



A thematic review of

Weekends in prison

by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

March 2023



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Introduction

Our inspections usually take place from Monday to Friday, but prisoners are, of course, detained for seven days a week. Alarming findings from our surveys over the past year indicated that their treatment and conditions in prisons at weekends required closer scrutiny.

For some time we have been reporting on the excessive amount of time prisoners still spend locked in prison cells despite the lifting of pandemic restrictions. But this post-COVID torpor is most acute at weekends. Of more than 6,000 prisoners surveyed in 2022–23, 60% of men told us that they spent less than two hours out of their cell on a typical Saturday or Sunday, compared with 42% during the week. This was more than double the proportion in the year before the pandemic (28%). The effect on women in prison was even starker; they were now four times more likely to say that they received less than two hours out of their cells at weekends. Two-thirds of women were unlocked for less than two hours on Saturdays and Sundays, compared with 36% on a typical weekday.

To find out more about the experience of prisoners at weekends, we carried out 11 unannounced day-long visits on either a Saturday or a Sunday to 11 adult prisons in England and Wales. The sites were chosen so that a range of different geographical locations and functional types of prison were represented. At each establishment, we asked for regime and staffing information, inspected the different areas of the prison, carried out wing roll checks, conducted focus groups where possible and spoke to prisoners about their experience of the weekend regime.

We found that most prisoners were spending at least 21 hours a day locked in their cells at the weekend – in 10 of the 11 prisons we visited, most prisoners could expect to be out of their cells for a maximum of just 2.5 hours a day. In the worst cases, prisoners received only 45 minutes to an hour and, in one prison, were not unlocked at all for one of the two days except to collect their meals. Libraries were closed at weekends, and many prisoners had little to no time at all in the fresh air and could not even have a shower. Even when prisoners were unlocked for a period of association, recreational equipment was broken and out of use, and there were too few activities to engage prisoners constructively. Combined with the severely limited time out of cell on weekdays, prisoners told us that their mental health and well-being was affected. For prisoners who were struggling, there were few opportunities to get the attention of a member of staff without pressing their emergency cell call bell.

Saturdays and Sundays are the days of the week when staffing in prisons is usually at its lowest and management presence is at its leanest. Some of the prisons we visited were struggling with acute prison officer shortfalls, and we found frontline staff working extremely hard to deliver even a minimal weekend regime. In some prisons, though, we saw missed opportunities to unlock prisoners for longer and engage more purposefully; practices introduced during the pandemic to only unlock prisoners in small groups and for a short amount of time were still in operation.

Levels of purposeful activity are usually bad enough during the week, but this series of prison inspections on Saturdays and Sundays shows that the legacy of the pandemic continues to inhibit activity to support prisoners to develop skills, engage with others and reduce their risk of reoffending, and that this is most apparent at weekends. At a time when we are increasingly concerned about self-harm, the cumulative effect that protracted periods locked up is having on prisoners' well-being and mental health is also extremely concerning. As pressure from prison populations rises, the situation can only worsen unless the prison service acts now.

Charlie Taylor

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

March 2023

Concerns

During this thematic review we identified the following concerns.

