the Secretary of State, the first having been issued in 2018.

In September 2024 HMIP carried out an IRP to assess progress against the four areas of concern identified in the 2023 inspection. The table below lists its findings:

Area of concern	Level of progress
Care and support for prisoners in their early days	Reasonable progress made
High levels of violence	Insufficient progress made
Care for prisoners at risk of self-harm	Reasonable progress made
Developing effective relationships between staff and prisoners	Insufficient progress made

Area of concern	Level of progress
Poor living conditions	Reasonable progress made
Fair treatment and inclusion	Good progress made
Poor mental health services	Reasonable progress made
Ofsted	Insufficient progress in three areas, reasonable progress in one

Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection

In April 2025 the CQC carried out an inspection of prison's healthcare service (provided by Northamptonshire Healthcare Trust) and, as a result, issued the following notice:

'We served a warning notice on Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust on 01 May 2025 for failing to meet the regulations relating to the safe care and treatment of service users at HMP Bedford. The provider had failed to ensure service users received safe care and treatment and that their records contained all relevant information.'

The judgements were as follows:

- Safe: Not all regulations met
- Effective: Not all regulations met
- Caring: Regulations met
- Responsive: Not all regulations met
- Well-led: Not all regulations met

Wing moves

Whilst it is normal for adjustments to be as to how the wings are used and who is housed where, there were two significant changes early in the reporting period. For many years PCoSOs (prisoners convicted of sexual offences) and any other prisoners that needed to be apart from the general population were located on F-wing, which is the oldest wing in the prison and is physically separated from the rest of the prison with its own education room and exercise yard.

This arrangement was changed in October 2024 so that F-wing, which has a capacity of 28, is now used by young adults with the PCoSOs located on the second floor of D-wing with the ground and first floor being used by non-PCoSO prisoners (for historical reasons the landing is known as D-4 or 'the fours').

We will comment on the impact of this change in the report.

3.2 Main findings

Safety

- the reception process is much improved, with staff generating an atmosphere of calm in a cramped area. Induction information is also better and clearer, although we feel it would benefit from the addition of a simple leaflet with key messages.
- whilst there has been a slight fall in prisoner-on-prisoner violence, HMP Bedford is still the third worst amongst reception prisons.
- for most of the reporting year there was a steady decrease in assaults on staff. However, the number of assaults at HMP Bedford remains very high in comparison with other reception prisons.
- there has been an ongoing reduction in the number of times that officers have had to use force to restrain or manage prisoners.
- all the evidence indicates that drugs and other illicit items are commonplace within the prison, with high levels of mandatory drug tests being positive.

Fair and humane treatment

- the prison remains overcrowded with, in the majority of instances, two men sharing a small cell and toilet, which could be considered as inhumane. There are some single cells.
- there has been a considerable improvement in the general living conditions over the reporting period – the wings have been repainted and feel cleaner and better organised. While cells are not without their issues our observations are that they are mostly in a reasonable condition.
- we have, for many years, set out in each annual report the horrible conditions for both prisoners and staff in the underground segregation unit, but in September 2024 the unit was relocated to a refurbished wing and it is a vast improvement on the previous environment.
- the number of key worker sessions has significantly increased, although it does not yet meet the national target.
- the number of complaints made by prisoners has remained around 100 per month which is the third highest of all reception prisons (when proportioning to the number of prisoners).
- missing or lost prisoners' property continues to be a source of frustration, particularly arising from transfers between prisons. The paper-based system is simply not up to the job.

Health and wellbeing

- we have received a high number of applications from prisoners complaining about the healthcare service and have observed that, on occasion, no nurses have been available on the in-patient unit. In addition, the service has not informed prisoners of appointments, meaning that they are missed.
- on 1 May 2025 the CQC issued a notice to the service provider in relation to safe care and treatment, with poor chronic care and treatment delays. In view of this and our own experience, we would question whether the current service is fit for purpose.
- many prisoners approached the IMB with concerns about their mental health and we note the strong connection between mental health and violence. The

CQC found delayed assessments, staff shortages and weak care planning in relation to mental health.

- there is little evidence that the drug and alcohol rehabilitation strategy of restricting supply, reducing demand and promoting recovery is having any significant positive impact.

Progression and resettlement

- whilst attendance at education has improved significantly, prisoners have commented on the lack of courses available other than basic English and maths and young adults have complained that there is nothing available for those who were attending college.
- the library is a well-stocked and welcoming facility but there have been problems with books going missing and there are access issues for some prisoners.
- despite improvements in the training offered, only around 40% of prisoners are engaged in what is termed 'purposeful activity' (that is education, work or skills training), which is below average for reception prisons.
- although there are issues to be resolved, prisoners were positive about family contact arrangements and the visits centre is well-managed by the provider, Invisible Walls.

3.3 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- Whilst the prison is currently fully staffed, the Board is concerned that many of the officers (including operational support grades) are on overseas work visas and changes to the rules could mean that they do not earn the minimum salary, as set by the Home Office, and the visas are, therefore, withdrawn. This would have a significant impact on the regime provided and the stability of the prison. Will the Minister influence government policy so that staff on overseas visas are not lost to the prison service?

TO THE PRISON SERVICE

- in view of the critical inspection by the CQC and our own findings from monitoring visits and from talking to prisoners, we would question if the current healthcare service is fit for purpose. What action will HMPPS take to ensure that the healthcare contract is properly managed?
- the prison has over 100 unsecure windows and a significant investment will be needed if the influx of drugs and other illicit items is to be reduced. Will money be made available to address this problem?
- it is surprising that the prison service is still recommending glass in inspection panels that can be broken into shards which can be used as weapons or for self-harm and that research has not been carried out to find an alternative solution. Will HMPPS undertake research or other initiatives to find a more appropriate inspection panel material?
- prisoners suffer hugely from an antiquated paper-based process for interactions with the prison and we hope that the promised digital Launchpad system is introduced as soon as possible. Can HMPPS confirm when Launchpad will be introduced?

- it would be very helpful if there was a consistent approach across all prisons in respect of clothing guidance for visitors and in respect of the amount of money that visitors can spend during visits. Will HMPPS confirm that this will be reviewed?
- the prison has no policies or protocols when it comes to dealing with deaf prisoners. Neither does there appear to be any specific guidance available from HMPPS. Since most commands and information is by voice, and there are unlikely to be signers in the prison, communicating with and managing deaf prisoners is a particular challenge. Will HMPPS produce clear guidelines on communication with deaf prisoners and equipment that is available?

