

INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARDS

A case study of volunteer involvement in monitoring prison conditions

June 2016



**Valuing
volunteers
in prison**

The Independent Monitoring Boards recruit volunteers to ensure that proper standards of decency and care are maintained in their local prison. This case study will be especially interesting to readers who wish to:

- use experienced volunteers to mentor, train and induct less experienced volunteers
- understand the benefits of involving independent members of the public in prisons.

The role of Independent Monitoring Boards

Every prison in England and Wales has an Independent Monitoring Board (IMB), made up of volunteers drawn from the prison's local community. IMB volunteers are known as 'IMB members'. IMB members have a statutory duty to monitor the day-to-day life in their local prison to ensure that proper standards of care and decency are maintained. There are also IMBs in every immigration removal centre and at some short-term holding facilities. This case study focuses on the work of IMBs in prisons only.

IMB members have unrestricted access to their local prison at any time and can talk to any prisoner they wish to, out of sight and hearing of a member of staff if necessary. For example, a typical monitoring visit might include time spent in the accommodation blocks, workshops, classrooms, Segregation Unit, healthcare and kitchens.

IMB members play an important role in dealing with problems inside the prison. If prisoners have issues that they have been unable to resolve through the usual internal channels, they can put in a confidential request to see an IMB member.

Issues vary, for example:

- concerns over lost property
- release dates
- access to activities
- visits from family or friends
- special religious or cultural requirements
- serious allegations such as bullying.

If something serious occurs, for example a riot or a death in custody, representatives of the Board may be asked to attend and observe the way in which the situation is handled. In the absence of

CCTV footage, the presence of an IMB member may be the only source of independent evidence about how an incident unfolds.



Each IMB writes an annual report which goes to the Prisons Minister, currently Andrew Selous MP. Reports are also published on the IMB website. The annual report includes information on what the IMB has monitored during the past year. Each IMB can ask questions and raise issues, which the Prisons Minister will respond to. Prior to an inspection by HM Inspectorate of Prisons, inspectors will usually read the last IMB annual report. They will also speak to IMB members during the inspection. Similarly, when the Prison and Probation Ombudsman is conducting an investigation, they may contact the relevant IMB.

How IMB volunteers do their work

In every prison, IMB members work to ensure that everyone in custody is treated humanely, fairly and decently. Prisoners can make written applications to the IMB members, as well as speaking to them in person. Contact in person is usually done when members make their rounds monitoring all the various aspects of the prison. Such rounds are known as rota visits.

The number of applications to see the IMB can vary throughout the year. Rota visits are scheduled regularly and can last from several hours to a day. When they can IMB members make every effort to attend adjudication hearings and Segregation Review Boards, conducted by senior prison staff, to ensure due process. The hearings address issues of prisoner behaviour and continued segregation from the rest of the prison. IMB members do not take part in the hearing process itself.

“We believe that we offer a very different volunteering service to the prison. We are completely independent of the prison service, and are publicly appointed volunteers from the community. We have a duty to report our findings, annually, to the Secretary of State. IMBs are part of the UK National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) which was created to meet the obligations of the Optional Protocol of the United Nations Convention against Torture (OPCAT). We are allowed unfettered access to all areas of the establishment to be able to perform our monitoring duties. We promote good practice with our diverse skills and experiences to articulate the concerns that prisoners have, and form a bridge between prisoners and prison staff. As part of the NPM, in England and Wales, we work in partnership with other members such as Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons.”

(Sue Bird, IMB chair at HMP High Down)

A service for all prisoners

Every prisoner is potentially an IMB service user, but there is no obligation on any prisoner to talk to the IMB. Occasionally, an IMB may focus on certain groups; for example, they will try and see every prisoner in the Segregation Unit (also sometimes known as Care and Separation Unit - CSU) and is usually informed when a prisoner is sent to or removed from the CSU. Although IMBs are not there for prison staff, staff issues which affect prisoners can be of concern to them. For example, one IMB recently noticed an unusual atmosphere amongst prison staff on the wing, with officers not engaging with prisoners the way they usually do. When enquiries were made, it transpired some staff hadn’t been paid. The Governor was not aware of this. The Board was able to speak to the Governor and the situation was rectified. Collaboration and calm returned to the wings.