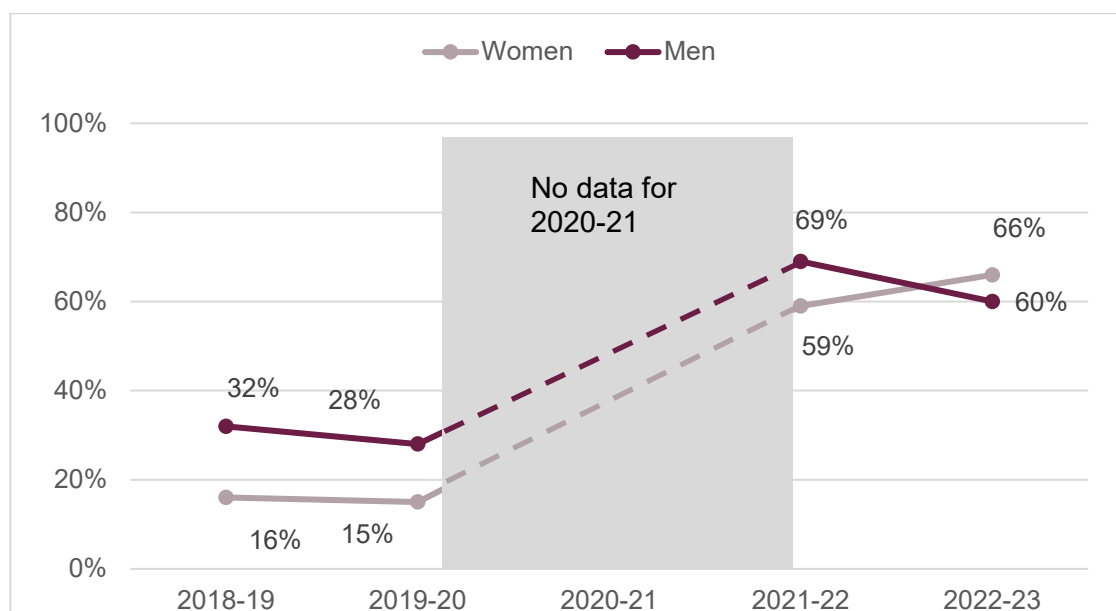
1. **Around 60% of prisoners have less than two hours out of cell each day at weekends.** This means they are locked up for longer than on weekdays and that the situation is worse than before the pandemic. This is likely to have a detrimental impact on their mental health and well-being.
2. **Most prisoners weren't unlocked for long enough at weekends to complete essential domestic tasks, such as showering, cleaning their cell, making phone calls, and submitting applications.**
3. **Where time unlocked included a period of association at weekends, prisoners were left with little to do.** There was little opportunity to socialise with peers, recreational equipment (such as pool tables) was broken or out of use, and there were few enrichment activities such as gardening, music or games.
4. **Opportunities for prisoners to engage in constructive activities – for exercise and to help them develop skills in preparation for release – were very limited if they existed at all.** Access to the gym was inconsistent and libraries were closed at weekends.
5. **At weekends, time in the open air for prisoners was not guaranteed, which was detrimental to their well-being.**

Key findings

Too much time spent locked up

1.1 Of the prisoners we surveyed in 2022–23, 60% of men told us that they spent less than two hours out of their cell on a typical Saturday or Sunday, more than double the proportion in the year before the pandemic (28%). The amount of time out of cell was also much less than on weekdays, when 42% of men said they spent less than two hours unlocked. The effect on women in prison was even starker; they were now four times more likely to say that they received less than two hours out of their cells at weekends.

Figure 1: Prisoners reporting that they usually spent less than two hours out of their cell on a typical Saturday or Sunday, 2018–19 to 2022–23, prisons in England and Wales.



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

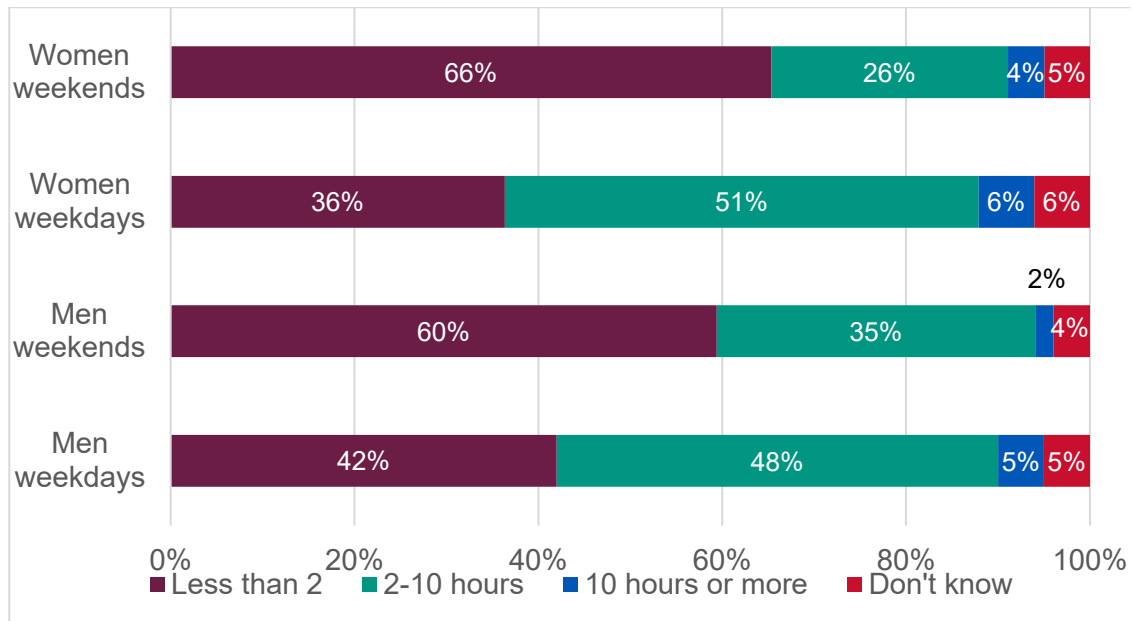
1.2 This was confirmed by our own observations. In 10 of the 11 prisons we visited, most prisoners could expect to be out of their cells for a maximum of 2.5 hours a day. In the worst cases, prisoners were not unlocked at all for one of the two weekend days, and others received just 45 to 60 minutes. Prisoners told us that this caused a great deal of frustration.

