HMIPS

HM INSPECTORATE OF PRISONS FOR SCOTLAND

Independent Prison Monitoring (IPM) Findings

Annual Report

Prison:
HMP BARLINNIE

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

INVESTING IN VOLUNTEERS

npm national preventive mechanism

Annual Monitoring Figures

	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
Total number of visits:	70	120	77
Total number of missed weeks:	0	1	1
Total number of prisoner requests received:	194	262	268
Total number of IPM hours:	320.5	425	254

Executive Summary

This report presents monitoring findings for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026. The reporting year was characterised by sustained and significant operational pressure, driven by a rising national prison population, persistent overcrowding at its greatest across Scotland in Barlinnie, and the limitations of an ageing estate. These factors shaped all aspects of the prison's operation and had a direct effect on the experiences of those living and working within the establishment.

Overcrowding continued to increase and the population peaked at 1,459 prisoners. This placed considerable strain on accommodation, regime delivery, and access to services. Despite these conditions, staff demonstrated resilience and commitment, contributing to the overall stability of the establishment.

Staff were regularly observed by Independent Prison Monitors (IPMs) engaging respectfully and professionally with prisoners. Positive staff–prisoner relationships were evident in many areas, with staff frequently demonstrating awareness of individual needs, providing support and signposting prisoners to appropriate services. These relationships were an important factor in sustaining a generally stable environment, with most prisoners reporting that they felt safe.

However, the cumulative impact of overcrowding and operational pressure was evident in the consistency and quality of prisoners' day-to-day experiences, particularly in relation to communication, access to information, and engagement in prison processes. Communication was a key area requiring improvement. Monitoring identified that many prisoners had a limited understanding of their rights, entitlements, and prison processes, including the complaints system. This lack of clarity contributed to the volume of prisoner requests received to the IPM service, prisoner dissatisfaction, and a perception of unfairness. While steps had been taken to improve information provision, including the introduction of accessible guidance and improvements to digital platforms, these had not yet achieved consistent awareness or impact.

Standards of decency remained mixed. Cleanliness across the establishment was generally good, reflecting the efforts of both staff and prisoners in maintaining the living environment despite difficult conditions. However, the physical infrastructure continued to present significant and longstanding challenges. The ageing estate, combined with sustained overcrowding, resulted in issues affecting dignity and daily living, including unreliable heating and hot water, poor ventilation, and access to showers and hygiene facilities. Shared cells fell below internationally recognised minimum space standards, further compounding these concerns. In addition, the affordability of basic items was increasingly raised as an issue, reflecting the interaction between static prisoner wages and rising living costs.

In relation to safety, the prison was generally well managed. Staff were observed to respond effectively to incidents and to maintain oversight of risks, including violence, self-harm, and vulnerability. Established processes such as the SPS Suicide Prevention Strategy -Talk to Me (TTM) were implemented with evidence of care and awareness in supporting those at risk.

However, substance use remained a persistent and destabilising factor, contributing to violence, debt, and unpredictability. Reports of intimidation and bullying, while not always directly observed, were consistently raised and remained a concern.

Access to purposeful activity was a significant weakness. While there was clear evidence of strong practice in individual areas, including workshops, education, family engagement, and third-sector provision, the overall availability of meaningful activity was woefully inadequate for the needs of the population. Many prisoners spent extended periods in their cells, in some cases up to 22–23 hours per day, with limited access to meaningful opportunities, which had clear implications for wellbeing, progression, and rehabilitation. Although staff made efforts to maximise opportunities within the constraints they faced, the scale of demand significantly exceeded available provision.

Progression and transition from custody were similarly affected. While local processes for case management and release planning were generally well organised and supported by multi-agency working, outcomes for prisoners were heavily influenced by national systemic factors. Limited programme availability, long waiting times for offence-focused interventions, and capacity pressures across the wider estate all contributed to delays and uncertainty. As a result, many prisoners had reduced confidence in their ability to progress or prepare effectively for their release.

Access to routine healthcare was often delayed and was this was further affected by the changed staff rosters and regime.

Overall, HMP Barlinnie continued to function, mainly due to staff resilience and commitment. However, significant challenges, including overcrowding, ageing infrastructure, and gaps in prisoners' understanding of their rights, continued to limit positive outcomes. Addressing these issues, alongside improving communication and engagement, will be critical to achieving sustained improvement.

General Observation

Standard 1: Lawful and Transparent Custody

Arrangements to ensure lawful and transparent custody were largely effective, with core processes operating well. Reception, induction, and liberation procedures were generally delivered competently, with staff seen communicating clearly, treating prisoners with respect, and following established processes. Liberation practice was a particular strength, with appropriate attention given to prisoners' entitlements, vulnerabilities, and onward support.

The provision of clear and accessible information to prisoners was less effective. Monitoring found that many prisoners had a limited understanding of their rights and entitlements, including aspects of the Prison Rules. Improvements during the year, including the introduction of a plain English guide, Your Rights Under the Scottish Prison Rules published in July 2025, and enhancements to digital platforms were positive developments. However, awareness and availability of the booklet were inconsistent amongst both staff and prisoners, reducing overall value.

