



# Independent Prison Monitoring (IPM) Findings Annual Report

## Prison

HMP & YOI POLMONT

Year (1 April – 31 March):

2024 – 2025

By HM INSPECTORATE OF PRISONS SCOTLAND



## Annual Monitoring Figures

		2023-24	2024-25
	Total number of visits	60	68
	Total number of missed weeks	2	1
	Total number of prisoner requests received	16	72
	Total number of IPM hours	283	355

## Executive Summary

This annual report summarises the observations made and engagement with prisoners, staff, and management throughout the year, by Independent Prison Monitors (IPMs) against the nine HMIPS inspection and monitoring standards.

There was an average of 1.3 visits per week, although one week was missed due to unforeseen circumstances. The number of visits, IPM hours, and requests received all increased compared with 2023/24. The increase in requests was mainly due the change in prisoner population, and the introduction of adult men, who are more likely to use complaints processes and contact the IPMs than women and young people.

Overall, the prison continued to perform well and has embedded good systems and practices across most areas of the prison. They have done this despite the challenges of managing three distinct prisoner groups; women, men and young offenders. Looking after these three groups brings added pressure to the prison, but in general they have risen to this challenge. However, the IPM team would ask that SPS and the Scottish Government review the ask being made of Polmont prison, and more widely the strategy for managing young offenders, to ensure it is the most appropriate model.

As reported in the previous two years, the prison management team was open and transparent in their dealings with the IPM team and has always been responsive to issues raised. The prison has developed a strong positive culture of improvement. They have been open to challenge and criticism and worked constructively to address issues as they arose. In this regard particular praise is given to the outgoing Governor. With his management team and staffing group, the prison has improved over the last few years, and in many ways is unrecognisable from the one he inherited.

The IPM team is confident that this positive progress can be maintained and built upon in the coming year, and we look forward to seeing them drive forward further improvements.

# General Observations

## Standard 1: Lawful and Transparent Custody

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Reception remained well run and welcoming for prisoners arriving during all IPM visits in the reporting period. The IPM team spoke to several new inductees over the course of the year, and they consistently noted that staff had been caring towards them and that issues were being dealt with. The IPM team observed good practice in this regard during visits, noting the time that officers in both reception and on the halls spent talking to prisoners to set them at ease. The prison should ensure that the induction programme is restarted in the upcoming year, to build on this positive start to prisoners' time in the prison.

The positive practice of providing food within reception to those arriving at the prison in the evening, either as new arrivals or returning from court, has continued.

The IPM team is delighted to be able to report that those under the age of 18 are no longer housed in prison. The plans to move them from Polmont were well managed by the prison. The IPM team commends all the staff involved for what they achieved, and the level of the support provided to the boys. However, IPMs were disappointed that some aspects of the legislation were not enacted, meaning some of the boys returned to Polmont in a matter of weeks after leaving, when they turned 18. Given the traumatic effect of being transferred and settling into a new environment, this was a failing by the Scottish Government. The IPM team hopes that lessons have been learned for any similar future operation.

## Standard 2: Decency

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Lunch was sampled by members of the IPM team on various occasions throughout the year and was noted as being of a generally decent standard. IPMs spent time during the year visiting the kitchen and observing the processes for preparing food, and saw the efforts being made to address any concerns that were raised by prisoners, or in response to the IPM reports. Prisoners did report they felt there was a lack of choice and that menus do not change frequently enough. The prison should ensure their systems for hearing from prisoners and responding to them is clear. The IPMs were pleased to hear about the new Prisoner Information Action Committee (PIAC) systems and management checks being implemented, and hope to report positively on their impact in the coming year.

Polmont has a higher budget than other prisons to provide meals for prisoners, given the young offender population. However, the IPMs remain of the view that the SPS and the Scottish Government should review the budget available for meals in prisons, to ensure fresh and kitchen-prepared food is the norm. Regarding budgets, prisoners across the halls reported to the IPMs that they felt that they were provided with too much of certain items, like bread, and that savings could be made here to allow for money to be spent in other areas. The prison may wish to review their feedback loops to ensure halls provide information back to the kitchen to allow agile response to such suggestions. The prison may also wish to consider if more food can be prepared in house.

On a related note, and as reported in previous years, the cost-of-living issues common to wider society continued to have an impact on prisoners. The SPS should keep this issue under review, to ensure that all prisoners are able to purchase items to meet their basic needs, above and beyond those provided by the prison.