How IMB volunteering is organised and managed

There are currently about 1,500 IMB members, out of whom some 90% are based in prison with the remainder in the immigration and detention estate.

IMBs are largely grass-roots organisations managed by members themselves. Each IMB elects a Chair, Vice Chair and a Board Development Officer once a year. These posts share the leadership and development duties for their IMB, including recruitment and training of new members, organising a visits rota, dealing with disciplinary issues in the first instance and preparing the annual report.

At a national level, the National Council sets most policies and procedures. The National Council is comprised of 10 elected members representing all regions in England and Wales with a separate representative for the immigration and detention estate. National Council members are elected on a 3-year term and are overseen by the IMB President, currently John Thornhill, who is appointed by the Minister.

Every National Council member usually has an area of special interest and chairs a working group made up of IMB members. Working groups develop new policies or propose improvements to existing procedures.

In 2015, the National Council and the President entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with NOMS about the provision of clerking time and facilities to IMBs by prison. This should make it easier for members to get the support they need in settings where an SLA with the prison has not already been established.

Another example of recent work undertaken by the National Council is a development of a National Monitoring Framework to promote best practice in IMB monitoring.

“Establishments are all different from each other in many ways, even when they might be expected to be similar because they are similarly categorised. Although all IMBs have the same ministerial remit (to monitor the fairness and humanity with which those held are treated and how well they are prepared for release), the optimum way to fulfill this remit varies considerably from one establishment to another.

To address this requirement, the IMB National Council has just published a National Monitoring Framework to promote monitoring with an appropriate purpose by every individual IMB. The Framework stresses principles rather than procedures, deciding what to monitor rather than dictating how it should be done. For some IMBs this will mean little change from what they have done in the past, but for others it may mean a significant shift in approach.”

(Geoffrey Penzer, National Council member for London)

At a national level, there is the IMB Secretariat, a small team of civil servants based in the Ministry of Justice in London. Secretariat staff are involved in supporting the work of IMBs, the National Council and the President, mainly through providing back-office administrative support. This includes providing support for the recruitment and appointment of new IMB members, organising training venues, arranging payment of members' expenses, and assisting IMBs in raising their profile.

At present, the Ministry of Justice is conducting a governance review of IMB. This review aims to clarify the roles of IMBs, the National Council and the President and to promote consistency and sharing of good practice for all IMBs.

Volunteer recruitment and security clearance

The Secretary of State appoints IMB members and the recruitment and selection process is governed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). This means that recruitment and selection must be open, fair and transparent and there must be public competition for each appointment. This places particular constraints on how IMB members can be recruited and adds an additional layer of checks. The constraints are not shared by other volunteering roles.

IMBs cannot accept ad hoc applications from members of the public. Each IMB has to run its own recruitment campaign, typically for four to six weeks. As a minimum, adverts are placed online on the Cabinet Office Public Appointments website and on the IMB website. In addition, adverts appear on some paid-for platforms. Members of individual IMBs are encouraged to spread the word in their local community via local media, Volunteer Centres, community groups and universities. There is no funding available for local advertising so many IMBs work hard to raise their profile and attract applications from their local community.

In some parts of the country it can be difficult to attract sufficient numbers of applicants, particularly in remote or difficult to access areas, or those with a number of prisons in relatively close proximity. This is a constant challenge for the IMB.

Once a recruitment campaign closes, applicants are invited to come for a familiarisation visit at the prison. This gives them a chance to find out more about the role and the establishment. This is followed by a formal interview, with a panel of three existing IMB members. The panel makes recommendations for appointment to the Secretariat, who then checks interview records. Once satisfactory security clearance has been obtained, the Secretariat prepare a submission to the Minister.

All IMB members require an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate. Members applying to join an IMB at a high security prison also require a Counter Terrorist Check (CTC) clearance.

