

Introduction

1. We welcome the opportunity to submit a response to the Justice Committee on drugs in prisons.
2. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMI Prisons) is an independent inspectorate whose duties are primarily set out in section 5A of the Prison Act 1952. We provide independent scrutiny of the conditions for and treatment of prisoners and other detainees and report on our findings.

Scale and impact

3. Whilst drugs in prison is not a new issue, the prevalence of illicit substances is a particular concern at the moment. Some of the factors behind current levels include activity by serious organised crime groups (e.g. the use of increasingly sophisticated drones), as well as a lack of purposeful activity to help deter prisoners from turning to drugs. Inspectors are also concerned by the lack of effective drug treatment for the many prisoners who are addicted.
4. Our 2023-24 Annual Report noted that we raised priority or key concerns about illicit drugs at fifteen adult men's prisons. Our survey analysis revealed that drugs can be easily acquired in prison. In men's prisons in 2023-24 around one-third of prisoners told us that it was easy to get illicit drugs (32%); in women's prisons, it was around a fifth (21%).¹
5. Illicit drugs continue to be a key area of concern in 2024-25. At certain jails, drugs are especially easy to acquire. In a recent inspection of HMP Long Lartin 59% of prisoners surveyed said it was easy to get drugs.² Meanwhile at HMP Garth this figure was 63%.³ More positively, only 16% of women surveyed at HMP/YOI Drake Hall reported that it was easy to get illicit drugs, compared with 49% at our last inspection.⁴
6. Positive testing rates are too high in many prisons. At HMP Rochester the mandatory drug testing failure rate was 42%⁵, at HMP Winchester it was 41% in August⁶ and at HMP Manchester it was 39%.⁷ Of particular concern, our inspection of HMP Hindley in November and December 2023 found the positive drug testing rate for random mandatory drug testing in the previous 12 months to be 53%.⁸ When inspectors returned for an Independent Review of Progress (IRP) in August, the reported rate for the previous six months had risen further to 59%. In the month of April, the positive rate was 77% - the highest reported positive rate in a random mandatory drug test of any adult male prison in England and Wales at the time.⁹

¹ [Annual Report 2023-24 – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

² [HMP Long Lartin – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³ [HMP Garth – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁴ [HMP/YOI Drake Hall – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁵ [HMP/YOI Drake Hall – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁶ [HMP Winchester – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁷ [HMP Manchester – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁸ [HMP/YOI Hindley – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁹ [HMP/YOI Hindley – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

7. For some prisoners, jail is where they first experience serious issues with drugs. Survey analysis accompanying our 2023-24 Annual Report found that 9% of men and 6% of women surveyed had developed a problem with illicit drugs since arriving in jail.¹⁰ Back in July 2023, inspectors were shocked to find 21% reported having developed a drug problem since arriving at HMP Lindholme.¹¹
8. Where drugs are available and widespread, they present a significant threat to the stability and safety of prisons. High levels of drug misuse typically correlate with increased violence, self-harm, and poor safety outcomes. At HMP Manchester, where drugs were a particular concern, 57% of prisoners reported feeling unsafe at some point, and the rate of serious assaults was the highest among adult male prisons.¹² Drug related debt often exacerbates these issues, impacting both prisoners and staff.
9. The prevalence of drugs also increases the likelihood of drug-related deaths. Tragically, three suspected drug-related deaths were reported at HMP Manchester since our last visit in 2021¹³ and jails like HMP Parc have struggled with multiple drug-related deaths in recent months. Where drugs are prevalent, there are often negative perceptions among staff about their own safety and welfare, which can contribute to poor staff retention.
10. Illicit drugs also have far-reaching implications beyond safety, often contributing to poor outcomes across all four healthy prison areas. Delivering purposeful activity and rehabilitative work is significantly more challenging in unsafe, unstable prisons. The prevalence of illicit drugs in jail poses a threat to vital risk reduction work that ought to be taking place.

