



Value-Based Metrics in Prison:

The role of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons in decision making and how this could meet new evidence requirements for prison reform

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prisons are facing unprecedented pressures, with the current focus in England and Wales on immediate reduction of capacity. The crisis of capacity has seen the Government take drastic measures, such as the reduction in Standard Determinate Sentences from 50% to 40% (SDS40) and with promises of expanding prisons in the near future (MoJ, 2025a). Yet, there are wider challenges appearing within prisons that are overlooked, including violence, self-harm, and suicide, which show little sign of improvement. The Prison and Probation Ombudsman's (PPO) annual report showed a total of 100 self-inflicted deaths in 2024-2025 (lower from the previous year by 1 death), likewise His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) stated that "violence rose considerably in some jails with little to encourage good behaviour" (HMIP, 2025: 23). Change is not apparent on these issues, as efforts to implement changes to the experiences of imprisonment are challenging politically and managerially (MoJ and HMPPS, 2025). Addressing wider challenges beyond capacity is critical for

long-term sustainability of prisons, therefore change is needed to ensure that everyday problems in prisons are not sidelined but instead placed directly before politicians responsible for prisons. This can be achieved by strengthening the political use of independent inspection of prisons, making it so that political leaders have the responsibility to respond and act on recommendations through policymaking. HMIP plays a crucial role in providing accountability for a service that sits outside of the public eye. HMIP's responsibility is to make recommendations that support changing practices within prisons and to report on treatment and conditions in prisons to political leaders (CJA 1982).

Political managers of prisons should be confident with being told what they do not want to hear, trusting HMIP to do this helps to give that principled challenge to political rhetoric. Therefore, mechanism should be put into place that prevent politicians 'closing the door' on what is said on the treatment and conditions within prisons (Simpson, 2024).

POLICY CONTEXT

Current challenges with the prison population stand as a priority for the current Government, identified by the Independent Sentencing Review (MoJ, 2025b) and the report from Woolf et al (2024) on sentence inflation. However, these reviews focus on changes to sentencing and not the treatment and conditions within prisons. This only leads to political rhetoric on prison expansion, prioritising populist sentiment of being “tough on crime”. Such rhetoric is inadequate in addressing the cultural and organisational challenges that result in the everyday harm experienced inside prisons and do not seek to challenge practice on the crises of violence, self-harm, and suicide seen across prisons. Current political strategies provide limited attention to address the everyday problems faced by staff and people in prisons, thus treatment and conditions are not changing to save lives and to make prisons safer and more effective at reducing reoffending. This was summarised by Harman (MP) when discussing prison suicide during a debate, where she claimed that “it is not that we do not know what needs to be done; it is just that we have not done it” (Hansard HC Deb., 20 March 2017).

In response to the Independent Sentencing Review (MoJ, 2025b), Lord Timpson, Prison Minister, stated that the in “response to the sentencing review, this Government will take the steps necessary to end the enduring capacity crisis we inherited and end the cycle of reoffending” (Hansard HL deb, vol 846: 2 June 2025). This provides an opportunity to consider not only the practices of sentencing, but the quality of treatment and conditions that are seen around prison sentences. This could be done by re-introducing some of the key strategies that were drafted for the

withdrawn Prisons and Court Bill 2017 (HC Bill 170), which saw HMIPs recommendations and reports requiring direct political response. The bill proposed new legislative relationships between HMIP and ministers and expanding HMIPs remit from treatment and conditions to always consider management and leadership. Despite withdrawal, opportunities now arise with the proposed action following the Independent Sentencing Review and the imminent response from the Government. New legislation can tackle both wider systemic issues of sentencing and capacity, alongside using independent inspections to construct policymaking in response to the everyday issues that appear within prisons. This will not only allow for everyday progressive change in prisons, but will create a mechanism so that unheard warnings are not being sidelined by wider political rhetoric on prisons and punishment. Research by Simpson (2024) necessitates a transformation in the political management of prisons, advocating for a shift from risk-centric managerial models towards using experiential approaches that prioritise processes and value-based metrics to inform decision making in prisons. Policy change is imperative to develop mechanisms and strategies to make sure that the everyday problems in prisons are seen as the responsibility of government, updating the legislation around HMIP provides an opportunity to ensure that the Government are listening to them