The laundry processes were observed to work well. Where prisoners had raised issues, the prison was able to evidence the steps they had taken to resolve these concerns.

The prison was generally noted as being kept clean and tidy during all IPM visits.

One area of serious concern, outwith the control of the prison, was the continued use of single cells to house two prisoners on Blair house. The IPM team is clear that housing people in cramped

conditions is a potential breach of their human rights, and the SPS and Scottish Government must take urgent action to cease this practice across the entire prison estate.

### **Standard 3: Personal Safety**

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Generally, the prison felt safe and well managed throughout the year. Whilst young offenders reported fights, these incidents appeared to be well managed. The IPM team was pleased with the response by the prison management team when issues were brought to their attention either by prisoners, prisoners' families or the IPMs. The prison was responsive to concerns and looked into matters swiftly and thoroughly. The work done by the inclusion unit and the violence reduction team was positive. More generally, staff showed good knowledge and understanding of the needs of prisoners and ways to support them. Many staff went above and beyond to help the prisoners in their care, treating them with empathy and compassion.

The IPM team is concerned about the impact on the young offenders of housing them all on one houseblock, which has led to an increase in violence on that hall. Issues of managing 'enemies' within one custodial setting, and within that one hall, is challenging at best. The SPS and the Scottish Government should look at other solutions to support this complex and vulnerable prisoner population.

The IPM team was also concerned about some of the female prisoners that Polmont were asked to house. The women's hall, Blair House, in the opinion of the IPM team, should not be used to house the most vulnerable of the female prisoners in custody. Despite the excellent work undertaken by the staff here, the physical setting is not appropriate, causing trauma to those women with the most acute needs, as well as to the wider population who are affected by their behaviour.

The IPM team was concerned to hear about one instance where a young prisoner was taken to court for a short hearing, but did not return to the prison until the early hours. Whilst this case may have been a one off, the SPS, the Courts and the transport provider must prevent any recurrence.

The issue of drugs is more prevalent than in previous years. The IPM team recognise the security work done by the prison to try to manage this issue.

The IPMs observed good processes for managing prisoners at risk of self-harm. As noted above with regards to reception processes in particular, staff took time to talk to prisoners and understand their needs, and the team witnessed a good handover of information.

This notwithstanding, the IPM team was saddened by the death in custody in the prison during the reporting year and extend their sympathies to all of those affected.

### **Standard 4: Effective, Courteous and Humane Use of Authority**

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The number of prisoners held in the SRU was variable over the course of the year, with some increases. The IPM team notes this may be a consequence of housing all young prisoners on one hall. As above, the IPM team calls on the SPS and Scottish Government to consider the strategy for managing the young offender population, and more generally to review their population strategy.

The prison has also had to manage some prisoners with very challenging and complex needs. The IPM team asks the SPS and Scottish Government to consider if a prison environment is most suitable to house those with significant additional needs.

During the reporting year staff within the SRU continued to work to a high standard. They were knowledgeable about the prisoners and showed empathy and compassion in their dealings. All prisoners had reintegration plans when checked.

As noted above, the prison was generally well ordered. Times of mass movement were well managed and felt safe for all involved.

Measures to restrict the availability of drugs appeared well measured.

One area of concern for the IPM team was the ongoing use of strip searching of the male prisoner population, despite the introduction of body scanners. The IPM team commends the approach taken at Polmont towards the strip searching of women and note that its routine use has been ended. IPMs believe that strip searching of prisoners is dehumanising and not trauma informed. The SPS and Scottish Government should review this policy and look to learn from the good practice Polmont has developed for female prisoners.

## **Standard 5: Respect, Autonomy and Protection**

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For most prisoners, the regime at Polmont was good, with reasonable time out of cell and access to good activities. However, there were some concerns about the offering available for the remand prisoners, who had more limited time out of cell and less access to activities. This is compounded by the three distinct populations that Polmont was holding. The introduction of men to Polmont was well managed, but the challenges of providing a full regime to these different groups can not be underestimated. The IPM team calls on the SPS and the Scottish Government to review the prisoner population strategy.

Across the prison excellent staff and prisoner relationships were observed, as noted elsewhere in this report. Staff in general had a good understanding of their role and offered good support to prisoners. The IPM team further witnessed the positive interactions of staff in the visits area, and the support and advice offered to family members.