Tackling the supply of drugs into prisons

11. Some jails are being specifically targeted by organised crime gangs. Drones are often utilised by these groups and were a particular concern at prisons including HMP Long Lartin, HMP Manchester, and HMP Garth. At HMP Manchester, 220 drone sightings were recorded in the last year, highlighting physical security vulnerabilities. Despite very good partnership working with the police and other criminal justice services to improve detection and responses at the jail, this was still not enough to address the problem.¹⁴
12. Structural weaknesses, such as broken or inadequate windows, can be quickly exploited by prisoners to facilitate contraband delivery if not promptly repaired. At HMP Garth and HMP Manchester prisoners used elements from kettles to burn holes in their Perspex windows to enable deliveries. Basic security measures such as netting and working CCTV are also key and yet often inspectors find gaps in these lines of defence. At HMP/YOI Erlestoke, despite the efforts of leaders, a lack of funding for perimeter closed-circuit TV was hindering efforts to prevent drugs entering the establishment.¹⁵

¹⁰ [Annual Report 2023-24 – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹¹ [HMP Lindholme – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹² [HMP Manchester – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹³ [HMP Manchester – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹⁴ [HMP Manchester – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹⁵ [HMP/YOI Erlestoke – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

Inconsistent search procedures are also an issue. At HMP Kirkham, prisoners returning from work in the community were not routinely searched,¹⁶ while at HMP Garth, searches of prisoners leaving the wing were insufficient.¹⁷ There is little use investing in the latest technology to counter more sophisticated entry routes if officers are not also conducting basic searches and aware of their role in keeping drugs out. We see cases of staff reporting deliveries to cells but by the time they are searched, the contents have been dispersed around the prison. The scale of staff corruption is difficult to determine, but it is another route for drugs to enter prisons. High levels of staff inexperience further heighten this risk.

13. Poor medicines management in prisons can also lead to diversion of medicines. Our 2023-24 Annual Report noted that we had raised concerns with medicines practices and oversight at fourteen prisons that we inspected.¹⁸ This has continued to be an issue again this year. For example, at HMP Long Lartin, 53% of prisoners said it was easy to access medication not prescribed to them, compared with 38% for other high secure prisons.¹⁹
14. An effective whole-prison strategic approach is essential, and yet we continue to inspect jails lacking a coherent, joined-up plan of action. The use of data is often also absent or overlooked in many prisons.
15. Where security is effective, it can make a big difference. At HMP Oakwood the installation of twenty-five new cameras had considerably increased live coverage of risk areas.²⁰ Meanwhile additional netting at HMP Bristol helped to improve the defence against throwovers and we also praised the efforts of leaders there to better resource the number of cell searches.²¹ Sufficient resource to help prison leaders to maintain, and where necessary, bolster key security measures, is crucial.

¹⁶ [HMP Kirkham – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹⁷ [HMP Garth – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹⁸ [Annual Report 2023-24 – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

¹⁹ [HMP Long Lartin – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²⁰ [HMP Oakwood – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²¹ [HMP Bristol – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

16. Strong partnership working with the police is also important. At HMP/YOI Hatfield for example, prison leaders worked closely with local police to monitor drug trends in the community, a strategy relevant for prisoners released on temporary licence (ROTL).²² Effective liaison between prison managers and the police is also vital to efforts to counter staff corruption.