DBS clearance is arranged through the IMB Secretariat. They check completed DBS forms and send them off to the Disclosure and Barring Service. The high security prison CTC is undertaken by the establishments themselves.

One of the main issues IMBs face when recruiting new volunteers is obtaining security clearance in good time. The process can be very lengthy, which can put people off from applying. It is not unusual for good candidates to be lost at this stage, as they can lose interest and choose another volunteering opportunity that they can start straight away.

Whilst the entire DBS clearance process can take up to six weeks, longer in some exceptional cases, CTC clearance remains the most difficult area. It is not unusual for CTC to take six to 12 months, making recruitment and retention of volunteers for high security prisons one of the most challenging aspects of involving new volunteers in IMB work.



Volunteer training

Training is delivered at two levels, nationally and locally. Experienced IMB members deliver both types of training.

Nationally, a small group of IMB members have volunteered to develop course materials and deliver face-to-face training at different locations across the country. They are known as the National Training Team. New members must attend a two-day residential course before they can pass their 12-month probationary period.

“This course helps members learn how to monitor a prisoner’s journey in custody and includes modules such as personal safety, building relationships with prisoners and staff, equality and diversity as well as how to monitor the establishment and how to answer prisoners’ applications.”¹

(Sue Bird, IMB Chair at HMP High Down)

Members are allocated an experienced IMB member who mentors them during prison visits.

“Training and development is key for new and existing members. For new members, we have developed a local guide for the mentee and, equally importantly, a guide for the mentor. Both are reviewed annually. Shortly after a new member is appointed, security and key training starts.

Progress of new members is closely monitored and there is regular contact between the mentor, the Board Development Officer and the mentee. Formal reviews of new member performance supplement the on-going development and reporting system at six months and at 12 months, with a detailed report prepared and passed to the mentee for their comments and observations.

¹ Applications are requests for information to the IMB on a varied range of subjects. Prisoners have a right to submit applications to the IMB.

At the six month review, the new member will be allocated a project to undertake. We try to identify areas where the new member has an interest or expertise and where the aspect of prison life or work is not at the forefront of the regular monitoring activity."

(Mike Siswick, IMB Chair at HMP Stocken)

Nationally, there is two-day residential training for new Board Chairs and Vice-Chairs, which is due to become mandatory later in 2016. There is also a one-day training course for Board Development Officers.

The value of volunteer involvement in IMBs

IMB members, like many other volunteers working in prisons, are committed and passionate about their work.

"Many establishment governors, directors or managers say that they value the presence of the IMB and find its work helpful. This is partly because the regular presence of IMB members within the establishment is a strong reminder to all working there of the high standards that are expected of them. It is also partly because IMBs sometimes spot something significant that the prison authorities themselves have missed."

(Geoffrey Penzer, IMB Chair at HMP Thameside)

For example:

- The IMB in a women's prison pointed out to the Governor that all officers working in its segregation unit were male, a point that had previously not been registered by the prison.
- An IMB collected data about the number of hospital visits that were cancelled because of a lack of available transport, convincing a prison that there was a problem it had previously denied.
- An IMB pointed out to senior prison managers that, although their decisions when responding to prisoner complaints were fair and reasonable, the way they were explained to prisoners was poor, from illegible handwriting to use of complicated language.
- IMBs collectively have reported on various systemic problems. For example, unreliable handling of prisoner property, unsatisfactory treatment of some prisoners with mental illnesses and long delays in arranging some inquests for prisoners who have died in custody. This ensures that Ministers and the National Offender Management Service are not allowed to forget the issues.

"As part of our routine weekly rota visits, we currently identify a 'focus' area for our members to concentrate on for the four/five weeks each month. This might be kitchens, chaplaincy, visits, education, segregation, adjudications, regime, gym, offender management unit, or mental health etc...Not only does this provide additional scrutiny for the Governor and the departments

concerned to take note of, it also provides additional, more detailed learning for our members. In turn, that hopefully provides more informed contributions to our annual reports.”

