



Independent Prison Monitoring (IPM) Findings Annual Report

Prison
HMP & YOI POLMONT

Year (1 April – 31 March):
2025 – 2026



Annual Monitoring Figures

		2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
	Total number of visits:	60	68	64
	Total number of missed weeks:	2	1	7
	Total number of prisoner requests received:	16	72	45
	Total number of IPM hours:	283	355	311

Executive Summary

This Annual Monitoring Report sets out the findings of Independent Prison Monitors (IPMs) at HMP & YOI Polmont over the reporting year. The assessment is based on regular monitoring visits and engagement with prisoners, staff, and managers. The IPM team has maintained a regular presence in the prison during the year. Whilst on seven weeks a visit was not possible due to volunteer availability, the overall number of visits remained stable compared with previous years, and scrutiny was maintained.

Overall, the prison was stable and processes were followed effectively over the year. Significant changes in the population it holds have been managed with minimal disruption, such as the introduction of long-term male sentenced prisoners. IPMs note ongoing questions regarding the appropriateness of the current population model at Polmont. On the wider issue of safety, IPMs remain concerned about the effect on the young people of housing them all on one houseblock, where the elevated levels of violence noted in last year's report remain. This continues to present challenges in managing this complex and vulnerable population.

Staff–prisoner relationships were observed to be constructive and respectful. Reception processes were routinely well organised, and new admissions were usually supported appropriately, including access to healthcare staff shortly after arrival. Across the year, IPMs noted many examples of staff expertise and care shown to prisoners, and willingness to engage openly with IPMs and respond to concerns raised.

Decency standards were largely maintained, particularly in relation to cleanliness of residential halls, communal areas, and visits facilities. However, significant and recurrent pressures affected prisoners' living conditions. Most notably, the repeated use of single cells in Blair House to accommodate two prisoners remained a concern. Whilst their use was intermittent and fluctuated based on wider population issues, the need for the SPS to rely on this reflects an imbalance in the places available for women across the wider estate. Sharing too small cells limited personal space and privacy and puts pressure on the services and activities available.

Across the year, IPMs also noted increasing pressure on prisoners' ability to meet basic personal needs through the prison canteen. Prisoners regularly raised concerns about the affordability of canteen items, particularly against the backdrop of rising living costs more generally. This was compounded by the fact that prisoner earnings and weekly canteen spend limits have remained unchanged for years. While canteen provision itself was not found to be deficient, IPMs found that affordability had become a growing issue for prisoners and one which had implications for perceptions of decency and fairness within the prison environment.

Physical adaptations to reduce ligature risks were observed, and staff engagement following serious incidents was described as supportive. IPMs were saddened by the death in custody

which occurred during the reporting year, and they extend their sympathies to the family, prisoners, and staff affected.

Purposeful activity provision was often described positively where prisoners were able to access it, but access remained uneven across populations. Staffing pressures, competing population needs, and regime curtailments limited opportunities for some prisoners, particularly those not allocated to work or education. Despite these challenges, examples of good practice were observed in specialist activities, wellbeing initiatives, and pre-release support. It is fair to say that some of the activities on offer may be some of the best across the prison estate, for example the Polmont Youth Theatre or programmes such as Paws for Progress.

Taken together, performance across the year was broadly stable compared with the previous reporting year. There was evidence of sustained strength in staff culture, engagement, and organisational openness, alongside persistent structural pressures relating to population management, regime delivery, and affordability of items for prisoners. Some concerns identified in previous years, particularly around accommodation pressures and access to a full regime for all populations, remained largely unchanged.

General Observations

Standard 1: Lawful and Transparent Custody

Throughout the reporting year, reception and admission processes at Polmont were routinely observed to operate in an orderly and transparent manner. IPMs consistently observed staff engaging positively with new admissions, providing information clearly and responding to questions. Prisoners spoken to shortly after arrival generally reported satisfaction with how they were received and treated. Induction for young people was restarted towards the end of the reporting period.