TO THE GOVERNOR

- in our view, it would be helpful if the induction was supported by a simple leaflet with the key messages in the form of bullet points for future reference. Can the Governor confirm that this will be delivered?
- we are pleased to see the increase in key worker sessions and hope that it can meet the national target in the next 12 months. What strategy is in place to achieve this?
- despite progress in underlying factors, assaults on staff remain far too high. What actions is the prison taking to address this?
- the drug and alcohol rehabilitation strategy of restrict supply, reduce demand and build recovery appears to have had limited success in all areas. What actions will be taken to make the strategy more effective?
- feedback from the HMPPS prisoner survey suggests that the high number of complaints that the prison receives could be reduced significantly if officers could address problems and queries at an earlier stage. How will the prison enable this to happen?
- whilst the wing moves appear to have worked well for young adults, we are concerned that the prisoners moved to D-4 do not have access to all education courses, that there have been problems getting to the library and that the wing generally feels less well managed (for example very few application forms are available). Will the prison review the management of the D-4 wing and access of D-4 prisoners to education and the library?
- although attendance at education has improved, the limited curriculum is discouraging further engagement by prisoners. How will the prison increase the attractiveness of the curriculum?
- we would ask that the rules in respect of clothing for visitors and the amount of money that can be brought in be reviewed in light of comments made by the service provider and consistency with other local prisons. Will the Governor confirm that this will happen?

3.4 Response to the last report

From HMPPS

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
The long delay and design issues associated with the relocation of the CSU suggests some basic flaws in understanding how prisons work and a lack of consultation with local managers. When will the Prison Service address this issue?	Recognises the importance of learning lessons.	The IMB is not aware of any progress on this.
The insistence on providing additional maths and English places, at the expense of art and music, does not appear to recognise the elective nature of a prison where most inmates are on remand or the relationship between drug use and more attractive alternative activities. How will the Prison Service resolve this issue?	A new needs analysis and a curriculum review will be carried out to ensure the needs of prisoners are met. HMP/YOI Bedford is currently exploring enrichment activities through local organisations and charities to reintroduce some courses to vary the offer alongside the core educational delivery.	The prison has made significant efforts with the introduction of art classes on a Friday and the WINGS initiative (see section 7.1)
The paper-based system for managing property remains unfit for purpose and the inconsistent approach between the prisoner escort contractors in respect of the number of bags carried causes problems for the prison and prisoners. What steps will the Prison Service take to improve this system?	It is an area that HMPPS is currently giving further attention.	We are not aware of any progress.

From the prison

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
The induction process remains inconsistent in terms of quality and delivery.	No formal response.	There has been a significant improvement in the induction process.
Violence towards staff has been, for most of the reporting year, highest of all reception prisons and although this has improved in recent months. there are still issues to be addressed.	No formal response.	Violence remains too high but some of the underlying indicators are improving.
We hope that, with the relocation of young adults to F-wing, the opportunity is taken to reinvigorate the STRIDE programme and regain the initial impetus of a dedicated youth wing.	No formal response.	The move to F-wing generally appears to have been successful.
It does not appear difficult for drugs and other illicit items to get into the prison: on average, there is at least one find every day.	No formal response.	No improvement in this area – in fact, it seems to have got worse .
Whilst there have been improvements in overall cleanliness, many of the cells remain in a very poor condition.	No formal response.	There has been an improvement in the physical environment within the prison.
There has been no progress in the provision of digital kiosks.	No formal response.	We understand that surveys have been carried out and that the project is soon going to be implemented.
We would like to see the key worker scheme fully operational in the not-too-distant future.	No formal response.	There has been a large rise in the number of key worker sessions carried out.

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
We are concerned that the number of black, Asian, other ethnic minority prisoners and those from the Traveller community are significantly over-represented in adjudications.	No formal response.	This does not appear to be the issue that it was.
We feel that HMP Bedford's strategy for remand prisoners had many positive elements, and we would like to see more progress on its implementation.	No formal response.	The strategy for remand prisoners appears to have been abandoned.
We are concerned about the large rise in applications we have received about healthcare, the general negative view of prisoners and the lack of access to healthcare managers. We are concerned that group and individual drug rehabilitation work is no longer carried out.	No formal response. No formal response.	We have seen little improvement in this area. The drug strategy has remained ineffective.
We would like to see if the delays in giving prisoners access to phone numbers could be reduced by a simple computer system replacing the current arrangement of bits of paper being carried around.	No formal response.	Prisoners continue to contact the IMB about this issue.
It remains disappointing that, of the five workshops, there are only three able to provide activities.	No formal response.	Four workshops were active in the year.

Issue raised	Response given	Progress
Whilst we understand the national context, we feel strongly that education needs to offer a suitable range of courses to attract the (elective) remand prisoners and provide attractive diversion activities.	No formal response.	The prison has made significant efforts with the introduction the WINGS initiative (see section 7.1)

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

Reception

As we have reported previously, the reception area is cramped and crowded, but staff cope as best they can within the limitations of the current layout. In our experience, staff generate an atmosphere of calm and deal with prisoners respectfully.

On arrival, prisoners receive a hot meal, a bedding pack and a decency pack. They are offered a shower and given toothbrushing facilities. In addition, new prisoners are given the opportunity to make a phone call.

Orderlies (prisoners who have been specifically approved for the role) provide an invaluable service in reception. As well as providing the hot food, they reassure new prisoners - particularly those for whom this is their first time in prison - and give information and guidance.

All incoming prisoners go through the body scanner. Prisoners who have been to emergency hospital appointments are also scanned. These prisoners have their pin phones checked before they go out to check they have not informed anyone that they are leaving the prison. Security procedures for reception are reviewed at monthly security meetings and procedures adjusted in line with intelligence.

Below are points that we have noted from our visits to reception:

- non-English speaking prisoners have access to The Big Word translation service, but help with translation is also provided by officers and orderlies, where they speak other languages.
- the target for the time each prisoner spends in reception is two hours – this was met on the occasions when we visited.
- incoming prisoners are located on E-wing on the first night, except for those with substance dependency issues, who are located on D-wing, which is adjacent to the healthcare unit.

Induction

The first stage of the induction is carried out in reception, where prisoners complete most of the 'early days in custody' booklet. Induction takes place over three days on E-wing, though some prisoners do not receive an induction; the Board understands this may be because they have been in HMP Bedford previously or are unwell.

Prisoners begin by completing the 'basic custody screening tool', part of which is completed by an officer on the induction unit. When prisoners need translation, they use The Big Word translation service - this is done on a one-to-one basis.

The main induction is through a slideshow presentation. We found that the slides were clear, concise and well delivered, although there was a lot of information to take in, particularly for men who had not been in prison before. The topics covered included:

- equality and diversity protocols.
- behaviour (vaping policy, dress code, respect for the environment, misuse of cell bell).
- health and safety (reporting of accidents, information on general alarms and fire alarms).
- support networks (Listeners, who are prisoners trained by the Samaritans to provide confidential emotional support to fellow prisoners, Samaritans, mental health team).
- substance misuse - help available.
- chaplaincy.
- social video calling and social visits.
- prisoner and family interventions - family visits once or twice a month.
- PIN phone and credit and how and when to order 'canteen' (where prisoners can buy basic essentials).

It would be difficult, particularly for first timers, to remember all the information presented. In our view, it would be helpful if it was supported by a simple leaflet with the key messages in the form of bullet points for future reference.

