

Progress in the Penal System (PIPS)

A framework for penal reform

2024

Guiding Principles of Penal Reform

1. Imprisonment is viewed as a sanction of last resort.
2. The harms and costs associated with imprisonment are recognised.
3. The 'deprivation of liberty' principle is adhered to, whereby the loss of freedom is viewed as the punishment.
4. The security and protection of prisoners is balanced with provision of a safe and purposeful regime.
5. Human rights, equality, and social justice are protected and promoted.
6. There is a focus on rehabilitation, desistance, and reintegration.

Values of the Penal System

- Safety, protection of life and a duty of care;
- Respect, dignity, and protection from inhumane, discriminatory or degrading treatment;
- Accountability and transparency;
- Consistency and promotion of fairness and equality;
- Promotion and maintenance of good relationships between prisoners, staff and management.



Responsibility for the content of this report lies solely with the Irish Penal Reform Trust.

The Irish Penal Reform Trust is an independent nongovernmental organisation campaigning for the rights of everyone in the penal system, with prison as a last resort.

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2024



List of acronyms

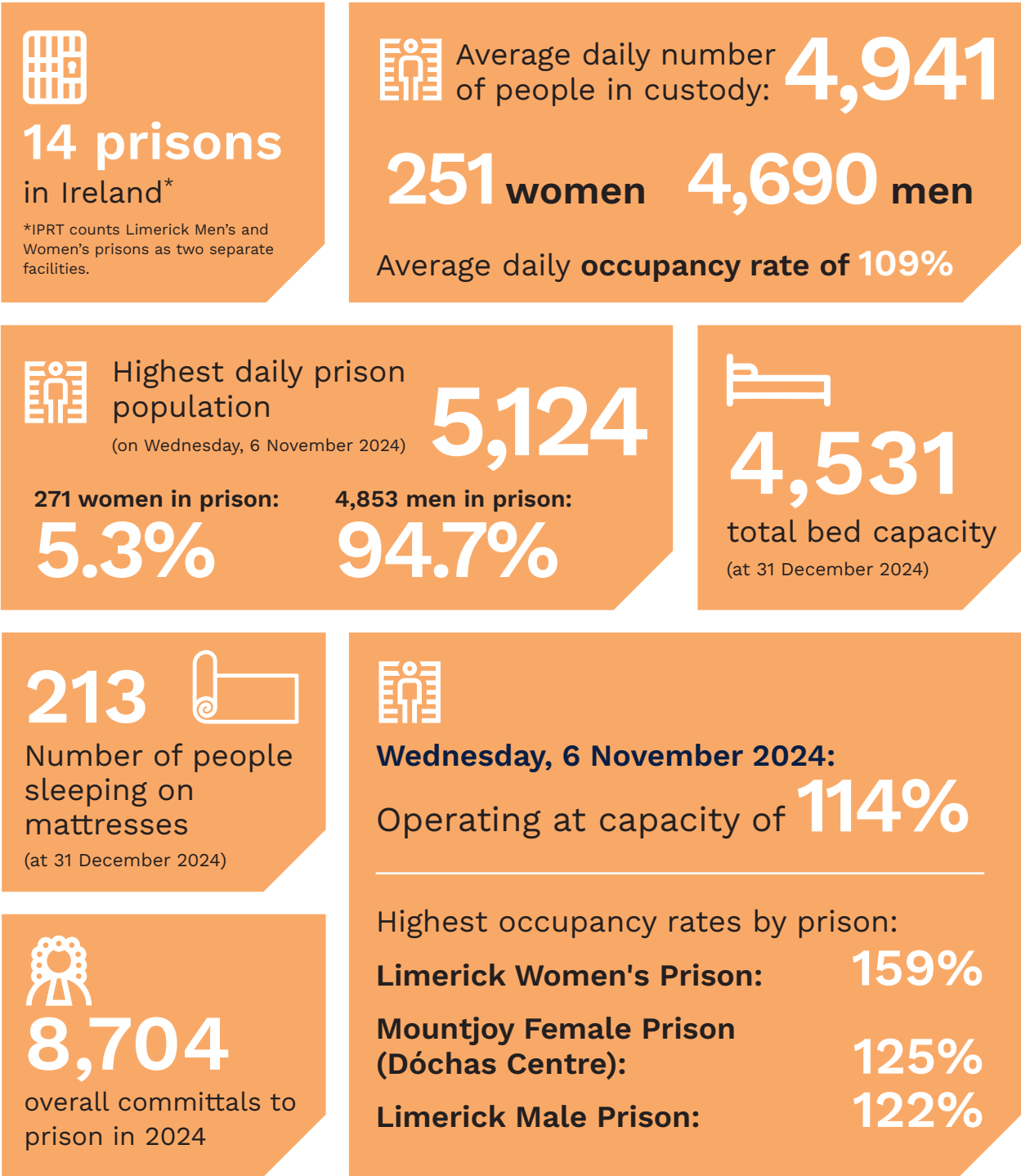
APT	Association for the Prevention of Torture
C&R	Control and Restraint
CMH	Central Mental Hospital
CPT	European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
CSO	Community Service Order
DIC	Death in custody
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EM	Electronic monitoring
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
GP	General Practitioner
HNA	Health Needs Assessment
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IHREC	Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
ILU	Independent Living Unit
IPRT	Irish Penal Reform Trust
IPS	Irish Prison Service
ISM	Integrated Sentence Management
MQI	Merchants Quay Ireland
NPM	National Preventive Mechanism
OIP	Office of the Inspector of Prisons
OPCAT	Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
PICLS	Prison In-reach and Court Liaison Service
PIMS	Prisoner Information Management System
PIPS	Progress in the Penal System
PQ	Parliamentary Question
PVC	Prison Visiting Committee
SPT	Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of the Committee against Torture

Contents

At a Glance		
The Irish Penal System in 2024	1	
Progress in the Penal System throughout 2024	1	
Acknowledgments	2	
Foreword	3	
Introduction	5	
Spotlight Focus: Engaging in Oversight	7	
Section A: An effective and humane penal system	13	
1. Towards progressive penal policy	14	
2. Imprisonment as a last resort	16	
3. Safe custody limits	18	
4. Prison size	20	
5. Minimum prison security settings	22	
6. Open prison provision	22	
Overall assessment: An effective and humane penal system	24	
Section B: Prison conditions	25	
7. Humane prison conditions	26	
8. In-cell sanitation	28	
9. Single cell accommodation	29	
10. Pre-trial detention as an exceptional measure	31	
11. Family contact	34	
12. Access to healthcare services	36	
13. Mental healthcare	37	
14. Drug and alcohol treatment	40	
15. Privacy	43	
Overall assessment: Prison conditions	44	
Section C: Prison regimes	47	
16. Time out-of-cell	48	
17. Sentence management	49	
18. Life skills	51	
19. Education and training	52	
20. Community engagement and involvement	54	
21. Political and civic participation	55	
Overall assessment: Prison regimes	57	
Section D: Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms	59	
22. Complaints system	60	
23. Independent complaints review and appeals mechanisms	62	
24. Inspections and monitoring	62	
25. Investigations into deaths in custody	65	
Overall assessment: Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms	67	
Section E: Safety and protection in Irish prisons	69	
26. Solitary confinement	70	
27. Safety and security in Irish prisons	72	
28. Prison escorts	74	
29. Staff training	74	
30. Developing positive relationships and work culture	74	
31. Use of force and restraints	75	
32. Cohorts at risk of discrimination	79	
Overall assessment: Safety and protection in Irish prisons	81	
Section F: Release and reintegration	83	
33. Parole System	84	
34 & 35. Release planning	86	
Overall assessment: Release and reintegration	88	
Summary of assessment of Standards and Recommendations	89	
Spotlight Focus: Engaging in Oversight	90	
An effective and humane penal system	91	
Prison conditions	93	
Prison regimes	95	
Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms	97	
Safety and protection in Irish prisons	98	
Release and reintegration	100	

At a Glance

The Irish Penal System in 2024





1,723

Community Service
Orders made in 2024



31 Deaths

in custody or within one month of
temporary release



€99,072

average annual cost of
an available, staffed
prison space



€57 million

Funding allocated to
the Probation Service
in 2024



€502 million

Funding allocated to
the Irish Prison
Service in 2024



14 of 76

parole applications finalised by the
Parole Board in 2024 were granted

Progress in the Penal System throughout 2024

31 Standards Assessed

Progress in 3 standards



Regress in 11 standards



No change in 7 standards



9 standards assessed as mixed



Unable to make final assessment on 1 standard

50 recommendations for improvement



Acknowledgements

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) would like to express sincere gratitude to our donor-advised family fund and Community Foundation Ireland for their continued financial support, which makes the Progress in the Penal System (PIPS) project possible. Without their support, this multi-annual agenda-setting piece of work would not exist.

IPRT would also like to thank the PIPS Advisory Group – Ashling Golden (Chair), Damien Quinn, Professor Kathleen Lynch, Dr Róisín Mulgrew, and Vivian Geiran – for their support, insights, and advice in preparing this edition of PIPS.

IPRT would like to thank the Irish Prison Service for its engagement on PIPS. While we recognise it was not possible to provide data in all requested areas, we appreciate the information we did receive, and hope that in future years we can build on this. We would also like to thank all other stakeholders who contributed their insights, views, and ideas, particularly individuals with lived experience of prison, and civil society organisations working within the prison system.

We would like to extend special thanks to former IPRT staff members who have previously worked on the PIPS project, including Michelle Martyn, Sarahjane McCreery, and Pamela Drumgoole. The strong foundations laid in previous iterations of the PIPS project are critical for its continued success.

Responsibility for the content of the report lies solely with IPRT.

Tom Lord

Policy and Research Coordinator,
Irish Penal Reform Trust

Foreword

Anyone familiar with IPRT’s Progress in the Penal System (PIPS)’ report will know that it aims to take stock of developments in Irish penal policy and provide a temperature check of how the penal system overall is faring for people in detention and the wider criminal justice system.

This seventh edition of Progress in the Penal System focuses on developments in 2024 and unfortunately does not make for an uplifting read. In June 2024, for the first time ever the prison population exceeded 5,000 people, marking a new record and a prison overcrowding crisis the likes of which we have never before experienced. Conditions across the prison estate have continued to deteriorate, with more people sharing cramped cells designed for single occupancy, longer waiting lists for overstretched yet necessary services, and conditions falling far below an acceptable standard to the point where they have been described as “degrading” and “inhumane” by both the Office of the Inspector of Prisons and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture’s (CPT), terminology that neither body uses lightly. Disturbingly, 31 people died in custody or within one month of temporary release, again a new record.

In these types of crisis situations, from the data available, it is clear that people in prison are not afforded their right to dignity. I am extremely conscious as this report goes to print that we are regularly reaching new records, and unless clear and decisive action is taken, this trend will not reverse any time soon. There are now more people imprisoned in Ireland than at any other point in our history.

The CPT’s official visit to Ireland in May 2024 was timely and welcome. While the report was not published until July 2025, we have referenced the Committee’s report and recommendations as they relate to 2024. Their critical findings are sobering, yet many of their recommendations have not been implemented. Indeed, many of the recommendations made by the CPT are the same recommendations that have not been implemented for over a decade. While the Irish Prison Service (IPS) has accepted the premise of many of the recommendations made, it maintains it is not in a position to deliver on recommendations for improvement while the prison population remains so high. However, it is

important to recognise that a system-wide approach is needed with leadership from government. Nowhere is this more obvious than the failure to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), a longstanding recommendation from oversight and human rights agencies.

The Chief Inspector of Prisons has also sounded the alarm with his findings from unannounced general inspections of seven Irish prisons throughout 2023 and 2024, as well as a follow-up inspection to Cloverhill Prison and thematic visits to seven prisons examining the provision of psychiatric care. While these inspections – the first full general inspections that many of these prisons have received since 2014 – provide critical external scrutiny, the reports from these inspections had not been published by mid-November 2025. The decision to publish continues to lie with the Minister for Justice rather than the inspectorate itself.

The need for transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement with oversight bodies becomes even more important when the prison system is under such pressure. IPRT places a particular spotlight on this in *PIPS 2024*. We recognise that many of the steps taken by the IPS and other agencies in 2024 would result in vast improvements and meaningful change if they were not in a crisis situation, which is why many of the Standards in the report have been assessed as ‘mixed’ or ‘no change’. However, we are concerned by the regress in a number of key areas, and we only saw significant progress in three Standards.

While these oversight reports, including PIPS, cumulatively paint a troubling picture, we are convinced that these issues do not have to become a permanent feature of our penal system. Recommendations made by oversight bodies, as well those in Department of Justice and IPS policy reviews and assessments, all provide a clear roadmap for improvement. However, it is not up to the IPS or Department of Justice alone to implement these recommendations – many

demand the input of other government agencies, as well as adequate resourcing. Far too often, the prison system is left to care for people who have been failed by social services and health systems that have not responded to their underlying needs and trauma. This is evident in the number of people entering and leaving prison with no fixed abode, in the lengthy waiting lists for mental health and addiction supports and the ever-increasing number of people on short sentences, often for minor offences.

IPRT firmly believes that solutions to these challenges lie in an effective community sanctions regime, alternative justice pathways for people experiencing severe mental health or addiction issues, understanding and addressing the underlying causes of offending, and delivering effective programmes and services within prisons that assist with rehabilitation and social reintegration. Many practical responses to these problems have already been identified in the 2024 Final Report by the Prison Overcrowding Response Group.

Regardless of the pressures on the system, Ireland cannot renege on its obligation, founded in both domestic and international law, to ensure that prison conditions do not violate a person's dignity. What is needed now is the political will to take meaningful and swift action to tackle overcrowding, divert people from prison, and ensure that prison is truly a last resort. We welcome the fact that the new Minister for Justice has indicated support for expanding the use of community-based sanctions and committed to progress key pieces of legislation to improve accountability and oversight. IPRT looks forward to seeing these much-needed reforms become a reality as a matter of priority.



Saoirse Brady
Executive Director

Introduction

When first launched in 2017, the *Progress in the Penal System* (PIPS) project set out a clear vision for Ireland's penal system and aspired for Ireland to become a world leader in upholding the rights of people in prison. During this time, we have seen significant changes in the Irish penal context, not least due to the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of severe overcrowding in Irish prisons.

Overview of the PIPS project

Progress in the Penal System 2024 is the seventh edition of PIPS, and the first PIPS report to be published since *PIPS 2022* in May 2023.

From the outset, the overall purpose of the PIPS project has been to promote and assess progress across the broad range of issues in Ireland's penal system, guided by a set of 35 standards developed by IPRT. These standards, informed by international human rights standards and best-practice, provide a framework for assessing progress and outline IPRT's expectations for penal policy and the conditions and treatment experienced by people in Irish prisons. These are not just minimum standards to be met: IPRT maintains that our standards can and should be exceeded. Overall, PIPS is guided by the principles and values of penal reform, including:

- Prison itself is damaging and therefore must be used as a last resort.
- The deprivation of liberty is the punishment, and prison conditions cannot be used as further punishment.¹

Through the PIPS project, IPRT has established a system where the national situation in the penal system is tracked and independently analysed on a regular basis. In doing so, it seeks to inform a wide range of stakeholders about the current state of the Irish penal system, including criminal justice professionals, policymakers, legislators, politicians, media and the general public. IPRT hopes that PIPS will encourage and inspire stakeholders to lead and work towards a progressive penal system that respects, protects, promotes, and fulfils the rights of all individuals in contact with the penal system.

Current edition of PIPS

Progress in the Penal System 2024 sets the scene for the next three-year cycle of the project. While it principally focuses on the 2024 calendar year, it also draws on key developments in the penal

system since the last edition of PIPS was published in May 2023. It also uses data and information from sources published throughout 2025, including the report of European Committee for the Prevention of Torture following its visit to Ireland in May 2024, published in July 2025.

For this 2024 edition of PIPS, we reviewed the language used in each of the 35 PIPS standards to ensure they remain relevant, current and aligned with international standards, making amendments as necessary. Notably, we have avoided using the term 'prisoner' where possible, as this term can have negative connotations and serves to define people by their imprisonment, rather than as individuals whose rights should be retained to the greatest extent possible throughout their imprisonment and in their wider contact with the penal system.

In *PIPS 2024*, we assessed 31 of the 35 PIPS standards. Challenges with obtaining relevant and up-to-date information and data remain a barrier in the production of PIPS, particularly in the face of internal time and capacity constraints. IPRT continues to explore avenues to obtain relevant data and information to inform PIPS, and we undertake to ensure all standards are assessed throughout the next three-year PIPS cycle.

PIPS 2024 was guided by an Advisory Group of five experts on Irish penal policy and issues related to the rights of people in prison. The Advisory Group met three times throughout 2025 and provided insights and feedback on the PIPS standards, draft sections of the report and assessment of progress.

How to read *PIPS 2024*

Through our assessment of the PIPS standards, PIPS considers a broad range of issues across the Irish penal system.

The first section of this report explores several issues related to oversight, transparency and accountability within the Irish penal system as a 'Spotlight focus'. The following sections outline

¹ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System: A framework for penal reform* (2017) (2017).

developments across the PIPS standards, clustered by themes. These are:

Section A. An effective and humane penal system

Section B. Prison conditions

Section C. Prison regimes

Section D. Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms

Section E. Safety and protection in Irish prisons

Section F. Release and reintegration

PIPS does not purport or aspire to capture everything that happened in a given year under each standard. Rather, PIPS provides insights into discrete areas of penal policy and practice, collating them together in a single report. In doing so, it hopes to demonstrate the interconnected nature of penal policy and issues in prisons which impact on the conditions and treatment experienced by people in Ireland's prisons.

PIPS provides an overarching assessment of developments throughout 2024 as 'Progress', 'Regress', 'Mixed', or 'No change'. These are explained below:

- **Progress:** Where there is clear movement towards achieving a standard.
- **Regress:** Where there is clear movement away from achieving a standard.
- **Mixed:** Where there has been both movement towards and away from achieving a standard.
- **No change:** Where there has been neither significant movement towards or away from achieving a standard.

Throughout the report, we have indicated standards that we have not assessed due to challenges associated with monitoring the standard and obtaining relevant, up-to-date data. As noted above, it is intended for these standards to be assessed in future PIPS reports. Further, one standard (Standard 26: Solitary confinement, p. 70) we have marked as 'Unable to assess' due to the lack of data available, despite requests for this information.

Assessment of progress

IPRT uses a variety of different sources to assess progress under each standard. This includes a comprehensive desk review of published information and reports; examining information provided in response to parliamentary questions

and debates; requesting written information and data directly from stakeholders; and engaging directly with stakeholders, including community-based organisation and people with lived experience of the criminal justice system.

This report also draws valuable insights from the reports of other oversight bodies on their monitoring activities throughout 2024. This includes the report of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture following its 2024 to Ireland,² and the 2024 annual report of the Office of the Inspector of Prisons.³ Prison Visiting Committee reports from 2023 have also been drawn on to inform this report; at the time of writing, the reports for 2024 had not yet been published.

Where we use 'Minister for Justice' in this report, this may be in relation to the current Minister, Jim O'Callaghan TD, or previous recent Ministers, including Helen McEntee TD, Heather Humphreys TD, and Simon Harris TD. IPRT has adopted the approach of the Oireachtas and Department of Justice in this regard.

The voices of people with experience of the penal system

IPRT is committed to engaging with people with lived experience of the penal system and incorporating their views and stories into PIPS. One of key long-terms goals of the PIPS project is to involve people with lived experience as a central component of our monitoring of the penal system.

For *PIPS 2024*, IPRT engaged with a number of people with recent experience of prison through undertaking informal, semi-structured focus groups and interviews. As part of our wider work, we also conducted an annual survey of our members in prison, and regularly engage with people with recent experience of prison, and their families, via our information line. All of these engagements provide a crucial insight into individuals' experiences of prison, some of which have been highlighted in this report. Overall, we are working towards enhancing our engagement with people with lived experience of incarceration, and hope that this will become a central aspect of future PIPS reports.

² European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Report to the Irish Government on the visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 21 to 31 May 2024* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025).

³ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025).

Spotlight Focus:
**Engaging in
Oversight**

Spotlight Focus

Engaging in Oversight: the need for greater transparency and accountability in the Irish penal system

The need for greater transparency and accountability in Ireland's penal system has been a recurring theme throughout the PIPS project. *PIPS 2019* focused specifically on accountability structures throughout the penal system, exploring the meaning of accountability in penal policy, the courts, and within prisons themselves.¹ *PIPS 2021*, meanwhile, highlighted the need for greater transparency in the Irish penal system, highlighting inadequacies in the available data related to Ireland's penal system and outlining core data expectations to address these gaps.²

Transparency, accountability, and effective prison oversight in Ireland is more important now than ever before. The number of people in custody in Irish prisons was the highest in 2024 than it had ever been, and this has only increased throughout 2025. This has resulted in acute prison overcrowding, which affects every aspect of prison life. Both the Office of the Inspector of Prisons (OIP) and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) have unequivocally stated their view that the conditions experienced by many in Irish prisons due to overcrowding may amount to inhuman and degrading treatment. This is contrary to Ireland's obligations under both the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 3) and the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Article 16).

Alongside current conditions of detention in Ireland, IPRT is concerned about the failure of relevant bodies across the penal system to establish effective oversight systems, implement the recommendations of oversight bodies, and collect and publish data necessary to enable civil society participation in prison oversight. Each of these issues is discussed in turn below.

OPCAT ratification in Ireland – a lack of commitment to improved oversight?

A key issue related to prison oversight in Ireland is the continued failure of successive governments – including the current Government – to ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT). OPCAT establishes a system of regular visits to all places of detention by independent domestic bodies (known as 'National Preventive Mechanisms' (NPMs)) and by the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT). The purpose of these visits is to identify situations that may risk torture or ill-treatment occurring, and to proactively address these through constructive dialogue with the relevant state agencies, NPMs, and the SPT. Internationally, OPCAT has been marked as a significant step forward in addressing torture and ill-treatment in places of detention through its 'preventive approach', which seeks to avert human rights abuses in places of detention before they occur. While Ireland signed OPCAT in October 2007, the Government has still not incorporated it into domestic legislation and, as such, has not ratified it. At the time of publication of *PIPS 2024*, Ireland is the only European Union member state and the only Council of Europe state to have not ratified OPCAT, meaning that the SPT cannot conduct monitoring visits and that Ireland has no designated NPM.

While successive Governments have committed to ratifying OPCAT,³ this will not be done until the underpinning domestic legislation is enacted. In July 2022, the General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022 was published, which would pave the way for the State to ratify OPCAT and transform the current Office of the Inspector of Prisons into the Inspectorate of

¹ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System: A framework for penal reform (2019)* (2019), 13-19.

² Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System: The need for transparency (2021)* (2022).

³ See, for example, Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future (2020)*, and Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future (2025)*.

Places of Detention, with scope to inspect all places where an individual may be deprived of their liberty in the justice sector.⁴

The Bill underwent scrutiny by the Joint Committee on Justice in late-2022 and the final *Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022* was published in March 2023.⁵ However, an updated version of the Bill has not yet been published. Notably, both the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)⁶ and IPRT⁷ have highlighted that it is not necessary to enact legislation at the national level before ratification. Article 24 of OPCAT provides that a State – upon ratification – may make a declaration postponing the implementation of their obligations under Part III of OPCAT (relating to visits from the SPT) or Part IV (relating to NPMs) for a maximum of three years (extendable by a further two years).⁸ In the absence of the Bill progressing, the Government should consider ratifying OPCAT immediately to demonstrate its commitment to upholding its international human rights obligations and its recognition the value of independent, external scrutiny of places of detention.

Overall, IPRT reiterates our recommendation that the Government ratify OPCAT as a matter of urgency in advance of the enactment of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill and seek a postponement of their obligations until the legislation is commenced at a national level. Alternatively, the Bill should be published as a matter of priority and enacted in 2026.

Constructive engagement and dialogue with oversight bodies

Designating NPMs and allowing visits to Ireland by international oversight bodies, however, are on their own insufficient to uphold the rights of those deprived of their liberty. It also requires genuine engagement with these bodies to understand their concerns, as well as the allocation of sufficient resources to implement their recommendations. This process of ‘constructive dialogue’ between the State party, the SPT, and the NPM, is at the heart of OPCAT.⁹ Further, Article 3 of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which Ireland ratified in 1989, obliges the ‘competent national authorities of the Party concerned’ to cooperate with the CPT to improve the situation of people deprived of their liberty.¹⁰

The CPT most recently visited Ireland in May 2024.¹¹ During its visit, the CPT visited six Irish prisons, and in its subsequent report noted that it had experienced good cooperation with Irish authorities on accessing places of detention. However, it also highlighted serious concerns in relation to Ireland’s implementation of its previous recommendations. The CPT stated:

“... the principle of cooperation set out in Article 3 of the Convention is not limited to steps taken to facilitate the task of a visiting delegation. It also requires that decisive action be taken to improve the situation in light of the CPT’s recommendations, and that those recommendations are effectively implemented in practice. ... In this respect, the CPT remains concerned about the lack of implementation of

⁴ Department of Justice, ‘Minister for Justice publishes General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill’ (24 June 2022) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/press-releases/minister-for-justice-publishes-general-scheme-of-the-inspection-of-places-of-detention-bill/>>

⁵ Joint Committee on Justice, *Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill* (33/JC/36, 2023).

⁶ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *Ireland and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Submission to the Human Rights Committee on Ireland’s fifth periodic report* (2022), 63; and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, *Ireland and the Convention against Torture: Submission to the United Nations Committee against Torture on Ireland’s second periodic report* (2017), 4.

⁷ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Submission to the Joint Committee on Justice on the General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022* (2022), 36.

⁸ This is extendable by an additional two years upon representations being made to the UN Committee against Torture by the State Party and following consultation with the SPT.

⁹ Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (adopted 18 December 2002, entered into force 22 June 2006) 2375 UNTS 237, Articles 12(d) and 22.

¹⁰ European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (adopted 26 November 1987, entered into force 1 February 1989) ETS No 126, Article 3.

¹¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Report to the Irish Government on the visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 21 to 31 May 2024* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 7.

a number of the CPT's long-standing recommendations."¹²

IPRT echoes the concerns of the CPT on the lack of progress on implementing key recommendations to improve the conditions of detention and treatment of people in Irish prisons and **calls on the Government and Irish Prison Service (IPS) to set out a clear plan of action with defined timelines for implementing the CPT's recommendations.**

IPRT is also disappointed to note the lack of cross-agency input on addressing the impacts of overcrowding highlighted in the report of the CPT. IPRT reiterates that the State *as a whole* bears a duty to prevent ill-treatment in Irish prisons. As such, it is disappointing that the State response to the CPT does not appear to accept a number of recommendations solely due to implementation challenges, including recommendations relating to:

- Eliminating the use of mattresses on floors to accommodation people, particularly those with mental health concerns and other vulnerabilities,¹³
- Minimum cell space requirements,¹⁴
- Partitioning of toilets,¹⁵ and
- Increasing the length of family visits and outbound telephone calls.¹⁶

Given the challenges posed by prison overcrowding, responsibility for implementing these recommendations does not fall solely on the IPS. Rather, the Government must take clear and immediate actions to reduce the prison population to enable the IPS to implement these recommendations. In this context, it is disappointing that a more holistic State response was not provided to the CPT. IPRT considers that this is a missed opportunity to have outlined in detail how other government departments and agencies plan to deliver on key recommendations

by the CPT, in particular in the areas of healthcare, mental healthcare and housing.

IPRT therefore recommends that all recommendations made by international oversight bodies, including the CPT, are considered and responded to by all appropriate and competent State authorities. In many cases, while consideration of recommendations will require input from both the IPS and the Department of Justice, other departments or agencies may bear overall responsibility.