'It's depressing, 23 and half hour bang up at weekends and no opportunities, and they wonder why we misbehave.' (Prisoner)

1.3 The amount of time spent locked up on a Saturday and Sunday was longer than on weekdays in almost all prisons that we visited. Despite the end of pandemic restrictions, our survey showed that only 5% of

men were unlocked for more than 10 hours on weekdays, but this dropped to just 2% on a Saturday or Sunday.

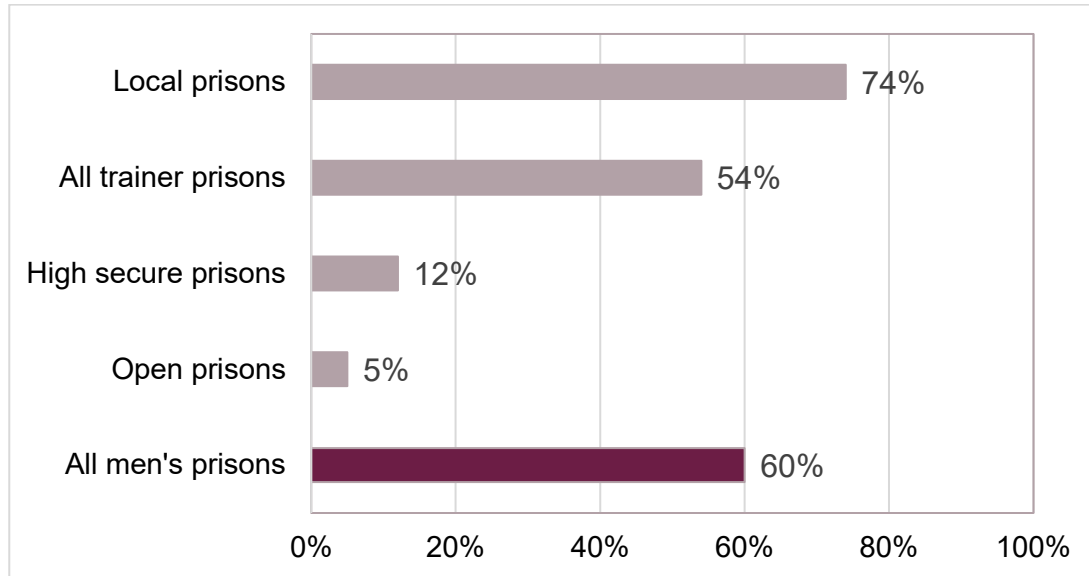
Figure 2: Time out of cell, weekends and weekdays, 2022–23, prisons in England and Wales.



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

- 1.4 Women prisoners, however, experienced the most disparity between time unlocked on weekdays and weekends; two-thirds were unlocked for less than two hours on Saturdays and Sundays compared with 36% on a typical weekday.
- 1.5 The amount of time men spent locked up also varied according to the type of prison. In local prisons, our survey found three-quarters were unlocked for less than two hours a day, compared with 54% in trainer prisons. Those in open prisons had considerably more time out of their cell, and prisoners in high secure establishments also spent less of their weekend locked up.

Figure 3: Prisoners reporting that they usually spent less than two hours out of their cell on a typical Saturday or Sunday, 2022–23, men’s prisons in England and Wales.



Source: HMI Prisons detainee surveys

1.6 Leaders claimed that chronic staffing shortages meant that they could not run a regime with more time out of cell at weekends. In addition, already limited regimes were frequently curtailed even further by acute and unpredictable staff shortages. Of concern, in one prison that we visited we were told of prison officers working long shifts – some in excess of 24 hours without an adequate break – because there were insufficient staff. After working all day in the prison, staff had volunteered to also cover the overnight watch for prisoners admitted to hospital. In another prison, however, we found staff sitting around rather than offering additional activities or support to prisoners, and some prisons we visited still only unlocked prisoners in small groups – a system introduced during the pandemic which still severely limited time out of cell.