Monitoring found weaknesses in how information was communicated to and understood by prisoners. Improving the clarity, consistency, and accessibility of rights-based information requires further improvement.

Standard 2: Decency

Standards of decency were mixed, with generally strong levels of cleanliness, but persistent concerns affecting prisoners' daily living conditions, largely linked to the age of the estate, overcrowding, and operational pressures.

Residential areas, work sheds, communal areas, and kitchens were regularly observed to be clean. Access to showers and personal hygiene facilities was inconsistent, mostly caused by significant and sustained overcrowding. While in the main it was achieved, both prisoners and staff reported that it was not always possible for everyone to access a daily shower.

The physical condition of the ageing establishment remained a deep concern. IPMs reported ongoing issues which affected prisoners' dignity, including outdated shower facilities, cold conditions, unreliable hot water and heating, and problems with ventilation and mould. Shared cells were below the 4m² per person minimum standard of living space set by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) to prevent inhuman or degrading treatment.

Food provision met basic requirements, and food hygiene standards were generally good. However, concerns were raised about limited variety and nutritional balance, with meals regularly described as carbohydrate heavy. Affordability of canteen items was also an increasing concern, with rising costs combined with static SPS national prisoner wage policy and spending limits placing increased pressure on prisoners' ability to purchase items from the canteen and other sources.

Overall, the prison generally maintained acceptable standards of cleanliness and respectful day-to-day practices, despite the difficult operational circumstances and the ageing estate. However, IPMs had ongoing concerns about accommodation quality, access to hygiene facilities, and sustained overcrowding. Meaningful improvement in these areas will depend on addressing physical limitations and the effect of overcrowding on prisoners' living conditions.

Standard 3: Personal Safety

Most prisoners reported feeling safe, and monitoring provided strong evidence of staff commitment to maintaining safety in a challenging environment. Staff were routinely observed managing risk effectively, responding calmly to incidents, and demonstrating good awareness of prisoners.

However, some prisoners reported experiences of intimidation or bullying. While these concerns were not always directly observed, the consistency of reports indicates ongoing risks that require continued monitoring.
Staff had detailed knowledge of individuals subject to Talk To Me procedures and showed compassion and awareness of underlying needs and circumstances. Information about the 'Listeners' service was visible and promoted, although availability was sometimes limited by the number of prisoners trained by Samaritans.

Substance use was widely reported by staff and prisoners as contributing to risks of violence, debt, and instability. Periods of increased tension, including assaults, were often related to substance use. While these risks were actively managed by SPS, underlying pressures remained.

Where concerns were raised there was evidence of the Intelligence Management Unit and senior management taking allegations seriously, with cases investigated and action taken.

Personal safety was generally well managed, with evidence of trained staff, effective safeguarding processes, and a prevailing sense of safety among prisoners. However, there were ongoing concerns due to persistent risks associated with substance use, overcrowding, and isolated but recurring reports about intimidation and bullying.

Standard 4: Effective, Courteous and Humane Use of Authority

Staff were generally observed to use authority appropriately and proportionately. Interactions were typically respectful, and staff demonstrated the ability to balance control with humane treatment.

Monitoring across the year showed effective and humane practice in high-risk and restrictive environments, particularly within the Separation and Reintegration Unit (SRU). Movements, segregation management, and daily engagement were regularly observed to be calm and organised. Positive staff–prisoner relationships were evident, including appropriate informal interaction and visible efforts to de-escalate tension.

Instances of use of force were rarely observed directly by IPMs, and where discussed, were generally reported rather than evidenced. Some prisoners alleged overly robust use of force. These concerns were not verified by IPMs but highlighted the importance of transparency and public confidence, which the use of body-worn cameras should support.

Overall, staff generally acted proportionately and respectfully. With sustained overcrowding and operational pressure, maintaining consistently high-quality engagement remained challenging.

Standard 5: Respect, Autonomy and Protection from Mistreatment

Relationships were observed to be respectful, with many prisoners reporting positive day-to-day interactions. In several areas, including residential halls, the SRU, Hubs, and work settings, positive informal interaction were common, and staff demonstrated a willingness to support prisoners. Prisoners working in roles such as the library, resource hub, Barbed Wireless and various work sheds, often spoke positively about staff support and the sense of autonomy and dignity associated with these roles.

However, access to complaints processes remained inconsistent. Monitoring found that complaint forms were not always available and some prisoners reported delays or lack of responses. These issues undermined confidence in the system and reflect wider national concerns. Overall, the complaint process requires attention to ensure transparency and prisoner confidence. It is concerning that meaningful action has not been taken despite these continually raised issues, most recently in the August 2025 SHRC report, Access to Justice for Prisoners: The Complaints System.

Changes to the regime, implemented from October 2025, received mixed views from prisoners. While some welcomed the revised regime, others reported feeling rushed and experiencing reduced flexibility around routines. Managers reviewed the implementation and sought to maximise access to regime opportunities and minimise the effects of overcrowding. Following the staff shift and regime changes there was no immediate change to purposeful activity hours, but evidence of an increase from January 2026.