Publication of inspection and visit reports

A further key area of concern to IPRT is the continued lack of publication of inspection reports of the OIP. This severely impacts transparency and inhibits oversight by civil society organisations such as IPRT. The OIP currently does not have authority to publish its inspection reports directly. In accordance with section 31 of the Prisons Act 2007, inspection reports are submitted to the Minister for Justice, and the decision to publish a report lies with the Minister.¹⁷

The European Prison Rules are clear that the findings of inspections bodies must be made public, stating: "... prisons shall be monitored by a designated independent body or bodies, **whose findings shall be made public**" (emphasis added).¹⁸ Further, section 31(3) of the Prisons Act 2007 provides that:

As soon as practicable after receiving the report, the Minister shall, subject to subsection (4), cause a copy of it to be laid before each House of the Oireachtas **and to be published** (emphasis added).¹⁹

While subsection (4) provides that the Minister may omit any matter in a report that prejudices prison or state security, infringes on the constitutional rights of any person, or would be contrary to the public interest,²⁰ this does not

¹² European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Report to the Irish Government on the visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 21 to 31 May 2024* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 7.

¹³ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Response of the Irish Government to the report of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) on its visit to Ireland from 21 to 31 May 2024*, (CPT/Inf (2025) 23, 2025), 17.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 14 and 34.

¹⁷ Prisons Act 2007, s 3.

¹⁸ Council of Europe, *Recommendation Rec(2006)-2-rev of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the European Prison Rules* (adopted 11 January 2006; revised 1 July 2020), Rule 93.1.

¹⁹ Prisons Act 2007, s 31(3).

²⁰ *ibid.*, s 31(4).

prevent the overall publication of a report with necessary omissions or redactions. It would therefore appear that the Government is not upholding its obligations under both the European Prison Rules and domestic legislation to publish OIP reports.

Article 18 of OPCAT requires that NPMs are functionally independent, and therefore NPMs must have the freedom to decide whether to publish visit reports.²¹ As such, to be compliant with OPCAT, the Inspection of the Places of Detention Bill must ensure that the NPM has authority to publish its own reports.

IPRT maintains that inspection reports should be published in a timely manner as a matter of course. Where an inspection report is not published (for example, where it may negatively impact the principle of constructive dialogue or undermine the preventive objective of OPCAT), that decision, and reasons for the decision should be recorded and published.

Data collection and publication

The systematic collection and publication of data and statistics about how imprisonment is being used and the treatment of people within prison is essential for transparency and accountability. It can provide an important safeguard against ill-treatment and other human rights abuses in Irish prisons, and enables oversight by civil society organisations such as IPRT, academics, and other interested parties, and forms the basis for robust, evidence-based penal policy.²²

The IPS currently proactively publishes a number of datasets related to Irish prisons. These include:

- **Daily prison population data** on the number of people in each prison custody (including on remand), temporary release, and the bed capacity of each prison.²³
- **Monthly information notes** on committals to and releases from each prison, average numbers of

people in custody and on temporary release for that month, and a ‘snapshot’ of the prison population on offence profile, sentence length, and Non-Irish nationalities.²⁴

- **Quarterly census reports** on cell occupancy, in-cell sanitation, and the use of restricted regimes.²⁵
- **Snapshot statistics** of the sentenced population on comparable days between 2007 and 2023 on age, gender, nationality, sentence length and offence.²⁶
- **Yearly statistics** on persons committed to prison, assault figures, and contraband seizures.²⁷

Annual reports published by the IPS also contain useful statistical information. Overall, the publication of this data is to be commended, and provides a crucial insight into the prison population and trends. However, the robust collection, collation, and proactive publication of further data is necessary to ensure transparency and accountability of the IPS and wider Irish penal system. In this regard, IPRT is pleased to note that the IPS has signalled the ambition to be a ‘data-driven organisation’,²⁸ and in its *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* committed to strengthening its data and information requests processes as a key deliverable during 2023 and 2024.²⁹ The IPS has also stated that it is actively building its internal resources and capacity in data analytics and reporting, including reviewing existing data collection practices. It is also working to determine what information can be made publicly available in line with the Open Data Directive, with a view to improving accessibility and usefulness of prison-related data for all stakeholders.³⁰

IPRT is encouraged by such initiatives, and we were appreciative of the provision of some information by the IPS for this edition of PIPS relating to previous IPRT recommendations, and note the positive engagement with the IPS in this regard.

²¹ Association for the Prevention of Torture and the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, *Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture Implementation Manual* (revised edition) (2010), 104.

²² Rob Allen and Helen Fair, *Prison Data Collection: A Guidance Note* (Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research, Birkbeck, University of London, 2024).

²³ See Irish Prison Service, ‘Daily Prisoner Population’ <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/2015-daily-prisoner-population/>>

²⁴ See Irish Prison Service, ‘Monthly Information Note’ <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/monthly-information-note/>>

²⁵ See Irish Prison Service, ‘Census Reports’ <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/census-reports/>>

²⁶ See Irish Prison Service, ‘Snapshot Statistics’ <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/snapshot-statistics/>>

²⁷ See Irish Prison Service, ‘Yearly Statistics’ <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/yearly-statistics/>>

²⁸ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2023* (2024), 64.

²⁹ Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* (2023), 23.

³⁰ Information provided to IPRT directly by the IPS via email, 23 September 2025.

However, we regret that the IPS did not provide a response to a specific data request on a range of operational issues to inform *PIPS 2024*. The IPS highlighted that this was due to capacity constraints related to a key vacancy that was only filled in late 2025. However, responses to data requests should not be reliant on an individual member of staff. A robust data collection and collation system should be in place that is accessible to other relevant staff members when necessary. IPRT hopes that the IPS will be in a stronger position to provide robust data for future editions of *PIPS*, in line with its commitment to improve its data and information requests processes as noted in the *IPS Strategy 2023-2027*.

As a part of its ongoing work to improve its handling of data and information requests, IPRT recommends that the IPS establishes a clear and transparent procedure for handling such requests, including outlining fair and reasonable timeframes.

Further, IPRT recommends that the IPS undertakes a robust and meaningful consultation process with civil society organisations, academics, and other key stakeholders to understand the data requirements of these bodies, and agree on data to be published on a regular basis above and beyond what is currently available.

Conclusion and summary of recommendations

Transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement with oversight bodies become even more important during times of crisis. IPRT is deeply troubled by the impacts of current prison overcrowding, exposing people to the risk of inhuman and degrading conditions and treatment. Given the present challenges in adhering to basic human rights standards in Irish prisons, there is an even greater onus on State authorities, including the IPS and the Department of Justice, to engage constructively with oversight bodies to improve the situation for people in prison and strengthen safeguards against ill-treatment.

As a part of this, Ireland must ratify OPCAT as a matter of urgent priority and enable the independent publication of inspection reports by National Preventive Mechanisms. Further, the IPS and Department of Justice must work constructively together to implement the recommendations of oversight bodies in spite of the current challenges posed by overcrowding. Finally, the IPS must make good on its commitment to strengthen data collection and publication systems that will enable further external scrutiny of the prison system, providing

greater transparency and accountability and promoting tangible improvements for the conditions and treatment of people in prisons across Ireland.

IPRT recommends:

- The Government ratify OPCAT as a matter of urgency in advance of the enactment of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill, and seek a postponement of their obligations until the legislation is commenced at a national level. Alternatively, the Bill should be published as a matter of priority and enacted in 2026.
- The Government and IPS set out a plan of action to implement the CPT's recommendations within clearly defined timelines.
- That all recommendations made by international oversight bodies, including the CPT, are considered and responded to by all appropriate and competent State authorities.
- Prison inspection reports be published in a timely manner as a matter of course. Where an inspection report is not published, that decision, and reasons for the decision, should be recorded and published.
- The IPS establish a clear and transparent procedure for handling information and data requests, including outlining fair and reasonable timeframes.
- The IPS undertake a robust and meaningful consultation process with civil society organisations, academics, and other key stakeholders to understand the data requirements of these bodies, and agree on data to be published on a regular basis above and beyond what is currently available.

Section A

**An effective
and humane
penal system**

Section A

An effective and humane penal system

Standard 1 Towards progressive penal policy

Penal policy is continually monitored, implemented, evaluated and evolving in line with established international best-practice. Policy development is supported by the collection and publication of relevant, reliable, and up-to-date data on the operations and outcomes of the penal system.

Assessment: Mixed

The term ‘penal policy’ refers to the assortment of national legislation, strategies, policies, and practices related to the sentencing and management of people who become involved with the criminal justice system. It deals with, among other issues, sentencing policies, alternatives to custody, prison accommodation and regimes, support for rehabilitation and reintegration, and issues related to particular categories of people in prison.¹

IPRT believes that Irish penal policy must reflect the guiding principles and values of penal reform:

1. Imprisonment is used as a last resort;
2. The harms and costs associated with imprisonment are recognised and mitigated;
3. The deprivation of an individual’s liberty is the punishment;
4. The security, safety, and protection of people in prison must be balanced against ensuring humane prison practices and regimes;
5. The rights of all people in the criminal justice system must be respected, protected, and promoted, and there is a focus on equality and social justice; and
6. There is a clear emphasis on rehabilitation and reintegration.

Penal policy must also reflect international best

practice and, where possible, improve on this, while also remaining sufficiently flexible to adapt to emerging issues, the needs of the Irish prison population, and the changing penal environment. Therefore, regular review and evaluation of penal policy is imperative.

In 2022, the Department of Justice published its consolidated vision for the future of Ireland’s penal system in the *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (‘the Review’).² The first ever *Criminal Justice Sectoral Strategy 2022-2024*,³ and an implementation plan,⁴ were also published in 2022. Taken together, IPRT welcomes these developments as a landmark roadmap for the development of more progressive penal policy in Ireland.⁵

Throughout 2023 and 2024, a number of further reports, strategies and policy documents related to the penal system were published, including:

- *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* (November 2023)⁶
- *Irish Prison Service Drugs Strategy 2023-2026* (November 2023)⁷
- *The Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024-26* (August 2024)⁸
- The Department of Justice’s *Justice Plan 2024*,⁹ and *A Safe, Fair, Inclusive Ireland: Statement of Strategy 2024-2026* (July 2024).¹⁰

¹ Department of Justice, *Strategic Review of Penal Policy: Final Report* (2014), 17.

² Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Policy: Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (2022).

³ Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Sectoral Strategy 2022-2024* (2022).

⁴ Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Sectoral Strategy 2022-2024: Implementation Plan* (2022).

⁵ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System* (2022): *A Framework for Penal Reform* (2023), 31.

⁶ Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* (2023).

⁷ Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Drugs Strategy 2023-2027* (2023).

⁸ The Probation Service, *Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024-26: Changing Lives in Our Communities for Safer Futures* (2024).

⁹ Department of Justice, *Justice Plan 2024* (2024).

¹⁰ Department of Justice, *A Safe, Fair, Inclusive Ireland: Statement of Strategy 2024-2026* (2024).

IPRT particularly welcomes the focus in the *IPS Strategy 2023-2027* on investigating alternative pathways for some individuals in the criminal justice system, particularly through the use of temporary release and community-based sanctions (see Standard 2, p. 16). This was also reiterated in the *Probation Service Statement of Strategy*, which included as key high-level goals: “strengthen the quality of community based supervision”, and “revise and extend the range of community sanctions and measures”¹¹

Positively, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth’s *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028*, published in November 2023, also contains consideration of both youth justice and the impacts of parental imprisonment on children.¹²

Taken in their entirety, the policy frameworks published throughout 2023 and 2024 comprehensively build on the recommendations put forward in the *2022 Review of Policy Options* and positively contribute to Ireland’s evolving penal policy landscape. However, it is critical that these documents result in tangible impacts for people in custody or who are otherwise navigating their way through the criminal justice system. Ongoing and concerted effort must be made to effectively implement the key goals and actions outlined in these policy documents, including appropriate allocation of resources. Without this, there is the real risk that goals and actions remain unfulfilled for years on end.

A key example of this is the disappointing lack of progress in establishing the ‘Penal Policy Consultative Council’, recommended in both the *2022 Review of Policy Options*¹³ and the *2014 Strategic Review of Penal Policy*.¹⁴ The purpose of the Consultative Council would be to advise on issues related to penal policy and to ensure all initiatives are evidence-led.¹⁵ Despite the Minister for Justice announcing that work to establish the council had begun in mid-2022,¹⁶ no apparent progress on establishing this group had been made by end of 2024. IPRT has consistently

highlighted that the absence of this group hinders the development of long-term, coherent penal policies grounded in research and best practices. As such, **we recommend that the Consultative Council is established without any further delay.**

Further, there was little movement throughout 2024 on key areas of legislative reform. There has been no further progress on the Irish Prison Service Bill 2023,¹⁷ which would establish the IPS as a statutory State body, despite the completion of pre-legislative scrutiny in October 2023. Progress to strengthen prison oversight and ratify the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Torture (OPCAT) through the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022 has been limited following the publication of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice’s report and recommendations in March 2023.¹⁸ There has also been no progress on publishing the revised Irish Prison Rules 2007, a project which was initiated in 2021 to incorporate the updated European Prison Rules (published in 2020). Such limited apparent progress in these key areas is disappointing, and IPRT maintains that such initiatives must be advanced as a matter of priority.

Assessment of Standard 1: **Mixed**

Throughout 2023 and 2024, a number of strategies and policies related to penal policy have been developed and published containing many progressive proposals and commitments. While the vision and action points within these documents comprehensively build on previous recommendations for penal reform, the State failed to deliver throughout 2024 on a number of key prior penal policy commitments, including establishing the Penal Policy Consultative Council, OPCAT ratification, updating the Irish Prison Rules 2007 and establishing the IPS as a statutory State body.

¹¹ The Probation Service, *Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–26: Changing Lives in Our Communities for Safer Futures* (2024), 14.

¹² Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028* (2023).

¹³ Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Policy: Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (2022), 46-47.

¹⁴ Department of Justice, *Strategic Review of Penal Policy: Final Report* (2014), 111.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 525, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 14 February 2023. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-02-14/525/>>

¹⁷ Draft General Scheme of an Irish Prison Service Bill 2023.

¹⁸ Joint Committee on Justice, *Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Irish Prison Service Bill 2023* (33/JC/45, 2023).

Standard 2 Imprisonment as a last resort

Imprisonment is only ever used as a sanction of last resort. There is a clear focus on establishing and implementing community-based sanctions and associated services as alternatives to custodial sentences.

Assessment: Mixed

The authority to deprive an individual of their liberty through a sentence of imprisonment is one of the most significant powers the State exercises, and impacts upon every aspect of an individual's life. While imprisonment is a necessary and proportionate sanction in some cases, depriving someone of their liberty is a harmful sanction in and of itself, as it diminishes an individual's autonomy and dislocates people from their families, friends and communities. Further, the harmful impacts of imprisonment are not only experienced by those imprisoned, but also by their families, children, friends, and wider community connections.

As such, while the right to liberty can be restricted as a legal sanction for committing an offence, this must only occur when necessary, proportionate, and when no other options are available to address offending behaviours – that is, where imprisonment truly is a last resort.

The principle of imprisonment as a last resort is increasing in salience in Irish penal policy. The 2022 *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform* listed as a priority action: “To consider the incorporation of prison as a sanction of last resort in statute”¹⁹ Further, Action 111 of the *Justice Plan 2023* stated: “Complete policy review of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 incorporating consideration of a statutory basis for prison as a sanction of last resort”;²⁰ however, this action was omitted in the *Justice Plan 2024*.²¹ Further, despite assurances from the Minister for Justice in April 2024 that a revised General Scheme of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 would be brought to Government “in due course”,²² this had still not

occurred by January 2025.²³ **IPRT recommends that the principle of imprisonment as a sanction of last resort is placed on statutory footing. We urge the Department of Justice to include this in the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014, and to prioritise publication of that Bill.** IPRT notes that legal precedent for this already exists in section 96(2) of the Children's Act 2001.

In practice it is clear that there is very little actual movement towards realising prison as a sanction of last resort. When PIPS was first launched in 2017, the daily average number of people in Ireland's prisons was 3,680, representing an imprisonment rate of 79 per 100,000 people. *PIPS 2017* set the goal of reducing the Irish imprisonment rate to 50 per 100,000 people, which IPRT maintains is a reasonable and achievable goal. In the past seven years, however, we have moved significantly further away from this goal. In 2024, the daily average number of people in prison was 4,941, representing an imprisonment rate of approximately 92 per 100,000 people.²⁴ The highest reported prison population in 2024 was 5,124 people.²⁵

Further, the number of short prison sentences (sentences less than 12 months in duration) handed down in Ireland remains of significant concern, and indicative of imprisonment not being used as a sanction of last resort. Short prison sentences, which are usually given for the least serious offences, are by far the most common sentences in Ireland.²⁶ Figures from the IPS indicate that the proportion of short prison sentences has increased from 74 per cent of all sentence committals (excluding fine defaulters) in 2018, to 77 per cent in 2024 (see Table 1, below).

¹⁹ Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Policy: Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (2022), 29.

²⁰ Department of Justice, *Justice Plan 2023* (2023), 36.

²¹ Department of Justice, *Justice Plan 2024* (2024), 20.

²² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 127, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 24 April 2024 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-04-24/119/>>

²³ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 958, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 22 January 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-01-22/958/>>

²⁴ Based on an approximate population of 3.38 million in April 2024, as estimated by the Central Statistics Office. See Central Statistics Office, ‘Irish Population and Migration Estimates’ (Ireland 2024: The Year in Numbers, 3 January 2025) <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-yin/ireland2024theyearinnnumbers/>>

²⁵ Irish Prison Service, ‘Prisoner Population on Wednesday 6th November 2024’ (6 November 2024) <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/06-November-2024.pdf>

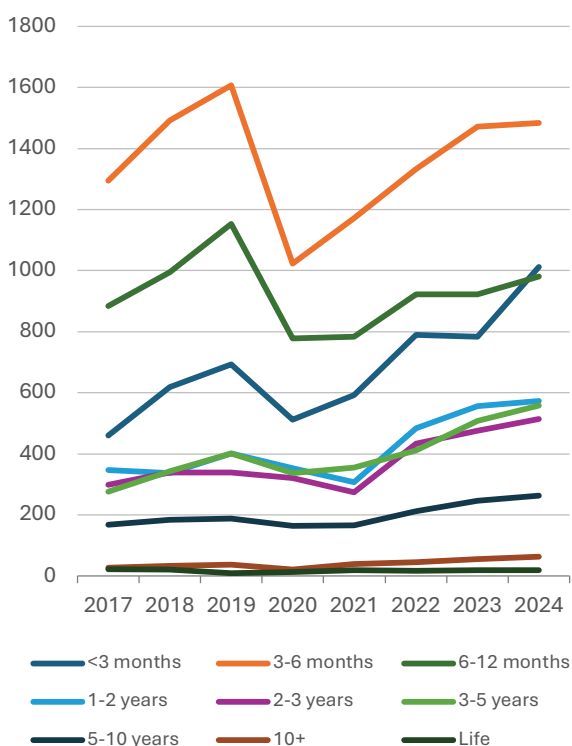
²⁶ Ian O'Donnell, ‘The Short Prison Sentence: An Obituary?’ (2024) *Irish Judicial Studies Journal* 8(2), 122.

Table 1: Total sentence committals for 12 months or less, 2017-2024²⁷

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
N/A*	74%	76%	78%	79%	78%	78%	77%

*Data not available

Following a reduction in 2020 due to the general decrease in people being processed by the courts due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of short sentences has continued to increase since 2020, with the most common sentenced committal being between three and six months (see Figure 1, below).

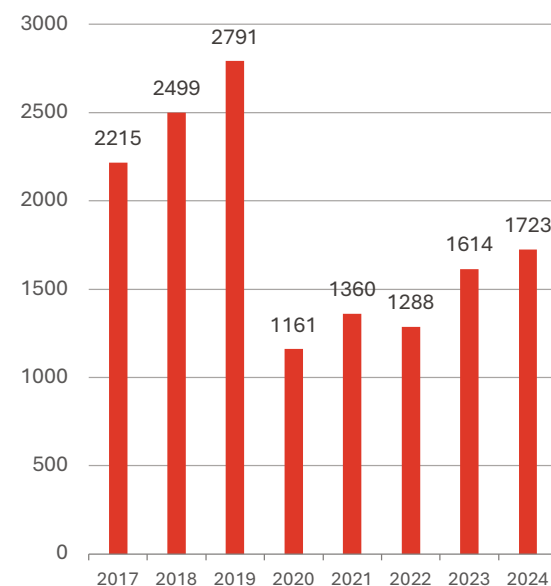
Figure 1: Sentencing trends, 2017-2024 (excluding fine defaulters)²⁸

Short prison sentences can be particularly harmful. They can adversely affect housing and employment opportunities, negatively impact family relationships, and disrupt access to community services an individual may have been receiving before being sentenced. Overall, research suggests that short prison sentences in Ireland contribute to increased recidivism.²⁹

IPRT believes that the use of short prison sentences is an ineffective, counterproductive, and disproportionate response to offending. For prison to genuinely be a last resort, short prison sentences should be replaced with effective and meaningful community-based alternatives.

Community sanctions in Ireland are typically community service orders (CSOs), supervised by the Probation Service. People whose offending would meet the threshold for a custodial sentence may instead be sentenced to a period of unpaid work in the community as an alternative to imprisonment.

The use of CSOs has fallen dramatically since 2017, from 2,215 to 1,723 in 2024 (see Figure 2, below). As noted above, while the 2020 drop off was largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the general reduction in cases processed by the courts, the rate of CSOs has not yet recovered to pre-COVID numbers.³⁰

Figure 2: Number of Community Service Orders supervised by the Probation Service, 2017-2024³¹

²⁷ Data taken from Irish Prison Service annual reports from those years.

²⁸ Data taken from Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2024), 81.

²⁹ Ian O'Donnell, 'The Short Prison Sentence: An Obituary?' (2024) *Irish Judicial Studies Journal* 8(2), 125.

³⁰ Similarly, the total number of supervision orders has still not returned to pre-COVID levels, as demonstrated by the figures provided in Probation Service annual reports.

³¹ Data taken from the Probation Service annual reports from those years.

In November 2024, the Department of Justice published a comprehensive review of community service orders, entitled “Community or Custody? A Review of Evidence and Sentencers’ Perspectives on Community Service orders and Short-Term Prison Sentences”.³² The report examines the general decline in the use of CSOs by the courts in recent years, and suggests there is a need to further resource CSOs to encourage their use. Overall, the review highlights that:

... properly resourcing CSOs so that they are available and responsive to the specific needs of persistent offenders with multiple difficulties (addictions, mental and physical health issues etc) may potentially increase CSO uptake and reduce reliance on short prison sentences.³²

Finally, it is important to highlight the discrepancy in the budget of the Probation Service, which oversees CSOs and provides community service suitability reports, compared to that of the Irish Prison Service (see Table 2, below). In 2024, the total budget for the Probation Service was just 11.4 per cent of that of the Irish Prison Service. Without a significant increase in investment in the Probation Service it will not be able to increase its delivery of effective, community-based alternatives.

Table 2: Irish Prison Service and Probation Service budgets, 2020–2024³⁴

Year	Irish Prison Service (million)*	The Probation Service (million)†	Probation Service budget as percentage of IPS budget
2024	502.00	57.00	11.4%
2023	442.00	53.59	12.1%
2022	414.00	50.38	12.2%
2021	395.00	49.99	12.7%
2020	408.09	48.94	12.0%

*Figures included here are the final gross budgets for the IPS taken from its annual reports from those years.

† Figures included here are the budget estimates for the Probation Service taken from its annual reports from those years.

Assessment of Standard 2: Mixed

While there is increasing acknowledgement of the last resort principle in Irish penal policy documents, the overall number of people imprisoned in Ireland continues to rise, while the proportion of people who receive a short prison sentence has not meaningfully declined. Until the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 is progressed to legislate for the principle of imprisonment as a last resort, this commitment will not be delivered in practice. While the number of people receiving community service orders has increased since 2022, this remains far lower than pre-pandemic levels, and Probation Service funding remains a small proportion of that of the Irish Prison Service, meaning that the emphasis for funding continues to be on custodial sanctions rather than community-based alternatives.

Standard 3 Safe custody limits

Every prison operates at a safe capacity level in line with international best practice. The number of people detained in each prison never exceeds the design capacity.

Assessment: Regress

Prisons that operate above their designated capacity present significant issues for both people in custody and for prison staff.

For people in custody, overcrowding can lead to cramped and unsanitary cell conditions due to multiple people being required to share a cell

designed for single occupancy. People in Irish prisons have also been forced to sleep on mattresses placed on the floor where there is no bed available (see Standard 7, p. 26). Cell overcrowding also significantly affects the privacy of people in custody, including when seeking and

³² Department of Justice, Community or Custody? A Review of Evidence and Sentencers’ Perspectives on Community Service orders and Short-Term Prison Sentences (2024).

³³ *ibid*, 27.

³⁴ Data taken from the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service annual reports from those years.

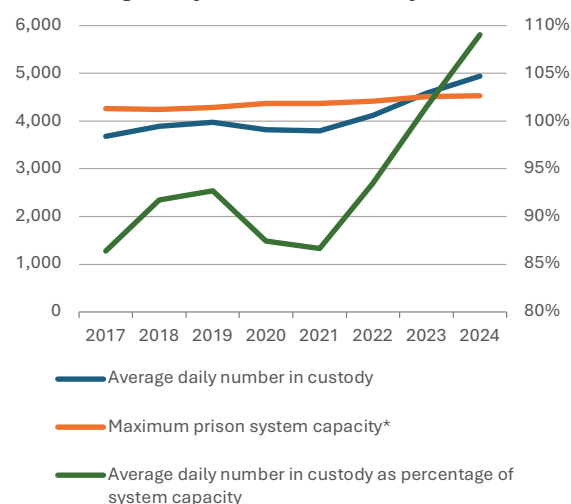
receiving legal counsel and maintaining family contact via in-cell telephones, and when toileting (see p. 28).

Prison overoccupancy also significantly affects the ability of staff to meet the basic needs of people in custody, such as providing regular access to showers, and also leads to negative outcomes including longer waiting times for healthcare and reduced time out of cell. It can also affect the ability of people in prison to attend work, education and training opportunities, and rehabilitative programmes, due to staff capacity to provide prison escorts. For prison staff, overcrowding can lead to degraded relationships between staff and people in custody owing to reduced staffing ratios and staff redeployments across and between prisons, and to a higher risk of work-related stress and burnout.

To support the effective management and operation of prisons and to provide a safety margin when there is a risk of overcrowding, prison occupancy rates at any one time should be no more than 90 per cent of the maximum prison capacity (i.e. the maximum number of people that a prison is staffed and has beds for).³⁵ This is widely accepted as international best-practice for safe prison capacity levels. The Irish Prison Service considers 95 per cent of the total prison capacity to be within safe operating limits.³⁶

Since PIPS was first launched in 2017, the average daily number of people in Irish prisons has increased by 34 per cent, or 1,261 people (see Figure 3, below). Meanwhile, the capacity of the Irish prison system has increased by 271 spaces, or six per cent. This means that the operating capacity in the Irish prison system has risen from an overall level of 86 per cent capacity in 2017 to 109 per cent in 2024.

Figure 3: Maximum Irish prison system capacity and average daily number in custody, 2017–2024³⁷



*Calculated by total number of beds across the prison estate at year end.

Table 3: Average occupancy levels of Irish prisons by quarter, 2024³⁸

Prison*	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
Arbour Hill	99%	97%	99%	98%	98%
Castlerea	109%	112%	117%	118%	114%
Cloverhill	113%	111%	114%	117%	114%
Cork	112%	114%	110%	116%	113%
Limerick (F)	119%	126%	140%	147%	133%
Limerick (M)	111%	115%	120%	118%	116%
Loughan House	86%	88%	87%	85%	87%
Midlands	109%	110%	111%	110%	110%
Mountjoy (F)	116%	119%	126%	124%	121%
Mountjoy (M)	106%	116%	114%	115%	113%
Portlaoise	101%	103%	105%	105%	104%
Shelton Abbey	90%	88%	84%	88%	88%
Training Unit	102%	102%	101%	102%	102%
Wheatfield	98%	103%	104%	105%	103%
Average	106%	109%	111%	111%	109%

³⁵ European Committee on Crime Problems, *White Paper on Prison Overcrowding* (PC-CP (2015) 6 rev 7, 2016).

³⁶ Department of Justice, *Prison Overcrowding Response Group Report* (2024), 2. Released under the Freedom of Information Act 2024, available: <https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7498/prison_overcrowding_response_group_report_web.pdf>

³⁷ Data taken from Irish Prison Service annual reports from those years.