The IPM team notes that work started by SPS two years ago to review the complaints processes at Polmont appear to have stalled. The SPS should consider reinstating this work to bring the complaints system in line with the model practice set out by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

Prisoner engagement through PIACs and other forums should remain a continued focus for the prison in the coming year, to ensure all prisoners voices are heard and their views are considered. As noted above, the IPMs were pleased to hear about planned work by the prison in this regard. The work started as part of the 'reimagining Monro' project is to be commended, and the IPM team looks forward to seeing this develop in the coming year.

## **Standard 6: Purposeful Activity**

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The purposeful activity offering at Polmont continued to be of a high standard. There was a wide variety of activity available. The atmosphere within workshops was noted as being positive and engaging. The IPMs noted the enthusiasm demonstrated by staff when in session and when explaining their roles. The work to deliver SVQ training in the kitchen was positive. The prison should consider if this could be expanded or further developed. Activities such as 'paws for progress' and the Polmont Youth Theatre had a profound impact on the prisoners involved. The work of the inclusion officer to engage with those who were less confident was to be commended. Again, the three distinct populations inhibit the prison from being able to fully maximise these offerings.

During the reporting year the IPM team observed the visits hall and the access to visits by prisoners' families. Families reported positively on their experiences, especially around bonding visits which were received well by prisoners and their wider families. The visits hall provided a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.

There were some concerns about access to exercise for the young offenders, in part an outcome of having to manage interpersonal issues between prisoners, a challenge exacerbated by holding them all on one hall. The prison must ensure it always offers all prisoners a full hour of time

outside each day and ensure that management checks on this are robust. The prison should also consider if they can do more to enrich the offering during exercise. Planned work to improve the physical security of the exercise areas should be funded by the SPS. The prison should also consider other initiatives such as the training of sports and games officers.

The IPM team was disappointed that issues raised to SPS last year regarding the wording of the inter-prison phone call policy were not acted upon and it remains an area of concern for the IPM Team. Any prisoner who wishes to speak to a close family member should be supported in doing so, and this should never only be considered in “exceptional circumstances”. The IPM team remain of the view this policy wording could be a potential breach of human rights, whilst also contradicting the stated aims of the SPS. For the third time, the IPM Team urge the SPS to change this policy.

## **Standard 7: Transitions from Custody into the Community**

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As noted above, the prison managed the move of children out of the prison to the secure estate exceptionally well. They likewise managed the introduction of adult men and worked quickly to adapt to their specific needs. Where concerns were raised by prisoners about access to Home Detention Curfew (HDC) the prison took steps to address this. However, the SPS and prison may wish to consider the information provided to prisoners before their transfer to Polmont to ensure expectations are properly managed. The prison should also keep under review the communications provided to prisoners, both individually and as a group, about the entitlements to HDC and the process and timelines.

The IPM team noted several examples of good work supporting prisoners prior to release, in particular the work to ensure all prisoners had a pre-release plan in place. Prisoners talked about the positive experiences they had and support provided around issues such as housing. The prison should consider what more support could be provided to those on remand to ensure they are prepared when released.

Issues around access to programmes were noted by the young offender population, who often felt they were not able to get on courses to address their offending behaviour. The SPS should ensure that all prisoners who can benefit from offending behaviour courses are able to access them.

## **Standard 8: Organisational Effectiveness**

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The IPM team is pleased to report the improvements in the provision by the transport provider, GeoAmey. Whilst there remain issues, the situation had vastly improved compared with last year.

Issues around staffing levels were raised by officers during the year. Whilst staffing levels are not at the problematic levels of some other prisons, the SPS should consider whether the staff profile provides the support required to the female and young offender populations.

The IPM team wishes to put on record the positive relationship with the prison staff and prison management team. The prison has been responsive to issues and concerns raised. The team looks forward to further developing this positive relationship in the coming year.

## **Standard 9: Health and Wellbeing**

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The healthcare provision remained generally positive. There have been some challenges with the changed prison population, but these appear to have been well managed. The issue of the times of dispensing of medication remained one area NHS Forth Valley and the prison need to work together on to bring about further improvements.



## Key Issues

1. Management of three distinct populations
2. Management of all young offenders on one hall
3. Overcrowding and the use of single cells to house two prisoners.



## Encouraging Observations

The prison is in a positive state. The staff and management attitude is good. They are aware of the issues the prisoners face and work hard to resolve these and are responsive to feedback. This provides a strong foundation moving into the coming year.

The different activities available to prisoners able to engage in purposeful activity is varied and interesting. The area provides a positive experience for those in custody.