However, overall, we feel that there has been a significant improvement in the induction process over the past year, both in terms of the quality of information and the style of delivery.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

Self-harm

Self-harm figures always need to be treated with some caution, as they can be impacted disproportionately by a few individuals. For example, in February 2025, one prisoner was responsible for half of the self-harm incidents. However, here are some of the headline statistics, based on the data for June 2025:

- the most common form of self-harm is cutting.
- the predominant causes are frustrations with the prison system and issues around vapes.
- in terms of ethnicity, white prisoners are significantly over-represented.
- Roman Catholics account for 33% of self-harm incidents in comparison with a prison population of around 14% (so, more than twice as much), whilst self-harm amongst Muslims is comparatively low (9% compared with 26% population).
- most self-harm incidents occur in D-wing, the care and separation unit (CSU) and healthcare.
- Friday is the most prominent day for self-harm incidents (19%).
- 37% of the individuals were highlighted as being neurodiverse; compared with an estimated establishment breakdown of 18%, they are over-represented.

The number of self-harm incidents has been on a slight downward trend for most of the reporting year, although there was a significant upward spike in May 2025, which was predominantly caused by one individual.

Overall, the prison remains in the worst half of reception prisons for the number of self-harm incidents. In the HMPPS survey, 68% agreed with the statement that 'my

experience in this particular prison has been stressful'. Similarly, 74% said that they had problems sleeping at night.

Deaths in custody

The Board is sad to report that there was one death in custody in HMP Bedford between July 2024 and June 2025. The prisoner died whilst in hospital, apparently of natural causes. We await the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's report to find out more details of what lessons, if any, can be learnt.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction

Violence

Some of the background influencers are positive – the number of key work sessions has gone up from 32 in February 2024 to 789 in June 2025; and the number of staff resignations has reduced dramatically over that time. However, there has been little positive change in the percentage of prisoners involved in purposeful activity.

Prisoner on prisoner assaults

Around half of the assaults are carried out by young people (18-25), whereas they only represent approximately 25% of the population. Those with known gang affiliations are disproportionately represented.

The most common type of assault is punching. Predominantly, assaults are classified as non-serious and weapons are not commonly used (for example, between March and May 2025, there were 39 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults but only three involved weapons). The data shows some over-representation of prisoners from minority ethnic backgrounds, although over half the assaults are carried out by those identifying as white.

There are no great correlations between sentence and the likelihood of being involved in violence – non-sentenced are involved in 60% of incidents compared with a population of 69%. The prison's monthly safety reports show that debt and gang-related issues are the most common causes of prisoner-on-prisoner violence.

Prisoner-on-prisoner assaults fell by around a third between July 2024 and April 2025, but rose again in May and June, when they were just slightly lower than the July 2024 figure. In comparison with other reception prisons, HMP Bedford has the third highest level of prisoner-on-prisoner assaults.

However, it is worth noting the response to the HMPPS survey statement, 'I feel safe from being injured, bullied or threatened by other prisoners here', 51% agreed and 21% disagreed, which is consistent with the IMB prisoner survey we carried out last year.

Assaults on staff

These follow a similar picture to prisoner-on-prisoner assaults, in that most are carried out by young people and there is significant ethnic minority disproportionality. M1 (individuals who identify with both white and black Caribbean backgrounds) and B9 (any other black background) account for 46% of incidents, compared with the prison population of 7%. A significantly higher than expected number of assaults occur in CSU and healthcare.

For reasons that are unclear, nearly 70% of assaults occur on Fridays, Wednesdays and Tuesdays. The most common forms of assault are biting and spitting. Half of prisoners involved were identified as having mental health issues or being neurodiverse.

In June 2024, there were eight assaults on staff – this rose to 18 in October 2024. There was then a steady and continuous fall in numbers until a low point of only four assaults in February. Unfortunately, they have risen again since then and in June 2025 there were 13 assaults. It is unclear why there has been this upturn, as for much of the reporting period the Board had seen an encouraging improvement in safety. The figures can be skewed by individual prisoners, who may stay for a relatively short time. This is particularly the case in the care and separation unit (CSU), which has housed some prisoners with very challenging behaviour.

In relation to other reception prisons, HMP Bedford has the second highest level of assaults on staff, as shown in the graph below. Despite the progress that has been made in some of the underlying factors (such as the significant increase in the key worker sessions) and some particular local factors (including the change of court served), clearly the level of staff assaults remains far too high.

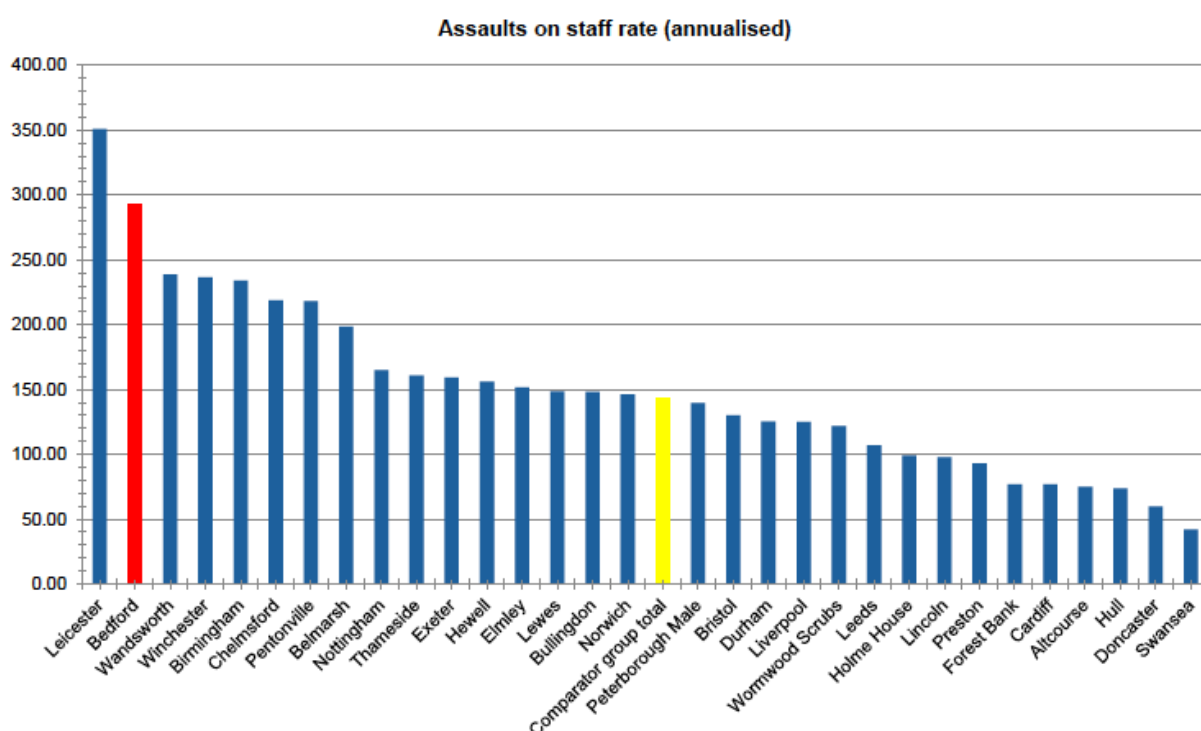


Figure 1: average assault on staff rate 12 months to May 2025

4.4 Use of force (UoF)

UoF is the term used to describe incidents where officers must use force on prisoners to resolve a situation. This is difficult and can be unpleasant for both officers and prisoners and something that, ideally, should rarely happen.