Admissions were well handled. Reception staff were caring and empathetic and took time to talk to the prisoners arriving and set them at ease. This was particularly the case with young prisoners. Systems were put in place following feedback from prisoners' families to ensure that phone numbers could be added whatever time someone arrived, demonstrating a responsiveness from the prison. A recent initiative to develop a virtual walk-through of the prison, initially to be shown to those transferring from secure care to Polmont and later added to the SPS website is a positive development, both in preparing those moving to Polmont, and in offering support and reassurance to their families. As noted last year, whilst the removal of children from prison is undoubtedly positive, it remains a concern that young people are transferred to Polmont immediately on turning 18, rather than addressing their needs on an individual basis and allowing for some people to stay in secure care for a short period after turning 18 if that is in their best interests.

Liberations, including early and standard releases, took place frequently and were observed to be well organised, with appropriate arrangements for travel, family collection, or third-sector support where required. Transfer processes were similarly observed to be structured, with staff managing documentation and prisoner property efficiently.

Induction arrangements improved during the year following the introduction of revised induction materials and a revamped induction process later in the reporting year. Attendance at induction among some repeat prisoners was reported by staff to be low, which could cause them to miss out on changes in the prison and subsequently miss opportunities that could be in their best interest.

Access to interpreters and translated information was observed where required, and IPMs noted examples of effective practice when supporting prisoners who did not speak English fluently.

Standard 2: Decency

Decency standards at Polmont were generally good across the reporting year. IPMs consistently observed residential halls, communal areas, and visits facilities to be clean and well maintained. Prisoners were regularly seen undertaking cleaning duties, and staff oversight of cleanliness was evident.

Food provision attracted mixed views. While some prisoners described meals positively and IPMs observed kitchens to be clean and well organised, persistent concerns were raised regarding early mealtimes, food temperature for those returning from activities, and portion sizes. A lack of food trolley hygiene and incomplete food temperature recording were identified during several visits. The timing of meals, particularly the evening meal, was a cause for concern and consideration should be given to ensuring this meal is provided later. Despite Polmont receiving a larger catering budget than most other prisons, it remained the case that IPMs do not believe that budget is sufficient. Things improved significantly towards the latter half of the year, and the new Catering Manager showed a willingness to listen to both IPM and prisoner concerns and take action to rectify issues raised.

Accommodation pressures were a significant and recurring concern. Single cells were repeatedly used to house two prisoners, particularly in Blair House. This practice reduced personal space, affected privacy, and placed additional strain on shared facilities. This concern was raised in last year's IPM report and remains unresolved, with pressures expected to continue. The IPM team is clear that housing people in cramped conditions is a breach of their human rights and continues to require urgent attention at a national level.

Canteen provision itself was not observed to be deficient. However, as reported in previous years, prisoners across multiple populations reported increasing difficulty affording items due to rising costs, coupled with unchanged wages and weekly spend limits. This remains an unresolved issue from previous reports.

Standard 3: Personal Safety

IPMs were saddened to learn of a death in custody during the reporting year and extend their sympathies to all those affected. Following this death, IPMs observed that prisoners and staff were provided with support, and staff were offered time off and access to mental health counselling services.

For much of the reporting year, Polmont was observed to be generally orderly, with staff demonstrating awareness of personal safety responsibilities. Suicide and self-harm prevention processes, including Talk to Me, were well understood by hall staff, and examples of supportive engagement were observed directly.

Physical measures to reduce ligature risk were noted, such as modified shower doors and the introduction of safer cell features, although IPMs observed that no cell could be rendered entirely risk-free due to standard fixtures and furnishings.

Violence between young people remained a concern, particularly in Monro Hall itself, where the majority of incidents were concentrated. While serious incidents were relatively limited in number, there continued to be a high volume of lower-level assaults and fights, indicating persistent challenges in managing conflict within this population.

Data provided by the prison shows that incidents were most frequently recorded in Monro residential areas and associated exercise spaces, with motivations often linked to interpersonal conflict, retaliation, and external factors. The concentration of young men within a single hall, alongside constraints in separating those identified as incompatible, limited the establishment's ability to manage risk effectively.

There was a reduction of about one third in overall incidents during the reporting period. This should be understood in the context of continued high levels of low-level violence and ongoing pressures in managing a complex and, at times, volatile population.

The concentration of all young people aged 18–21 within the establishment continues to present challenges in managing this population effectively.