An outdated notice in the association room at Brinsford

‘All the time it’s been short staff, short staff, short staff.’ (Prisoner)

Not enough to do on the wings

- 1.7 Limited time out of cell prevented prisoners from being able to do what they needed, such as making a phone call to family, asking staff for advice, getting some time in the fresh air, socialising with their peers or having a shower. In one prison, a prisoner told us:

‘I’ve been here six months and I’ve never had a shower on a Saturday.’

- 1.8 Meanwhile, as we saw during the pandemic, the sheer length of time that prisoners were locked up over the weekend – in some cases starting from Friday afternoons – was likely to have a detrimental impact on their mental well-being. One woman told us:

‘It’s inhumane. I wouldn’t treat an animal like this. I’ve been here three weeks and I’m lucky if I’ve been out for an hour a day at weekends – it’s so detrimental to your mental health.’

- 1.9 A minority of prisoners – for example those on enhanced wings or those required for work as orderlies or cleaners – could expect to be unlocked for longer. However, mirroring the pattern on weekdays, prisoners on the basic level of the incentives scheme or those in segregation experienced very poor regimes, often just 30 minutes to an hour a day out of their cells.
- 1.10 Prisoners had to use this limited time to complete essential domestic tasks like showering, obtaining cleaning materials, booking visits, submitting applications, complaints and menu choices, or getting outside for some fresh air. Prisoners without access to in-cell showers or phones were particularly disadvantaged in this respect. There were few opportunities for association or socialising with peers.

‘How is this association? You’re supposed to get kit change, shower... that’s not association. Association is supposed to be talking to people, relaxing.’ (Prisoner)

- 1.11 However, where prisoners’ time unlocked included a period of association, there was often little to occupy them and few enrichment activities in which they could participate. Even where limited and basic equipment was available, such as pool tables, it was often broken or out of use in prisons. For example, we observed prisoners sitting on a table tennis table because there was no ball to play with.

‘There’s no pool table, no table tennis, it’s sitting about talking about drugs all day.’ (Prisoner)



Table tennis tables with no bats or balls at Brinsford

1.12 Prisoners reported feeling bored and listless at weekends. One told us:

‘... not much to do. Weekends drag, it's the same old – pool, once you've had a game it's all the same. We just stand chatting over the railings.’

1.13 Wing cleaners were still able to do their jobs in most establishments, so communal areas remained as clean – or grubby – as they were during the week. Where wing cleaners were not unlocked, the environment quickly deteriorated, with overflowing bins and piles of rubbish bags waiting to be taken out.



Rubbish piled up at Garth (left) and overflowing bin at Rochester

- 1.14 As was the case on weekdays, very few prisoners were able to dine communally at weekends; this was only available in three of the 11 prisons we visited and, even then, only to certain groups of prisoners (for example those on the enhanced level of the incentives scheme). This was a missed opportunity – especially in establishments with adequate staff to supervise wings – to allow prisoners greater time out of cell and to socialise. Most prisoners did not have access to self-catering facilities and, where they did, the limited time out of cell and need to prioritise domestic tasks such as showering, meant that they could not always use them. For example, in one prison we found that one wing had a single microwave for 50 prisoners.



An unused dining table at Brinsford (left) and self-catering area at Garth

- 1.15 Prisoners typically received a hot lunch, which they collected at the servery, and a cold evening meal which was served at their door along with breakfast for the following day. Meals were often served far too early – at 11am in one prison we visited, with the evening meal and breakfast for the next day delivered by 3.30pm at some establishments. The evening meal represented the end of the day for prisoners; afterwards they were locked up until the following day and there was no evening association.

Case study: life in a local prison at the weekend

The published weekend regime gave most prisoners one hour out of cell during the weekend. This was for showers, exercise and structured wing activities.

With the exception of collecting their meal, most prisoners received no time out of cell on a Saturday.

Over the previous eight weeks the regime had been curtailed on every day apart from the day of our inspection, and all regime elements were more likely to be cancelled than delivered.

The hot meal, a roast dinner, was served at 11am on Sunday and we saw the cold evening meal, along with breakfast for the next day, being delivered at 3pm.

The library did not operate at the weekend, and the gym was only accessed consistently by 5% of the population.