Between May 2024 and April 2025, there was a downward trend in the number of times force had to be used, from an average of 50 per month to 38 (a reduction of 24%). More current information was not available at by the end of the reporting

period (June 2025). Officers have not drawn batons since June 2023. During the same period, PAVA spray (an incapacitant similar to pepper spray) was drawn on 10 occasions but was only used twice. In the Board's view, this suggests that the benefit of PAVA comes in its threat rather than its usage.

The common reason for the UoF being employed is a prisoner refusing to return to his cell. Most of these were dealt with through guiding holds, although rigid bar handcuffs had to be used on some occasions.

4.5 Preventing illicit items

All the evidence indicates that drugs and other illicit items are commonplace within the prison.

We have analysed the prison's daily briefing sheets for the month of June 2025. This showed the following:

- officers challenged prisoners for appearing to be UTI (under the influence) on 42 occasions, that is almost twice every day.
- illicit items were discovered on 49 occasions.
- There were a number of drone incidents around the prison.

The illicit items comprised mainly of phones and SIM cards, tampered vape pipes, cannabis, tobacco and hooch.

The random MDT (mandatory drugs tests) confirms the high level of drug use within the prison. Between April and June 2025, 36% of MDTs were positive, which is the third highest of all reception prisons.

Although we cannot be certain as to how drugs and other illicit items get into the prison, there is no doubt that drones of increased sophistication are becoming more prevalent. This is compounded by over 100 windows being 'breached' (that is, not secure) and, therefore, relatively easy for a prisoner to reach out and grab a line thrown over or a drone.

In addition, the regular finds indicate that mobile phones are not a rarity within the prison. This enables the communication, and potentially even drone guidance, for prisoners to access throwovers or lines thrown in from the outside.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

Accommodation and clothing

Although we have said it many times in previous reports, HMP Bedford remains over-crowded, with two men sharing a small cell and toilet with minimal privacy. That could be regarded as inhumane.

Last year, we were very critical of the condition of both the cells and the general wing environment. However, we feel that there has been a significant improvement over the 12 months of the reporting period – the wings have been repainted and feel cleaner and well-organised. While cells are not without their issues, our observations are that they are mostly in a reasonable condition. In response to the HMPP survey statement ‘I am given adequate opportunities to keep my living area clean and decent’, 58.1% agreed, which is significantly better than the average of the 15 reception prisons that took part in the survey.

However, there have been issues around washing machines and dryers being broken and taking ages to get fixed. In addition, there have been periods when toilet paper has been in short supply, and we have received several comments from prisoners about this. This was also a strong feature of the comments in the HMPPS survey, including ‘access to toilet paper is a nightmare here’ and ‘grown men shouldn’t be fighting to get a toilet roll’.

The basic structure of the prison cannot change. The problems are seasonal - too cold in winter, too hot in summer, and ongoing problems with the water and heating systems and ever-present rodents, cockroaches and pigeons. The prison does try to address these issues, and a lot of work has been put in to tackle the vermin problems. However, with parts of the prison dating back to 1801, it is never going to be possible to provide facilities to all modern standards.

We have commented in our previous two reports that prisoners spend far too long locked up, often over 20 hours a day. Our observations over the 12 months of the reporting period are that this has improved, with more prisoners out of their cells in association or in work, education or for exercise. The wings generally have been orderly with prisoners cutting hair, playing chess or cards or sitting in conversation. Whilst there are, of course, exceptions, we have observed an improved physical environment and a better general atmosphere on the wings.

However, despite this, the HMPPS survey showed that over 90% of prisoners respondents felt that they spent too long locked up in their cells.

Prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCoSOs) on D-4

In October 2024, PCoSOs were relocated from F-wing, which is physically separated from the other wings to D-4 and is on the second floor of D-wing. The ground and first floors house non-PCoSO prisoners and we had some concerns that this would lead to shouting, name calling and possibly violence. However, this has not transpired and, overall, the relocation has worked reasonably well.

Having said that, our observations are that the new D-4 residents have some level of disadvantage, including:

- access to education was very limited for part of the reporting period, with the teaching room on D4 not being used.
- difficulty in accessing the library.
- an apparent lack of officer focus (for example, there are hardly any application, or complaint forms available on the wing).

In our view, the wing would benefit from a more dedicated officer approach.

Young adults (YAs) in F-wing

Young adults (18-25 years old) represent around 25% of the population of the prison, so around 80-100 prisoners at any one time. After spending their first few nights on the induction wing, YAs are transferred to F-wing for approximately six weeks.

During that time, they can attend a locally developed, non-accredited programme called STRIDE, which is designed to change the thinking, attitudes and behaviours that lead people to reoffend. It is difficult to comment on the success of this behaviour programme, as there are no measurable statistics available. However, it is interesting to note that whilst YAs are involved in around half of prisoner-on-prisoner violent incidents across the prison, very few occur whilst they are located on F-wing.

Applications

The prison runs on forms – prisoners must complete a written form to do almost anything, including work, social visits, education, property and many others. There are over a dozen forms, which generate, on average, around 800 applications per month. The prison has struggled to deal with this workload in any sort of effective or efficient manner, which has been a source of considerable frustration for prisoners. As one prisoner put it, ‘in this prison all the cogs work, they just do not mesh together very well.’ In addition, in the HMPPS survey, 88% of prisoners who responded agreed with the statement ‘to get things done in this prison you have to ask and ask’.

Having said that, we have seen improvements during May and June 2025. The availability of application forms on the wings is now much better managed, with a full range of forms available in properly designed holders, except for D-4 (as outlined above).

We also recognise that there is now an improved recording and chasing system in place, with a staff member focused on trying to make sure that the process works. As a result, 92% of applications were completed on time in June.

The reliance on a paper-based system involves a huge amount of resource and is almost inevitably going to lead to delays and inefficiencies. We understand that prison will soon ‘go digital’ through an investment called Launchpad and we look forward in anticipation to the benefits that should result.

Food

The IMB rarely receives a written complaint about the food, and it is not something that is often raised in our conversations with prisoners. The MPQL did not ask a question specifically about food but did receive 26 comments. The results were mixed with about a third positive but with a third complaining that there was not enough food.

Our observations of the kitchens are that they are clean and hygienic.

Gym

The gym continues to be a popular and well-used facility. Improved staffing levels mean that more sessions being made available. In addition, use has been made of the synthetic pitch for organised football matches.

However, the facility is not maximising its usage potential.

5.2 Care and segregation unit (CSU)

We have, for many years, set out in each annual report the horrible conditions for both prisoners and staff in the underground segregation unit. We are pleased to report that in September 2024 the segregation unit was relocated to the ground floor of B-wing.