Standard 4: Effective, Courteous and Humane Use of Authority

Across the reporting year, authority at Polmont was generally exercised in a measured and competent manner. IPMs routinely found the prison to be calm and well-ordered during visits, including during periods of movement and operational activity. Staff demonstrated knowledge of rules and procedures and were usually able to explain decisions clearly.

The Separation and Reintegration Unit (SRU) remained a sustained area of strength. For much of the year, the number of prisoners held in the SRU remained comparatively low, maintaining an improvement noted in previous reports. Where numbers increased, this appeared to reflect wider

population pressures, the management of complex individuals, and the difficulties noted earlier of housing all young people within one hall, rather than a shift in local practice. IPMs attended SRU reviews and case conferences and observed these to be well-managed and appropriately focused on return to the hall. Prisoners were given opportunities to contribute, and reintegration planning was evident.

IPMs observed staff managing a small number of prisoners with particularly complex needs, including those with significant mental health or developmental concerns. While staff engagement was generally competent and compassionate, these cases continued to raise questions about the suitability of a custodial setting for individuals with these very high levels of need.

General security procedures, such as searching, were well managed. At a national level, as at other prisons, and as reported last year, the combined use of strip searching and full body scanners is disproportionate considering the technological safeguards now available. Female prisoners are not subject to strip searches unless there is an indication from the scanner that something is secreted and this should be the standard for all prisoners. This raises questions about the continued necessity of current practices and the traumatising and dehumanising effect of strip searching people, especially young people and women.

Standard 5: Respect, Autonomy and Protection Against Mistreatment

Staff–prisoner relationships were mostly positive throughout the reporting year. IPMs frequently observed respectful, polite, and supportive interactions across residential halls and activity areas. Prisoners across different populations spoke positively about individual members of staff who took time to listen, explain decisions, and provide practical support. In several instances, prisoners reported improvement in staff behaviour over the course of the year.

Despite these positive relationships, prisoners' experience of the regime was uneven. Prisoners not engaged in work or education reported spending extended periods locked in their cells, particularly at weekends. The prison recognised this challenge, and the new youth work contract with Kinetic saw a positive shift in the second half of the reporting year for young people.

For some women and young people, staffing pressures and regime restrictions limited time out of cell and access to social interaction.

Prisoner engagement mechanisms, including Prisoner Information and Action Committees (PIACs), were observed during the year. Where functioning well, prisoners valued the opportunity to raise concerns. However, IPMs noted inconsistency in how PIACs operated across halls, including variable attendance and limited evidence of outcomes from these meetings, which reduced confidence in the process for some prisoners. This is subject to an ongoing piece of work by the IPM team who will report findings more fully to the prison in due course.

Complaints processes were accessible, but IPMs observed occasions where prisoners had to request them from staff, which may discourage some from raising concerns, particularly where complaints relate to staff actions. Given the general reluctance of both women and young people to utilise formal complaints processes in any case, it is vital that any barriers to participation are removed. IPMs again noted that work started by the SPS three years ago to review the complaints processes at Polmont has not progressed.

Complaint responses when checked were generally thoughtful and addressed the issues at hand, and management showed a clear willingness to engage with issues of complaint. Positive proactive measures were taken on several occasions during the year to meet prisoners' family members to discuss their concerns, offer reassurance, and improve systems and relationships. The recent development of a walk-through video, to inform prisoners and their families about life at Polmont was excellent.

The introduction and management of longer-sentenced adult men within the establishment during the year was handled with care. Prisoners newly arrived at Polmont often described being treated respectfully and welcomed by staff. Nevertheless, the presence now of four distinct prisoner populations (young men, women, short- and long- sentenced men) continued to place strain on regime delivery, contributing to perceptions in all groups of inequality in access to opportunities.

Standard 6: Purposeful Activity

Where prisoners were able to access them, purposeful activities at Polmont were consistently described positively. IPMs observed a broad range of educational, vocational, creative, and therapeutic activities, including life skills courses, gym provision, creative arts, and specialist programmes such as Paws for Progress. Activity staff were enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and supportive.

However, access to purposeful activity was uneven across the year. Staffing pressures, population management demands, and regime curtailments resulted in some workshops being closed during visits. IPMs observed whole activity areas not operating at times, leaving prisoners locked in cells or confined to limited association.