³⁸ Data calculated from Irish Prison Service monthly information notes, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/monthly-information-note/>>

Throughout 2024, Ireland's two open prisons, Loughan House and Shelton Abbey, were the only prisons consistently below the 90 per cent occupancy threshold (see Table 3, above). With the exception of Arbour Hill Prison, every other prison operated above its designated maximum capacity during 2024. Overcrowding was most acutely experienced in Limerick Women's Prison with an average of 147 per cent occupancy in Q4, Mountjoy Female Prison (the Dóchas Centre), with 126 per cent occupancy in Q3, and Limerick Men's Prison, with 120 per cent occupancy in Q3.

Prison overcrowding has continued to increase significantly throughout 2025, severely impacting on conditions of detention for people in almost every prison in Ireland, including minimum requirements for living space (see Standard 9, p. 29). Furthermore, prison overcrowding has disproportionately impacted on women in Irish prisons. Throughout 2024, both Limerick Women's Prison and the Dóchas Centre were the most overcrowded prisons in Ireland. This significantly impacts access to specialist services within prison (see Standard 9, p. 29), as well as the higher proportion of women required to share cells compared to men generally.

Based on the observable impacts of prison overcrowding, the OIP has argued for the

introduction of a "legally enforceable ceiling on the number of people who can be held in each prison in Ireland".³⁹ The CPT, following its 2024 visit to Ireland, has also recommended the introduction of an 'absolute upper limit' for each prison, whereby "whenever a prison in the Irish prison estate has reached that limit, no further persons should be admitted to that establishment".⁴⁰ **IPRT maintains that the Government must set maximum occupancy limits on each prison to ensure the safe operation of each prison that ensures adequate prison conditions and access to rehabilitative services.**

Assessment of Standard 3: Regress

Throughout 2024, only two prisons in Ireland operated within safe capacity levels. Since 2022, the average daily number in custody as a percentage of system capacity has risen from 102 per cent to 109 per cent, with occupancy rates as high as 147 per cent in Limerick Women's prison in 2024. While the IPS is required to accommodate all individuals sent to prison by the courts, this situation is untenable as the system is operating at unsafe and unsustainable levels.

Standard 4 Prison size

Each prison is limited to a maximum operating capacity of 250.

Assessment: Regress

The size of each prison based on the number of people it accommodates has a significant impact on how it operates, including on the relationships between staff and people detained, access to rehabilitative services, and material conditions within prison. International studies have also demonstrated that smaller prisons also tend to have lower rates of bullying and violence than larger prisons.⁴¹ IPRT therefore believes that, alongside safe custody limits (see Standard 3, p. 18), each prison in Ireland should be working towards implementing a maximum operating capacity of 250 people.

At the end of 2024, the operational capacities of seven prisons in Ireland were below 250 (see Table 4, below). This is a decrease from 2022, when eight prisons met this standard. This is due to the addition of 76 beds in Limerick Men's Prison in 2023, which increased the total number of beds there from 210 to 286.

In both 2023 and 2024, significant capital expenditure was announced to build new prison spaces. In Budget 2025, an additional €53 million was allocated to the IPS to create a further 155 prison spaces in 2025.⁴² Capital investment in

³⁹ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Briefing Document on Overcrowding in the Prison System* (2024), 11.

⁴⁰ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Report to the Irish Government on the visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (CPT) from 21 to 31 May 2024 (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 32.

⁴¹ Francisco Caravaca-Sánchez, Nancy Wolff, and Brent Teasdale, 'Exploring Associations Between Interpersonal Violence and Prison Size in Spanish Prisons' (2019), *Crime & Delinquency* 65(14), 2019.

⁴² Department of Justice, 'Minister McEntee secures record €3.9bn' (1 October 2024) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/press-releases/minister-mcentee-secures-record-39bn-budget/>>

Table 4: Number of beds in each prison at year end, 2020-2024⁴⁵

Prison	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	1 Y change	5 Y change
*Arbour Hill	138	138	138	137	137		-1
Castlerea	340	340	340	340	346	+6	+6
Cloverhill	431	431	431	433	433		+2
Cork	296	296	296	296	296		
*Limerick (F)	28	28	28	56	56		+28
Limerick (M)	210	210	210	286	286		+76
*Loughan House	140	140	140	140	143	+3	+3
Midlands	875	875	875	875	875		
*Mountjoy (F)	146	146	146	146	146		
Mountjoy (M)	755	755	755	755	770	+15	+15
*Portlaoise	291	291	231	229	226	-3	-65
*Shelton Abbey	115	115	115	115	111	-4	-4
*Training Unit	-	-	96	96	96		+96
Wheatfield	610	610	610	610	610		
Total number of beds	4,375	4,375	4,411	4,514	4,531	+17	+156

*Denotes where maximum prison population is less than 250 people.

prison modernisation and improving cell conditions is an important step to promote decent prison conditions, particularly given that four Irish prisons, holding around 30 per cent of the total prison population, are over 175 years old.⁴³

However, as noted above, concerted efforts must be made to reduce the Irish prison population and ensure imprisonment is only ever used as a sanction of last resort. Capital expenditure must be put towards improving the material conditions of existing prison spaces and working toward maximum capacity limits of 250 people in each Irish prison. IPRT maintains that if new prison spaces are established, these should be in open prisons in line with the recommendation by the 2014 *Strategic Review of Penal Policy* which recommended “an additional open prison be considered for the Dublin area”.⁴⁴ (see Standard 6, p. 22).

Notably, in June 2024, Justice Ministers from all 27 European Union (EU) Member States unanimously adopted *Council Conclusions on Small-scale detention: focusing on social rehabilitation and reintegration in society*.⁴⁶ As part of the Conclusions, the Council called on Member States to:

Further explore the scope and potential benefits of forms of small-scale, differentiated

and community-integrated detention, including detention houses, in comparison with large prison institutions.⁴⁷

Small-scale detention accommodation is designed to accommodate a maximum of 30 people. It is designed to match the necessary security level and provide the rehabilitative, education and work programmes based on individual needs. These types of facilities have been introduced and adapted in different jurisdictions throughout the EU.⁴⁸

Assessment of Standard 4: **Regress**

The addition of 76 more beds in Limerick Men's Prison in 2023 increased operational capacity from 210 to 286. Therefore, at the end of 2024 only seven Irish prisons had an operational capacity of less than 250 beds, down from eight in 2022. While IPRT recognises the current pressure on the IPS in terms of capacity, increasing the size and capacity of closed prisons, even in a time of overcrowding, runs counter to the EU Council's Conclusions.

⁴³ Including Shelton Abbey (built in 1770), Limerick Men's Prison (1821), Arbour Hill (1845), and Mountjoy Men's prison (1850). See Irish Prison Service, *Capital Strategy 2016 – 2021* (2016), 12.

⁴⁴ Department of Justice, *Strategic Review of Penal Policy: Final Report* (2014), 60.

⁴⁵ Data taken from IPS Daily Prison Population data at the end of December each year.

⁴⁶ Council of the European Union, *Outcome of Proceedings: Council conclusions on 'Small-scale detention: focusing on social rehabilitation and reintegration in society'* (10105/24, 2024).

⁴⁷ *ibid*, para 11.

⁴⁸ See RESCALED, 'Inspirational Practices' (2024) <<https://inspirational-practices.rescaled.org/>>

Standard 5 Minimum prison security settings

People in prison are detained in the least restrictive security setting applicable, following a fair and thorough individual risk assessment.

Due to the unavailability of up-to-date, accurate, accessible data, we could not complete a fair assessment of this Standard in *PIPS 2024*.

Standard 6 Open prison provision

Open prisons comprise at least 30 per cent of the prison estate.

Assessment: Regress

The IPS currently operates two open prisons: Shelton Abbey, in Co. Wicklow, and Loughan House, in Co. Cavan. There is currently no open prison in Ireland for women.

Open prisons have minimal security settings and people can freely move around the prison. People in open prisons therefore have greater freedom and independence than those in closed prisons and can assume greater personal responsibility and autonomy in their day-to-day lives. Open prisons also have a greater focus on rehabilitation and reintegration, and people can often access work and training opportunities outside of the prison. They are typically for people nearing the end of their sentences who have demonstrated positive behaviours and are considered ‘low-risk’ in terms of prison safety and the likelihood of escape.

The number of prison spaces in Shelton Abbey and Loughan House form a small part of the total number of prisons beds in Ireland. In 2024, an additional three beds were added in Loughan House. However, spaces in Shelton Abbey reduced by four. The total number of open prison beds has therefore reduced by one space since 2022.

Due to the addition of new prison spaces in closed prisons, the number of open prison beds as a proportion of beds across the prison estate has

reduced from 5.8 per cent of prison capacity in 2022 to 5.6 per cent in 2024.⁴⁹ Further, because of overcrowding in closed prisons, the number of people in open prisons as a proportion of the total number of people in Irish prisons has decreased from 5.3 per cent in December 2022 to 4.4 per cent in December 2024.⁵⁰

Throughout 2024, measures to address the prison overcrowding crisis have included allocation of significant capital expenditure in new prison spaces (see p. 20). While IPRT does not consider that prison expansion is a meaningful or appropriate measure to address the current overcrowding crisis, if new beds are introduced across the prison estate, investment must be put towards building open prison spaces.

While the Government’s *National Development Plan 2021-2030* contained plans to “upgrade, improve and provide additional capacity” in Ireland’s open prisons as a matter of priority,⁵¹ there appears at present to be little appetite to increase capacity in open prisons. Given the importance of open prisons in promoting rehabilitation, autonomy, and avoiding institutionalisation, IPRT urges the Government to replace current closed prison spaces with spaces in open prisons. Further, the non-existence of an open prison for women should be seen as a gender equality issue and addressed urgently. This

⁴⁹ Calculated by the proportion of beds in open prisons versus closed prisons at the start of December 2022 and 2024. See Irish Prison Service, ‘Prisoner Population on Thursday 1st December 2022’ (1 December 2022) <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/01-December-2022.pdf> and ‘Prisoner Population on Monday 2nd December 2024’ (2 December 2022) <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/02-December-2024.pdf>

⁵⁰ *ibid*. Calculated by the proportion of people detained in closed prisons as a percentage of the entire prison population at the start of December 2022 and 2024.

⁵¹ Government of Ireland, *National Development Plan 2021-2030* (2021), 154.

is in line with recommendations made by the Joint Committee on Justice in its *Report on an Examination of Rehabilitative Opportunities* within the Prison System, published in May 2023.⁵²

Assessment of Standard 6: Regress

There has been no progress on expanding the number of open prison spaces in 2024. Further, given the addition of beds in closed prisons, the number of beds in open prisons as a proportion of all beds in Irish prisons has decreased, meaning that the prison estate is moving even further away from realising the PIPS goal of increasing open prison spaces to 30 per cent of overall capacity.

⁵² Joint Committee on Justice, *Report on an Examination of Rehabilitative Opportunities within the Prison System* (33/JC/39, 2023), 7-8.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Section A: An effective and humane penal system

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
1. PROGRESSIVE PENAL POLICY: Throughout 2023 and 2024, a number of strategies and policies related to penal policy have been developed and published containing many progressive proposals and commitments. While the vision and action points within these documents comprehensively build on previous recommendations for penal reform, the State failed to deliver throughout 2024 on a number of key prior penal policy commitments, including establishing the Penal Policy Consultative Council, OPCAT ratification, updating the Irish Prison Rules 2007 and establishing the IPS as a statutory State body.	MIXED 
2. IMPRISONMENT AS A LAST RESORT: While there is increasing acknowledgement of the last resort principle in Irish penal policy documents, the overall number of people imprisoned in Ireland continues to rise, while the proportion of people who receive a short prison sentence has not meaningfully declined. Until the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 is progressed to legislate for the principle of imprisonment as a last resort, this commitment will not be delivered in practice. While the number of people receiving community service orders has increased since 2022, this remains far lower than pre-pandemic levels, and Probation Service funding remains a small proportion of that of the Irish Prison Service, meaning that the emphasis for funding continues to be on custodial sanctions rather than community-based alternatives.	MIXED 
3. SAFE CUSTODY LIMITS: Throughout 2024, only two prisons in Ireland operated within safe capacity levels. Since 2022, the average daily number in custody as a percentage of system capacity has risen from 102 per cent to 109 per cent, with occupancy rates as high as 147 per cent in Limerick Women's prison in 2024. While the IPS is required to accommodate all individuals sent to prison by the courts, this situation is untenable as the system is operating at unsafe and unsustainable levels.	REGRESS 
4. PRISON SIZES: The addition of 76 more beds in Limerick Men's Prison in 2023 increased operational capacity from 210 to 286. Therefore, at the end of 2024 only seven Irish prisons had an operational capacity of less than 250 beds, down from eight in 2022. While IPRT recognises the current pressure on the IPS in terms of capacity, increasing the size and capacity of closed prisons, even in a time of overcrowding, runs counter to the EU Council's Conclusions.	REGRESS 
5. MINIMUM SECURITY SETTINGS	NOT ASSESSED
6. OPEN PRISONS: There has been no progress on expanding the number of open prison spaces in 2024. Further, given the addition of beds in closed prisons, the number of beds in open prisons as a proportion of all beds in Irish prisons has decreased, meaning that the prison estate is moving even further away from realising the PIPS goal of increasing open prison spaces to 30 per cent of overall capacity.	REGRESS 

Section B

Prison conditions

Section B

Prison conditions

Standard 7 Humane prison conditions

All people in prison are treated with respect, dignity and humanity and prison living conditions support their dignity and wellbeing.

Assessment: Regress

When an individual is sentenced to a period of imprisonment, it is the deprivation of liberty that is the punishment, and prison conditions and the treatment of people while in prison should not serve to punish individuals further. As such, conditions of detention and the treatment of people in prison must uphold their dignity, humanity and wellbeing, including for both sentenced individuals and those on remand. This principle is the basis for the first two of the European Prison Rules:

1. All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with respect for their human rights;¹ and
2. Persons deprived of their liberty retain all rights that are not lawfully taken away by the decision sentencing them or remanding them in custody.²

There is also a right to dignity under the Irish Constitution. In its 2019 judgement in *Gary Simpson v Governor of Mountjoy Prison & Others* the Supreme Court found that while the State may lawfully deprive a citizen of liberty in accordance with law, it may not do so by a means which, far from assuring the dignity of the individual, falls below a standard that could be considered minimally acceptable.³

A significant issue that has emerged in Irish prisons throughout 2023 and 2024 has been people sleeping on mattresses on cell floors due to prison overoccupancy. This is despite both the European Prison Rules and the United Nations

Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) making clear that all people in prison must be provided with their own bed and sufficient and appropriate bedding.⁴

At the start of 2024, the number of people sleeping on mattresses on the floor was 83; this had increased to 213 people by the end of 2024, when 5,001 people were in prison.⁵ Both the OIP and the CPT have criticised the accommodation of people on mattresses on the floor as contributing to degrading treatment in Irish prisons. In its 2022 annual report, the OIP stated:

During the visit to Mountjoy Prison, our team was shocked to find that a significant number of people were being obliged to sleep on mattresses on the floors of cells designed for single occupancy. The size and design of many of these cells meant that mattresses had to be wedged at an angle next to the in-cell lavatories. ...These conditions of detention could be considered degrading.⁶

The OIP has further reiterated its concerns about people sleeping on mattresses on the floor in its 2023 and 2024 annual reports.

The CPT, meanwhile, highlighted that the cumulative effect of cell overcrowding and a lack of access to time out-of-cell due to people being held on restricted regimes as potentially amounting to inhuman and degrading treatment.⁷

It is important to note the terminology used by both the OIP and the CPT. Degrading and inhuman

¹ European Prison Rules, Rule 1.

² *ibid*, Rule 2.

³ *Gary Simpson v Governor of Mountjoy Prison & Others* [2019] IESC 81.

⁴ European Prison Rules, Rule 21; and United Nations, *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* (UN General Assembly Resolution 70/175, 17 December 2015).

⁵ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 3.

⁶ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2022* (2023), 5.

⁷ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), paras 24-27.

treatment is prohibited by Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights⁸ and Article 16 of the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment,⁹ both instruments that Ireland has ratified and agreed to adhere to. The prohibition under these instruments is absolute, meaning there is no scope for derogation from them, regardless of circumstances or resourcing. Such observations by oversight bodies, therefore, indicate that they believe Ireland is in serious breach of its obligations under international human rights law.

More generally, the CPT highlighted concerns around the material conditions of cells they visited in 2024, describing cells as, for example, ‘cramped’, ‘dirty’, ‘dilapidated’ ‘squalid’, and ‘unventilated’.¹⁰ Concerns around material conditions were also raised by the Mountjoy Prison Visiting Committee (PVC) in its 2023 Annual Report:

... the age of the Prison buildings means that prisoners are often living in poor cell conditions. We have received complaints of wet cell walls, of cold cells, of poorly heated cells, of cockroaches, of toilets not flushing properly, of leaking sinks. These problems seem greater in particular parts of the Prison.¹¹

IPRT has heard directly from people with recent experience of Irish prisons of challenges drying their towels due to overcrowded, humid cells. The OIP also noted that people in Cloverhill Prison washed and dried their clothes in their shared cells.¹² Such conditions are not just unpleasant but could have serious health impacts due to the lack of adequate ventilation and associated health concerns related to damp conditions.

Overall, these conditions of detention are unacceptable and contrary to Ireland’s human rights obligations. **IPRT urges the IPS to ensure that no-one in Irish prisons is subjected to such degrading conditions. Where prison accommodation, due to its age, cannot uphold basic standards of living for people in prison, these cells should be decommissioned.**

In October 2023, the new Limerick Women’s Prison opened, replacing previous women’s accommodation in E Wing of the main Limerick Prison, built in 1821. The new prison includes 56 rooms designed for individual occupancy, comprising a mixture of bedroom units, some apartment-style units and a mother and baby unit.¹³ Cells in the new facility include ensuite sanitary annexes, as well as a bed, desk, chair, and storage space. Communal areas of the prison are bright, spacious, and decorated with local art.¹⁴ Overall, the design and material conditions within Limerick Women’s Prison represents a significant step forward for Irish prisons. However, as noted in Standard 3 above, Limerick Women’s Prison was consistently the most overcrowded prison in Ireland throughout 2024, requiring women to sleep on camp-beds. The CPT described both the Dóchas Centre and Limerick Women’s Prison as at ‘bursting point’.¹⁵ Such high occupancy levels severely undermine the positive progress achieved in the design and material conditions of this new prison.

Provision of food in prisons also plays an important role in ensuring humane prison conditions. In the second half of 2023, the Irish Prison Service introduced a refreshed 28-day menu cycle which meets the nutritional and dietary needs of people in prison. In that regard, the CPT noted:

A welcome development during this visit was that the food was universally appreciated by the prisoners with whom the delegation spoke across all the prisons visited; an unusual finding in an institutional setting and one to be commended. It helped contribute to a more positive environment.¹⁶

Through consulting people in prison, IPRT has heard directly that food is generally of a high standard, however more fresh fruit and vegetables would be a welcome addition, including to purchase in the Tuck Shop.

Of significant concern, however, is the requirement for people in prison to eat their meals from their laps in their cells, often in multi-

⁸ Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights, as amended) (ECHR), Article 3.

⁹ Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (adopted 10 December 1984, entered into force 26 June 1987) 1465 UNTS 85, Article 16.

¹⁰ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), paras 111, 153, and 154.

¹¹ Mountjoy Prison Visiting Committee, *Annual Report 2023* (2025), 26.

¹² Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 19.

¹³ Galway, Ciarán. “I can actually breathe now”: A visit to the new Limerick Female Prison” *Eolas Magazine* (November 2023) <<https://www.eolasmagazine.ie/i-can-actually-breathe-now-a-visit-to-the-new-limerick-female-prison/>>

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 183.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, para 166.

occupancy cells and near unpartitioned and uncovered toilets.¹⁷ Being required to eat in such close proximity to a toilet is both an affront to personal dignity, as well as being extremely unsanitary with the risk of spreading bacteria and disease through faecal-oral transmission.

In 2024, concerns were also raised about the provision of kosher food in Cloverhill Prison.¹⁸ Rule 22.1 of the European Prison Rules requires the provision of food that meets the dietary, cultural, and religious needs and preferences of all people in prison and must be guaranteed in all Irish prisons.

Assessment of Standard 7: Regress

The increase in the number of people required to sleep on mattresses on the floor and the overcrowding of cells more generally has had a significant impact on humane prison conditions across the entire prison estate. While the new Limerick Women's Prison is a significant improvement in terms of material conditions, the positive elements of the new facility are undermined by the severe level of overcrowding.

Standard 8 In-cell sanitation

All people in prison can, at any time, access toilet facilities that uphold their dignity and privacy.

Assessment: Regress

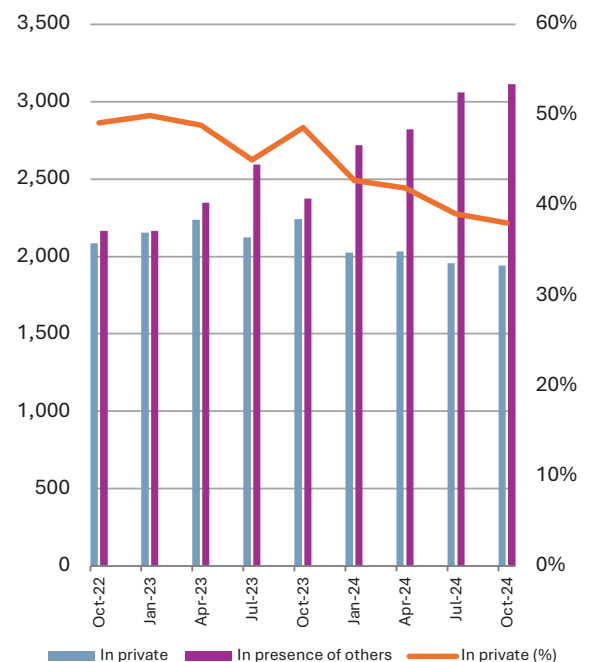
All people in prison should have access to toilet facilities that are clean, hygienic, and uphold their dignity and privacy.

Due to prison overcrowding and the associated rise in cell-sharing (see Standard 9, p. 29), the number of people able to toilet in private has substantially decreased since 2022, from around 50 per cent of the total prison population in October 2022 (2,087 people), to 38 per cent (1,942 people) in October 2024 (see Figure 4, below).

Toileting in the presence of others and the ability to be observed while toileting is a significant affront to an individual's privacy and dignity and has been a contributing factor to findings of inhuman or degrading treatment by the European Court of Human Rights, in violation of Article 3 (the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment) of the Convention.²⁰

In its 2024 report, the CPT recommended that toilets in multiple occupancy cells should be fully partitioned,²¹ a shortcoming it has continuously highlighted since its first visit to Ireland in 1993.²² However, despite this clear and repeated

Figure 4: Privacy while toileting, October 2022–2024¹⁹



¹⁷ See Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 13-14; and European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 110.

¹⁸ *Abraham v Governor of Cloverhill Prison* [2024] IEHC 518.

¹⁹ Data taken from IPS 'Census of Cell Occupancy and In-cell Sanitation' reports, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/census-reports/>>

²⁰ European Court of Human Rights, *Factsheet – Detention conditions and treatment of prisoners* (2023) <https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/FS_Detention_conditions_ENG>

²¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 162.

²² See European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government on the visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment from 26 to 5 October 1993* (CPT/Inf (95) 14, 1995), para 94.

recommendation, the Government stated in its response to the CPT that there are no current plans to improve privacy for people sharing cells through partitioning cells or putting in privacy screens, stating:

It is not possible to introduce fully partitioned sanitary areas as this would significantly impact on the availability of living space within cells. Such partitions are being factored into all future cell design projects. Additional efforts to identify a modesty curtain to provide enhanced privacy have not been successful due to operational and prisoner safety issues.²³

Notwithstanding the challenges caused by prison overcrowding, the number of people required to toilet in the presence of others across the prison estate is a significant issue both in terms of privacy and hygiene. The response to the CPT is disappointing, particularly as the same recommendation has been made repeatedly.

Positively, the practice of ‘slopping out’, which refers to the use of a container for toileting which is then emptied when cells are unlocked, has largely been eliminated from Irish prisons. In October 2024, four individuals in E Block in Portlaoise Prison were required to slop out, a reduction from 29 individuals across Portlaoise

and Limerick Prisons in October 2022. However, the Minister for Justice has stated:

Due to the historical nature and condition of the E Block, the reducing number of prisoners accommodated there, and the likely scale of costs involved, it has been determined that it is not feasible to provide in-cell sanitation in that location.²⁴

While the substantial decrease in this practice is welcome, IPRT maintains that slopping out is an avoidable breach of individuals’ rights to dignity and privacy, and therefore should be eliminated entirely without further delay.

Assessment of Standard 8: Regress

The significant decrease in the number of people ‘slopping out’ is welcome, however the practice should be eliminated entirely. There has also been an increase in the number of people toileting in the presence of others across the prison estate, with no indication from the IPS or Government that this will be addressed substantively in the short to medium-term.

Standard 9 Single cell accommodation

Every person in prison is accommodated in their own, separate cell. Cell sharing should be an exceptional measure and only occur following a robust risk assessment and with the consent of all individuals concerned.

Assessment: Regress

Both the European Prison Rules (Rule 18.5) and the Nelson Mandela Rules (Rule 12.1) are clear that single cell accommodation overnight should be normal practice. This helps promote and respect the privacy of people in custody and reduce tension and violence within prisons.

The IPS’s *Capital Strategy 2016–2021* outlined a key strategic objective of establishing “single cell occupancy as an estate-wide norm”.²⁵ The Strategy stated: “While subject to the constraints of trends in overall prisoner numbers, **reaching and**

maintaining this outcome must remain a long-term objective” (emphasis added).²⁶

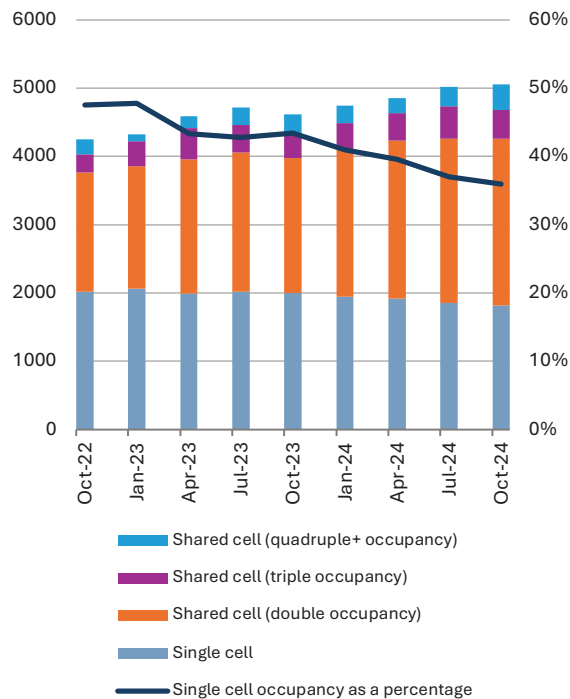
Despite this, there has been a decrease in both the total number of people accommodated in single occupancy cells (from 2,023 people in October 2022 to 1,818 people in October 2024), and the number of people in single occupancy cells as a proportion of the wider prison population (from 48 per cent in October 2022 to 36 per cent in October 2024) (see Figure 5, below).

²³ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Response of the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 23, 2025), 18.

²⁴ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 833, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 5 February 2025.
<<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-02-05/833/>>

²⁵ Irish Prison Service, *Capital Strategy 2016–2021* (2016).

²⁶ *ibid*, 21–22.