(David Pinchin, IMB Chair at HMP/YOI Isis)

Supporting IMB volunteers

Right from the start it is vital that volunteers have adequate support in all stages of their volunteering

career. They should also have access to opportunities for further development and opportunities to be involved in different aspects of the IMB work.

An IMB member will often have an area of special interest, such as health, education or the care of vulnerable prisoners. There is the opportunity to stand for one of the IMB's elected posts and take on additional responsibility for their particular area of interest.

Nationally and locally, some IMB members are involved in training and mentoring new members. Others take a lead on working groups or stand for a post on the National Council. Many members sit on interview panels, while others bring with them a whole raft of professional skills and experience to the IMB, anything from IT to press and publicity.

“One of our members is experienced in IT and now has a responsibility for the training and development of all members in the use of IT and for liaising with the HMPS IT Business Partner. This has led to members with limited IT skills becoming proficient and has enabled the IMB to complete, circulate and file reports via computer. It equally importantly offers something, in terms of skill acquisition to members.”

(Mike Siswick, IMB Chair at HMP Stocken)

One of the most important factors within the prison is the relationship between the IMB and the Governor and other prison staff. For example, support with clerking. It can also be about other factors. For example, the flexibility of prison arrangements to enable a diverse range of volunteers to be involved in the work of the IMB. It can be particularly challenging for people who also have paid work to make the commitment to becoming an IMB member.

“The IMB meets on the third Tuesday of every month in the prison boardroom at 4.00p.m. As we have six members who are working and one member who has only recently retired, it has been essential to ensure meetings are held at a time which is convenient for working members. We believe strongly in having as diverse a group as possible on the Board. We previously held meetings at 10am, and there was some considerable resistance to the change of time from previous members as well as prison staff. It took several years of constantly raising this issue before the meeting time was changed! We had to ensure that our clerk [a prison service employee] was amenable to the time change as it meant the working day for him may not finish until after 6pm.

Another obstacle revolved around prison staff who would regularly attend meetings to provide a training element. We were warned by members of the senior management team that they would not be willing to extend their working day. This matter was resolved by having any training element at the start of the meeting and by starting the meeting 30 minutes early when necessary. We have also

had difficulties with prison staff attending our meetings, who would prefer our meetings to be held in the morning. However, we have been able to persuade them over time to hold the meetings in the afternoon, and these arrangements work well, our meetings are well attended and have become much more focused in content and less anecdotal. A governor always attends the meetings and gives a verbal report. Members who have been rota visitors in the previous month have an opportunity to raise issues with the governor.”

(Karen Andrew, IMB Chair at HMP Swansea)



Barriers to volunteering

Time can be an issue for volunteers and may mean they may not spend as long as they wish monitoring the prison. Due to the size and location of many prisons, it can take a long time to make a rota visit and go round the establishment. Prisoners are often transferred to other prisons at short notice, or cannot be found where they were originally expected, which can make it difficult for IMB members to track down prisoners who may have requested contact.

“Being an IMB member is very time-consuming. Thus the chief factor that helps is being part of an efficient board which sets priorities about what to look at/for, and is good at extracting, analysing, interpreting and checking information/data. This requires a high degree of skill. It takes some time for a member to really understand what the ‘job’ entails. Recruitment of enough capable people is difficult, and there are problems with ‘churn’ and loss of hard-gained expertise. This is a hindrance for all the members of the team.”

(Jenny Blackburn, IMB member at HMP Lewes)

It takes a long time to recruit and train volunteers. Some 30% of IMB members leave within the first two years. It's important to have adequate resources to recruit, manage and retain volunteers. This is a particular challenge to IMB, with no paid IMB staff and a small team at the IMB Secretariat to provide national support.

Benefits of involving volunteers

Having volunteers monitor prisons means they are impartial and can report in a different way to that of paid government inspectors. IMB members have an all-year-round presence in their establishment, observing and keeping track of outcomes continually. Inspection provides a snapshot taken at a specific point in time. As the volunteers come from the local area around each prison, they are often more aware of what is going on in the community.