Young people and those being held on remand, and remand female prisoners, raised concerns about limited access to work and education. Prisoners also reported perceived inequalities between different populations in access to paid work and activity opportunities. While some prisoners spoke positively about available progression and support, others reported long waiting times and reduced availability, which they attributed to other population groups getting preference.

Education provision was an area of mixed performance. While teaching staff were praised for their skill and commitment, contractual transition issues earlier in the year affected stability and access to accredited courses. IPMs noted that work was ongoing to improve this by Polmont staff, but the effects were evident during the reporting period. As the contract changed to a new supplier, issues particular to Polmont, due to the service required by young people, did not appear to have been addressed prior to the awarding of the contract. This needs to be rectified when the contract comes up for renewal, as well as mitigating measures taken under the current arrangements.

Challenges remained around providing time in the fresh air to all prisoners, but staff managed. However, the planned improvements to the exercise yards have yet to be completed. Completion of this work remains important in supporting safe and consistent access to exercise.

As raised in the previous reporting period, the wording of the SPS inter-prison phone call policy continues to limit access to family contact in some cases. Whilst the prison takes a proactive and positive approach to inter prison family contact, despite the policy, the policy wording remains a concern for IPMs.

Standard 7: Transitions from Custody into the Community

Transitions from custody were mostly well supported for prisoners approaching release. IPMs observed effective engagement by staff and partner agencies in planning for liberation, including housing, healthcare, benefits, and travel arrangements. Prisoners nearing release often spoke positively about the support they received and felt informed and involved in planning.

Early release processes were observed to function well, with prisoners collected by family members, supported by third-sector organisations, or issued with travel warrants as appropriate. Staff liaised effectively with partner agencies, including Upside, to ensure continuity of support.

While transitions were largely positive, access to pre-release programmes remained selective, with limited capacity for some groups. Remand prisoners reported less access to structured

preparation, despite this being a service now offered by Upside. The shortage of places on accredited programmes, as across the wider estate, and reported on in the [HMIPS thematic report on progression](#), remained an unaddressed concern.

Standard 8: Organisational Effectiveness

The prison remained stable during the reporting year. Staff generally reported good morale, and IPMs observed staff to be open, helpful, and responsive to monitoring enquiries. Where issues were raised, managers' engagement with IPMs was constructive.

As noted above, the work by the prison leadership to engage with prisoners' families to address concerns was noteworthy. Senior managers opened themselves to constructive criticism and took proactive action to hear those concerns and address them which helped to shape a positive culture across the prison.

Wider organisational pressures were visible. Staffing shortages and redeployment affected activity provision and regime delivery. The current staff roster and absence allowance used in all SPS establishments does not provide sufficient resilience. It under-estimates the numbers of staff on sickness absence leave and offers no allowance for maternity cover.

Even if fully staffed, IPMs are of the opinion that the staffing profile is not sufficient to deliver the regime and provide the support required for the population held. This raises the need for different staffing models depending on the population, such as for female prisoners at HMP & YOI Stirling.

Managing four distinct prisoner populations by the end of the reporting period further stretched resources and increased complexity.

Some organisational systems functioned well, including coordination around visits and admissions. However, prisoners and staff raised concerns about perceived inequalities in service access and the cumulative impact of sustained pressures.

Outside agencies and third sector organisations operating in the prison described their relationship with the prison positively and noted the shared sense of direction between them. All staff spoken to from other organisations stated they felt supported by the prison.

Standard 9: Health and Wellbeing

Healthcare provision was mixed across the reporting year. IPMs observed positive engagement between healthcare staff and prisoners, including effective communication during induction and wellbeing sessions. Where urgent needs were identified, staff responded appropriately.

However, compared with previous years, prisoners reported delays accessing mental health services, dental care, and some prescriptions. Dental waiting times were described as particularly long, and remand prisoners were unable to access routine dental treatment even after extended periods in custody. Current arrangements do not reflect the longer remand periods now experienced.

These challenges are further compounded by the distinct prisoner populations with differing health needs.

Mental health needs within the population were reported to be increasing. Both staff and prisoners described challenges associated with managing complex mental health issues within the prison environment.

The issue of the inappropriate times for dispensing medication, raised in previous reports, remained unresolved.