Figure 5: Number of people accommodated in individual and shared cells, October 2022–2024²⁷

Not only has cell-sharing increased overall, but the number of people required to share a cell with two or even three or more people has increased by 65 per cent, from 483 people in October 2022, to 799 in October 2024. This significantly impacts Ireland's adherence with the CPT's minimum standard for living space, which is 6 m² per person in single cells and 4 m² per person in multiple-occupancy cells, excluding sanitary annexes.²⁸ Following its 2024 visit to Ireland, the CPT noted that:

The majority of cells in all the prisons visited were being used for double, triple and occasionally quadruple occupancy. This was despite the fact that they measured only 9 to 11.5 m², including an only semi-partitioned toilet. ... in these cells, prisoners were clearly not being offered 4 m² of living space each and in many cases, were only afforded 3 m² or even less.²⁹

Such confined conditions greatly impact on humane detention conditions, as discussed in Standard 7, above.

Where cell-sharing does occur, it should only happen with the agreement of all people concerned and only following a thorough risk assessment. Given the occupancy rates of Irish prisons throughout 2024 and the requirement for the IPS to accept into custody all people committed to prison by the courts, it is unclear how informed consent for cell-sharing can be obtained in the current circumstances.

The IPS has stated that a 'committal risk assessment process' is built into its Prisoner Information Management System (PIMS),³⁰ which allows a prison Governor to make an informed decision when allocating an individual to a shared cell. However, the IPS has also stated such a risk assessment may not always take place or the outcomes upheld, given the challenges of prison overcrowding:

The implementation of risk-based decisions may be **subject to the availability of suitable accommodation**. Additionally, where a person is committed late in the evening or at weekends, the committal risk assessment **may not be completed in advance of the assignment of cell accommodation** (emphasis added).³¹

This raises significant concerns about the safety of cell-sharing where a thorough risk assessment may not have taken place, or where the outcome of the assessment is unable to be implemented due to cell availability. This practice gives rise to significant risk, and its potential impact in terms of increasing tensions must be considered in the context of rising assaults rates between people in custody in Irish prisons (see Standard 27, p. 72).

Assessment of Standard 9: Regress

The number of people accommodated in single occupancy cells has decreased from 48 per cent of the total prison population in October 2022 to 36 per cent in October 2024. There was also a notable increase in the use of triple and quadruple occupancy cells between October 2022 and 2024.

²⁷ Data taken from IPS 'Census of Cell Occupancy and In-cell Sanitation' reports, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/census-reports/>>

²⁸ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Living space per prisoner in prison establishments: CPT standards* (CPT/Inf (2015) 44, 2015).

²⁹ CPT, *Report to the Irish Government on the visit to Ireland* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 154.

³⁰ The Prisoner Information Management System (PIMS) is the IT system used by the IPS to store and manage the records of people detained in Irish prisons and track information about people in prison.

³¹ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1686, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 8 September 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1686/>>

Standard 10 Pre-trial detention as an exceptional measure

Pre-trial detention is used as an exceptional measure. People on remand are accommodated separately from those who have been convicted of an offence and sentenced.

Assessment: Regress

There is a clear tension between the presumption of innocence enshrined in Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the practice of detaining someone charged with an offence before their trial (pre-trial or remand detention).³² The European Court of Human Rights has therefore noted that where someone is held in pre-trial detention, there must be “a genuine requirement of public interest which, notwithstanding the presumption of innocence, outweighs the rule of respect for individual liberty”.³³

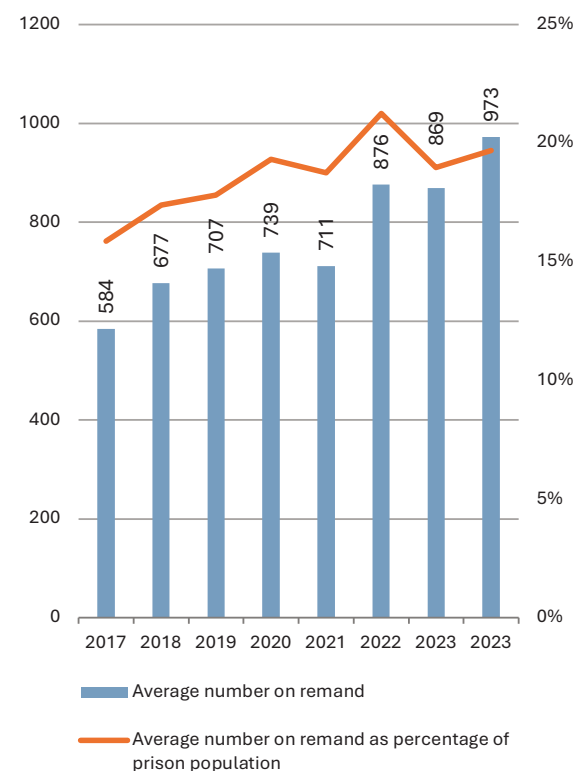
Pre-trial detention can have severe psychological effects on individuals. In 2022, rates of self-harm among people on remand were over double that of those sentenced.³⁴ Internationally, suicide rates are generally higher among remand detainees than those sentenced.³⁵

Given the harmful nature of pre-trial detention and the principle of presumption of innocence, pre-trial detention should only be used as an exceptional measure, for the shortest possible duration, and on a case-by-case basis where there is a significant risk of new offending, absconding, or interfering with the course of justice.³⁶

Ireland has historically had relatively low pre-trial detention rates compared to the European average.³⁷ However, in comparison to our European civil law counterparts, “the strong position of bail in both the Irish legal framework and legal culture is an important factor explaining its comparatively low rates of use”.³⁸ Since PIPS first launched in 2017, the average number of people held on remand in Irish prisons has increased significantly, from 584 in 2017 to 973 in 2024, representing an increase of 67 per cent (see Figure 6, below). The number of people on remand as a proportion of

the prison population has also increased from 16 per cent in 2017 to 20 per cent in 2024.

Figure 6: Average number of people on remand, 2017-2024³⁹



Data published by the IPS on the length of time people are held on remand shows the average number of people held on remand for more than one year has decreased since 2022, from 79 to 68 people in 2024 (see Figure 7, below). However, this is still a significant increase from when PIPS first

³² ECHR, Article 6.

³³ European Court of Human Rights, *Guide on Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights – Right to liberty and security* (2025), 39–40.

³⁴ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 41.

³⁵ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Remand Detention: Extract from the 26th General Report of the CPT, published in 2017* (CPT/Inf(2017)5-part, 2017), 1.

³⁶ *ibid*, 1–2.

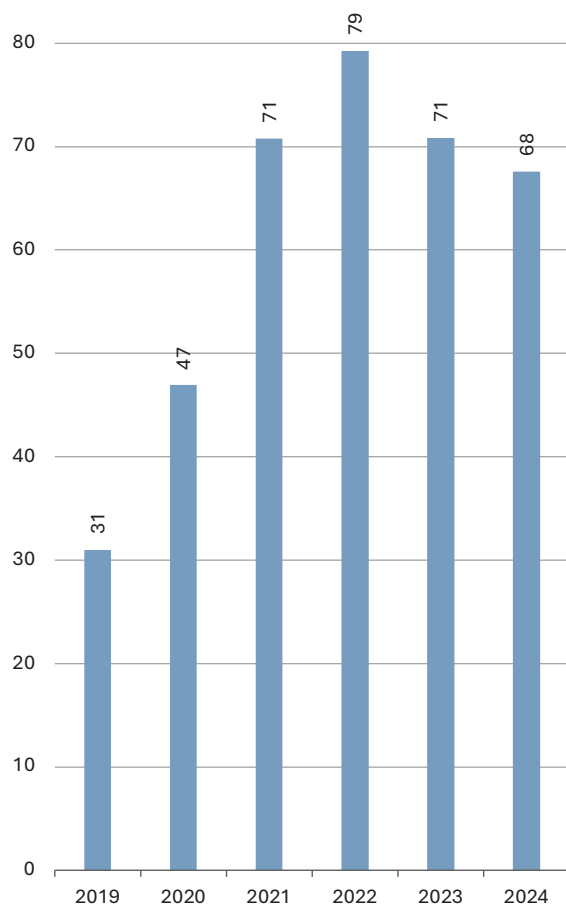
³⁷ Mary Rogan, ‘Examining the Role of Legal Culture as a Protective Factor Against High Rates of Pre trial Detention: the Case of Ireland’ (2022) *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 28, 425.

³⁸ Mary Rogan, ‘Understanding Ireland’s comparatively low rate of pretrial detention’ (Justice Trends, 2022) <<https://justice-trends.press/understanding-irelands-comparatively-low-rate-of-pretrial-detention/>>

³⁹ Data taken from IPS annual reports for relevant years.

launched in 2017. While the IPS has previously attributed this to an increase in the severity of charges,⁴⁰ it has not published more recent data.

Figure 7: Average number of people on remand for more than one year, 2019–2024⁴¹



As at June 2024, there were 12 people in Irish prisons who had been on remand for more than two years (see Table 5, below).⁴² This included two individuals who had been on remand for between three and four years, two individuals on remand for between four and five years, and one person who had been on remand for over five years. IPRT has significant concerns about these instances of prolonged pre-trial detention.

Table 5: Number of individuals on remand for more than two years, June 2024⁴³

Time spent on remand	Number of individuals
5 years and over	1
4 – 5 years	2
3 – 4 years	2
2 – 3 years	7
Total	12

Regarding the use of pre-trial detention more generally, research published by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties in May 2024 highlighted an increase in people remanded to custody for less serious offences, with a 56 per cent increase since 2016 in the number of people remanded into custody awaiting trial or sentencing for ‘public order offences and other social code offences’.⁴⁴

The increase in the number of people held on remand affects the ability of the IPS to keep people on remand separate to the sentenced prison population. This requirement is clearly outlined in Article 10(2)(a) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as the Nelson Mandela Rules (Rule 11(b)) and European Prison Rules (Rule 18.8). Ireland has maintained a reservation to Article 10(2) of the ICCPR since it ratified in 1989, stating:

Ireland accepts the principles referred to in paragraph 2 of article 10 and implements them as far as practically possible. It reserves the right to regard full implementation of these principles as objectives to be achieved progressively.⁴⁵

Despite this commitment to progressively implement the principles of Article 10(2) related to the separation of pre-trial and sentenced detainees, Ireland is moving further away from realising this. Between 2022 and 2024, there was a 52 per cent increase in the number of pre-trial detainees sharing a cell with sentenced detainees,

⁴⁰ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2019* (2020), 2.

⁴¹ Data taken from IPS monthly information notes, available: <https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/monthly-information-note/>

⁴² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 207, Dáil Éireann Deb, Thursday 27 June 2024 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-06-27/207/>>

⁴³ Data taken from response to PQ 27750/24; see Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 207, Dáil Éireann Deb, Thursday 27 June 2024 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-06-27/207/>>

⁴⁴ Irish Council for Civil Liberties, *Improving Judicial Assessment of Flight Risk*: (Flight Risk) (2024), 4.

⁴⁵ Law Reform Commission, *Discussion Paper: Domestic Implementation of International Obligations* (LRD 124, 2020), 145.

from 304 at the end of 2022, to 463 in 2024 (see Table 6, below).

Table 6: Number of individuals on remand cell-sharing with sentenced individuals at year end, 2022-2024⁴⁶

Prison	2022	2023	2024	2 Y change
Arbour Hill		1		
Castlereagh	39	37	58	+19
Cloverhill	41	96	111	+70
Cork	49	68	82	+33
Limerick (F)	7	5	8	+1
Limerick (M)	34	34	33	-1
Midlands	81	67	59	-22
Mountjoy (F)	15	37	29	+14
Mountjoy (M)	2	7	17	+15
Portlaoise	10	9	17	+7
Wheatfield	26	54	49	+23
Total	304	415	463	159

To help reduce the overall prison population and ensure people who have not been convicted of an offence are kept separate from those who have, Ireland must immediately take steps to reduce the number of pre-trial detainees in custody. IPRT maintains that the criminal justice system should operate on the presumption of bail being granted and deny it only when absolutely necessary, particularly in light of the *O'Callaghan* principles, which recognise the inherent legal nature of the right to bail.⁴⁷

IPRT welcomes ongoing work by the Department of Justice and the IPS to develop a pilot 'Bail Support Scheme' for women, which is designed to provide a community-based alternative to custodial remand.⁴⁸ The Department of Justice is also working to introduce electronic monitoring (EM) for 'specific categories of individuals', including those on remand in certain circumstances.⁴⁹ In other jurisdictions, EM has been found to widen the criminal justice net, has disproportionately affected people from ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, and has not been found to improve public safety.⁵⁰ IPRT recognises that EM can support a shift away from custodial remand, however, if it is to be introduced, appropriate safeguards must be built in from the outset to ensure it does not unduly or disproportionately impact the rights of individuals or increase the number of people subject to pre-trial monitoring and undermine the presumption of innocence.

Assessment of Standard 10: Regress

Since 2022 there has been a steady increase in the number of people held in pre-trial detention and a significant increase in the number of people on remand cell-sharing with sentenced individuals. While the average number of people detained on remand for greater than two years has decreased slightly since 2022, there remained a number of people held on prolonged pre-trial detention as at June 2024.

⁴⁶ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 873, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 17 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-17/873/>>

⁴⁷ *The People (Attorney General) v. O'Callaghan* [1966] IR 50.

⁴⁸ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 739, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 15 July 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-15/739/>>

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ American Civil Liberties Union, *Rethinking Electronic Monitoring: A Harm Reduction Guide* (2022).

Standard 11 Family contact

Every person in prison is encouraged, supported and facilitated to establish and maintain positive family relationships and other close social connections and friendships.

Assessment: Mixed

Despite being physically separated from wider society due to their imprisonment, all people in prison have the right to remain in contact with their family and other close connections. Families, next of kin, and other close significant relationships can play a key role in rehabilitation and community reintegration, and therefore should be encouraged and facilitated by prison staff and management. The right to family and social contact is provided for in the Prison Rules 2007, including via phone-calls, in-person visits, and mail. In recent years, video-calling has also been introduced in Irish prisons and can be opted for rather than in-person visits.

Under section 35 of the Prison Rules 2007, all sentenced people in prison may have family visits for up to 30 minutes each week. This may be extended at the discretion of the prison Governor. Following its 2024 visit to Ireland, the CPT raised concerns about the duration of prison visits and recommended that visits be extended. The IPS has stated, however, that due to prison overcrowding it is currently unable to provide family visits for longer than 30 minutes per week.⁵¹ This position has been confirmed by the Minister for Justice who stated: “Given the level of persons in custody it may not always be feasible to give prisoners their full entitlement”.⁵² Pressure on staffing levels may mean there is not enough prison staff to escort people in prison to visiting areas.

Published figures indicate that since 2022, the number of people in Irish prisons who did not receive in-person visits while in prison increased from 2,761 in 2022 to 2,946 in 2024.⁵³ While there are a number of different reasons for why this may be the case (including factors outside of the control of the IPS, such as people on short

sentences or those with family outside of Ireland), in-person visits and videocalls play a critical role in the wellbeing of people in prison. **IPRT urges the IPS to ensure they are able to provide the statutory minimum for all people in prison by dedicating ring-fenced staff resources to intra-prison escorts. The IPS should also undertake research to understand barriers to in-person visits that may contribute to the rising number of people not receiving in-person visits, and work towards reducing these barriers and further supporting people who do not receive in-person visits.**

A unique family initiative established in 2023 was the inaugural ‘Kids Camp’ at Shelton Abbey open prison, organised by the IPS and the Katharine Howard Foundation.⁵⁴ The two-day event provided children with imprisoned fathers the opportunity to visit Shelton Abbey and participate in a programme of activities designed to enable families to spend quality time together in a supportive and engaging environment. IPRT welcomes this initiative, and hopes that it can continue in future years.

Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been a greater emphasis on establishing videocalls as an alternative option to in-person visits. In 2023, over 41,000 family videocalls took place,⁵⁵ while in 2024 this was 47,609.⁵⁶ The option for people in prison to keep in contact with their family members and friends via videocall is undoubtedly positive, as it can help those who may otherwise not be able to travel to see their family member, and allows people in prison to see familiar, home surroundings. However, IPRT believes that videocalls are not a substitute for in-person visits and must not be

⁵¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Response of the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 23, 2025), 34.

⁵² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 74, Dáil Éireann Deb, Thursday 9 October 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-10-09/74/>>

⁵³ Lynne Kelleher, ‘Thousands of Irish prisoners receive no in-person visits from family or friends’ *Irish Independent* (13 April 2025). <<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/thousands-of-irish-prisoners-receive-no-in-person-visits-from-family-or-friends/a1963253734.html>>

⁵⁴ Katie Byrne, “‘Mine were only babies when I went in’: How kids’ camp at prison helps parents stay connected to their children” *Irish Independent* (3 November 2023) <<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/mine-were-only-babies-when-i-went-in-how-kids-camp-at-prison-helps-parents-stay-connected-to-their-children/a1407102619.html>>

⁵⁵ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 420, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 23 January 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-01-23/420/>>

⁵⁶ Irish Prison Service, ‘Video Visits in Irish Prisons 2024’ (LinkedIn, 2025). <https://www.linkedin.com/posts/irish-prison-service_irishprisonservice-familyconnections-innovationincorrections-activity-7289590768556523520-cM5z/>

treated as such; that is, people in prison must always retain the option of in-person visits.

The Minister for Justice has also noted that while some people in prison are opting for videocalls over in-person visits, these are at least 20 minutes in duration, below the statutory minimum for in-person visits.⁵⁷ **IPRT maintains that when videocalls are chosen as an alternative to in-person visits, these must meet the statutory minimum duration of in-person visits.**

Furthermore, IPRT would echo the recommendation of the CPT that the duration of both in-person and video visits be provided beyond the minimum statutory duration. The IPS should also take a flexible but fair approach to visiting procedures, particularly where family members may have travelled long distances to visit their loved ones.

With regard to the connection rates for videocalls, IPS highlighted a 99 per cent connection rate of videocalls on IPS systems in 2024.⁵⁸ While this is a high success rate, IPRT encourages the IPS to ensure that should a videocall fail due to IPS systems, an alternative call at a suitable time must be provided to people in prison and their families.

The IPS has continued to roll out in-cell telephones across the prison estate,⁵⁹ meaning that people in prison can call their family and friends from inside their cells. This helps reduce demand on communal phones, and allows people to call their relatives and friends more convenient times

However, following its 2024 visit, the CPT raised concerns about the length of time that people were allowed use the phone each day. At present, people in prison can make one six-minute outbound phone call per day. The CPT recommended that the IPS “significantly increase the length of time allowed on the telephone for all prisoners”.⁶⁰ In its response to the CPT, the Government noted: “Due to the current levels of

overcrowding, it is not possible to expand the existing offering due to ICT infrastructure and security resource requirements”.⁶¹ However, the response also stated the intention to introduce inbound telephone calls, which would mean family members could call for up to 10 minutes, twice daily.⁶² IPRT acknowledges the efforts to improve connections with family via enabling incoming calls, however greater contact with family and other social connections may be more effectively achieved by simply increasing the duration of outbound calls, as highlighted by the CPT. **IPRT would reiterate the recommendation of the CPT and urge the IPS to implement improvements to its ICT infrastructure and security resources to achieve this.**

In 2023, the IPS established a National Family Connections Officer role to oversee the implementation of IPS strategy and policy relating to families, and this role was filled in 2024.⁶³ The establishment of this role is a positive step forward for the IPS, and demonstrates a genuine commitment to improving family and wider social connections for people in prison. For the benefits of this position to be fully harnessed, however, sufficient resources must be allocated to ensure that improvements, initiatives and opportunities can be implemented.

Assessment of Standard 11: Mixed

The increasing provision for videocalls for people in prison is a positive step, as is the rollout of in-cell telephones. However, there is an increasing number of people in prison who received no in-person visits in 2024, and access to visits have been impacted by high prison occupancy.

⁵⁷ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 74, Dáil Éireann Deb, Thursday 9 October 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-10-09/74/>>

⁵⁸ Irish Prison Service, ‘Video Visits in Irish Prisons 2024’ (LinkedIn, 2025). <https://www.linkedin.com/posts/irish-prison-service_irishprisonservice-familyconnections-innovationincorrections-activity-7289590768556523520-cM5z/>

⁵⁹ Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, ‘Better Public Services article: Irish Prison Service’s Digital First approach’ (20 January 2025) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/better-public-services-article-irish-prison-services-digital-first-approach/>>

⁶⁰ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 267.

⁶¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Response of the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 23, 2025), 33.

⁶² *ibid.* See also Joint Committee on Disability Matters debate – Thursday 2 March 2023.

<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_disability_matters/2023-03-02/2/>

⁶³ See Action for Children and Families of Prisoners, ‘IPRT Action for Children and Families of Prisoners Network meets new Irish Prison Service Family Connections Officer’ (10 September 2024) <<https://www.actionforfamilies.ie/2024/09/10/iprt-children-and-families-of-prisoners-network-meet-new-irish-prison-service-family-connections-officer/>>

Standard 12 Access to healthcare services

All people in prison have timely access to healthcare services, including mental health services, which goes beyond the ‘equivalence of care’ principle. People have access to a full range of preventative services, and there is continuity between prison and community services.

Assessment: Mixed

All people in prison have the right to healthcare that is equal to that of the general population. This is clearly outlined in the Nelson Mandela Rules (Rule 24(1)), the Bangkok Rules (Rule 10), and the European Prison Rules (Rule 40). The healthcare needs of people in prison are often more acute than those of the general population, owing to a large proportion of people coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and the high risk of spread of certain illnesses in prison environments.

In 2022, the IPS commissioned an external review of health services in Irish prisons, undertaken by Crowe Ireland. The final report, *Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service* (the HNA), was published in May 2023.⁶⁴ The HNA set out 60 recommendations: 31 towards strengthening the delivery of IPS healthcare services, and 29 for improving governance of IPS healthcare services. **IPRT maintains that the recommendations contained in the HNA provide practical steps to improve the provision of healthcare in Irish prisons and should be implemented as a matter of priority.**

To this end, a ‘Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee’, made up of senior staff from the Departments of Justice and Health, the IPS and the Health Service Executive (HSE), was established in 2023, and is tasked with monitoring progress in implementing the HNA recommendations. The Steering Committee met three times throughout 2024.⁶⁵

Throughout 2024, the IPS also worked towards drafting a ‘Health Action Plan’, compiling health-related recommendations from various oversight reports and establishing “a structured, phased approach for implementation” of these recommendations.⁶⁶ An initial draft for this was

due to be completed by the end of 2024, however this had not yet been published by mid-2025.⁶⁷

The HNA, Steering Committee, and the drafting of a ‘Health Action Plan’ all demonstrate a commitment to improving health outcomes for people in prison, and IPRT encourages all relevant agencies to work closely to implement the recommendations from the report and ensure they have tangible impacts on the health of all people in prison.

In its report from its 2019 visit to Ireland, the CPT acknowledged the progress made in health service delivery in Irish prisons, and in 2024 it noted “momentum had been retained” and there was “generally good access to somatic healthcare in prisons”.⁶⁸

In 2024, the average number of General Practitioners (GPs) employed by the IPS across the prison estate was 12, resulting in a ratio of 1 GP to 412 people in custody, a decrease from 1:390 in 2022. Positively, however, a part-time locum female GP was introduced in Limerick Women’s Prison for three days per week.⁶⁹

The average number of fulltime equivalent (FTE) nurses employed by the IPS in 2024 was 144.5, an increase of 2.5 FTE positions since 2022. However, the ratio of nurses to people in custody decreased from 1:29 in 2022 to 1:34 in 2024. In 2024, there were 14 Chief Nurse Officers employed by the IPS, an increase from 10 in 2022. In its 2024 annual report, the OIP noted that while there had been an improvement in night nurse cover at Cloverhill Prison, this remained insufficient due to the increase in the prison population and the healthcare needs of the remand population.⁷⁰ The OIP also raised similar concerns related to night nurse cover at the Midlands Prison, including that

⁶⁴ Crowe Ireland, *Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service Final Report: March 2022* (2023).

⁶⁵ Government of Ireland, ‘Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee - Minutes of Meetings’. <<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/collections/health-needs-assessment-steering-committee-minutes-of-meetings/>>

⁶⁶ Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee, ‘3rd Meeting of the Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee: Meeting Minutes’ (2025). <<https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/hna-steering-committee-minutes-of-meeting-18-november-2024.pdf>>

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 206.

⁶⁹ Department of Justice, *IPS Health Needs Assessment: 1st progress report* (2024), 4.

⁷⁰ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 20.

the nurse's station was located a considerable distance from some prison landings.⁷¹ Given these challenges, the OIP has recommended that all operational staff are provided with First Responder training, including CPR and basic life support training,⁷² and IPRT urges the IPS to accept and implement this recommendation.

With regard to dental care, several people with recent experience of prison that IPRT has engaged with highlighted difficulties in seeing a dentist, in some cases causing significant pain and discomfort. Both the OIP and the CPT noted long dentist waiting lists in Midlands and Castlereagh prisons, respectively.⁷³

Overall, while work towards implementing the recommendations of the HNA assessment is a positive step, the IPS must ensure appropriate resourcing for all health services in the context of

severe prison overcrowding. Furthermore, the IPS and other relevant bodies must ensure there is concerted effort to implement the HNA recommendations and not lose momentum while managing acute prison overcrowding.

Assessment of Standard 12: Mixed

The completion of the Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service, and the subsequent establishment of a Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee and the drafting of a Health Action Plan, all demonstrate a commitment to improving health outcomes for people in prison and is to be commended. However, resourcing of health services in the context of acute prison overoccupancy remains a challenge.

Standard 13 Mental healthcare

People with serious mental health issues are diverted from the prison system and receive appropriate treatment and supports in an appropriate facility or service in a timely manner.

Assessment: Mixed

It is well established that the prison environment can both exacerbate underlying mental health conditions and can also be a source of mental distress itself. As such, there is typically a disproportionately high number of people with severe mental health issues in prison compared to the wider population and, as such, the Irish Prison Service must be able to meet the demand for mental health services.

The provision of mental health services in Irish prisons has been noted by a number of international human rights bodies. In 2022, the UN Human Rights Committee noted the lack of mental health services in Irish detention facilities.⁷⁴ Following its visit in 2024, the CPT highlighted that “a recurrent concern for the

Committee is the treatment of mentally ill persons in Irish prisons and the lack of change in this regard”.⁷⁵

A fundamental issue in the provision of mental health services in Irish prisons is the lack of detailed understanding of the mental health needs of the prison population. The Prison Officers Association in 2023 estimated that up to 70 per cent of the prison population experience mental ill-health.⁷⁶ At the start of 2025, there were approximately 2,078 people in prison waiting to be seen by a psychologist, or 46 per cent of the prison population.⁷⁷ However, there is, at present, no detailed information on the prevalence of mental health conditions among the prison population.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 15.

⁷² Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023* (2025), 36.

⁷³ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 15; and European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 209.

⁷⁴ UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Ireland* (CCPR/C/IRL/CO/5, 2023), 9.

⁷⁵ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 230.

⁷⁶ Diarmuid Pepper, ‘Up to 70% of people in Irish prisons have mental health issues, says Prison Officers Association’ *The Journal* (28 April 2023). <<https://www.thejournal.ie/irish-prisons-mental-health-issues-6055309-Apr2023>>

⁷⁷ This is both for mental health needs and for offence-related needs. See Irish Prison Service, ‘Prisoner Population on Friday 3rd January 2025 (2025). <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/03-January-2025.pdf>; and Minister for Justice, *Written answer to PQ No. 954, Dáil Éireann Deb. Wednesday 22 January 2025*. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-01-22/954/>>

This gap has been noted in several sources, including the Government's national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*, which highlighted the need for a mental health needs analysis of the prison population to be completed.⁷⁸ In 2023, the Director General of the Irish Prison Service stated that the IPS and the HSE were working together to engage in this needs analysis.⁷⁹ The IPS has twice advertised a tender for the Mental Health Needs Analysis but has been unsuccessful in securing a contractor to complete the work, despite this being first recommended in 2020.⁸⁰ Such a needs analysis is crucial to deliver effective mental health supports for all people in prison. Consequently, it is welcome that it has been readvertised.⁸¹ It should be appropriately resourced and undertaken as a matter of priority.