Tackling demand

17. Leaders and staff have a critical role to play in creating positive, purposeful cultures that genuinely encourage and support prisoners to engage and progress in their sentences. Our thematic about improving behaviour in prisons found that leaders having clear boundaries and high expectations was fundamental.²³ Prisoners need to know what is expected of them. Staff at all levels ought to model positive behaviours and prisoners should be clear about the potential consequences of poor behaviour. Visible leadership out on the wings is critical if leaders are to understand how drugs are impacting their jail, both for prisoners and staff.
18. Clear boundaries and high expectations are, in the best jails, accompanied by meaningful incentives and opportunities for prisoners to reduce their risk. Positive incentives might include access to education, employment and other interesting activities with fair wages, opportunities to act as peer workers, to access ROTL and more time out on the wings, to name just a few.
19. However, many prisoners we see are trapped in a cycle of boredom, frustration, and poor behaviour, which can fuel the demand for drugs.²⁴ Regimes continue to be far too restricted, with insufficient purposeful activity available to many men and women in prison. In 2023-24 we judged purposeful activity to be poor or not sufficiently good in 31 of the 39 adult prisons we inspected, and this trend has largely continued in 2024-25.²⁵
20. However, some prisons buck this trend and create cultures where prisoners can make better use of their time in custody and avoid substances. HMP Rye Hill recorded an MDT positive rate of less than 1% in the 12 months prior to inspection²⁶ and the open prison HMP/YOI Hatfield (4%²⁷) also recorded relatively low rates. In these jails, robust security measures, proactive leadership and a positive culture which incentivised abstinence and recovery were some important factors. Other jails, such as the Category C trainer HMP Oakwood, with particularly strong cultures underpinned by a rich purposeful activity offer are detailed in our Improving behaviour in prisons thematic.²⁸ Though typically Category B reception prisons have more issues with the ingress of drugs, jails such as HMP Swansea (13%²⁹) were faring better than their comparators at the time of inspection.
21. Though drug testing alone does not change outcomes, when used effectively, it can serve as both a deterrent and a mechanism for identifying the scale of

²² [HMP/YOI Hatfield – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²³ [Improving behaviour in prisons: A thematic review – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²⁴ [Annual Report 2023-24 – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²⁵ [Annual Report 2023-24 – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²⁶ [HMP Rye Hill – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²⁷ [HMP/YOI Hatfield – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

substance misuse. Despite growing concerns, we continue to visit some jails where no or very little testing is taking place. Where it is, consistency is often an issue. At HMP Kirkham, risk-based testing targeted prisoners applying for trusted jobs, though insufficient staff limited the programme's sustainability. A frequent testing scheme for those who had previously failed a test was implemented but lacked consistency, with only six tests conducted over two months, despite 21 failed tests.³⁰

22. HMP Rye Hill exemplified effective drug testing, conducting more than 100 tests monthly, including risk- and suspicion-based testing.³¹ This approach aligned with the prison's low MDT rate and demonstrated serious efforts by leaders to maintain a drug-free environment.

23. Supportive approaches to drug misuse can also play a key role. At HMP Kirkham, prisoners testing positive were encouraged to engage with substance misuse services, rather than facing overly punitive responses. Few prisoners were returned to closed conditions after a single positive test, fostering a rehabilitative environment.³²

²⁸ [Improving Behaviour in Prisons – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

²⁹ [HMP Swansea – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³⁰ [HMP Kirkham – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³¹ [HMP Rye Hill – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³² [HMP Kirkham – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

24. Incentivised drug-free living wings (ISFLs) are now more common. We have seen some impressive ISFLs, including recently at HMP The Mount where prisoners spoke positively about the unit and were given opportunities to work, attend education or participate fully in ISFL activities.³³ However, often the objectives of these units are not clear, and inspectors find that staff are not always sure about the purpose of these wings, or the criteria for admission. Many seem to be used as glorified enhanced units, rather than any specific focus on drug recovery.
25. At HMP Rochester, the drug treatment wing had the highest rate of prisoners found under the influence, with the ISFL unit being the second highest. At HMP Long Lartin, emphasis was on recovery rather than providing a wholly drug-free environment.³⁴ The Drug Recovery Wing at HMP Erlestoke was promising, with dedicated trained substance misuse officers, but prisoners were often returning to wings where drug use was high or onto ISFLs which functioned as an enhanced unit.³⁵