In 2014-15, IMB members paid 54,245 visits to prisons in England and Wales. With an average visit lasting 5 hours, this equates to over 140 full-time equivalent staff per year. There would be a significant cost to the taxpayer if IMBs were paid.

Most IMB members are proud of their status as independent volunteers and would not wish to be paid.

Many members stay with IMB for a long time. The current maximum period of service with the same IMB is capped at 15 years in line with rules for public appointees. Many members are passionate about making prisons a better and safer place for everyone in custody and go on to apply to join another board after their 15 years is up.

"One of the positives in having volunteers to carry out this role is that independence can be maintained. We are not part of the establishment and have nothing to gain by being anything other than objective."

(Karen Andrew, IMB Chair at HMP Swansea)

"It would be unfortunate if through any lack of support or appreciation of the role of volunteers, or equally through a failure to ensure that boards are effectively managed, the value of boards diminished and volunteers withdrew their contribution. I do not know of anyone on the Stocken board who would wish to be paid for what they do. Equally, given the expertise and skills that as the current Chair I have the privilege of working with, I know that if we did not manage ourselves effectively, positively and where possible with innovation, members would leave."

(Mike Siswick, IMB Chair at HMP Stocken)

Resources without which volunteering couldn't happen

IMB volunteers receive expenses and financial loss allowance without which it would be difficult to involve volunteers. The Ministry of Justice also pays for all training materials and venues, which would be impossible for volunteers to provide.

Other resources at the IMB Secretariat are also crucial, such as recruitment support, managing communication with volunteers, organising the annual conference for members and supporting publication of annual reports.



How to encourage more volunteering in prisons

Many people have never considered volunteering in prison. They may be discouraged by issues such as fears about personal safety or visions of prisons being a depressing place where one can't make a difference. A national campaign which promotes volunteering in prison, enabling volunteers' voices to be heard and myths to be misspelled, would be a great help.

It is important that there is adequate support for volunteer involvement in prisons; in particular, support for welcoming new volunteers and arranging security clearance, as well as flexibility in regimes which allows a diverse range of volunteers to be involved.

It is essential that the IMB Secretariat has access to sufficient resources in order to be able to support the work of IMB members. This includes resources for enhanced recruitment, management and development of volunteers, as well as access to resources that can help raise the profile of IMB and highlight the contribution IMBs make to raising standards in prisons.

A major barrier would be lifted by access to efficient and free online security clearance for volunteers.

A review of how rules on public appointments can be adjusted for IMBs, to enable faster and more efficient recruitment of new volunteers, would also be extremely helpful.

Closing quote

“Prisons are currently the subject of significant scrutiny, as the Government works to implement its prison reform programme. There are undoubtedly challenges, coupled with financial pressures in the department and beyond.

Andrew Selous MP, as the Minister responsible for prisons, probation and rehabilitation, has to gauge and act upon these challenges. As a vital part of this, Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs) provide the Minister with invaluable insight into the treatment and care of prisoners, and I know the Minister is very grateful for the hard work IMBs put in.

The Minister takes time to meet IMB members when he visits prisons, without a governor being present if possible. These insights form part of the picture about our prisons and how they are run. In addition, the Minister reads and replies to at least two IMB annual reports each week. This process helps inform the Minister’s understanding about how current prison rules and regulations are being observed and how they are working in practice.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank IMB members for their dedication and continued unremunerated hard work. As a former IMB member myself, I am deeply aware of the challenges and commitment the IMB role requires. IMBs are doing a truly fantastic job and deserve genuine recognition in the wider volunteering community.”

(Saffron Clackson, Head of the IMB Secretariat)

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**Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square,
London WC1H 9NA
020 7383 0966 | info@clinks.org
www.clinks.org**

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IMB Secretariat, Post Point 9.52
102 Petty France
London SW1H 9AJ
0203 334 3265
imb@justice.gsi.gov.uk
www.imb.org.uk