Mental health services in Irish prisons are provided by the IPS Psychology Service. Throughout 2024, the average ratio of psychologists to people in prison in was 1:212.⁸² This was a slight increase on the average ratio of 1:226 in 2022.⁸³ However, this is still a long way off the internationally recognised minimum resourcing levels of 1:150, recommended in the *Porporino Report*⁸⁴ and reaffirmed in the *Final Report of the High Level Task Force*.⁸⁵ Such resourcing levels would require approximately 33 psychologist positions in 2024 (notwithstanding increases to the prison population throughout 2025).

In 2024, the target set in the *Performance Delivery Agreement 2024* between the Department of Justice and the Irish Prison Service was for the IPS Psychology Service to see 2,200 unique clients, and provide at least 8,500 group or one-to-one psychology sessions.⁸⁶ The actual outcomes was 1,830 unique clients seen (a shortfall of 370, or 17 per cent of the target), and 9,720 total sessions completed (3,517 group sessions and 6,203 individual sessions). It is

positive that the number of sessions completed in 2024 is in excess of the target set, and the shortfall between the number of unique clients seen and the target has reduced since 2022 (see Table 7, below). However, it is of concern that the number of unique clients seen remains consistently below the set target, and the Government and IPS must ensure that Psychology Services are resourced appropriately to meet these targets as a minimum.

Table 7: Number of clients seen by IPS Psychology Service versus performance delivery agreement targets, 2022-2024⁸⁷

Year	Target	Number of clients seen	Difference
2024	2,200	1,830	-370 (17%)
2023	2,200	1,627	-573 (26%)
2022	2,000	1,303	-697 (35%)

In 2024, 636 individuals were seen by the Psychology Service for triage. Of this, 196 (31 per cent) were seen within 12 weeks, while 440 (69 per cent) waited for over 12 weeks for triage. The number of people seen by the Psychology Service for a mental health intervention was 546; of this, 27 per cent were seen within 12 weeks, while 73 per cent waited for over 12 weeks. While data comparison from previous years is not possible due to a change in the format of public reporting,⁸⁸ the number of people waiting for over 12 weeks for triage and to engage in mental health interventions is concerning.

However, IPRT was pleased to note the findings of research undertaken by Mental Health Reform that, once accessed, "the overwhelming majority of services and supports [were] viewed positively by both staff and men in custody" who participated in the research.⁸⁹

⁷⁸ Government of Ireland, *Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone* (2020), 103.

⁷⁹ Joint Committee on Disability Matters debate, Thursday 2 March 2023, 4. <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_disability_matters/2023-03-02/debate/mul@/main.pdf>

⁸⁰ Department of Justice, *IPS Health Needs Assessment: 1st progress report* (2024), 5.

⁸¹ Government of Ireland, 'Cft: CFT for the Provision of a Mental Health and Disability Needs Analysis of the Prison Population' (eTenders, 2025) <<https://www.etenders.gov.ie/epps/cft/prepareViewCfTWS.do?resourceId=6743014>>

⁸² Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 32.

⁸³ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2022* (2023), 25.

⁸⁴ F. Porporino "New Connections" *Embedding Psychology Services and Practice in the Irish Prison Service* (2015), 25.

⁸⁵ Department of Health and the Department of Justice, *High Level Task Force to consider the mental health and addiction challenges of those who come into contact with the criminal justice sector Final Report* (2022), 178.

⁸⁶ Department of Justice and Irish Prison Service, *Performance Delivery Agreement* (2024), 3. <<https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/irish-prison-service-performance-delivery-agreement-2024.pdf>>

⁸⁷ Data taken from relevant IPS annual reports and Department of Justice – IPS performance delivery agreements.

⁸⁸ Data taken from relevant IPS annual reports, which changed the format of reporting between 2023 and 2024.

⁸⁹ Mental Health Reform, *Mental Health Services & Supports in Prisons: Service Mapping and Reflections from Lived Experiences* (2024), 22. <<https://mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/MHR-24-PRISON-MAIN-1.pdf>>

Individuals with severe mental health conditions requiring inpatient treatment and care can be transferred from prison to the Central Mental Hospital (CMH), which had an operational capacity of 114 in 2024.⁹⁰ The number of people transferred from prison to the CMH in 2024 was 35, with a reported average wait time of around 103 days for transfer (see Table 8, below).⁹¹

Table 8: Number of people transferred to the Central Mental Hospital (CMH) and average wait time, 2022-2024⁹²

	2022	2023	2024
Number of people transferred from prison to CMH	19	41	35
Average wait time for transfer to CMH (days)*	253.7	230.6	102.93

*Includes transfer from court or recall from conditional discharge order.

As a snapshot from 1 July 2024, there were 21 individuals in prison awaiting transfer to the CMH.⁹³ Of these:

- Twelve had been on the waiting list for less than two months,
- Six had been on the waiting list for less than four months,
- Three had been on the waiting list for seven months, eight months, and nine months, respectively.

With regard to the timeliness of admissions to the CMH from prison, the Head of Service at the CMH has stated:

CMH have a clinical governance framework for review of the waiting list and admissions to the hospital. Admissions are dependent on vacancies within the admission wards, needs of current patients; prioritisation of waiting list

based on need and associated risks to individuals and ability for service to admit an individual safely.⁹⁴

While noting that reported data also includes transfer from court or recall from a conditional discharge order, the general reduction in waiting time for admission to the CMH is a hugely positive step. However, while acknowledging that CMH admissions are dependent on a number of factors outside of the control of the CMH, IPRT remains concerned about the excessive waiting times for some people in prison awaiting admission to the CMH, as demonstrated by the 1 July snapshot data.

Following its 2024 visit to Ireland, the CPT also raised concerns about the treatment of people with serious mental health conditions in Irish prisons but who do not meet the threshold for admission to the CMH. The CPT highlighted the lack of pathways out of prison for these individuals, noting that the lack of available treatment in prison may amount to inhumane treatment.⁹⁵ In both Castlerea and Mountjoy Prisons, the CPT highlighted the lack of healthcare available to people experiencing mental health difficulties and the ‘impoverished’ regimes such individuals were subject to. Overall, the CPT suggested there is a “systemic reliance on imprisonment for severely mentally ill individuals” and reiterated its view that “prisons are fundamentally inappropriate for those with severe mental illness and they should not serve as substitutes for medical institutions”.⁹⁶ IPRT reiterates the views of the CPT that people with serious mental health conditions should not be held in prison but treated in more appropriate health facilities.

IPRT maintains that further investment should be put into the ‘Prison In-reach and Court Liaison Service’ (PICLS), which assist courts in identifying defendants with major mental illness and provides practical solutions to accessing appropriate mental health care through liaising with community services. While PICLS currently operates in Cloverhill Prison, **IPRT believes that**

⁹⁰ Mental Health Commission, Central Mental Hospital Portrane: *Annual Inspection Report 2024* (2025).

⁹¹ Central Mental Hospital, National Forensic Mental Health Service, ‘PQ Number: 46407/25’ (2025). <<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/personal/pq/pq/2025-pq-responses/september-2025/pq-46407-25-matt-carthy.pdf>>

⁹² Data taken from response to PQ 46407/25, see *ibid*.

⁹³ Central Mental Hospital, National Forensic Mental Health Service, ‘PQ Number: 29185/24’ (2024). <<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/personal/pq/pq/2024-pq-responses/july-2024/pq-29185-24-cormac-devlin.pdf>>

⁹⁴ *ibid*.

⁹⁵ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 319.

⁹⁶ Council of Europe, ‘Council of Europe anti-torture committee (CPT) publishes report on Ireland, highlighting serious concerns about prisons’ (2025). <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-cpt-publishes-report-on-its-2024-periodic-visit-to-ireland>>

the PICLS models should be fully resourced and expanded to all committal prisons nationwide.

Positively, work progressed throughout 2024 to implement the recommendations of the High Level Taskforce on Mental Health and Addiction.⁹⁷ This included, for example, the establishment and recruitment into the role of Clinical Lead for Mental Health and Addiction, responsible for “developing the care and services available within prisons and liaising with community services to ensure continuity of care.”⁹⁸ Further, the IPS commenced work with the HSE to establish a dual-diagnosis pilot service within Cork Prison for people experiencing challenges with both mental health and addictions.⁹⁹

Assessment of Standard 13: Mixed

Some good progress has been made on implementing the recommendations of the High Level Taskforce on Mental Health and Addiction, including establishing a Clinical Lead for Mental Health and Addiction position and work to establish a dual-diagnosis pilot service within Cork Prison. The average wait time for transfer to the Central Mental Hospital for people with serious mental health conditions was also lower than previous years. However, serious concerns remain regarding the treatment of people with severe mental health conditions in Irish prisons, including access to services and conditions of detention.

Standard 14 Drug and alcohol treatment

People with drug and alcohol addiction challenges are diverted from the criminal justice system to receive appropriate treatment. Where imprisonment is the only appropriate option, treatment must be made available within prison, with a continuum of care upon release.

Assessment: Mixed

As with the prevalence of mental health issues, discussed above, the extent of people with addiction challenges in Irish prisons, both current and historic, is largely unknown. The Minister for Justice has stated that “over 70 per cent of people committed to prison have issues with drug addiction”,¹⁰⁰ while senior IPS management estimated that “approximately half of the prison population across the IPS estate may be using, or seeking to use, illicit substances, with a high percentage of these presenting with current or historical addiction challenges”.¹⁰¹

There is also very little publicly available data on the prevalence of illicit substances in Irish prisons. Prison management at Cloverhill Prison told the CPT during its 2024 visit that there was an increase of drugs entering the prison system.¹⁰² However, figures released by the IPS indicate that

between 2022 and 2024, there was a 25 per cent decrease in the number of drug seizures in Irish prisons (see Table 9, below).

Overall, further research is needed to understand the extent and needs of those experiencing addiction challenges in Irish prisons, as well as the prevalence of illicit substances in prison. **IPRT would urge the Mental Health Needs Analysis commissioned by the IPS to also consider the needs of those with addictions in Irish prisons from a health-based perspective.**

In 2023, the IPS released its *Irish Prison Service Drugs Strategy 2023-2026*.¹⁰² This strategy outlined three key components to its approach: 1) to inform and educate on the harmful impacts of illicit substances, 2) to support and treat those in prison with addictions through an integrated model of care, and 3) increase detection and

⁹⁷ Department of Justice, *Final Report of the High Level Task Force to consider the mental health and addiction challenges of those who come into contact with the Criminal Justice Sector* (2022).

⁹⁸ Joint Committee on Drug Use debate, Thursday, 26 September.
<https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_drugs_use/2024-09-26/debate/mul/@/main.pdf>

⁹⁹ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 278, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 8 October 2025.
<<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-10-08/278/>>

¹⁰⁰ Crowe Ireland, *Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service Final Report: March 2022* (2023), 44.

¹⁰¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 19.

¹⁰² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 278, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 8 October 2025.
<<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-10-08/278/>>

¹⁰² Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Drugs Strategy 2023-2026* (2023).

Table 9: Drug seizures by prison, 2017-2024¹⁰¹

Prison	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Arbour Hill	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Castlerea	85	70	59	36	29	48	38	47
Cloverhill	93	155	186	207	313	283	410	235
Cork	21	55	65	46	69	42	36	40
Limerick (M + F)	84	94	81	116	145	152	38	66
Loughan House	5	4	1	0	0	0	0	7
Midlands	124	97	97	33	61	74	58	69
Mountjoy*	386	230	252	322	439	240	233	178
Portlaoise	35	30	19	11	9	29	48	22
Shelton Abbey	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Wheatfield	183	403	490	479	453	510	433	371
Total	1,018	1,138	1,251	1,251	1,518	1,378	1,294	1,035

*Includes Mountjoy Men's, Mountjoy Female and the Training Unit (from 2023 onwards)

reduce the availability of illicit substances in prisons.

The strategy outlines a number of key actions within each component, which, if implemented, will undoubtedly reduce the harms associated with drug use in Irish prisons. However, the majority of actions in the strategy relate to drug detection and reduction. While measures to prevent the inflow of illicit substances into Irish prisons is important to limit the availability of these substances, **IPRT encourages greater emphasis to be placed on a health-based approach to drug use in practice, including providing timely and effective supports, education, and meaningful activities that can reduce drug dependency.**

Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI) is engaged by the IPS to provide addiction counselling and support across the Irish prison estate. In January 2025, there were 20 addictions counsellor posts¹⁰⁵ and in July 2024 over 600 people in prison were

engaged in addiction counselling.¹⁰⁶ The number of interventions provided by MQI increased by 16 per cent between 2022 and 2024, to 15,364 (see Table 10, below). However, the number of unique clients seen by MQI fell from 2,126 to 1,283. This was due to a combination of staffing changes and turnover, and changes to the service delivery model to try and increase engagement with people on shorter sentences. MQI also noted challenges in facilitating some sessions due to prison staff availability to escort people to attend these.¹⁰⁷

Table 10: Addiction counselling services provided by Merchants Quay Ireland, 2022-2024¹⁰⁸

	2022	2023	2024
Total number of interventions	13,241	14,947	15,364
Number of unique clients seen	2,126	2,035	1,283

¹⁰⁵ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 954, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 22 January 2025.

<<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-01-22/954/>>

¹⁰⁶ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 510, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 9 July 2024.

<<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-07-09/510/>>

¹⁰⁷ Information provided to IPRT directly by Merchants Quay Ireland, 13 November 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Data taken from Merchants Quay Ireland annual reports for those years, available: <<https://mqi.ie/reports/>> ; and Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 507, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 14 February 2023 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-02-14/507/>>

While data on the average wait-times to access addiction counselling services is not currently recorded,¹⁰⁹ throughout 2024 there was consistently over 800 people on waiting lists to access addiction counselling services.¹¹⁰ Further, the CPT noted concerns related to long waiting lists and delays in accessing drug counselling sessions, particularly for women in the Dóchas Centre.¹¹¹ These long waiting lists, combined with the high use of short sentences (see Standard 2, p. 16), means that some people cannot access addiction counselling services while in prison. This has been highlighted by the Director General of the IPS, who stated: “The reality is that if a person is in a custodial setting for four months or four and half months, it is very hard for us to provide a service.”¹¹² **IPRT urges the IPS and the Government to appropriately resource drug and alcohol addiction counselling services in all Irish prisons to ensure all people in prison have access to addiction services in a timely manner and on an equitable basis.**

Positively, throughout 2024, the IPS introduced a number of harm reduction measures in Irish prisons, including acquiring extra naloxone kits to use in the event of an opioid overdose in prison,¹¹³ providing intranasal naloxone to people on release from prison with history of opioid use, and broadcasting educational videos on in-cell televisions to increase awareness on responding to possible overdoses.¹¹⁴ IPRT also notes the swift and effective action taken by the IPS following a series of synthetic opioid overdoses in Portlaoise prison in August 2024,¹¹⁵ including an information campaign and substance amnesty. The IPS is to be commended on this.

Overall, the CPT noted that there has been an “improved drug treatment approach” in Irish prisons since its 2019 visit.¹¹⁶ However, recommendations made by the CPT included increasing resources for addiction and prevention services across the prison estate, and increasing the availability of opioid agonist therapy (methadone treatment). Specifically, the CPT highlighted that while it is possible to continue opioid agonist therapy upon arriving to prison, it is “rarely possible” to initiate treatment in Irish prisons, with the exception of stabilisation (detox).¹¹⁷ The recommendation made by the CPT aligns with recommendations IPRT has previously made related to timely access to addiction services, harm reduction measures, and equivalence of care in the community.

Assessment of Standard 14: Mixed

The introduction of the new *IPS Drugs Strategy* provides a firm foundation to reduce the harms associated with drug use in Irish prisons, and the IPS has implemented a number of harm reduction measures, including the provision of naloxone kits and establishing an awareness raising campaign of risk factors for drug overdoses. However, there remain long waiting lists for the provision of addiction counselling services, and there was a decrease in the number of unique clients reached in 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 510, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 9 July 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-07-09/510/>>

¹¹⁰ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 291, Dáil Éireann Deb, Thursday 25 January 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-01-25/291/>>; see also Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 510, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 9 July 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-07-09/510/>>; and Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 954, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 22 January 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-01-22/954/>>

¹¹¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 213.

¹¹² Joint Committee on Drug Use Deb, Thursday 26 September 2024 <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_drugs_use/2024-09-26/debate/mul@/main.pdf>

¹¹³ Eoghan MacConnell, ‘HSE confirm new drug behind mass overdose at Portlaoise Prison’ *Leinster Express* (19 August 2024). <<https://www.leinsterexpress.ie/news/local-news/1582861/hse-confirm-new-drug-behind-mass-overdose-at-portlaoise-prison.html>>

¹¹⁴ Órla Ryan, ‘Naloxone will be more widely available after helping save lives in recent overdose cases’ *The Journal* (3 Jan 2023). <<https://www.thejournal.ie/naloxone-programme-in-ireland-to-be-extended-6262393-Jan2024/>>

¹¹⁵ Jackie Fox, ‘One prisoner still in ICU after suspected overdoses’ *RTÉ* (15 August 2024). <<https://www.rte.ie/news/leinster/2024/0814/1464878-portlaoise-prison/>>

¹¹⁶ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 206.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, para 227.

Standard 15 Privacy

The right to privacy of all people in prison, and their families or other next of kin, is respected and protected.

Due to the unavailability of up-to-date, accurate, accessible data, we could not complete a fair assessment in *PIPS 2024*.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Section B: An effective and humane penal system

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
7. HUMANE PRISON CONDITIONS: The increase in the number of people required to sleep on mattresses on the floor and the overcrowding of cells more generally has had a significant impact on humane prison conditions across the entire prison estate. While the new Limerick Women's Prison is a significant improvement in terms of material conditions, the positive elements of the new facility are undermined by the severe level of overcrowding.	REGRESS 
8. IN-CELL SANITATION: The significant decrease in the number of people 'slopping out' is welcome, however the practice should be eliminated entirely. There has also been an increase in the number of people toileting in the presence of others across the prison estate, with no indication from the IPS or Government that this will be addressed substantively in the short to medium-term.	REGRESS 
9. SINGLE CELL ACCOMMODATION: The number of people accommodated in single occupancy cells has decreased from 48 per cent of the total prison population in October 2022 to 36 per cent in October 2024. There was also a notable increase in the use of triple and quadruple occupancy cells between October 2022 and 2024.	REGRESS 
10. PRE-TRIAL DETENTION AS AN EXCEPTIONAL MEASURE: Since 2022 there has been a steady increase in the number of people held in pre-trial detention and a significant increase in the number of people on remand cell-sharing with sentenced individuals. While the average number of people detained on remand for greater than two years has decreased slightly since 2022, there remained a number of people held on prolonged pre-trial detention as at June 2024.	REGRESS 
11. FAMILY CONTACT: The increasing provision for videocalls for people in prison is a positive step, as is the rollout of in-cell telephones. However, there is an increasing number of people in prison who received no in-person visits in 2024, and access to visits have been impacted by high prison occupancy.	MIXED 
12. ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE SERVICES: The completion of the Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service, and the subsequent establishment of a Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee and the drafting of a Health Action Plan, all demonstrate a commitment to improving health outcomes for people in prison and is to be commended. However, resourcing of health services in the context of acute prison overoccupancy remains a challenge.	MIXED 
13. MENTAL HEALTHCARE: Some good progress has been made on implementing the recommendations High Level Taskforce on Mental Health and Addiction, including establishing a Clinical Lead for Mental Health and Addiction position and work to establish a dual-diagnosis pilot service within Cork Prison. The average wait time for transfer to the Central Mental Hospital for people with serious mental health conditions was also lower than previous years. However, serious concerns remain regarding the treatment of people with severe mental health conditions in Irish prisons, including access to services and conditions of detention.	MIXED 

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
14. DRUG AND ALCOHOL TREATMENT: The introduction of the new <i>IPS Drugs Strategy</i> provides a firm foundation to reduce the harms associated with drug use in Irish prisons, and the IPS has implemented a number of harm reduction measures, including the provision of naloxone kits and establishing an awareness raising campaign of risk factors for drug overdoses. However, there remain long waiting lists for the provision of addiction counselling services, and there was a decrease in the number of unique clients reached in 2024.	MIXED 
15. PRIVACY	Not assessed

Section C

Prison regimes

Section C

Prison regimes

Standard 16 Time out-of-cell

Every person in prison, including those on remand, can spend a minimum of 12 hours outside of their cell each day, including a minimum of five hours per day engaged in structured, meaningful activity for five days a week. All people in prison have access to appropriate outdoor areas for at least one hour each day.

Assessment: Regress

The ability to spend as much time out of cell as possible and engaged in meaningful activity is critical to the wellbeing of people in prison and to support their rehabilitative needs.

The CPT has repeatedly stressed that people in prison should be able to spend a 'reasonable' amount of time outside of their cells.¹ IPRT maintains that this should be at least 12 hours each day, including at least one hour of time spent outside (as required by the European Prison Rules (Rule 27.1) and the Nelson Mandela Rules (Rule 23)). This is also reflected in Irish legislation, as section 27(3) of the Prison Rules 2007 states:

In so far as is practicable, each convicted prisoner should be engaged in authorised structured activity for a period of not less than five hours on each of five days in each week.²

In response to a parliamentary question seeking data on time out-of-cell, by prison, for 2022, 2023 and 2024, the Minister for Justice stated:

A review of information supplied by each prison for the years sought indicates that the time spent out-of-cell by prisoners ranges from 7.5 hours to 8.5 hours depending on the constraints of the particular prison. The majority of prisons operate an average of 8 hours and 30 minutes out-of-cell time.³

In the absence of the specific data requested, it is

not possible to undertake any analysis of trends related to time out-of-cell or the likely impacts that significant increases in prison occupancy and associated staffing pressures have had. It is unlikely that this average would have remained static over the three-year period. The lack of detailed published data on time out-of-cell is an issue that IPRT has repeatedly highlighted, and it is disappointing that data is not available nor proactively published.

There continues to be a high number of people held on restricted regimes in Irish prisons (i.e. people that are locked in their cells for 19 hours or more per day). As noted in Standard 27, p. 72, this is in large part due to an increase in the number of people placed on a restricted regime for protection.

Between October 2022 and October 2024, the number of people on a restricted regime increased from 733, or 17 per cent of the prison population,⁴ to 970, or 19 per cent of the prison population.⁵

Of those on a restricted regime in October 2024:

- 205 were on 19-hour restricted regime (meaning they were confined to their cells for 19 hours a day),
- 471 were on a 21-hour restricted regime,
- 284 were on a 22-hour restricted regime,

¹ The CPT has highlighted that this should be at least eight hours for people on remand, and 'even more favourable' for sentenced individuals; see European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *The CPT standards: "Substantive" sections of the CPT's General Reports* (CPT/Inf/E (2002) 1 – Rev, 2003).

² Prison Rules 2007, SI No 2007/252, s 27(3).

³ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 874, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 17 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-17/874/>>

⁴ Irish Prison Service, 'Census of Restricted Regime Prisoners October 2022' (2025) <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/October-2022-Restriction.pdf>

⁵ Irish Prison Service, 'Census of Restricted Regime Prisoners October 2024' (2025) <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/October-2024-Restriction.pdf>

- eight on a 23-hour restricted regime, and
- two on a 24-hour restricted regime.⁶

As such, in October 2024, nearly one in five people in Irish prisons had less than five hours out of their cell per day, and almost 10 per cent had less than three hours out of their cell each day.

Additionally, there is no publicly available data regarding the length of time that an individual spends on a restricted regime.⁷ This again is of significant concern as it inhibits external oversight of the use of restricted regimes in Irish prisons. Given the large proportion of people in Irish prisons who are on restricted regimes, and the severe impact that a lack of time out-of-cell has on an individual's wellbeing, **IPRT maintains that this data should be recorded and published as a matter of priority. Further, the IPS should take immediate steps to ensure that people on**

restricted regimes can spend an increased amount of time out-of-cell, particularly those on 22+ hour restricted regimes.

Assessment of Standard 16: **Regress**

Both the total number and proportion of people restricted to their cells for 19 or more hours a day increased throughout 2024. Furthermore, there is no publicly available data on time-out-of-cell generally, including where an individual may have limited time out of their cell without being placed on a restricted regime.

Standard 17 Sentence management

All people in prison serving a sentence, and their family or next of kin (as appropriate) has the opportunity to be actively involved in their sentence planning, from the beginning of their sentence through to the point of release.

Assessment: **No change**

Sentence planning and management is an essential part of supporting an individual through prison rehabilitation processes and addressing the causes of offending behaviours. It should provide structure to individuals' sentences and help establish and achieve goals. Both the Council of Europe and the CPT have highlighted the importance of comprehensive, individualised sentence plans that are drawn up with the involvement of the person serving a sentence and their family or next of kin, as appropriate.⁸

The IPS introduced the 'Integrated Sentence Management' (ISM) system in 2008, designed to ensure coordinated work with people sentenced to prison for over one year based on their agreed sentence plans.⁹ A sentence plan is prepared by

an ISM Coordinator and the individual in prison, and reviewed regularly by the ISM Coordinator and the person in prison throughout their sentence.

At the start of 2024, there were 27 ISM Coordinators across all Irish prisons, with a total of 3,297 people in prison eligible for sentence management.¹⁰ An additional two ISM Coordinators were assigned to a joint IPS and Probation Service co-located unit, dedicated to managing individuals selected for specific programmes.¹¹

The average caseload for each ISM Coordinator across the prison estate, based on the number of ISM Coordinators in each prison, was 113. This ranged from 1:12.5 at Cloverhill Prison, to 1:226 at Mountjoy Men's Prison (see Table 11, below).¹²

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 680, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 24 June 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-06-24/680/>>

⁸ Council of Europe, *Recommendation Rec(2003)23 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the management by prison administrations of life sentence and other long-term prisoners* (adopted 9 October 2003); and European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Situation of life-sentenced prisoners: Extract from the 25th General Report of the CPT, published in 2016* (CPT/Inf (2016) 10-part, 2016).

⁹ Irish Prison Service, 'Integrated Sentence Management' <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/prisoner-services/integrated-sentence-management/>>

¹⁰ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 456, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 23 January 2024 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-01-23/456/>>

¹¹ Including the Joint Agency Response to Crime, Community Support and Community Return Schemes, *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

Table 11: Integrated Sentence Management (ISM) Coordinators in Irish prisons, January 2024¹³

Prison	Number of FTE ISM Coordinators	Total individuals eligible for sentence management	Average Caseload
Arbour Hill	1	135	135
Castlerea	2	251	125.5
Cloverhill	2	25	12.5
Cork	3	162	54
Dóchas Centre (Mountjoy Female)	2	79	39.5
Limerick (M)	2	192	96
Limerick (F)	1	35	35
Loughan House	1	120	120
Midlands	4	771	193
Mountjoy Male	3	678	226
Portlaoise	1	197	197
Shelton Abbey	1	104	104
Training Unit	1	98	98
Wheatfield	3	450	150
Co-Located Unit	2	N/A	N/A
Total	29	3,297	113.3 average

In its 2024 visit to Ireland, the CPT raised concerns about the ISM system, given the small number of ISM Coordinators and the fact that they often had to undertake regular prison officer duties as well.¹⁴ Some people with recent experience of prison that IPRT has engaged with highlighted delays in meeting with ISM Coordinators at the start of their sentences and limited engagement their ISM Coordinator throughout their sentence. **IPRT maintains that for the ISM system to work as envisioned, additional ISM Coordinator positions must be established and provided with specific, protected time to undertake these functions.**

IPRT also maintains that sentence planning should start from the very first day of an individual's sentence and be available to all, irrespective of the duration of their sentence. As noted above, sentence planning plays a critical role in ensuring that individuals can use their time in prison constructively and that there is a coordinated

approach to accessing services and supports. As such, **IPRT urges the IPS to consider expanding sentence management to all people in prison, and resource the ISM system appropriately.**

Assessment of Standard 17: No change

There continues to be a relatively low number of ISM Coordinators compared to the number of people eligible for sentence management. For the ISM system to work as envisioned, IPRT believes that additional ISM Coordinators positions must be established and provided with specific, protected time to undertake these functions.

¹³ Data taken from response to PQ 3023/24, *ibid*.

¹⁴ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 173.

Standard 18 Life skills

All people in prison have the opportunity, and are supported, to develop and maintain life skills, and can exercise independence, autonomy, and personal responsibility to the greatest extent possible.