Support for prisoners

26. Treatment and support varies from prison to prison, but generally we report positively about substance misuse services. Where services are of concern, it tends to be related to staffing issues. For example, at HMP Winchester low staffing levels were compromising a range of services, including substance misuse psychosocial services and drug recovery.³⁶ Our reports often note particularly high demand for psychosocial support. For example, at HMP Brixton, the Forward Trust provided psychosocial support to just under the half the population.³⁷ Flexible prescribing of medications such as buprenorphine or buvidal is important, though is not always available either in prison or in the local community when prisoners are released.
27. We tend to find effective screening taking place, which is important given that we know some prisoners enter prison with a pre-existing drug problem. Thirty percent of women and 23% of men surveyed by the inspectorate in 2023-24 reported entering prison with a drug problem, which might include illicit drugs or medication not prescribed to them.³⁸

³³ HMP The Mount – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons (unpublished)

³⁴ [HMP Long Lartin – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³⁵ [HMP/YOI Erlestoke – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³⁶ [HMP Winchester – His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³⁷ [HMP Brixton – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

³⁸ [Annual Report 2023-24 – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

28. Supporting prison staff to help with detection of issues is important. At HMP/YOI Hatfield, prison staff received training in substance misuse, and a steroid awareness group was delivered jointly with gym staff. Meanwhile at HMP Rye Hill, all new prison custody officers received a half day training with Forward Trust staff to gain a better understanding of addictions and how to identify referrals.³⁹ At HMP Kirkham, patients could self-refer to substance misuse services at any time which was positive.⁴⁰ We also find more and more prisons where officers have been trained in how to administer nasal naloxone (a drug to reverse the effects of opiate overdose), which is a promising development.
29. In the better jails, core work by substance misuse teams is strengthened by a range of additional services and support, including ISFLs, mutual aid groups and a range of peer support. HMP Rye Hill had some excellent provision in place. Forward Trust delivered a range of interventions which included one-to-one, workbooks and groups in their bespoke unit. Meanwhile, the drug recovery team provided other enrichment activities and bespoke jobs in the DART garden where prisoners grew a variety of flowers and food. Prisoners we spoke with were very grateful for this opportunity.⁴¹
30. Where positive work has taken place in prison, it is essential that this is maintained through the gate and on release. We tend to find relatively good pre-release planning and effective joint working with community services and regional Reconnect teams to ensure continuity of treatment. At HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall the transfer and discharge of prisoners were well coordinated by the team, achieved through early engagement and effective planning. Prisoners consistently received information relating to harm reduction, tolerance, and relapse prevention throughout their sentence.⁴² In many prisons, where necessary, prisoners are also receiving naloxone on release, to help treat opiate overdose. At HMP Manchester, we noted the existence of a recovery hub, located just outside of the prison, which provided a range of advice and practical support on release.⁴³
31. Discharge from reception prisons can be more complicated, with some prisoners being released directly from court. At HMP Winchester, over 25% of prisoners were released directly from court unexpectedly. Staff were proactive in identifying those who did not return from court, to manage their release retrospectively, and those going to court left with some information in anticipation of this, but the situation was not ideal.⁴⁴

³⁹ [HMP Rye Hill – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁴⁰ [HMP Kirkham – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁴¹ [HMP Rye Hill – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁴² [HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁴³ [HMP Manchester – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

⁴⁴ [HMP Winchester – HM Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

32. For those released homeless it can be especially challenging to stay away from substances, and many end up being quickly recalled to prison.

Conclusion

33. Drug taking remains rife in many prisons with far too many prisoners, particularly with the ingress of drones, able to acquire their drug of choice. With organised crime gangs making large amounts of money out of what is a lucrative market and a population that does not have enough to do, including many who came into prison with a drug problem, this is a complex problem.

34. The inspectorate welcomes this timely inquiry but recognises that there is no single solution to the issue. Instead, a multi-faceted approach that seeks to tackle both supply and demand, while supporting prisoners through effective treatment and recovery services will be key.

I hope that you find this information useful. Should you require anything further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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