In the context of the sustained overcrowding and increased operational demand experienced at HMP Barlinnie over decades, maintaining consistency in access to services, complaints processes, and day-to-day engagement remained problematic, and this influenced prisoner perceptions of fairness and responsiveness.

Standard 6: Purposeful Activity

Daily access for all to purposeful activity varied and was significantly constrained, with levels of provision worse because of overcrowding. While there was evidence of good practice in specific areas, many prisoners continued to experience limited time out of cell and restricted access to meaningful activities that should have been supporting their health, progression, and return to the community.

Opportunities such as the Bike Shed, Tea Packing, Re-use IT, Recycling, Resource Hub, Wellbeing Hub, Library and Barbed Wireless, and education provided meaningful engagement and skills development. Prisoners involved in these activities frequently reported pride in their work and described respectful, supportive supervision. Educational provision, including core subjects, ESOL, art and structured group activities such as chess clubs, were felt to be of benefit to those able to access them. It was not possible to offer approximately 1,400 prisoners sufficient and regular daily access.

Access to visits and family contact was good, particularly within the Family Visitor Centre and dedicated family visit spaces, which were welcoming, calm, and well managed. Partnerships with third-sector providers enhanced visitor experiences and provided additional support to families. However, changes to visiting times under the revised staff roster presented challenges for some families, particularly those in employment or travelling long distances, and reduced flexibility for evening/late visits.

Initiatives, like Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids supported personal development, family relationships, and preparations for return to the community, with constructive efforts to combine physical activity, education, and family engagement.

Despite some good initiatives, the overall provision of purposeful activity was insufficient for much of the population. Many prisoners reported spending lengthy periods locked in their cells, often up to 22–23 hours per day, particularly those on remand or short-term sentences, who had limited access to work or education. Prisoners also reported difficulty accessing their statutory minimum of one-hour outdoor exercise. Compared with previous years, and during this period, IPMs felt this had significantly improved and was being regularly monitored by the senior management team. However, this continued to be hampered by overcrowding and the associated operational challenges.

Standard 7: Transition from Custody into the Community

As in the previous year, there were persistent barriers identified in relation to progression, access to programmes, and preparation for release. This was because of a lack of sufficient programme delivery and difficulties accessing places in prisons running courses because of lack of space.

Access to programmes was a significant area of concern. Prisoners reported lengthy waits, in some cases extending to several years, to access accredited programmes required for

progression and parole consideration, including offence-focused interventions. The impact of this on individuals was significant, particularly where parole eligibility was approaching with little prospect of programme completion or alternative means by which to demonstrate the required evidence. This undermined prisoners' ability to demonstrate reduced risk and progress toward release.

Many prisoners experienced prolonged uncertainty and reduced prospects for timely and effective transition from custody to the community.

Standard 8: Organisational Effectiveness

Managers demonstrated a generally steady and responsive approach, within the constraints of significant operational pressure. Senior management engagement was visible, with IPMs regularly observing management meetings, effective local oversight, and evidence of structured responses to inspection activity and emerging operational risks.

Processes for responding to inspection findings and managing performance were largely effective. Prison management demonstrated awareness of HMIPS inspection outcomes, with clear allocation of responsibility for recommendations, and staff spoke knowledgeably about wider work within the prison and organisational pressures, including overcrowding and population volatility.

Equality and diversity arrangements showed positive intent and leadership. Equality action planning was in place and leadership roles demonstrated commitment and openness; however, engagement levels varied and participation in some initiatives was limited.

Standard 9: Health and Wellbeing

Public health initiatives were a particular strength. Uptake of Blood Borne Virus testing during targeted periods was exceptionally high, indicating effective planning, collaboration, and proactive healthcare engagement. The flu vaccination programme was similarly well organised and delivered. Positive practice was also evident in initiatives linking family relationships to wellbeing, notably the Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids programme. Co-facilitated by Physical Training Instructors and Family Contact Officers, this programme combined exercise, play, and structured discussion to support father-child relationships, with a focus on emotional wellbeing, positive parenting, and healthy lifestyles.

However, access to non-urgent healthcare remained a concern. Both prisoners and staff reported delays in routine appointments. While urgent cases were prioritised, limited access to less acute care risked unnecessary health deterioration. Issues were also identified in healthcare complaints handling and communication, with some complaints reportedly unrecorded or lost. These concerns, consistent with those noted under Standard 5, reduced confidence in the process.

Operational changes following the introduction of new staff shift times and a revised regime in October 2025 also affected health and wellbeing. This included adjustments to medication administration times which raised concerns about the management of sedative medication and its effects on sleep patterns. Staff reported instances of prisoners becoming drowsy earlier in the day or attempting to retain medication for later use. There was also anecdotal evidence of increased staff stress.

Health provision showed notable strengths, but persistent delays to routine healthcare, NHS complaints processing weaknesses, and operational pressures continued to present challenges.