A significant amount of alteration work was needed, and the opening was delayed by over 18 months, as several design and construction issues emerged. However, the unit is now operational, and it is a vast improvement on the previous conditions.

The CSU has nine normal cells, one 'special cell' (which is only be used for the shortest necessary time to manage an individual, to maintain good order and to prevent injury to self, others or property), which comprises an unbreakable chair and bed fixed to the floor, and one 'dirty protest' cell. We carry out observations in the CSU on at least a weekly basis and from what we have seen, there are generally between five and eight prisoners in there at any one time.

Some prisoners are in the CSU because of an incident on the main wings and are reintegrated (depending on behaviour) within a week. This is the norm. However, there are some prisoners who display very challenging behaviour who are continually violent and may need up to four officers in protective equipment to unlock them. Sometimes prisoners carry out a 'dirty protest' by smearing faeces on the walls.

Some prisoners have severe mental health issues and, indeed, on occasions the mental health team have said that they are not fit, from a mental health perspective, to be held in segregation. However, the prison may have no other option but to keep them in segregation for their own safety. If there is a high risk of severe self-harm, then a prisoner may need to be constantly watched by an officer.

It can be seen from the foregoing that this is an intense environment which uses a large amount of resources for relatively few prisoners. We have been impressed by the patience, perseverance and sympathetic engagement that officers in the CSU have continually shown during the Board's observations. Most weeks we attend reviews of prisoners in segregation, which are carried out by a Governor. Our observations are that these are fair and reasonable, with each prisoner encouraged to express themselves.

A final observation concerns the glass in the observation panels. Although each cell has an inundation point in the door for a fire hose, we are told that the observation panel glass must be breakable. It is quite often broken by prisoners in the CSU, resulting in small shards of glass that can be used as items for self-harm or weapons against others. It is surprising that a technical solution has not yet been found that avoids this issue.

5.3 Staff and prisoner relationships, key workers

Staff relationships

In our numerous visits to the prison, we have seen a lot of good interactions between prisoners and officers. This is helped by the fact the prison is fully staffed (or thereabouts), which in turn helps to have stable wings and a predictable regime. However, we are concerned that many of the officers (including operational support grades) are on overseas work visas and changes to the rules could mean that they do not earn the minimum salary threshold and the visas are, therefore, withdrawn. This would have a significant impact on the regime provided and the stability of the prison.

Staff resignations have reduced significantly, from 15% in June 2024 to 5% in June 2025. This means that officers are gradually becoming more experienced.

The HMPPS survey also was generally positive about staff relationships with 62% of those surveyed agreeing that 'staff address me and talk to me in a respectful manner'. One of the quotes was 'some of the best staff I have ever met in nine years in jail'.

However, although prisoner and officer relationships may generally be good, it is also clear that staff are often not able to answer queries or deal with problems, either through a lack of knowledge or a lack of time. In the HMPPS survey, 59% of prisoners disagreed with the statement 'staff in this prison have enough experience and expertise to deal with the issues that matter to me' and 69% said 'the prison is poor at giving prisoners reasons for decisions'.

Key workers

HMP Bedford was one of the leading lights when the key worker scheme was introduced a few years ago. The idea is that each prisoner has a named key worker who spends 45 minutes per week with them as part of the offender management programme. It should mean that the prison gets a much better knowledge of individual prisoners and can provide targeted support. The target for HMP Bedford, as a prison with a high turnover, is 40% of prisoners to have a weekly session and 60% to have bi-weekly session. This translates to about 1,000 sessions per month.

However, over recent years the number of key worker sessions decreased significantly and were only focused on the most vulnerable prisoners. We reported in last year's report that things were picking up and we are glad to confirm that this trend has continued – in June 2025, 789 key worker sessions were carried out. Although a considerable improvement, it does not fully meet the target.

It is hard to assess the impact of the key worker scheme, but the increase may well have contributed to the reductions in applications to the IMB.

5.4 Equality and diversity

Ethnicity, age and religion

While the diversity of prisoners varies continually in a prison that houses people on short sentences and remand, the following figures give an approximation of the mix of prisoners in HMP Bedford, based on June 2025 when the prison held 367 prisoners:

- there were 185 prisoners from ethnic minorities, which is 51% of the prison population
- 49% of prisoners were from a white background
- 64 prisoners (17%) were young adults (18-24 years old)
- there were 81 foreign nationals
- 31 prisoners (9%) had a recorded disability
- in terms of religion, 20% identified as Muslim and 54% as Christian

We did not receive many applications around equalities – only four out of 129 within the reporting year.

The prison holds a monthly diversity and inclusion meeting at which is presented a range of detailed information regarding protected characteristics and adjudications, activities, segregation and use of force. As shown in paragraph 4.3, there is some disproportionality in relation to use of force (UoF), most notably 24% of UoF occurrences involved prisoners identifying as Muslim compared to 20% of the prison population being Muslim.

There is a similar pattern in respect of segregation, where 27% were Muslim. In respect of adjudications and activities the data did not show any significant disproportionalities.

In the MPQL survey there was limited commentary where participants explicitly discussed their experiences of perceived discrimination. However, in six of the 14 areas in the survey prisoners from an ethnic minority were significantly less positive than those from a white background. Those areas were: harmony with staff, meeting individual needs, staff use of authority, ordered regime, family contact and personal hygiene. In the other areas there was little difference between white prisoners and those from an ethnic minority.

The prison has no policies or protocols when it comes to dealing with deaf prisoners. Neither does there appear to be any specific guidance available from HMPPS. Since most commands and information is by voice, and there are unlikely to be signers in the prison, communicating with and managing deaf prisoners is a particular challenge. In our experience, officers have tried to be imaginative and flexible in addressing this issue, but it would be helpful if guidance was available on best way to operate and how to access resources.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

Faith provision is delivered through a multifaith chaplaincy service, supporting both Christian and non-Christian prisoners as well as staff. The chaplaincy accommodates a broad range of faiths—including Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Pagan, Humanist, and others—and provides fair access to worship and religious observance. Chaplains also provide pastoral and spiritual care across the population irrespective of religion or belief.

The Anglican chaplain leads Church of England worship, bible study, and pastoral support, while ensuring that all who request pastoral care are supported regardless of belief. The Roman Catholic chaplain oversees Catholic worship (Mass, sacraments), and contributes to the broader chaplaincy operation and interfaith pastoral care. The Free Church chaplain similarly provides Free Church worship activities as well as engaging with prisoners and staff of other traditions. The Imam

leads Friday prayers and oversees weekly Islamic study groups. A Jewish Rabbi attends every two weeks. Hindu and Sikh chaplains conduct regular services. There is a Buddhist service and meditation session - prisoners self-refer and feedback is very positive from prisoners on the benefits of meditation.

Attendance at services has greatly improved due to better management of prisoner transfer by the prison.