Assessment: Mixed

Opportunities to develop and maintain life skills in prison are essential to assist with reintegration and rehabilitation, and to promote normalisation and reduce the risk of deskilling through institutionalisation.

In September 2024, the Minister for Justice announced plans to establish three 'Independent Living Units (ILU), totalling 30 new spaces, in Castlerea Prison and Shelton Abbey and Loughan House open prisons.¹⁵ The Minister noted:

The ILUs will prepare such people for living independently following their release by providing an environment that requires personal responsibility similar to what will be needed outside the prison setting. They will allow individual responsibility to be taken for living spaces and will help improve life skills by enabling individuals to obtain basic skills such as cooking a meal, washing their laundry, cleaning and maintaining a home, while also interacting with others within a residential accommodation type complex.¹⁶

IPRT has previously recommended that such units be established across the prison estate,¹⁷ and so this is a welcome development.

However, we were disappointed by the decision of the IPS in March 2024 to repurpose the low security 'Progression Unit' in Mountjoy Prison to accommodate individuals convicted of a sexual offence, due to the pressures caused by prison overcrowding. The Progression Unit previously housed individuals on enhanced regimes and those near the end of their sentences, and helped prepare people for their release and reintegration through an enhanced focus on rehabilitation and encouraging greater personal autonomy.¹⁸ In May 2024, IPRT signed an open letter to the Minister for Justice and the Director General of the IPS calling for the reversal of the decision to close the

unit.¹⁹ Notwithstanding the challenges caused by prison overcrowding and the need to keep all those in custody safe, **we would reiterate our recommendation that the Progression Unit be reopened.**

Assessment of Standard 18: Mixed

The proposal to establish new Independent Living Units in Castlerea Prison, Shelton Abbey and Loughan House are positive steps that will assist people accommodated there to develop and maintain life-skills essential for exercising personal autonomy and successful reintegration into the wider community. However, it is disappointing that the Mountjoy Progression Unit, which prioritised preparation for life post-release and supported meaningful reintegration, has been repurposed due to the impacts of prison overcrowding.

¹⁵ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1086, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 9 September 2024 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-09-09/1086/>>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ See Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System: A Framework for Penal Reform (2018)* (2018), 74; and Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System: A Framework for Penal Reform (2019)* (2019), 74.

¹⁸ Lynn Ruane, 'Opinion: Repurposing Mountjoy's Progression Unit - a short-term solution to a long-term problem' *The Journal* (30 May 2024) <<https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/mountjoy-prison-6390398-May2024/>>

¹⁹ Irish Penal Reform Trust, 'Joint letter to Minister for Justice and IPS regarding concerns about closure of Progression Unit in Mountjoy Prison' (31 May 2024) <<https://www.iprt.ie/latest-news/letter-to-minister-and-ips-concerns-regarding-closure-of-progression-unit-in-mountjoy-prison/>>

Standard 19 Education and training

All people in prison have access to a range of regular educational and training activities that meet their individual needs and take into account their personal aspirations and rehabilitation and reintegration requirements.

Assessment: Progress

Education is a vital aspect of human development and is a basic human right. Many people in Irish prisons have low educational achievement, and 2022 estimates suggest that over 70 per cent of people in Irish prisons were early school leavers, with the median-school leaving age of 14 years old.²⁰ As such, access to education while in prison can greatly contribute to personal development and increase the likelihood of successful future desistance from crime.

Service delivery of education in Irish prisons was previously guided by the joint IPS and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) *Prison Education Strategy 2019-2022*.²¹ A new joint IPS/ETBI prison education strategy was due to be developed and implemented from 2023 onwards, however, this strategy was not published in 2024. In its *Annual Report 2024*, the IPS stated that the *IPS Strategy 2023-2027* “incorporates education strategy and policy into the overall Irish Prison Service strategy”.²² However, the only substantive mention of prison education in the wider IPS strategy is: “Expand work training and education opportunities” listed as a key deliverable.²³ **IPRT would encourage the IPS, in conjunction with the ETBI, to develop an updated Prison Education Strategy to provide a more detailed vision and roadmap for the provision of education in Irish prisons in the coming years.**

In May 2023, a Prison Education Taskforce was established “to improve education and upskilling across the criminal justice sector”,²⁴ including by

promoting greater alignment between prison services and the tertiary education system.²⁵ The Taskforce is jointly chaired by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Minister of State with responsibility for Law Reform in the Department of Justice, and membership comprises representatives from relevant government departments, national education and training agencies, and experts with lived experience.²⁶ This initiative is expected to work towards improving access to education opportunities within prisons, and promoting employment and further or higher education on release from prison.²⁷

During 2023 and 2024, the number of fulltime equivalent teacher positions allocated to the IPS through the ETBIs was 220. This number has been the same for a number of years,²⁸ despite recent increases in the prison population.

There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of people in prison attending prison education opportunities (including classes and blended learning) reported by the IPS, from 33 per cent in 2022 to 45 per cent in 2024 (see Table 12, below). While this is a positive development, this is only slightly higher than when PIPS was first launched in 2017, when it was reported that 42 per cent of the prison population was engaged in education.

²⁰ Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science debate, Tuesday 5 July 2022 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/2022-07-05/2/>

²¹ Irish Prison Service and Education and Training Boards Ireland, *Prison Education Strategy 2019-2022* (2019).

²² Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 25.

²³ Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* (2023), 15.

²⁴ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2023* (2024), 21.

²⁵ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 213, Dáil Éireann Deb, Thursday 22 February 2024 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-02-22/213/>>

²⁶ Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Ministers Harris and Browne co-chair Prison Education Taskforce’s first meeting’ (31 May 2023) <<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/press-releases/ministers-harris-and-browne-co-chair-prison-education-taskforces-first-meeting/>>

²⁷ Eolas, ‘Prison Education Taskforce established’ (November 2023) <<https://www.eolasmagazine.ie/prison-education-taskforce-established/>>

²⁸ For example, a response to a PQ in 2012 indicated there were 220 FTE teacher positions at that time; see Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 89, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 13 March 2012 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2012-03-13/39/>>

Table 12: Attendance at education programmes, 2020-2024²⁹

Year	Percentage of total prison population attending prison education (classes and blended learning)
2024	45%
2023	37%
2022	33%
2021	28%
2020	35%

IPRT has also heard concerns related to education programmes not being run, or people being unable to attend education programmes, due to a shortage of staff cause by prison overcrowding. This is acknowledged in the final report of the Prison Overcrowding Response Group, which highlighted:

The increase in prisoner population also stretches limited staffing levels significantly, as it requires the redeployment of staff into landings, and other shared spaces, for safety reasons. This has a **direct knock on effect of decreasing access to education** and rehabilitation services, as the staff required to facilitate such services are necessarily diverted to other duties to ensure the safe running of the respective prisons (emphasis added).³⁰

Shortages of prison officers mean that individuals cannot always be escorted safely around the prison or moved from their cells to activities and programmes (such as education and training). The IPS has also noted that “school and work and training closures are directly attributable to prison staff short-falls as a result of the large numbers of officers required to escort persons in custody”.³¹

Unfortunately, there is no available data regarding the frequency of school closures or other restrictions on access to education and training programmes,³² despite IPRT calling for a number of years for these to be recorded and made publicly available.³³ **IPRT reiterates our recommendation that information on the frequency and rates of school closures must be recorded and made available upon request.**

Prison overcrowding can also impact on an individual’s access to education and training opportunities due to the use of inter-prison transfers to manage prison occupancy levels.³⁴ The movement of individuals to different prisons can mean that progress in education is disturbed, or even halted. **IPRT therefore considers that a formal process allowing for individuals to be placed on an ‘education hold’ and ineligible for transfer in certain specific circumstances should be explored in Irish prisons.**

In early 2023, the OIP released its reports on a *Thematic Inspection on Education & Work Training at Wheatfield, Mountjoy Men’s, and Arbour Hill Prisons*.³⁵ The OIP made 30 recommendations for improvement, 21 of which were accepted and nine that were partially accepted. The OIP’s recommendations broadly related to ensuring a consistent approach to education and training across the prison estate, ensuring individuals on restricted regimes have access to work training, strengthening certification and accreditation systems, enhancing staffing, support for staff and resources, and increasing data collection and dissemination. **IPRT encourages the IPS to implement all of the OIP’s recommendations and report on progress and outcomes for people in prison.**

²⁹ Data taken from IPS annual reports from those years.

³⁰ Department of Justice, *Prison Overcrowding Response Group Report* (2024), 13.

³¹ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *IPS Recommendation Action Plan: Thematic Inspection on Education & Work Training: Wheatfield Prison, Mountjoy Men’s Prison & Arbour Hill Prison* (2023), 11. <<https://www.oip.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/IPS-Action-Plan-Education-and-Work-Training-Thematic-Inspection-Recommendations.pdf>>

³² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 127, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 30 April 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-04-30/127/>>

³³ For example, IPRT made this recommendation in 2018; see Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System: A Framework for Penal Reform* (2018) (2018).

³⁴ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 2075, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 29 July 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2075/>>

³⁵ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Thematic Inspection on Education & Work Training: Wheatfield Prison, Mountjoy Men’s Prison & Arbour Hill Prison* (2023); and Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *IPS Recommendation Action Plan: Thematic Inspection on Education & Work Training: Wheatfield Prison, Mountjoy Men’s Prison & Arbour Hill Prison* (2023) <<https://www.oip.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/IPS-Action-Plan-Education-and-Work-Training-Thematic-Inspection-Recommendations.pdf>>

Assessment of Standard 19: Progress

There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of people in prison engaging in education programmes, and the establishment of the Prison Education Taskforce is a positive initiative to promote engagement with prison education and supporting work and further/higher education opportunities post-release. However, the IPS must ensure that access to education programmes is equitable across the prison estate (including for those on restricted regimes) and is sufficiently resourced in the context of acute prison overcrowding.

Standard 20 Community engagement and involvement

People in prison have opportunities to participate and engage in the wider community through structured forms of temporary release. Civil society and community groups are encouraged and supported to engage with those in custody and to run programmes and activities within prisons.

Assessment: Mixed

The use of structured temporary release for those serving a prison sentence can be an important tool to help people in custody engage in the wider community and reconnect with family ahead of their release. However, IPRT has previously raised concerns over temporary release being used as a 'release valve' to manage pressure from overcrowding.³⁶ Both the 2022 *Review of Policy Options*³⁷ and the 2024 *Prison Overcrowding Response Group Report*³⁸ also highlighted recent increases in the use of unstructured temporary release in response to prison overcrowding. IPRT maintains that while temporary release can be used as an effective way to reduce the overall number of people in prison, this must be done in structured way that is based on the specific needs of the individual.

There is a large number of community-based organisations that regularly engage with people in prisons across Ireland. IPRT believes that strengthening engagement and exchange between community organisations and people in prison is a

vital component in the rehabilitation process and should be encouraged by the IPS.

The Irish Red Cross is a key community organisation operating within Irish prisons and runs a 'Community-Based Health and First Aid' programme in all prisons across the country. The programme "empowers and trains volunteers within the prison community to engage in peer-to-peer health promotion", and volunteers "attend workshops, trainings, develop and execute projects and graduate from the programme".³⁹ Throughout 2023 and 2024, 219 volunteers completed the programme.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, due to prison overcrowding and associated impacts on staffing capacity, IPRT has heard reports of community organisations not gaining entry or having reduced access to Irish prisons for pre-arranged programmes and activities. As noted on p. 53 with regard to education, IPRT urges all prisons to keep a register of instances where people in prison have been

³⁶ Muiris O'Cearbhaill, 'More prisoners on temporary release in attempt to tackle Irish Prison Service overcrowding' *The Journal* (7 November 2023). <<https://www.thejournal.ie/prison-service-temporary-release-6211077-Nov2023/>>

³⁷ Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Policy Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (2022), 51.

³⁸ Department of Justice, *Prison Overcrowding Response Group Report* (2024), 11.

³⁹ Irish Red Cross, *Annual Report 2024* (2025).

⁴⁰ Irish Red Cross, *Annual Report 2023* (2024); and Irish Red Cross, *Annual Report 2024* (2025).

unable to participate in programmes and activities, including those organised by community-based organisations, and the reasons for these.

Assessment of Standard 20: **Mixed**

There continues to be some good examples of community engagement in Irish prisons, including the Irish Red Cross's engagement through its 'Community-Based Health and First Aid' programme. However, the IPS must ensure that all community organisations continue to have full access to prisons for pre-arranged programmes and activities. Further, while temporary release can help to reduce the overall number of people in prison, it must be used in a way that supports community engagement and reintegration and meets the specific needs of the individual.

Standard 21 Political and civic participation

People in prison have opportunities to, and are encouraged and supported to, exercise their political and civic rights.

Assessment: **Progress**

The ability to vote while in prison is an important way in which individuals can continue to exercise their political and civic rights. The Electoral (Amendment) Act 2006 provides the legal basis for the enfranchisement of individuals in prison, subject to other voter registration criteria.⁴¹ Voting can take place by postal vote within the prison, and while no home address is needed for registration, constituency registration is required. People on remand have the same right to vote as people who have been sentenced.

The prison must make available the relevant PV6 application form to allow for individuals to register for a postal vote.⁴² People wishing to vote should also be facilitated to check the electoral register to ensure they are registered. Prison Governors are also required to confirm in Section 3 of the PV6 application form that the individual will be in prison on polling day, and therefore unable to vote in the community. A person on parole or temporary release at the time of an election is free to vote in the constituency where they are registered.

In April 2024, IPRT wrote to all Prison Governors ahead of local and European elections in June 2024 asking them to put in place measures to support voter registration and facilitate voting in each prison. IPRT was pleased to note a positive response, with a number of Governors indicating the proactive measures taken to encourage voting registration across the prison estate, including the provision of information through leaflets, posters, and the internal prison TV channel.⁴³ ISM Coordinators also supported people to complete forms, particularly those with literacy difficulties. A voter registration drive also took place in advance of the care referendum in March 2024.

People in prison are wholly reliant on others to support them to check the electoral register, provide a PV6 application form, support them to complete the form (if required), and then post it for them. Often the short time period between a referendum or election being called and the deadline for registering for a postal vote can place people in prison in a more difficult situation because of the series of steps that have to be undertaken by other people.

⁴¹ Electoral (Amendment) Act 2006.

⁴² Form PV6: Application for postal vote by registered voters detained in prison, available: <<https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7519/pv6-ua.pdf>>

⁴³ Information received by the IPRT by email from IPS representative, 29 April 2024.

⁴⁴ Electoral Commission, 'Referendums on Family and Care' <<https://www.electoralcommission.ie/referendum/referendums-on-family-and-care/>>

It is positive that the IPS and the Electoral Commission are taking steps to support people in prison to register to vote. IPRT would encourage a wide information campaign to empower individuals in prison to vote to be developed and rolled out. Statistics on the number of registrations to vote should also be collated alongside the number of people who exercised their vote in prison. A consultation with people in prison and those with lived experience of the system should be conducted well in advance of the next anticipated election to explore what supports should be put in place to increase the number of people in prison who exercise their vote where eligible.

Assessment of Standard 21: Progress

People in prison are wholly reliant on the support of prison staff to exercise their right to vote while in prison. IPRT was pleased to note the proactive measures to support this in a number of prisons in 2024, including a voter registration drive and the provision of information through leaflets, posters, and the internal prison TV channel. IPRT would urge the IPS to take further initiatives to empower people in prison to vote, including consulting with people in prison on what supports should be in place to encourage voting, and the collation of statistics on registration and voting rates.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Section C: Prison regimes

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
16. TIME OUT-OF-CELL: Both the total number and proportion of people restricted to their cells for 19 or more hours a day increased throughout 2024. Furthermore, there is no publicly available data on time-out-of-cell generally, including where an individual may have limited time out of their cell without being placed on a restricted regime.	REGRESS 
17. SENTENCE MANAGEMENT: There continues to be a relatively low number of ISM Coordinators compared to the number of people eligible for sentence management. For the ISM system to work as envisioned, IPRT believes that additional ISM Coordinators positions must be established and provided with specific, protected time to undertake these functions.	NO CHANGE 
18. LIFE SKILLS: The proposal to establish new Independent Living Units in Castlereagh Prison, Shelton Abbey and Loughan House are positive steps that will assist people accommodated there to develop and maintain life-skills essential for exercising personal autonomy and successful reintegration into the wider community. However, it is disappointing that the Mountjoy Progression Unit, which prioritised preparation for life post-release and supported meaningful reintegration, has been repurposed due to the impacts of prison overcrowding.	MIXED 
19. EDUCATION AND TRAINING: There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of people in prison engaging in education programmes, and the establishment of the Prison Education Taskforce is a positive initiative to promote engagement with prison education and supporting work and further/higher education opportunities post-release. However, the IPS must ensure that access to education programmes is equitable across the prison estate (including for those on restricted regimes) and is sufficiently resourced in the context of acute prison overcrowding.	PROGRESS 
20. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT: There continues to be some good examples of community engagement in Irish prisons, including the Irish Red Cross's engagement through its 'Community-Based Health and First Aid' programme. However, the IPS must ensure that all community organisations continue to have full access to prisons for pre-arranged programmes and activities. Further, while temporary release can help to reduce the overall number of people in prison, it must be used in a way that supports community engagement and reintegration and meets the specific needs of the individual.	MIXED 
21. POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION: People in prison are wholly reliant on the support of prison staff to exercise their right to vote while in prison. IPRT was pleased to note the proactive measures to support this in a number of prisons in 2024, including a voter registration drive and the provision of information through leaflets, posters, and the internal prison TV channel. IPRT would urge the IPS to take further initiatives to empower people in prison to vote, including consulting with people in prison on what supports should be in place to encourage voting, and the collation of statistics on registration and voting rates.	PROGRESS 

Section D

Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms

Section D

Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms

Standard 22 Complaints system

All people in prison, and their families or next of kin, have access to a robust and effective complaints mechanism that is accessible and trusted. All complaints are investigated in a timely manner and the outcome clearly communicated to the individual, with a satisfactory resolution if the complaint is upheld.

Assessment: No change

An effective and trusted internal prison complaints system is a critical safeguard against ill-treatment and abuse in any place of detention. The importance of complaints systems is highlighted in both the Nelson Mandela Rules (Rules 56 and 57) and the European Prison Rules (Rule 70), as well as by the CPT.¹

The shortcomings of the current complaints system within the Irish prison system have been widely noted.² Illustrative of this are the responses to the OIP's general survey carried out during its inspections since 2023, which indicate low trust among people in prison in the complaints system and a general reluctance to make a complaint. As noted by the OIP in its 2024 annual report:

More than half of people in prison who completed the Inspectorate survey (54%, 236 of 438) reported they did not feel safe making a complaint in prison. Only 27% of prisoner survey respondents (118 of 438) believed the current complaint system works well.³

Although the Minister for Justice stated that the drafting of the Regulations required to implement

reforms to the prison complaints system was at an 'advanced stage' in June 2023,⁴ no tangible progress was made in 2024.

The OIP has noted that during 2024 "the Inspectorate continued to engage with the Office of the Ombudsman and the Director-General of the Irish Prison Service regarding the drafting of a Statutory Instrument on a more effective complaints system",⁵ while also noting disappointment that this work did not come to fruition in 2024. While IPRT is encouraged by this ongoing engagement, it is disappointing that no tangible improvements were implemented in 2024, and **IPRT recommends the completion of this process as a matter of priority.**

Under the current complaints process, the IPS *Prisoner Complaints Policy* outlines clear requirements related to timeliness for responding to and investigating complaints. For Category A complaints, the most serious complaints, the IPS policy states: "The time limit for the investigation of such complaints should not, except in exceptional circumstances, exceed 3 months".⁶

¹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Complaints mechanisms: Extract from the 27th General Report of the CPT* (CPT/Inf (2018) 4-part, 2018).

² See, for example, Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Review, Evaluation and Analysis of the Operation of the present Irish Prison Service Prisoner Complaints Procedure* (2016); Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2020* (2021), 24; Sophie van der Valk, 'Irish Prisoner Complaints: The Challenges of Complaining from Within' in T. Daems and E. Larrauri (eds), *Just Prisons* (Palgrave Macmillan 2024).

³ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 21.

⁴ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 900, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 13 June 2023. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-06-13/900/>>

⁵ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 39.

⁶ Irish Prison Service, *Prisoner complaints policy* (PN 011, 2021), 8. <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/11-011-Prisoner-Complaints-Policy.pdf>

When asked for information related to the timeliness of responding to complaints, the Minister for Justice stated:

The centralised electronic prisoner complaints system cannot detail the specific length of time taken to complete or communicate the outcome at present, however, work is underway to further develop the ICT system to capture these details and improve record management and process measurement in the future.⁷

Given the clear timeframes stipulated in the IPS policy, it is unacceptable that this information is unavailable when sought.

In 2024, 17 of 55 Category A complaints made were listed as 'Incomplete' (see Table 13, below). This means that, *at a minimum*, nearly one third (31 per cent) of Category A complaints made in 2024 had taken longer than six months to complete. While Category A complaints are likely to generally be more time-consuming than other complaints, given their serious nature, such delays in investigating and closing these complaints is deeply concerning. The Minister has stated that complaints are 'dealt with promptly'.⁸ However, on the figures available, it would appear this is not always the case.

Table 13: Outcomes of Category A complaints, 2023-2024⁹

Outcome	2023	2024
Upheld	2	0
Not Upheld	45	24
Not Proved	0	2
Part upheld	0	0
Terminated 57B*	5	1
Withdrawn	2	0
Outside Scope	9	10
Vexatious	0	1
Incomplete	0	17
Unable to determine	1	0
Total	64	55

*Refers to the closure of an investigation into a complaint because the investigation was taken over by An Garda Síochána or the complainant left custody or refused to participate in the investigation.

The CPT also raised significant concerns related to the complaints system, noting that serious complaints (including those relating to alleged abuse) were not investigated promptly, nor that the quality of the appointed external investigators was sufficiently robust.¹⁰

An effective and trusted complaints system is of utmost importance for enabling people in prison to address grievances and to safeguard against ill-treatment and abuse. **IPRT urges work on the new complaints system to be expediated, and to ensure that when it is introduced, it is fully accessible, including to people with literacy issues or learning and other disabilities, and resourced appropriately to gain the trust of people in prison as an effective protective mechanism.**

Assessment of Standard 22: No change

While work progressed throughout 2024 between the Department of Justice, the IPS, the OIP and the Office of the Ombudsman, there was no tangible progress towards introducing and implementing an improved prison complaints system in 2024.

⁷ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 2102, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 29 July 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2102/>>

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Data taken from response to PQ 43333/25, see: Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 2102, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 29 July 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2102/>>

¹⁰ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), paras 65-68.

Standard 23 Independent complaints review and appeals mechanisms

All people in prison, and their families or next of kin, have access to an effective and independent external complaints review and appeals mechanism.

Assessment: No change

Access to an independent external review and appeals mechanisms for prison complaints is an integral part of an effective complaints system which helps build trust and promotes transparency.

In its 2023 report following pre-legislative scrutiny of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022, the Joint Committee on Justice made two recommendations related to prison complaints systems:

- a) The Committee recommends the establishment of an Ombudsman for Prisons and Places of Detention with responsibility for handling and investigating complaints made in relation to prisons and places of detention, and
- b) The Committee recommends that a separate and independent body should be tasked with deciding on the categorisation of a prisoner's complaint rather than the Irish Prison Service.¹¹

The Minister for Justice has highlighted that there

“are no plans at present to establish a separate Ombudsman for Prisons” in Ireland.¹² However, as a part of the improved prison complaints system (see Standard 22, p. 60), it is understood that the Ombudsman's Office is likely to have an enhanced role in oversight of prison complaints, and multilateral engagement has progressed between the Department of Justice, the Irish Prison Service, the Ombudsman, and the Inspector of Prisons in order to develop a new Prisoner Complaints System.¹³ As noted above, however, no tangible outcomes for people in prison have been realised in 2024.

Assessment of Standard 23: No Change

While work progressed throughout 2024 between the Department of Justice, the IPS, the OIP and the Office of the Ombudsman, there was no tangible progress towards introducing and implementing an improved prison complaints system in 2024, including establishing an independent complaint review and appeals system.

Standard 24 Inspections and monitoring

There is independent, external scrutiny of prisons, including through ongoing monitoring and regular physical inspections. Inspection reports are made publicly available within reasonable timeframes, and any recommendations for improvement are implemented promptly and transparently.

Assessment: Mixed

Independent external oversight of prisons and other settings where someone may be deprived of their liberty is central to preventing human rights abuses from occurring and increasing transparency and accountability within the prison system. The importance of regular inspections and monitoring of prisons is emphasised in the Nelson

Mandela Rules (Rule 83–85) and European Prison Rules (Rules 92 and 93), as well as the Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Torture.

Prison inspections in Ireland are conducted by the Office of the Inspector of Prisons, a statutory body established under Part 5 of the Prisons Act 2007.¹⁴

¹¹ Joint Committee on Justice, *Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022* (33/JC/36, 2023).

¹² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 2077, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 29 July 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2077/>>

¹³ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 2102, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 29 July 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2102/>>

¹⁴ Prisons Act 2007, part 5.

Table 14: Office of the Inspector of Prisons inspections, November 2022 – December 2024¹⁵

Place(s) of detention	Date of visit	Type of visit	Inspection report published?
Mountjoy Men's Prison and the Training Unit	Nov/Dec 2022	Unannounced general inspections	No
Cloverhill, Cork, the Dóchas Centre, Limerick, Midlands, Mountjoy and Portlaoise	Feb/March 2023	Thematic visits – focus on psychiatric care	Yes
Cork Prison	March/April 2023	Unannounced general inspection	No
Cloverhill Prison	May 2023	Unannounced general inspection	No
Dóchas Centre	Sep/Oct 2023	Unannounced general inspection	No
Shelton Abbey	Nov 2023	Unannounced general inspection	No
Arbour Hill Prison	March 2024	Unannounced general inspection	No
Midlands Prison and the National Violence Reduction Unit	June/July 2024	Unannounced general inspections	No
Limerick Women's Prison	Nov 2024	Unannounced general inspection	No
Cloverhill Prison	Dec 2024	Unannounced follow-up inspection	No

Between late-2022 and the end of 2024, the OIP conducted unannounced full inspections of nine of Ireland's 14 prisons, as part of its programme for regular inspections of all prisons in Ireland (see Table 14, above). It also conducted thematic visits to seven prisons examining the provision of psychiatric care, and a follow-up inspection of Cloverhill Prison.

The Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT), the leading international non-governmental organisation promoting preventive monitoring of places of detention, recommends that higher risk places of detention (including pre-trial facilities, prisons with high numbers of 'vulnerable' individuals, and prisons with significant issues related to ill-treatment or substandard conditions) are visited at least annually, with other facilities at least once every three years.¹⁶ Overall, throughout 2023 and 2024 the OIP made good progress in its inspection programme. Regular visits (usually considered to be at least every three years) to all places of detention provide a crucial safeguard against ill-treatment, and IPRT recommends that the OIP is sufficiently resourced to be able to

undertake general inspections of all Irish prisons at least once every three years.

In December 2024, the OIP published an updated *Framework for the Inspection of Prisons in Ireland*, building on its 2020 Inspection Framework.¹⁷ Under the updated Inspection Framework, each general inspection of Irish prisons will focus on four key areas, including: 1) respect and dignity, 2) safety and security, 3) health and wellbeing, and 4) purposeful activity and resettlement. The updated framework was designed with input from a variety of different stakeholders, including IPRT. IPRT believes that the updated Inspection Framework is a positive initiative and assists with transparency of the inspection process, as well as providing a valuable resource outlining the OIP's assessment measures and the international standard they are based on.

Notwithstanding these areas of good practice, however, IPRT continues to have serious concerns at the lack of publication of prison inspection reports. As discussed on p. 10, the OIP currently does not have authority to publish its inspection

¹⁵ Data taken from OIP annual reports and relevant press releases from 2023 and 2024.

¹⁶ Association for the Prevention of Torture, *Establishment and Designation of National Preventive Mechanisms* (2006).