RESEARCH FINDINGS

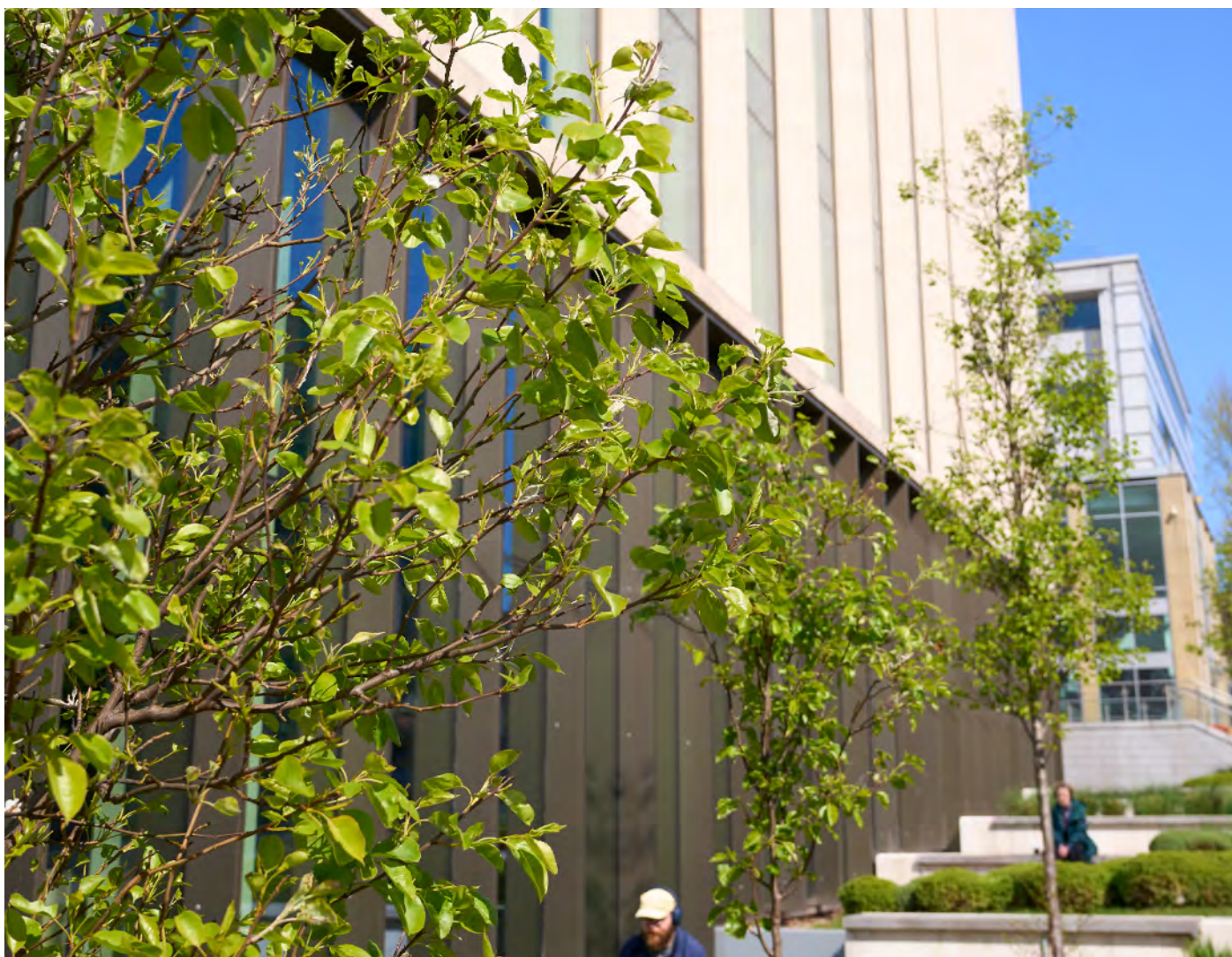
This briefing draws on research into how prison inspection and political discourse shape our understanding of action and inaction on the problems of violence, self-harm, and suicide in prisons across England and Wales (Simpson, 2024). Simpson’s (2024) research used a model of language analysis on documents and speeches from politicians and HMIP from 2015-2019, identifying the following challenges:

- Politicians employ “discursive veils”, which are language frameworks that prioritise neutrality, risk, and blame over specific direction, human empathy, and actions to reduce everyday problems in prisons. For example, by attributing rising self-harm and violence to individual prisoners, politicians employ a veil of blame that deflects attention from systemic policy failures
- Reporting concentrated on telling stories through statistics rather than lived experiences, thereby failing to acknowledge the intricate realities faced by people in prison. Data was used in documents over explanations of lived-experiences, used for political-gaming, and used as indicators for success and failure, such as in Prison Safety and Reform (MoJ, 2016: 41) which presented data on staffing numbers before claiming “it has become harder to retain existing staff” which does not capture experience.

- The use of vague, institutional terms like 'risk,' 'management,' and 'outcomes' can obscure who is responsible for problems in the prison system, making it harder to identify what needs to change and how to take effective action.

Yet political use of HMIP remains limited in informing political narratives of prisons, with HMIP’s voice not used in key decision-making and policy development, with 3 out of 8 documents selected using HMIP findings for their claims. This contributes to:

- A reactive rather than preventative approach to prison harm and treatment.
- Missed opportunities for reform, particularly those grounded in recognising the harm that people in prison experience through poor conditions in all adults prisons, such as living conditions that are dirty, inhumane and which show visible signs of self-harm.
- Ongoing neglect of prisoner and staff welfare, despite known solutions seen through parliamentary reports, for example the Harris Review (2015), which presents ample evidence and support for its recommendations.



KEY MESSAGES

1. Current political and policy responses to prison harm are inadequate because they prioritise capacity and risk management over the treatment and conditions within prisons.
2. Despite a decade of concerning data (MoJ, 2025a), institutional responses remain widely unsuccessful and are often obscured by overly technical language and data-driven reporting, reducing human activity to language based on risk and monitoring over treatment and conditions.
3. HMIP's recommendations will likely reduce violence, self-harm, and suicide in prisons, but they remain underused in practice.
4. We have the policy solutions, but we need the political drive to implement change on treatment and conditions.





POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Re-introduce legislation that makes it a political responsibility to act on all of HMIPs recommendations

To establish HMIP as a central voice in policy decision-making on prisons.

For politicians to use HMIP for value-based metrics on prisons.

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Simpson's areas of interest include penology, the sociology of imprisonment, prison accountability and penal policy – his current research utilises Critical Discourse Analysis to explore the sociology of prison reporting.