Continued staff shortage in chaplaincy has not impacted on the very valuable work done by the team – all prisoners are seen within 24 hours of coming into prison. There are daily visits to the CSU and regular visits to those identified at risk of self-harm.

A bereavement counsellor has been appointed who gives one-to-one support to bereaved prisoners.

A family course has been introduced, which runs once a week for four weeks. Prisoners can self-refer and must have contact with their families/ and children. If they attend the full course, they have a celebration visit with their family at the end.

Yoga classes are provided once a week - prisoners can self-refer for these classes.

Chaplaincy staff are always available to offer confidential emotional support, without judgement or prejudice, on an individual basis in the event of family bereavement or to prisoners in any form of distress.

The chaplaincy team is trusted, respected and valued by all members of the prison community for their dedication and commitment to the wellbeing of prisoners. They provide a much-needed beacon of hope and compassion in what can seem a bleak environment.

5.6 Complaints

The number of complaints the prison received from prisoners within HMP Bedford was 109 in June 2025, compared with 104 in June 2024. However, there was considerable variation in those twelve months, including a high of 149 complaints and a low of 69. In comparison with other reception prisons, HMP Bedford has the second highest level of complaints per year per 1000 prisoners.

Property complaints were, by a significant margin, the most common subject of complaints and comprised 22%. The next biggest topic was residential (that is, relating to cells, clothing, availability of cleaning materials and similar issues) at 13%. Complaints against staff represented 8%.

From what we have seen, the complaints process is well-managed with effective chase-up system. Response times are coming down, from an average of 12 days in April 2025 to around seven days in June 2025. However, from what we have seen, the quality can be variable and sometimes there is more of a focus of getting rid of the complaint rather than properly answering the issues raised.

It is unclear why HMP Bedford has so many complaints in comparison with other prisons – it may simply be that there is more to complain about. But it also may be because issues are not dealt with by officers at the first point of contact. More effective and knowledgeable engagement would, in our view, reduce the need to

complain. The digital Launchpad system, when introduced, should also have a positive impact.

5.7 Prisoners' property

Prisoners submitted 123 applications to the IMB between July 2024 and June 2025 of which 11% related to property issues within the prison and 6% about property between prisons. Whilst this is still a high proportion, it is no longer the highest subject area, which is now healthcare. And, as we can see above property issues represent the highest number of complaints to the prison.

Like most prisons, HMP Bedford is trying to manage a system that is paper-based and not fit for purpose. Currently there seems little prospect of this changing. Our experience over the last ten years or so is that HMP Bedford has gradually got better at managing prisoners' property and IMB members at the prison spend less time dealing with property issues.

The most complex and frustrating problems often concern transfer between prisons where property is left behind and where there appears to be a lack of accountability or a willingness to supply information within a reasonable period. Internal transfers to the CSU can also cause problems as they may be done hurriedly in response to an incident and follow-up cell clearances do not happen. Property can then just go missing.

However, until there is a system that enables digital tracking and updating of prisoners' property, this perennial issue will not be resolved.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Physical healthcare

Healthcare is delivered by Northamptonshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust (NHFT) and is commissioned to provide the following services

- Primary healthcare (medical, nursing, pharmacy)
- Primary and secondary mental health services
- Clinical and psychosocial substance misuse support
- Physiotherapy, podiatry, and optometry
- Inpatient unit with 24-hour nursing care
- Pain management via a multidisciplinary approach led by a GP and physiotherapist
- Health promotion: literacy-adjusted materials, promotional boards, and health promotion days
- RECONNECT service: supports vulnerable individuals in accessing and re-engaging with healthcare on release or transfer.

Dentistry is delivered on a separate contract by 'Time for Teeth'.

We have had several concerns about the healthcare service during the reporting year including:

- on occasions we have noted that no nurses are in attendance on the in-patient unit.
- prisoners are not told in advance of doctor or nurse appointments and so may miss them.
- the service does not keep any record of the applications to healthcare made by prisoners and so has no information on how well it deals with applications or how it can use them to learn to improve.
- 26% of applications to the IMB during the reporting period were about health services, which is by far the highest single category.

Here is an example of a prisoner interaction with a Board member, from a rota visit in May 2025, which exemplifies some of these issues:

'Mr X is somebody who appears to have multiple health issues, but his main concern was that he had put in numerous applications but that they never got responded to. He asked what happened to them, if there was a record of them and whether he could find out how many applications he had put in and how many had been responded to and how many were outstanding.'

I visited healthcare administration, and the process was explained to me - the application (which is helpful in its simplicity with pictures to reference what is required) is actioned by arranging an appointment or asking for an appointment. No record is kept of the applications so there is no audit trail in respect of numbers of performance. However, there was some good news, as Mr Xs ultrasound is this afternoon.'

How the application has been actioned is written on the application and given to the wing office where it should then go to the prisoner. However, Mr X said that this had not happened. Other prisoners have said the same thing.

I went to see Mr X on the way out and told him that he had an appointment - he did not know'

The IMB concerns have been corroborated by the findings of the Care Quality Commission (CQC) when it carried out an inspection in April 2025. The CQC found breaches of four regulations out of five assessment areas as follows:

- **Safe:** not all regulations met 'reporting of incidents, timely mental health referrals, risk assessments, and care documentation were not compliant.'
- **Effective:** not all regulations met
- **Caring:** regulations met 'This domain did meet regulations, suggesting compassionate delivery of care where possible
- **Responsive:** not all regulations met
- **Well-led:** not all regulations met 'multiple legal requirements unmet, indicating systemic failings in oversight and operations.

The provider (NHFT) received a warning notice on 1 May 2025 relating to ongoing failures in safe care and treatment and record-keeping.

We recognise the compassionate care given by staff on the ground despite being overstretched by ongoing unacceptable staff shortages. On our visits to the in-patient unit we frequently note that there is no nurse on duty.

Of the 129 applications received by the IMB in the reporting period 33 (26%) raised issues with healthcare. Recurring themes were medication issues, failure to provide treatment/care, difficulty getting appointments and problems being assessed and receiving treatment for mental health issues. These concerns were also reflected in the CQC's 'summary table of recurring issues' below:

Area	Recurring Problems Identified
Medication	Missed doses, delays, unsafe record-keeping
Access to appointments	Long waits, failed escorts, weak triage systems
General healthcare	Poor chronic care, treatment delays, referral failures
Mental health	Delayed assessments, staff shortages, weak care planning

We are concerned that, with the current unacceptably low staffing levels, it is impossible to reach a standard which meets the regulations. A way must be found to address this issue without delay. We realise that the process of appointing new permanent staff takes months but change needs to happen without delay so we would like to see a plan for appointing temporary staff in the interim.

6.2 Mental health

Many prisoners approached the IMB with concerns about their mental health:

- two of these prisoners found the frustration and stress of matters relating to being in prison was causing them difficulties in sleeping and having an impact on their mental health.
- one prisoner said he was experiencing psychosis.
- one prisoner reported difficulties in receiving his medication. This had a negative impact on his mental health, leading to extreme anxiety and hearing voices.
- a prisoner with a long history of anxiety, depression and ADHD told us his condition had deteriorated due to the poor conditions at the prison.
- one prisoner felt he was not being sufficiently well-supported by the mental health team. He said he felt suicidal every day and struggled to control his emotions.
- one prisoner felt he was being victimised by prison staff. He had safety concerns. He told us he had a history of mental illness, anxiety, depression and PTSD.