Not much activity at the weekend

- 1.16 Opportunities for prisoners to leave the wing at weekends were often limited to gym sessions for those fortunate enough to access them, attending communal worship, and for a handful of kitchen, segregation and reception orderlies to attend work. Table 1 sets out the range of activities that we found offered across the 11 prisons that we inspected.
- 1.17 The library was closed at weekends in all the prisons we visited. One establishment intended to provide some library access but found they did not have enough staff to open the library most weekends. A prisoner told us of his frustration that he had no book to read in his cell as he had been unable to access the library since arriving at the prison some weeks ago. More positively, another prison we visited had small wing libraries that prisoners could use.
- 1.18 Most prisoners from majority faiths were able to access corporate worship at the weekends. However, this sometimes clashed with other activities such as gym and social visits, which limited attendance.
- 1.19 Most prisons ran at least some gym sessions at the weekend, although the number of prisoners that could access the gym and the consistency with which sessions were offered varied greatly. Leaders of some

establishments recognised the importance of gyms to the physical and mental health and well-being of prisoners and ensured that they were fully staffed over the weekends, that there were plenty of sessions for prisoners, and that there were a range of activities on offer. One prison had a parkrun at weekends, in which around 100 prisoners participated, and another had a game played against a community football team on site, which was positive. However, other establishments could only offer sessions to a limited number of prisoners due to a lack of staff, and in some establishments the gym remained closed all weekend.

- 1.20 It was not uncommon for prisoners to tell us that leaving the wing at weekends meant missing out on something else. For example, in one prison the chapel orderlies had to choose between going to work and having time in the fresh air; in another attending chapel meant foregoing association; and in another, kitchen workers worked from 9am until 3pm but were locked up when they returned and did not get association time. Long waiting times for medication also meant that prisoners in many establishments often missed chapel, gym sessions or time outside.



Unused outdoor exercise equipment at Leicester

- 1.21 Although most of the prisons we visited provided some opportunity to exercise outdoors over the weekend, this was often limited to half an hour or clashed with the chance to take a shower or carry out other domestic tasks. A prisoner told us about the impact of a lack of access to the open air:

'Makes you mentally unstable. I've not been getting no fresh air for days. It's unacceptable.'

Table 1: Activities on offer at weekends by institution inspected

Institution	Average time out of cell (hours per day)*	% of prisoners locked up **	Gym access	Library access	Social visits	Other activities
Aylesbury	2	47%	No	No	Yes	
Berwyn	2	50%	Good	No	Yes	parkrun on Saturday mornings
Brinsford	1	60%	Good	No	Yes	Weekly football match against external team
Channings Wood	4	24%	Good	No	Yes	
Eastwood Park	2.5	45%	Limited	No	Yes	
Garth	3	44%	Limited	No	Yes	
Leicester	1.5	40%	Limited	No	Yes	
Pentonville	1	40%	Very limited	No	Yes	
Rochester	2.5	51%	Limited	No	Yes	
Stafford	5	3%	Good	Sometimes	Yes	
Thameside	3	44%	Reasonable	No	Yes	

* Association/domestics (time for functional tasks, such as medication and meal collection) not included. ** During our roll checks.

Contact with family and friends at weekends

1.22 Social visits were available on Saturdays and Sundays in all the prisons we visited, which was positive. Although these were often busy, they were not oversubscribed. Delays to visit start times and some short, hour-long visit slots caused frustrations for prisoners whose families had travelled long distances. Secure video calls were available at weekends in only around half of the prisons we visited, but there were few slots available and uptake was low.

- 1.23 Prisoners with in-cell telephones were able to make phone calls at times that were convenient for their families and told us that this helped them to stay in touch. Prisoners without telephones in their cells could only make phone calls during their very limited time out of cell and they spent this time queuing, while those in shared cells with telephones got very little privacy on calls as they were locked up together for most of the day.

Less support available at weekends

- 1.24 Combined with the severely limited time out of cell on weekdays, prisoners told us that their mental health and well-being was affected by the amount of time spent locked up. Their ability to access support informally from staff or peers was hindered.

‘People that have got mental health problems, they suffer in silence behind their doors...’ (Prisoner)

- 1.25 There were fewer staff on duty than during the week, and the officers were also less likely to be familiar with the wing, the prisoners and their needs. We saw many staff remaining close to other officers and in offices, rather than spending time on the landings, which led to very limited one-to-one interactions with prisoners. For prisoners who were struggling, there were few opportunities to get the attention of a member of staff without pressing their emergency cell call bell.
- 1.26 Very few key work sessions were held at weekends, which was a further missed opportunity to make sure that prisoners struggling with the extended periods locked up at weekends could have a meaningful conversation with an officer who already knew them, their circumstances and their needs.