¹⁷ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *A Framework for the Inspection of Prisons in Ireland* (2024).

reports directly; rather, the decision to publish a report lies with the Minister for Justice.¹⁸ Notably, a redacted version of the OIP inspection report following a monitoring visit to the Dóchas Centre, conducted in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, was only published in January 2024.¹⁹ Aside from the issues raised in the report, IPRT is concerned by the lengthy delay in its publication and the implications for accountability. Indications were made at a Parliamentary Committee in February 2024 that two additional oversight reports would be published at the earliest possible date,²⁰ yet this has not happened. IPRT maintains that OIP general inspection reports must be published as a matter of routine in full and in a timely manner.

Independent scrutiny of Irish prisons also occurs by Prison Visiting Committees (PVCs) established under the Prisons (Visiting Committees) Act 1925 and the Prisons (Visiting Committees) Order 1925. Successive Governments have committed to reviewing the operation of Prison Visiting Committees,²¹ and in mid-August 2022 the Department of Justice undertook a public consultation on the reform of PVCs.²² In April 2023, the Department of Justice published the *Report on a review of Prison Visiting Committees*, which contained 22 legislative recommendations and 27 non-legislative recommendations.²³ The majority of these recommendations are focused on the structure, membership and appointment process of the Committees.

Notwithstanding the publication of the *Report on a review of Prison Visiting Committees* in 2023, there remain deficiencies with the oversight provided by PVCs, including the reporting processes, the variable and inconsistent content and presentation of reports, and a lack awareness and trust in the roles of PVCs among people in prison.²⁴ The annual reports of the PVCs from both 2022 and 2023 took over 18 months to be published.

Table 15: Timeliness of publication of Prison Visiting Committee annual reports, 2018-2023²⁵

Year	Date of publication	Time difference between year end and publication (days)
2023	14/07/2025	561
2022	30/08/2024	608
2021	21/06/2023	537
2020	08/03/2022	432
2019	15/01/2021	381
2018	25/05/2020	511

Overall, such delays in the publication of Prison Visiting Committee reports and the absence of any published general inspection reports of the OIP seriously undermines the purpose of independent external scrutiny.

Assessment of Standard 24: Mixed

A number of positive steps have been made in prison oversight since 2022, including the first general inspections of Irish prisons since 2014 by the OIP, significant progress on its programme of inspecting all prisons, and the publication of its Inspection Framework. However, delays in the publication of PVC reports, as well as the complete absence of published general inspection reports, undermines the purpose of external scrutiny of the prison system.

¹⁸ Prisons Act 2007, s 31.

¹⁹ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Inspection Report: Oversight Monitoring Visit During COVID-19 Pandemic – Mountjoy Female Prison (Dóchas Centre)* (2024).

²⁰ Committee of Public Accounts Deb, Thursday 15 February 2024, 20. <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/committee_of_public_accounts/2024-02-15/debate/mul@/main.pdf>

²¹ See, for example, Government of Ireland, *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* (2020), 86.

²² Department of Justice, ‘Review of Prison Visiting Committees’ (8 July 2022). <<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/consultations/review-of-prison-visiting-committees/>>

²³ Department of Justice, *Report on a review of Prison Visiting Committees* (2023).

²⁴ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *IPRT Submission to the Department of Justice on the Review of the Prison Visiting Committees* (2022).

²⁵ Data taken from the date of publication of Prison Visiting Committee reports on the Ministry of Justice website.

Standard 25 Investigations into deaths in custody

The death of, or serious incident involving, any person in prison is immediately investigated by an appropriate independent, external body. Investigation reports are made publicly available within reasonable timeframes, and any recommendations for improvement are implemented promptly and transparently.

Assessment: Regress

Alongside undertaking general inspections of prisons, the OIP is tasked with investigating any deaths occurring in Irish prisons or within one month of being granted temporary release. This is required by a number of international human rights instruments,²⁶ and provided for in section 31(2) of the Prisons Act 2007.²⁷

Following an investigation, a report is submitted to the IPS and Minister for Justice alongside any recommendations. As with inspection reports, the decision to publish an investigation report lies with the Minister for Justice. There were 23 deaths in custody (DICs) in 2022,²⁸ 20 in 2023,²⁹ and 31 in 2024.³⁰ The increasing number of deaths in Irish prisons is of serious concern, and the Chief Inspector of Prisons has noted that there is ‘no doubt’ that prison overcrowding has contributed to this increase.³¹ The CPT also highlighted its view

that some deaths may have been prevented “had lessons been learnt sooner”.³²

Given the immense pressure the prison system is currently under, there is an even greater need for timely and robust investigations into all deaths in custody, as well as immediate reviews and ‘lessons learnt’ at the local prison level. It is also critical that investigation reports and associated recommendations are made public to ensure transparency and accountability.

Timeliness of reporting and publishing investigation reports, however, remains an ongoing issue. By October 2025, investigation reports had been published for only 30 per cent of DICs which had occurred in 2023 (see Table 16, below). Of those, the average length of time for these reports to be transmitted by the OIP to the IPS was 622

Table 16: Timeliness of Death in Custody (DIC) investigation reporting (days), 2020-2024^{*33}

Year	Number of DICs	Number of DIC reports published by 31 Oct 2025	Average length of time for OIP to submit report to IPS	Average length of time between submission to IPS and submission to the Minister	Average length of time from submission to Minister to publication	Overall average from date of DIC to publication of report
2024	31	3 (10%)	217	24	77	318
2023	20	6 (30%)	622	77	72	749
2022	23	14 (61%)	656	27	117	812
2021	8	6 (75%)	630	104	143	878
2020	13	12 (92%)	930	93	82	1105

*Information presented in this table is based on *published reports*, and, as such, does not reflect timeliness of unpublished reports.

²⁶ Including, for example, Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Rule 71 of the Nelson Mandela Rules, and the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016).

²⁷ Prisons Act 2007, s 31(2).

²⁸ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2022* (2023), 15.

²⁹ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023* (2025), 34.

³⁰ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 26.

³¹ *ibid.*, 2.

³² European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 79.

³³ Data taken from the publications webpage of the OIP website, available: <<https://www.oip.ie/publications/investigation-reports/death-in-custody-investigation-reports/death-in-custody-report-by-year-of-death/>>

days. However, the real average is likely much higher, given that 70 per cent of reports from 2023 were outstanding at the end of October 2025.

Given the unique circumstances of each death in custody, each DIC investigation will require different amounts of time and resources. As a guide, however, a former Chief Inspector of Prisons envisaged that an investigation of a death in custody should be concluded within six months.³⁴

IPRT recognises the swift investigation and subsequent publication of the investigation report in July 2024 of ‘Mr K’, who tragically died in Cork Prison in March 2024. The OIP has also made a concerted effort to clear a backlog of death in custody reports in recent years.³⁵ However, the average length of time taken for a report to be submitted to the IPS, and subsequently published, remains significant. **Given the recent increase in deaths in custody and the importance of external oversight of deaths in custody, IPRT maintains that the OIP must be fully resourced to be able to undertake and complete these investigations in a timely manner.**

Regarding the publication of death in custody reports, in January 2024, the Minister for Justice stated the Department was “not in a position to publish a number of reports based on legal advice”.³⁶ IPRT maintains that for prison oversight to be transparent and accountable, unpublished legal advice cannot be used as a reason to withhold reports which, as suggested by the Prison Rules (discussion on p. 10), should be published except in exceptional circumstances. Where elements of oversight reports are considered as being prejudicial to state or prison security, or contrary to the constitutional rights of any individual, these should still be published with necessary omissions or redactions. If, in the

exceptional circumstance that a report is assessed as being completely unable to be published based on these grounds, then IPRT believes that best practice would be to publish an investigation summary in a timely manner.

A further concern raised by the CPT regarding deaths in custody relates to the absence of adequate reviews and systemic learning at the local prison level. The CPT noted that at both Limerick and Cloverhill Prisons there had been some deaths that it believed “might have been prevented had lessons been learnt sooner”.³⁷ In its response to the CPT, the Government stated that the IPS has established a debrief process where “unexpected deaths in custody are reviewed within two weeks of the death, attended by a combination of local and national operational and healthcare management”, and that any recommendations made during this review are disseminated to all prisons.³⁸ IPRT welcomes this initiative, and hopes that this will help avert any potentially preventable deaths in Irish prisons in the future.

Assessment of Standard 25: Regress

Sadly, 2024 saw a substantial increase in the number of deaths in Irish prisons. The timeliness of publication of reports from the investigation of deaths in custody remains an issue, while the CPT highlighted that some deaths may have been prevented had effective, prison level reviews taken place immediately. Given the immense pressure the prison system is currently under, swift implementation of learnings from all deaths in custody is more important than ever.

³⁴ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *An Assessment of the Irish Prison System by the Inspector of Prisons Judge Michael Reilly* (2013), 42.

³⁵ See Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2021* (2022), 22.

³⁶ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 457, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 23 January 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-01-23/457/>>

³⁷ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 79.

³⁸ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Response of the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 23, 2025), 12.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:
Section D: Complaints, accountability, and
inspection mechanisms

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
22. COMPLAINTS SYSTEM: While work progressed throughout 2024 between the Department of Justice, the IPS, the OIP and the Office of the Ombudsman, there was no tangible progress towards introducing and implementing an improved prison complaints system in 2024.	NO CHANGE 
23. INDEPENDENT COMPLAINTS REVIEW AND APPEALS SYSTEM: DWhile work progressed throughout 2024 between the Department of Justice, the IPS, the OIP and the Office of the Ombudsman, there was no tangible progress towards introducing and implementing an improved prison complaints system in 2024, including establishing an independent complaint review and appeals system.	NO CHANGE 
24. INSPECTIONS AND MONITORING: A number of positive steps have been made in prison oversight since 2022, including the first general inspections of Irish prisons since 2014 by the OIP, significant progress on its programme of inspecting all prisons, and the publication of its Inspection Framework. However, delays in the publication of PVC reports, as well as the complete absence of published general inspection reports, undermines the purpose of external scrutiny of the prison system.	MIXED 
25. INVESTIGATIONS INTO DEATHS IN CUSTODY: Sadly, 2024 saw a substantial increase in the number of deaths in Irish prisons. The timeliness of publication of reports from the investigation of deaths in custody remains an issue, while the CPT highlighted that some deaths may have been prevented had effective, prison level reviews taken place immediately. Given the immense pressure the prison system is currently under, swift implementation of learnings from all deaths in custody is more important than ever.	REGRESS 

Section E

Safety and protection in Irish prisons

Section E

Safety and protection in Irish prisons

Standard 26 Solitary confinement

No person in prison is subjected to solitary confinement. Any measure that amounts to solitary confinement (i.e. where an individual is confined to their cell for 22 hours or more without the opportunity for meaningful human contact) is recorded and reported, including the reasons for restrictions and the length of time spent under such conditions. Any measure amounting to indefinite or prolonged solitary confinement, including back-to-back solitary confinement for longer than 15 days, is recognised as inhuman or degrading treatment.

Assessment: Unable to assess

Solitary confinement is generally understood as the “physical isolation of individuals who are confined to their cells 22 to 24 hours a day”.¹ It is characterised by the deprivation of meaningful social contact with others and confinement to a limited space or area. Even if someone may leave their cell, this may still amount to solitary confinement where there is no opportunity for meaningful social contact.

While the term ‘solitary confinement’ is not defined in primary Irish legislation or the Prison Rules 2007, the IPS’s policy document *Elimination of solitary confinement* defines solitary confinement as: “The confinement of prisoners for 22 hours or more a day without meaningful human contact”.² For the avoidance of doubt, this same definition is used by IPRT.

The *Elimination of solitary confinement* policy was introduced by the IPS in 2017 to incorporate Rules 44 and 45 of the Nelson Mandela Rules into IPS policy.³ The Prison Rules 2007 were also amended in 2017 to guarantee all people in prison a “minimum period of 2 hours out of his or her cell or room with an opportunity during that time for meaningful human contact”.⁴

However, notwithstanding the amendments to the Prison Rules 2007 and the IPS *Elimination of solitary confinement* policy, measures that can amount to solitary confinement are still widely used in Irish prisons. Solitary confinement may

typically occur through the imposition of a ‘restricted regime’ on an individual under section 62 of the Prison Rules 2007 (for maintaining good order in the prison), section 63 (for the protection of vulnerable persons), section 64 (for medical reasons), or section 67 (for disciplinary reasons).⁵ Being placed on a restricted regime may include cell confinement and/or restrictions on association with others in prison. Where a restricted regime requires an individual to spend 22 hours or more a day in a single occupancy cell, this would amount to solitary confinement.

There is a wide body of evidence documenting the harms caused by solitary confinement. IPRT maintains that such harms cannot be justified and can and should be avoided through appropriate supports and interventions for people who may pose a safety risk to themselves or others. Overall, IPRT maintains that solitary confinement should not be used in Irish prisons, meaning that no person should ever be confined to a cell for 22 hours or more without the opportunity for meaningful human contact.

Due to the lack of data published by the IPS, it is impossible to determine the number of people subjected to solitary confinement in Irish prisons, or the length of time they may have spent in solitary confinement. Information on the general use of restricted regimes is published by the IPS in its quarterly ‘Census of Restricted Regime

¹ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *‘Behind Closed Doors’: Solitary Confinement in the Irish Prison System* (2018).

² Irish Prison Service, *Elimination of solitary confinement* (PIN – 51, 2017) <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/Elimination-of-solitary-confinement-Policy.pdf>

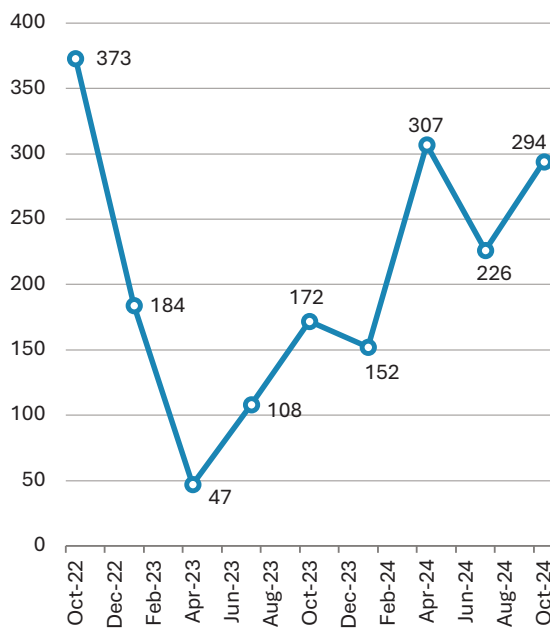
³ *ibid*, 1.

⁴ Prison (Amendment) Rules 2017, SI 2017/276.

⁵ Prison Rules, 2007, SI 2007/252.

Prisoners' reports.⁶ These reports indicate that the number of 22+ hour restricted regimes fell markedly between October 2022 and April 2023, before rising steadily again throughout 2023 and 2024 (see Figure 8, below). Overall, between October 2022 and October 2024, the number of people subjected to a 22+ hour restricted regime fell from 373 people to 294 (a reduction of 21 per cent).

Figure 8: Number of people held on a 22+ hour restricted regime, October 2022–2024⁷



The reduction in the number of people held on a 22+ hour restricted regime in October 2024 is welcome compared to October 2022. However, IPRT is deeply concerned by the lack of transparency around where a restricted regime or other measures may amount to solitary confinement in Irish prisons. As noted above, it is not possible to accurately assess the number of people held in solitary confinement or trends in its use based on the quarterly 'Census of Restricted Regime Prisoners' reports. This is

because people subjected to a 22+ hour restricted regime may be held in a multiple-occupancy cell – which would by definition not amount to solitary confinement – however this detail is not included in the quarterly reports. Further, instances where an individual spends 22 hours or more alone in their cell *without* being subjected to a restricted regime are not reported by the IPS, either.

There is also a concerning lack of data in Irish prisons on the use of prolonged solitary confinement which is defined by both the Nelson Mandela Rules and the IPS *Elimination of solitary confinement* policy as solitary confinement lasting for a time period in excess of 15 consecutive days.⁸ Because of the potential for lasting mental damage caused by prolonged solitary confinement, its use is prohibited by the Nelson Mandela Rules.⁹ The former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture has also stated the use of prolonged or indefinite solitary confinement “can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”¹⁰

Despite this, recommendations made by the OIP suggest that prolonged solitary confinement continues to be used in Irish prisons: in 2022 and 2023, the OIP made recommendations in relation to Mountjoy Men's Prison, Cork Prison, and the Dóchas Centre that the Director General of the IPS “should with immediate effect, cease the practice of prolonged solitary confinement”¹¹

There is also a disturbing lack of transparency regarding prolonged solitary confinement in Irish prisons, as the IPS does not collate the data to indicate the length of time a person may spend in solitary confinement.¹² This is despite the IPS *Elimination of solitary confinement* policy requiring a prison Governor to record the date of the initiation of a 22+ hour restricted regime, and to notify the Director of Operations of this. Further, where an individual is placed on a restricted regime under section 62 of the Prison Rules 2007, the Governor must keep a record of any direction given, and the period in which the direction remains in force.¹³ It is imperative that the IPS collate and publish information on solitary confinement to ensure public scrutiny and

⁶ See Irish Prison Service, 'Census Reports' <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/census-reports/>>

⁷ Data taken from IPS 'Census of Restricted Regime Prisoners' reports, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/census-reports/>>

⁸ Nelson Mandela Rules, rule 44.

⁹ *ibid*, rule 43.

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly, *Interim report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment* (A/66/268, 2011), para 81.

¹¹ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 62.

¹² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 680, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 24 June 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-06-24/section/572/>>

¹³ Prison Rules 2007, s 62(6).

oversight, particularly given the severe harm it can cause.

Overall, IPRT is deeply concerned by the use of prolonged solitary confinement in Irish prisons, and **we recommend that prolonged solitary confinement is prohibited by statute and abolished in practice as a matter of utmost priority. Further, immediate steps must be taken to reduce and ultimately eliminate the use of solitary confinement in all Irish prisons.**

Data collection and collation related to solitary confinement must also improve immediately. This should include central recording and public reporting, at least annually, of all instances of solitary confinement across the Irish prison estate, including the number of people subjected to solitary confinement, the number of instances of solitary confinement, and the length of each instance.

Assessment of Standard 26: Unable to assess

IPRT is deeply concerned that the data on the use of solitary confinement, including prolonged solitary confinement, is unavailable and has not been published upon request. This inhibits external scrutiny of the use of solitary confinement in Irish prisons. While it is positive that there has been a reduction in the number of people subjected to 22+ hour restricted regimes compared to October 2022, this number has risen steadily throughout 2023 and 2024. Overall, IPRT maintains that the IPS and the Department of Justice must take immediate steps to prohibit the use of prolonged solitary confinement in both statute and in practice, and ensure measures are in place to reduce and ultimately eliminate the use of solitary confinement in Irish prisons.

Standard 27 Safety and security in Irish prisons

Every person in prison, including prison staff, feels safe and does not experience violence or abuse of any kind.

Assessment: Regress

All people in prison should feel safe and protected from all forms of abuse, harm and violence while in prison. There are many measures which help people feel safe in prisons, including safe custody limits, single-cell accommodation, fostering positive relationships between staff and people in custody, the provision of meaningful activities, and opportunities for social connections within prison.

Under section 63 of the Prison Rules 2007, people who feel unsafe in Irish prisons may request to be kept separate from other people “who are reasonably likely to cause significant harm to him or her”.¹⁴ This is often known as being put ‘on protection’. A person can also be placed on protection at the direction of the Governor if they are aware that someone is at risk of harm.¹⁵

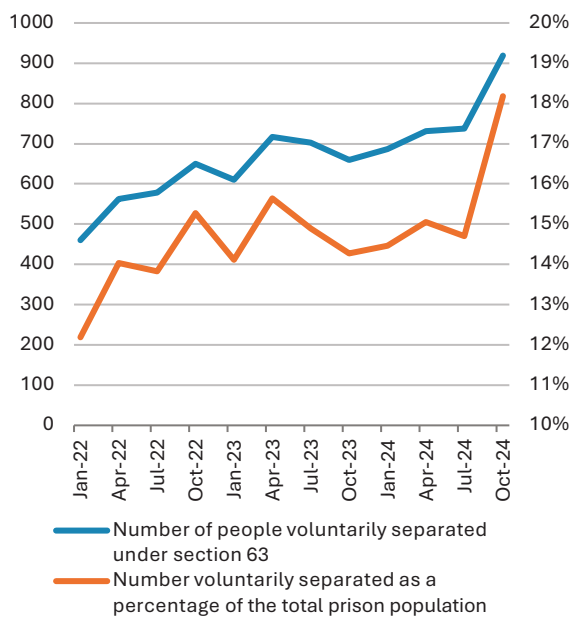
The number of people requesting separation from the general prison population under section 63 is

a key indicator of general feelings of safety in prison. Given that the majority of individuals separated under section 63 have significantly reduced periods of time out-of-cell and limited access to training and activities, the decision to be separated under section 63 is rarely taken lightly, and is often driven by serious concern for personal safety.

Between January 2022 and October 2024, the number of people voluntarily separated under section 63 doubled, from 460 to 919 people (see Figure 9, below). This represents an increase from 12 per cent of the total prison population at the start of 2022, to 18 per cent in October 2024. This increase indicates that more people are opting to be placed on protection for their own safety. This underpins an overall concern about personal safety in prison.

¹⁴ Prison Rules 2007, SI 2007/252, 63(1).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

Figure 9: Number of people under section 63 voluntary separation, 2022-2024¹⁶

The number of recorded assaults within Irish prisons has also significantly increased between 2022 and 2024. In 2022, the total number of recorded assaults between people in custody (usually referred to as prisoner-on-prisoner assaults) was 380; this increased by 130 per cent to 874 recorded assaults in 2024 (see Table 17, below). The most significant increases in assaults between 2022 and 2024 were in Castlerea Prison, Cloverhill Prison, Mountjoy Female Prison (the Dóchas Centre), Limerick Prison, and Mountjoy Men's Prison. In 2024, the majority of assaults took place in cells (27 per cent), landings (27 per cent), and exercise yards (25 per cent).¹⁷

Both the significant increase in assaults in Irish prisons, and the number of people requesting voluntary separation, indicate a significantly worsening safety situation in Irish prisons. Notably, research published by the UK Ministry of Justice clearly links a recent rise in assaults in English and Welsh prisons to overcrowded prison conditions.²⁰

Table 17: Number of assaults between individuals in custody, 2022-2024¹⁸

Prison	2022	2023	2024	1 Y change	1 Y change %
Arbour Hill	0	3	0	-3	
Castlerea	16	20	72	+52	260%
Cloverhill	125	182	262	+80	44%
Cork	88	112	135	+23	21%
Limerick (M + F)	11	90	96	+6	7%
Loughan House	0	1	0	-1	
Midlands	59	92	114	+22	24%
Mountjoy (F)	5	17	44	+27	159%
Mountjoy (M)	20	62	75	+13	21%
Portlaoise	5	12	14	+2	17%
Shelton Abbey	0	0	0		
Training Unit	1	0	0		
Wheatfield	50	69	58	-11	-16%
Other*	0	3	4	+1	33%
Total	380	663	874	+211	32%

*Other includes unknown location/no data, operational support group,¹⁹ and while under transfer by the Prison Service Escort Corps.

¹⁶ Data taken from IPS 'Census of Restricted Regime Prisoners' reports, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/census-reports/>>

¹⁷ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1687, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 8 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1687/>>

¹⁸ Data taken from IPS yearly statistics assault data, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/yearly-statistics/>>

¹⁹ The Operational Support Group was established in 2008 to help prevent the direction of crime from within prisons, and to prevent the entry on contraband into prisons. See Irish Prison Service, 'Operational Support Group' <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/prison-support-units/operational-support-group/>>

²⁰ Ministry of Justice, 'Transparency data: The impact of overcrowding on assaults in closed adult public prisons' (19 June 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-overcrowding-on-assaults-in-closed-adult-public-prisons/the-impact-of-overcrowding-on-assaults-in-closed-adult-public-prisons>>

IPRT maintains that the single most effective step that can be taken to improve safety in Irish prisons is to address prison overcrowding, ensuring all people have single-cell accommodation and access to meaningful activities while in prison. **The IPS should also further invest in proven interventions that can help address violence in prisons, including violence reduction and conflict mediation programmes run by the Alternatives to Violence Programme Ireland,²¹ and the Traveller Mediation Service.²²**

Assessment of Standard 27: Regress

There was a significant increase in assaults between people in custody between 2022 and 2024, as well as an increase in the number of people requesting to be placed on voluntary separation. This is indicative of a worsening safety situation in Irish prisons, which must be addressed through an easing of overcrowding and investing in violence reduction and conflict mediation and resolution programmes in Irish prisons.

Standard 28 Prison escorts

The health and welfare of people in custody consistently monitored and upheld while they are under escort.

Due to the unavailability of up-to-date, accurate, accessible data, we could not complete a fair assessment in *PIPS* 2024.

Standard 29 Staff training

All staff receive relevant, regular training and support to effectively carry out their duties to a high standard.

Due to the unavailability of up-to-date, accurate, accessible data, we could not complete a fair assessment in *PIPS* 2024.

Standard 30 Developing positive relationships and work culture

Positive relationships between prison management, staff, and people in prison custody are facilitated and supported. Leadership at all levels ensure that positive working cultures are maintained within all prisons.

Assessment: No change

Establishing and maintaining good working relationships between people in custody and staff at all levels helps to create a positive prison environment. Prison staff also play a critical role in upholding the dignity of people in prison through their day-to-day interactions.

Positive relationships between people in custody and staff were noted by the Prison Visiting

Committees in Castlerea,²³ Cloverhill,²⁴ and Cork Prisons.²⁵ Both the CPT and the OIP also noted generally positive relationships between staff and people in custody in prisons they had visited;²⁶ however, the OIP also noted an exception in the Dóchas Centre, “where the cumulative effect of poor staff-prisoner dynamics and overly punitive sanctions was having a substantial adverse effect

²¹ See Alternatives to Violence Programme Ireland, *Annual Activity Report 2024* (2025).

²² See Traveller Mediation Service, ‘Peer Mediation in Prisons Programme’ <http://travellermediation.ie/?page_id=244>

²³ Castlerea Prison Visiting Committee, *Annual Report 2023* (2025).

²⁴ Cloverhill Prison Visiting Committee, *Annual Report 2023* (2025).

²⁵ Cork Prison Visiting Committee, *Annual Report 2023* (2025).

²⁶ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 35; Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023* (2025), 4; and Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 12 and 15.

on the day-to-day lives of the women living there”.²⁷

People with recent experience of prison that IPRT has engaged with noted variable quality of relationships with prison staff, however all generally agreed that there was a staff member they trusted and could turn to for help.

Concerns with low morale amongst some staff in certain prisons have been raised by the OIP. Following inspections of Cork and Cloverhill Prisons in 2023, the OIP recommended that the IPS conduct a review of the working/management culture at these prisons to identify the underlying reasons for reported levels of low morale amongst certain staff.²⁸ Further, findings from staff surveys conducted by the OIP during 2024 found that less than half of operational staff surveyed (47 per cent, or 130 of 277 respondents) reported that they were satisfied with the quality of their working life, while only 41 per cent (110 of 271 respondents) looked forward to coming to work.²⁹

IPRT has previously recommended that the IPS conduct periodic ‘Measuring Quality of Prison Life’ surveys in Irish prisons to assess relationships between people in custody, operational staff, and prison management. IPRT maintains that such surveys provide an important insight into the quality of relationships and the views of staff and people in custody on prison life.

As a part of the IPS *Strategy 2023-2027*, the IPS has committed to undertaking a ‘Culture Audit’ to

assess organisational culture and to develop and implement a ‘Culture Roadmap’ to promote a unified service-wide culture centred on health and wellbeing that positively influences the everyday experiences of all staff and people in custody.³⁰ This Culture Audit was due to take place in 2023, and while some work on this progressed throughout 2024, this had not been completed by the end of the year.³¹ **IPRT encourages the IPS to undertake its Culture Audit as soon as practicable, and explore how other initiatives such as independent Measuring Quality of Prison Life surveys may complement this work.**

Assessment of Standard 30: No change

Both the CPT and the OIP have highlighted generally positive relationships between staff and people in custody in prisons visited, and people with recent experience of prison that IPRT has engaged with have all generally agreed that there was a staff member they trusted and could turn to for help. However, outcomes from inspections and staff surveys conducted by the OIP have highlighted low morale among some staff. The IPS has committed to undertaking a ‘Culture Audit’, and while work on this progressed throughout 2024, it had not yet been completed by the end of the year.