We note that data from the prison indicates a strong link between mental health and violence. These data showed that prisoners with mental health issues were involved in 25% of violent incidents.

Prisoners experiencing severe episodes of mental illness receive care and treatment in the health care wing of the prison. The IMB has noted that this does not provide a good environment for the treatment of mental illness. The IMB has noted with concern that the Care Quality Commission (CQC) had found that the healthcare wing was not always safe.

6.3 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

The prison's drug and alcohol strategy has three strands: restrict supply, reduce demand and promote recovery.

Restrict supply

As we have seen in section 4.5, success in this area appears to have been limited. Random drug tests show positive results that are the third highest of all reception prisons. During the month of June officers reported a prisoner appearing to be 'under the influence' nearly twice a day.

We are not party to the prison's intelligence information and do not know all the actions the prison has taken to stop drugs coming in. However, in our view, it is clear that drugs and other illicit substances are too easily available within the prison.

Reduce demand

Given the high number of positive mandatory drugs tests (MDTs) and that pretty much every day at least one prisoner is noted by officers as appearing to be under the influence, there is little evidence that the prison has been successful in reducing demand for drugs and other illicit substances.

Promote recovery

Through Supporting Change (the drug rehabilitation service provided as part of the healthcare contract) the prison holds monthly clinics on the risks and consequences of drug use in prison.

The prison also arranges ongoing support for prisoners on release in terms of appointments with drug counselling services – for example, in April and May 2025, 18 appointments were made, although only seven were kept. However, there is an issue with unplanned releases, that is where remand prisoners are released direct from court because either they are found not guilty, or they are already time served because of their time in prison waiting to go to trial. In such cases no supporting services for drug management are provided.

7. Progression and resettlement

7.1 Education, library

Education

Background:

The main education classrooms and the library are on the top floor of a block that houses the gym at ground level. There is no working lift to this level. There is air conditioning in the education office and in a separate large outer classroom. There is also a classroom on D4 for use by the prisoners on that floor.

The core curriculum offered in education comprises classes in maths and English at entry level or level 1/2, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). The 'non-core' subjects available are CSC (construction skills certificate) card, food hygiene and health and safety.

All prisoners should undertake a maths and English assessment (MEA) as part of their induction. This determines whether they are assigned to an education course (entry level 1, 2 or 3, functional skills level 1 (equivalent to GCSE grades 1-3), or level 2 (equivalent to GCSE grade 4) in maths and/or English. Courses are run on a 6-week cycle. MEA scores obtained in previous establishments can now be shared, so this information should prevent prisoners from having to retake the assessment.

Education in HMP Bedford is provided by People Plus. There has been some turnover of staff during the year: two tutors were dismissed in early 2025, and a new on-site manager came into post in April 2025, following the departure of the previous manager.

Education hours are 8.30 – 11.30am and 2.00 – 4.30pm on Monday – Thursday. Twice a month there are staff training days on a Tuesday afternoon, which means that only the morning session is run on those days.

Attendance:

The percentage of allocated prisoners attending classes was of concern earlier in the year, with reports of late arrival times of prisoners and low attendance, particularly in the afternoons. Tutors were not informed of how many of the prisoners allocated to a class would be attending, they had to wait and see who drifted in after the start time.

Allocations to classes are made the previous day but attendance numbers can be disrupted by court attendance, family and legal visits, transfers, and a move to a different wing. Additionally, there is no requirement for prisoners on remand to attend education.

60% attendance has previously been regarded as a 'good' attendance level by the prison, with attendance of over 75% being seen as exceptional. By April 2025, reported attendance levels were routinely above 60%, and in June 2025 a figure of 85% attendance was reported. This is a welcome improvement on previous years when attendance was often around the 50% mark.

Staff tell us that prisoners who attend in the morning are generally more engaged and motivated.

Equality of access:

Prisoners in the healthcare unit and on the D-4 wing (PCoSOs) have frequently reported to the IMB that they did not have equal access to education compared with other groups. For example, D-4 prisoners for a while were having to complete MEAs in their cells rather than in the classroom, and some prisoners sent straight to healthcare were missed. The poor on-site management in education that led to these issues was resolved with staffing changes in March.

Prisoners from healthcare can now attend education if they are physically able, otherwise there is an outreach service.

Curriculum:

Prisoners have commented on the lack of courses available other than basic English and mathematics' courses. Some young adult prisoners have complained that there is nothing available for those who were attending college or in employment prior to being remanded; these prisoners wanted access to courses above the basic maths and English level. However, CSC, food hygiene and health and safety courses are popular.

The IMB noted that there were classroom displays showing opportunities for accessing Open University courses, but this information is not evident in the wings.

In April 2025, the prison noticed that, following the change in location of the courts remanding to HMP Bedford, the average level of educational attainment had increased, so that 47% of prisoners in custody were above functional skills level 1. Prison management was looking into adjusting the provision of classes in response to this.

Teaching and Learning:

The IMB noted that the classes they observed were well-structured, and that the prisoners appeared engaged and motivated to learn. Tutors were encouraging and helped to overcome barriers to learning, for example, providing materials in larger print for a prisoner who did not have his reading glasses. Prisoners who said that they had struggled at school said they felt supported to learn.

The WINGS project

WINGS, a HMP Bedford project, is an acronym for 'where initiative never gets stopped'. Initially it was an eight-week course where participants engaged in poetry, painting, sketching, scratch art, and collaborative projects.

There have been some positive outcomes, with one prisoner designing a clothing brand and another replicating his home in Romania by modelling it with matchsticks. The key point is that it provides a creative outlet outside mainstream education. We commend the prison for introducing this initiative and look forward to seeing how it grows and develops in the future.

Library

The library is a well-stocked and welcoming facility in the education block. The librarian has said that the main issues faced by the library service in the prison are prisoner access and loss of books.

The librarian creates a timetable for library visits from the different residential wings and those attending education classes. Prisoners attending education have easy access, as the library is on the same floor as the classrooms, but visits from residential wings require prison staff to escort. Prisoners from healthcare and D-4 have complained frequently during the year about not being taken to their designated library sessions, particularly when the session was before lunch.

Prisoners in healthcare are big users of the library, but for several weeks had no confirmed slot on the library timetable. There is no disabled access to the library due to the broken lift to the top floor. The librarian runs an outreach program and goes to the wings to get book requests from prisoners who cannot come in person.

Library books leave the prison with those leaving or transferring to another prison, or books are thrown away inside the prison. This has a significant effect on the library budget. There has been an improvement in retention of stock through an initiative in reception to collect books from those leaving the prison, and through the waste recycling workshop retrieving books from the rubbish.