‘People that are struggling, that can’t cope – they get nothing.’ (Prisoner)

- 1.27 Case reviews for prisoners supported by the ACCT process (assessment, care in custody and teamwork case management for those at risk of self-harm or suicide) were not generally held at weekends as some of the necessary contributors, such as mental health professionals, were not available. Access to Listeners (prisoners trained by the Samaritans to provide peer support to other prisoners) was good at some establishments, with staff and prisoners alike saying Listeners could be unlocked if a prisoner asked to speak to one. However, we met one prisoner subject to constant observation because of his risk of self-harm who had only left his cell to collect medication since arriving at the prison on the Friday. The person watching him did not know his name.
- 1.28 Prisoners could still get their medication at the weekend, at a similar time to during the week. However, queues could be long, and, in many

establishments, prisoners told us that queuing for medication at weekends meant missing out on association, gym, or time outside.

- 1.29 Most prisons did not schedule routine medical appointments for weekends, but provided emergency cover 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, in one prison, access to even emergency health care was particularly poor, and we saw a prisoner with a suspected fractured hand being told no one was available to take him for an X-ray and he would have to wait until the following day (Monday).

Appendix I Methodology

The fieldwork for this report was undertaken in January and February 2023. Inspectors carried out 11 unannounced day-long visits on either a Saturday or a Sunday to 11 adult prisons in England and Wales. The sites were chosen so that a range of different geographical locations and functional types of prison were represented.

The prisons visited were:

HMP Aylesbury
HMP Berwyn
HMP Brinsford
HMP Channings Wood
HMP Eastwood Park
HMP Garth
HMP Leicester
HMP Pentonville
HMP Rochester
HMP Stafford
HMP Thameside

At each establishment, we asked for regime and staffing information, inspected the different areas of the prison, carried out roll checks on each wing, conducted focus groups where possible and spoke to prisoners about their experience of the weekend regime. We also requested follow-up information from each of the establishments that we visited, outlining the regime in operation and any curtailments over the previous eight weekends.

The project was conducted in line with HM Inspectorate of Prisons' ethical principles for research activities (see <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/about-ourinspections/research/ethical-principles-for-research>). Inspectors paid particular attention to the well-being of the detainees we spoke to, reporting any safeguarding concerns to prison staff, and adhered to the Inspectorate's safeguarding protocol for adults (see <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wpcontent/uploads/sites/4/2019/12/HMIP-Safeguarding-Adults-Protocol-Nov-2019.pdf>).

Project team

This report was written by Lindsay Jones (Inspector) with assistance from Sara Pennington (Team Leader). The project and fieldwork team included the following inspection staff: Jane Boys, Ian Dickens, David Foot, Sumayyah Hassam, Natalie Heeks, Amelia Horn, Angela Johnson, Angus Jones, Chelsey Pattinson, Kellie Reeve, Paul Rowlands, Alex Scragg, Rebecca Stanbury, Nadia Syed, Shaun Thomson and Donna Ward.

Appendix II Glossary

We try to make our reports as clear as possible, and this short glossary should help to explain some of the specialist terms you may find. If you need an explanation of any other terms, please see the longer glossary, available on our website at: <http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprison/about-our-inspections/>

Key worker scheme

The key worker scheme operates across the closed male estate and is one element of the Offender Management in Custody (OMiC) model. All prison officers have a caseload of around six prisoners. The aim is to enable staff to develop constructive, motivational relationships with prisoners, which can support and encourage them to work towards positive rehabilitative goals.

Leader

In this report the term 'leader' refers to anyone with leadership or management responsibility in the prison system. We will direct our narrative at the level of leadership which has the most capacity to influence a particular outcome.

Parkrun

Every Saturday morning hundreds of people in prisons and young offender institutions walk, jog or run 5km or volunteer to help on the course, as part of the global parkrun community.

Secure video calls

A system commissioned by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) that requires users to download an app to their phone or computer. Before a call can be booked, users must upload valid ID.

Time out of cell

Time out of cell, in addition to formal 'purposeful activity', includes any time prisoners are out of their cells to associate or use communal facilities to take showers or make telephone calls.

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