7.2 Vocational training, work

Four workshops were active during the 2024/25 year: industrial cleaning 'recycle your cycle', waste and recycling, and future skills.

The industrial cleaning workshop has consistently offered morning and afternoon workshop training for six prisoners per session. IMB reports noted that the workshop space was always tidy and professionally managed, with opportunities for learning both practical skills and theory. Prisoners complete the five-step cleaning program and can practice their learning on the wings. Laptop computers are used for learning and completing tests for some modules, for example, health and safety at work, as part of the 'Passport 2 Employment' scheme. However, the lack of connection to a printer meant that certificates could not be issued. Attendance at sessions can be an issue due to reasons such as prisoners feeling unwell or refusing to come, court attendance, family and legal visits and lack of escort staff.

The waste and recycling workshop has enlarged over the year. It is open for six sessions per week, with a staffing of six people per session, of which three prisoners are full-time. The nature of the work has meant that it is not always a popular allocation, but the full-time staff appear to be proud of their work. The workshop recovers a large amount of prison clothes, bedlinen, towels, and books from the prison waste.

The recycle your cycle bike repair workshop appears well-organised and professionally run; however, several sessions have been cancelled during the year due to the instructor being off sick.

The future skills workshop offered four sessions over four weeks in areas such as carpentry, plumbing and boot repair. This workshop has not been operational since the end of 2024 as it was considered that a four-week course is not suitable for a transient prison population and funding was withdrawn.

Training for the Listener scheme (prisoners trained to provide confidential emotional support to fellow prisoners) is carried out by the Samaritans. One of the prisoners working in reception commented on the difficulty of maintaining Listener numbers in a remand/reception prison. In the last course held, eight prisoners received listener training, however before the course was finished five had been moved on, and those who did complete the course were due to be moved out in a matter of weeks.

Prisoners have expressed a need for mental health workshops.

The prison is taking an integrated approach to education and skills as shown on the diagram below, which is displayed as a large poster within the prison.



However, despite all this effort on average only around 40% of prisoners are engaged in what is termed 'purposeful activity' (that is education, work or skills training), which is below average for reception prisons.

7.3 Offender management, progression

With most prisoners in HMP Bedford being either on remand, short-term recall or waiting to be transferred, there is less need for offender management and progression systems in the traditional sense. Remand prisoners tend to want support with knowing court dates or getting access to information and documents necessary for their hearings.

Our contact with the offender management unit has generally been positive and we have found the staff helpful and efficient.

However, the MPQL survey showed that prisoners who responded had a poor view of progression and rehabilitation within the prison with a negative score in every area. For example, 51% disagreed with the statement 'I feel that I have been encouraged to address my offending behaviour in this prison' and 53% disagreed with the statement 'every effort is made by this prison to stop offenders committing offences on release from custody'.

7.4 Family contact

The visits centre is appreciated by prisoners and satisfaction with family contact scored highly in the MQPL survey. The prison visiting service continues to be provided by Invisible Walls who provide a good service to the prison. Visiting sessions are facilitated four times a week, with five family days a year.

When we observed one of the family days, Invisible Walls had provided a magician and food such as quiches, crisps and sausage rolls. Prison officers were dressed in casual clothes. There were around 15 families, mostly with young children so the atmosphere was noisy and a bit chaotic but no more than any children's party. It was good natured with prisoners really seeming to benefit from the contact.

The prison holds a quarterly family forum to give families the opportunity to comment on the arrangements for visits.

However, there have remained many challenges. For example, the facilities used for visits remain in poor condition. The ramp to the visitors' centre is rarely cleaned and there is damp on the walls of the waiting area.

There are also problems resulting from an inconsistency of rules in different prisons. Many visitors will have been to visit in other prisons and will just assume that the rules are the same. For example:

- **Clothing:** visitors often turn up with clothing that does not comply with the rules in HMP Bedford and this causes difficulty. It was suggested to us that this is particularly gender based in that women are not allowed to have bare shoulders which is related to an outmoded concept of 'decency'. This rule is not applied consistently to prisons in the area. As a result, visitors might be late and flustered which reduces time available and the quality of the visit.
- **Booking system:** the times given in the centralised booking system are not consistent with the times operated in HMP Bedford, nor does the system give advice on the length of time the process will take to get through security and checking. This can result in visitors arriving too late or too early.
- **Money:** for normal visits prisoners and their family can buy food from the canteen - in HMP Bedford there is an allowance that can be brought in of £20 per adult visitor and £10 per child. However, in two prisons in the local area the allowance is £30. The reduced allowance at Bedford means that less food can be purchased. In the view of the Board, there should be a consistent approach across the prison estate.

Invisible Walls also run wellbeing groups that were started for prisoners without family contact. Groups are held on F, D and main wings once a week. They have proved popular with many prisoners. Groups consist of 12 prisoners, with activities such as quizzes and bingo.

7.5 Resettlement planning

This activity area relates to the prison trying to ensure, mostly through other providers, that prisoners have support on release to facilitate their resettlement in the community. This includes accommodation for at least the first night, job interviews, drug management support if necessary and access to universal credit.

This is done through a multi-disciplinary team that meets on a fortnightly basis. However, the nature of the prison population in HMP Bedford means that the numbers are relatively low – around 50 prisoners per month are supported by the team, compared with the average of 400 per month that leave the prison.

This is because resettlement planning only applies to sentenced prisoners. Prisoners who are held on remand are often in prison for months and, as a result, can lose their jobs, homes and relationships. Many are then released direct from court because they are found not guilty, are time served or given non-custodial sentences. In such cases they do not get the support of the resettlement planning team.

There is only one metric in this area that is measured by the prison service: the percentage of (sentenced) prisoners that have housing on the first night of release. The prison performs poorly on this assessment with 60% being housed – this is the third worst of all reception prisons.

8. The work of the IMB

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	9
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	6
Total number of visits to the establishment	We visited between two and three times every week.

Applications to the IMB

Code	Subject	Previous reporting year	%	Current reporting year	%
A	Accommodation, including laundry, clothing, ablutions	22	11%	14	11%
B	Discipline, including adjudications, incentives scheme, sanctions	12	6%	1	<1%
C	Equality	3	1%	4	3%
D	Purposeful activity, including education, work, training, time out of cell	11	5%	2	2%
E1	Letters, visits, telephones, public protection, restrictions	29	14%	9	7%
E2	Finance, including pay, private monies, spends	10	5%	4	3%
F	Food and kitchens	7	3%	1	<1%
G	Health, including physical, mental, social care	45	22%	33	26%
H1	Property within the establishment	26	12%	13	10%
H2	Property during transfer or in another facility	11	5%	8	6%
H3	Canteen, facility list, catalogues	3	1%	7	5%
I	Sentence management, including HDC, ROTL, parole, release dates, re-categorisation	12	6%	7	5%
J	Staff/prisoner concerns, including bullying	28	13%	11	9%
K	Transfers	1	<1%	0	0%
L	Miscellaneous	35	17%	15	12%
	Total number of applications	255		129	



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