Standard 31 Use of force and restraints

Physical force is only ever used as a measure of last resort when there is an immediate and serious risk of harm. The use of physical force and restraints are accurately recorded and reported. Prison staff are skilled in de-escalation and conflict resolution approaches, and the use of these approaches is emphasised in prison policy.

Assessment: Regress

The use of force in Irish prisons, which can involve either a spontaneous physical intervention (where a prison officer responds with force to an unexpected violent situation) or a planned physical intervention (where force is used deliberately, usually to relocate a non-compliant individual), is governed by section 93 of the Prison Rules 2007 and by an unpublished internal IPS *Use*

of Force Standard Operating Procedure (the *Use of Force SOP*).

Section 93(1) of the Prison Rules 2007 provides that force should only be used for “maintaining or restoring good order or safe or secure custody”, and such force must only be “reasonably necessary and proportionate to achieve that purpose shall be used”.³² The *Use of Force SOP*,

²⁷ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2023* (2025), 4.

²⁸ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 65-66.

²⁹ *ibid*, 21.

³⁰ Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* (2023), 17.

³¹ Irish Prison Service, *Annual Report 2024* (2025), 73.

³² Prison Rules, 2007, SI 2007/252, s 93(1).

meanwhile, requires that “the Use of Force should only be undertaken as a last resort, after all other attempts to resolve or de-escalate the situation have failed”.³²

Standards for the use of force are also covered by the IPS *Code of Ethics*, published in December 2021, which provides that when force is used it must be:

- The minimum force necessary;
- Only used as a last resort;
- For the shortest necessary time to achieve the purpose; and
- Used in accordance with prescribed and humane techniques and in compliance with relevant Service policies, standard operating procedures, manuals and operating instructions.³⁴

The *Code of Ethics* also requires that an individual is examined by a medical professional ‘as soon as possible’ following a use of force event, and that the recording and reporting of the details are provided in writing to the prison Governor as soon as possible following the event, and that this is true and accurate.³⁵ These policy documents provide a comprehensive framework for the use of force in Irish prisons, in line with the European Prison Rules (Rules 64–66)³⁶ and the Nelson Mandela Rules (Rule 82),³⁷ and as noted by the CPT following its visit to Ireland.³⁸ However, concerning, the CPT also noted that “local management and use of force coordinators at most of the prisons visited (apart from Cloverhill Prison) appeared unaware of the SOP guidance”.³⁹

Only staff that are appropriately trained may use force against people in prison. Irish prison officers are trained in ‘Control and Restraint’ (C&R) techniques during their initial 12-week training at the Irish Prison Service College.⁴⁰ Staff who use

C&R are also provided with annual refresher training. Recruit prison officers also complete ‘Communications and De-Escalation’ training, and ongoing communication and de-escalation training is provided alongside C&R refresher training as part of continuous practice development.⁴¹

The exact number of incidents of use of force (both planned and spontaneous) in Irish prisons is not routinely published by the Irish Prison Service, which inhibits external oversight of use of force. Data on use of force has also not been made available when specifically requested.⁴² Further, the CPT raised concerns about the disorganised record-keeping of use of force incidents, and, overall, concluded that in all prisons visited, “the review, oversight and accountability systems for the use of force remained underdeveloped”.⁴³

Further, the IPS has no system in place for recording incidents that are successfully de-escalated without recourse to physical force. A register of incidents resolved by prison officers using de-escalation and conflict resolution techniques is critical to help share best-practice and ensure that force is only ever used as a last resort. **IPRT has been recommending this since the inception of PIPS in 2017, and we once again recommend that the IPS develop and maintain a register of incidents that are successfully de-escalated through conflict resolution approaches.**

The IPS does publish data on the physical interventions “where inadvertent or unintentional striking of a staff member or injury to a prisoner occurs in the course of a planned physical intervention or spontaneous physical intervention” (see Table 18, below).⁴⁴ While it is positive that these numbers decreased between 2022 and 2024, this aggregated data is of limited value when it cannot be balanced against the total number of physical interventions (as this data is not published) and as it does not differentiate

³³ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1691, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 8 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1691/>>

³⁴ Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Code of Ethics* (2021), 19.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ European Prison Rules, rules 64–66.

³⁷ Nelson Mandela Rules, rule 82.

³⁸ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 51.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1688, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 8 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1688/>>

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1690, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 8 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1690/>>

⁴³ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 53.

⁴⁴ See Irish Prison Service, ‘Table of Assaults on Prison Staff and Prisoners’ (2025), 2. <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/Table-of-assaults-on-prison-staff-and-prisoners-2023-2024.pdf>

Table 18: Physical interventions where inadvertent or unintentional striking of a staff member or injury to a person in custody occurred, 2022-2024⁴⁵

Prison	2022	2023	2024	1 Y change	1 Y change %
Arbour Hill	0	0	0		
Castlerea	5	21	3	-18	-86%
Cloverhill	10	15	9	-6	-40%
Cork	42	21	10	-11	-52%
Limerick (M + F)	3	7	8	+1	14%
Loughan House	0	0	0		
Midlands Prison	6	11	18	+7	64%
Mountjoy Men's	10	13	15	+2	15%
Portlaoise	0	0	4	+4	
Prison Service Escort Corp	5	9	5	-4	-44%
Shelton Abbey	0	0	0		
The Dóchas Centre	1	3	1	-2	-67%
Training Unit	N/A	0	0		
Wheatfield	16	18	16	-2	-11%
Total	98	118	89	-29	-25%

between prison officers or persons in custody.

IPRT maintains that the publication of detailed data on the use of physical interventions in Irish prisons is essential to providing external oversight of coercive prison practices, and therefore should be published by the IPS at least annually.

The CPT also expressed deep concerns about indications of staff ill-treatment, including excessive force used by some prison officers. In its report, the CPT noted that allegations of ill-treatment by prison staff had increased between 2019 and 2024, with reports of slaps, kicks, and punches, including incidents which allegedly took place in areas not covered by CCTV.⁴⁶ Further, the CPT noted allegations of excessive use of force by some prison staff, which in many cases were supported by medical findings and external independent investigations.⁴⁷ Examples highlighted by the CPT, which were observed on CCTV footage, include:

- An incident where an individual awaiting transfer from a prison escort van was struck by a prison officer with a protective shield

“with force, three times in a row”, followed by “a slicing sideways motion” strike with the shield.⁴⁸ The same prison officer then punched the individual with a closed fist, despite the fact that the individual was “motionless crumpled on the floor and posed no threat to the Officer”. The CPT noted that the individual suffered serious injuries, including brain injuries, following this incident, and highlighted its view that such an incident may amount to torture (Cloverhill Prison, 2023).⁴⁹

- An incident where the same officer noted above was seen to “jump on the head” of a restrained individual, following which a second officer “gives one single punch with closed fist” to the individual’s back (Cloverhill Prison, 2023).⁵⁰
- An incident where 11 staff were used to relocate a single individual in the Dóchas Centre, with the CPT noting that their approach was ‘uncompromising’, there appeared to be no attempt at de-escalation,

⁴⁵ Data taken from IPS yearly statistics assault data, available: <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/statistics-information/yearly-statistics/>>

⁴⁶ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 37.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, para 45.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, para 38.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, para 40.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, para 46.

and staff behaviour appeared ‘extremely aggressive’ (Dóchas Centre, 2024).⁵¹

Such examples of excessive use of force and abuse are of serious concern, and should not take place in any Irish prison. The State response to the CPT noted that: “The Irish Prison Service will publish a Spotlight on the Intranet portal PRISM to remind staff that no more force than is strictly necessary should be used”, and that the Spotlight “will also remind staff of the disciplinary sanctions associated with a finding of disproportionate use of force”.⁵² Further, the response stated: “The Irish Prison Service continues to develop and enhance oversight around the use of force through policy development, improved recording and reporting and providing support with implementation to prison management”.⁵³

As noted above, IPRT remains concerned about the transparency of use of force in Irish prisons, and believes that the IPS must take further steps to enhance oversight of its use, including through publishing data of all instances of use of force, as well as data disaggregated by staff and person in custody where there is an injury following a use of force. Further, the IPS must enhance accountability mechanisms following allegations or suspicions of excessive use of force or deliberate ill-treatment, including through timely, effective, and independent investigations (see Standard 22, p. 60).

In October 2023, the IPS released a tender for ‘control and restraint equipment’ worth €3 million.⁵⁴ The tender included a variety of equipment used for the protection of prison officers, including protective overalls and vests, body armour, riot helmets, batons, safety boots, gloves and shields. The tender also included anti-spit masks and ‘hook and loop straps/limb straps’. There is limited public information available on

how these straps are used by the IPS, however the tender noted that these are “adjustable, heavy-duty strap[s] designed for a range of uses **including temporary restraint**” (emphasis added), and that they “should be adjustable to accommodate a range of different limb sizes”.⁵⁵ IPRT is concerned about the use of these devices, particularly given there is no transparency on how or in what circumstances these are used.

IPRT is also deeply concerned about the use of anti-spit masks in Irish prisons. Anti-spit masks are covers placed over the nose and mouth of a restrained individual to prevent the transmission of spit and other bodily fluids. While the tender required that the supplied masks “allow for normal breathing, and not cause undue discomfort to the wearer”, and “must not cause harm or discomfort when in contact with skin and should be safe for use around eyes, nose and mouth”,⁵⁶ the use of such devices has been criticised by international human rights bodies as being inhuman and degrading. Notably, the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture following its 2022 visit to Australia stated that: “The Subcommittee considers that the use of both spit hoods and spit guards constitutes a form of inhuman and degrading treatment, which in some cases may amount to torture”, and recommended Australia “institute a complete ban on the use of spit hoods, spit guards and all similar equipment in all areas under its jurisdiction”.⁵⁷ In 2023, the UN Committee against Torture similarly recommended that New Zealand should “take all measures necessary to end the use of spit hoods in all circumstances”.⁵⁸

Concerningly, there is no reporting in Ireland on the use of anti-spit masks in Irish prisons, despite concerns about this being raised in 2021⁵⁹ and 2022.⁶⁰

⁵¹ *ibid*, para 50.

⁵² European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Response of the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 23, 2025), 8.

⁵³ *ibid*, 9.

⁵⁴ Irish Prison Service, Open Procedure: Request for Tender – Multi-Party Framework Agreement (eTenders RFT ID 2609154, 25 October 2023). <<https://www.etenders.gov.ie/epps/cft/listContractDocuments.do?resourceId=2609154#>>

⁵⁵ Irish Prison Service, *Appendix 1 – IPS Control & Restraint Equipment Specifications 2023* (2023). <<https://www.etenders.gov.ie/epps/cft/prepareAnonymousDownload.do?resourceId=2609154&documentId=2641308>>

⁵⁶ *ibid*.

⁵⁷ United Nations Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, *Report of the Subcommittee: Visit to Australia undertaken from 16 to 23 October 2022: recommendations and observations addressed to the State party* (CAT/OP/AUS/ROSP/1, 2023), paras 31-32.

⁵⁸ United Nations Committee against Torture, *Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of New Zealand* (CAT/C/NZL/CO/7, 2023), para 16.

⁵⁹ Conor Gallagher, ‘Use of spit hoods on prisoners not centrally recorded’ *The Irish Times* (Dublin, 6 February 2021) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/use-of-spit-hoods-on-prisoners-not-centrally-recorded-1.4477330>>

⁶⁰ Irish Council for Civil Liberties, *ICCL Report to the UN Human Rights Committee: Alternative to the State Report for Ireland’s 2022 review under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (2022).

The Minister for Justice has recently highlighted that: “A Personal Protective Equipment review group was established in 2024 to conduct a fresh review of the requirement for Personal Protective Equipment for operational staff in light of the challenges and dangers posed by overcrowding”.⁶¹

IPRT maintains that the findings of this group must be made public. Furthermore, IPRT calls for the immediate prohibition on the use of anti-spit masks or similar devices in Irish prisons, noting that use of these devices has been highlighted as inhuman and degrading treatment by the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture. IPRT also maintains that there must be more transparency around the use of restraints in Irish prisons to ensure that all restraint devices are only ever used in compliance with human rights standards.⁶²

Assessment of Standard 31: Regress

The CPT has highlighted its concerns related to the use of force in Irish prisons, including allegations of abuse and excessive use of force. Further, IPRT has significant concerns about the IPS tender for devices such as ‘anti-spit masks’ and ‘hook and loop straps/limb straps’, and the lack of transparency around their use in Irish prisons.

Standard 32 Cohorts at risk of discrimination

All staff and managers at all levels take a proactive approach towards protecting any person in prison at-risk of discrimination due to their age, gender, ethnicity (including Traveller status), nationality, sexuality, disability, or any other characteristic.

Assessment: No change

Certain groups in prison have specific needs or are at increased risk of discrimination. The IPS has a legal duty under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty to promote equality, prevent discrimination, and protect the human rights of employees and ‘service users’ (i.e. people detained).

The Irish Prison Service has a dedicated ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit’ tasked with ensuring that the IPS upholds its obligations under the Duty.⁶³ The IPS regularly publishes its action plans on initiatives under the Duty, which include, for example, running awareness-raising workshops and campaigns on groups in prison at-risk of discrimination, ensuring internal IPS policies and documents reflect the spirit of the Public Sector Duty, raising awareness of matters relevant to equality, diversity and inclusion, and monitoring

complaints and litigation to learn from outcomes and address arising issues.⁶⁴

A key action noted in the 2022 *Action Plan* included: “Development of policies to cover 9 grounds of discrimination”.⁶⁵ However, this action was not referred to again in the 2023 *Action Plan*, and no relevant IPS policies are publicly available. **IPRT would encourage the IPS to develop and publish discrete policies or strategies for preventing discrimination of at-risk groups as a matter of priority.**

Key issues related to groups at-risk of discrimination throughout 2024 include:

- IPRT is concerned about the lack of understanding of the prevalence and needs of **people with disabilities in prison**, including psychosocial disability and neurodiverse

⁶¹ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1571, Dáil Éireann Deb, Monday 8 September 2025 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1571/>>

⁶² See Róisín Mulgrew, ‘Human Rights Spotlight: Instruments of Restraints’ (*Europis*, 18 March 2024) <<https://www.europis.org/file/human-rights-spotlight-instruments-of-restraints-2024/>>

⁶³ Irish Prison Service, ‘Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Unit’. <<https://www.irishprisons.ie/information-centre/equality-diversity-inclusion-unit/>>

⁶⁴ Irish Prison Service, *Public Sector Duty Action Plan 2023* (2023). <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_other/Public-Sector-Duty-Action-Plan-2023-WEB.xlsx>

⁶⁵ Irish Prison Service, *Public Sector Duty Action Plan 2022* (2022). <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_other/Public-Sector-Duty-Action-Plan-2023-WEB.xlsx>

diagnoses.⁶⁶ We hope that this lack of data will be addressed in the forthcoming mental health and disability needs analysis (see Standard 13, p. 37).

- There continues to be no policy on **transgender people in Irish prisons**, despite a commitment by the former Minister for Justice following a recommendation made by the OIP in 2021.⁶⁷ IPRT is aware that work has been undertaken to develop a strategy and maintains that such a strategy is long-overdue, and must be published and implemented urgently. This should be informed by the CPT standards on transgender persons in prison published in 2024⁶⁸ as well as the findings of the CPT following its official visit to Ireland.⁶⁹
- **Irish Travellers** remain significantly over-represented in Irish prisons, comprising eight per cent of people in custody in August 2024,⁷⁰ while representing less than one per cent of the wider Irish population.⁷¹ There is even greater disparity in women's prisons, where in August 2024, 16 per cent of detained women were Travellers.⁷² In its report from its 2024 visit, the CPT noted allegations of discrimination against Traveller women by staff in the Dóchas Centre, and therefore recommended that the IPS ensure staff are clear that discriminatory behaviour is not acceptable.⁷³

- Research published by Maynooth University in November 2024 highlighted the challenges faced by **foreign nationals in Irish prisons**, including language barriers, isolation, and 'ad hoc' provision of services and information.⁷⁴ The research highlighted: "The inability to communicate with staff and their peers negatively impacts almost all aspects of prison life including basic interactions, understanding prison rules and their rights", and recommended that the IPS establish a dedicated support service for non-Irish nationals across the prison estate and put in place 'Foreign National Liaison Officer' posts in each Irish prison.⁷⁶

Assessment of Standard 32: No change

There has been little apparent progress on implementing a number of recent key actions the IPS has committed to, including publishing bespoke strategies to address potential discrimination against at-risk groups. While work has continued on the IPS transgender policy, it was not published and implemented in 2024.

⁶⁶ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 1430, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 23 July 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-07-23/1430/>>

⁶⁷ Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Limerick Prison 6-7 April 2021* (2021), 52. <<https://www.oip.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Limerick-Prison-COVID-19-Thematic-Inspection-Report-2021.pdf>>

⁶⁸ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Transgender Persons in Prison – Prison Standard: Extract from the 33rd General Report CPT/Inf (2024) 16 – part* (2024).

⁶⁹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 106-107.

⁷⁰ Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community Deb, Dáil Éireann, Thursday 26 September 2024, 2. <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community_2023/2024-09-26/debate/mul@/main.pdf>

⁷¹ Central Statistics Office, 'Census of Population 2022 Profile 5 – Diversity, Migration, Ethnicity, Irish Travellers & Religion' (26 October 2023). <<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpp5/censusofpopulation2022profile5-diversitymigrationethnicityirishtravellersreligion/irishtravellers/>>

⁷² Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community Deb, Dáil Éireann, Thursday 26 September 2024, 2. <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_key_issues_affecting_the_traveller_community_2023/2024-09-26/debate/mul@/main.pdf>

⁷³ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture, *Report to the Irish Government* (CPT/Inf (2025) 22, 2025), para 37.

⁷⁴ David M. Doyle and others, *Foreign National Prisoners and Irish Prisons: Evaluating the Need for a Dedicated Service* (2024).

⁷⁵ Maynooth University, 'MU Study of Foreign National Prisoners' Needs recommends a dedicated support service in Irish prisons' (5 November 2024) <<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/news-events/mu-study-foreign-national-prisoners-needs-recommends-dedicated-support-service-irish-prisons>>

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Section E: Safety and protection in Irish prisons

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
26. SOLITARY CONFINEMENT: IPRT is deeply concerned that the data on the use of solitary confinement, including prolonged solitary confinement, is unavailable and has not been published upon request. This inhibits external scrutiny of the use of solitary confinement in Irish prisons. While it is positive that there has been a reduction in the number of people subjected to 22+ hour restricted regimes compared to October 2022, this number has risen steadily throughout 2023 and 2024. Overall, IPRT maintains that the IPS and the Department of Justice must take immediate steps to prohibit the use of prolonged solitary confinement in both statute and in practice, and ensure measures are in place to reduce and ultimately eliminate the use of solitary confinement in Irish prisons.	UNABLE TO ASSESS
27. SAFETY AND SECURITY: There was a significant increase in assaults between people in custody between 2022 and 2024, as well as an increase in the number of people requesting to be placed on voluntary separation. This is indicative of a worsening safety situation in Irish prisons, which must be addressed through an easing of overcrowding and investing in violence reduction and conflict mediation programmes in Irish prisons.	REGRESS 
28. PRISON ESCORTS	NOT ASSESSED
29. STAFF TRAINING	NOT ASSESSED
30. DEVELOPING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND WORK CULTURE: Both the CPT and the OIP have highlighted generally positive relationships between staff and people in custody in prisons visited, and people with recent experience of prison that IPRT has engaged with have all generally agreed that there was a staff member they trusted and could turn to for help. However, outcomes from inspections and staff surveys conducted by the OIP have highlighted low morale among some staff. The IPS has committed to undertaking a 'Culture Audit', and while work on this progressed throughout 2024, it had not yet been completed by the end of the year.	NO CHANGE 
31. USE OF FORCE AND RESTRAINTS: The CPT has highlighted its concerns related to the use of force in Irish prisons, including allegations of abuse and excessive use of force. Further, IPRT has significant concerns about the IPS tender for devices such as 'anti-spit masks' and 'hook and loop straps/limb straps', and the lack of transparency around their potential use in Irish prisons.	REGRESS 
32. COHORTS AT RISK OF DISCRIMINATION: There has been little apparent progress on implementing a number of recent key actions the IPS has committed to, including publishing bespoke strategies to address potential discrimination against at-risk groups. While work has continued on the IPS transgender policy, it was not published and implemented in 2024.	NO CHANGE 

Section F

Release and reintegration

Section F

Release and reintegration

Standard 33 Parole system

The parole system is fair, transparent, and removed from political control.

Assessment: Progress

Parole plays an important role in supporting an appropriate balance between upholding the rights of victims and the wider public and the rights of a sentenced individual to a fair and balanced system of release. The parole system in Ireland is administered by the Parole Board, an independent statutory body established by the Parole Act 2019. The Parole Board currently considers the parole applications of people carrying out life sentences and who have served at least 12 years of their sentence in prison (however they may apply for parole once they have served 10.5 years of a life sentence).

While the Parole Act currently only applies to people serving a life sentence (and therefore only life sentenced individuals may be considered for parole), the Act provides that the Minister for Justice may make Regulations under section 24(3) to extend parole eligibility to those serving a sentence of eight years or more. The *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* noted that the introduction of Regulations under section 24 should occur ‘as soon as possible’¹ and in early 2024 the Minister for Justice stated that policy work on the Regulations had commenced.² At the time of writing, Regulations had not yet been introduced. IPRT firmly believes that parole eligibility should be expanded to those serving long sentences (e.g. over eight years), and therefore **we urge the Department of Justice to prioritise the drafting and introduction of these Regulations. The Department of Justice must also, as a matter of priority, ensure that the Parole Board is sufficiently resourced and staffed to effectively fulfil its current remit and take on a greater number of parole applications when**

section 24 Regulations are introduced.

Commensurate resources must also be provided to the Probation Service to supervise additional individuals released on parole.

On a regional level, there is a relatively high proportion of people serving life sentences in Irish prisons: at the start of 2024, the proportion of people serving life sentences in Irish prisons was 9.9 per cent, compared with the European average of three per cent.³ Because of this, there are also high numbers of people eligible for parole. At the end of 2023, the number of people eligible for parole was 257,⁴ while no data for 2024 was published.

In 2024, 108 parole applications were considered by the Board, an increase from 95 in 2023 and 22 in 2022, respectively (see Table 19, below). The Board issued 76 final decisions, and 14 parole orders were granted. The Parole Board also made 20 recommendations other than release, including transfer to an open prison and temporary release. Such recommendations play an important role in sentence management and preparation for release, and it is promising that the Parole Board is making such recommendations.

Timeliness in Board decision-making and communicating board decisions is a hallmark of an effective parole system. However, no data has been made publicly available on the timeliness of Parole Board decision-making. IPRT has heard concerns from people serving life sentences that delays in Board decision-making can cause frustration and disillusionment with the parole system.

¹ Department of Justice, Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Policy: Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (2022), 66.

² Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 440, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 23 January 2024. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-01-23/440/>>

³ M. F. Aebi and E. Cocco, SPACE I – 2024 – *Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics: Prison populations* (PC-CP (2024) 5, 2025), 51-52.

⁴ The Parole Board, *Parole Board Annual Report 2023* (2024), 16.

⁵ Data taken from Parole Board annual reports from those years.

Table 19: Parole Board decision-making, 2022-2024⁵

	2022	2023	2024
Number of applications considered/reviewed*	22	95	108
Number of final decisions issued	11	75	76
Number of parole orders granted	2	8	14
Number of temporary release and/or transfer to an open centre recommendations made	N/A	36	20
Number of applicants refused parole	N/A	67	62
Number of variations made to parole orders and orders revoked	N/A	N/A	8

*N/A denotes where data was not published and therefore is not available.

The Chairperson of the Parole Board has noted that applying for parole is a lengthy process, and while it was envisioned in the legislation that the application and decision-making process would take 18 months, “the reality is that it takes **at least 18 months** for most initial applications” (emphasis added).⁶

At the end of December 2024, the Board comprised 14 members,⁷ and all members must be involved in deciding the outcome of an application. IPRT notes that this can impact the timeliness of decision-making due to the availability of Board members. As such, **IPRT would urge the Department of Justice to explore best-practice models of Parole Board decision-making, including the use of panels of Parole Board members.**

The Board also noted that delays in receiving requested reports from the IPS, Probation Service, and IPS Psychology Services “significantly contributes to delays in considering parole applications in a timely fashion”.⁸ In its 2024 annual report, the Board’s Chief Executive highlighted that:

At the end of 2024 there were 52 applicants who did not have their application considered in a timely fashion, due to delays in our receiving reports.⁹

IPRT encourages the Department of Justice to ensure that all relevant bodies, including the IPS Psychology Service and the Probation Service, are appropriately resourced to provide assessment reports requested by the Parole Board in a timely manner.

Providing information on the parole process to eligible and soon-to-be eligible people is important to provide clarity on Parole Board decision-making and build greater understanding of the system. The Parole Board has conducted information sessions in prisons across the country, completing 12 sessions in 2023 and 11 in 2024. Carrying out these information sessions is to be commended. However, the Parole Board has also noted that due to staff and resource constraints, it was unable to carry out a number of areas of its work, including reviewing publications, leaflets, and greater awareness raising.¹⁰ These activities are important for all people engaging with the parole process, including applicants and victims.

Assessment of Standard 33: Progress

Following the establishment of the Parole Board in 2021, it has increased the number of applications it has reviewed and decisions finalised. It is also positive to note the Board making alternative recommendations where parole has not been granted, and for the Board to be providing information sessions in prisons across the country on the parole process. However, to ensure that all applications are processed and decisions reached in a fair and timely manner, the Parole Board must be fully resourced and receive parole reports from external bodies without undue delays. The Regulations to extend parole to people on determinate sentences of eight years or more should also be progressed as a matter of urgency.

⁶ The Parole Board, *Parole Board Annual Report 2024 (2025)*, 2.

⁷ *ibid*, 9.

⁸ *ibid*, 23.

⁹ *ibid*, 4.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 23.

Standards 34 & 35 Release planning

Standard 34: All people in prison have comprehensive preparation and structured plans for release. National policy and legislation provide for a structured release system.

Standard 35: Protocols are in place for inter-agency coordination in order to ensure the successful reintegration of people into the wider community following their release from prison.

Assessment: No change

Leaving prison can be a particularly vulnerable period for individuals, and meaningful planning and support for people released from prison is essential for ongoing rehabilitation and effective reintegration into wider society.

There is increasing recognition in Irish penal policy of the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration.¹¹ However, there remain many barriers to social reintegration faced by people on their release from prison, including, for example, accessing housing and employment.

The IPS has noted in its *IPS Strategy 2023-2027* that homelessness can be a key driver of reoffending, and that “a lack of housing is one of the reasons cited for reoffending amongst those returning to the Irish Prison Service”.¹² In 2024, 748 individuals reported their address as ‘No Fixed Abode’ upon their committal to custody.¹³ Data provided by the Minister for Justice also demonstrates an increasing number of sentenced individuals applying for social housing prior to their release (see Table 20, below).

Table 20: Applications for social housing in advance of prison release, 2021-2024¹⁴

Year	Housing applications
2024	317
2023	316
2022	270
2021	249

A ‘Criminal Justice Housing First’ pilot scheme operated in the Dublin region between October 2020 and May 2024, but has since been streamlined into the mainstream Housing First.¹⁵ Internationally, the Housing First model has been proven to be highly cost-effective and represents a more efficient allocation of resources than traditional services, saving on the alternative costs of frequent use of other services such as homeless supports, medical, and psychiatric services, as well as criminal justice services.¹⁶ Enhancing the availability and suitability of Housing First will go some way towards meeting the needs of people with experience of the criminal justice system who, quite often, are experiencing multiple complex disadvantages.

Overall, availability of stable accommodation upon release from prison is of significant concern. IPRT has heard concerns that people in prison have refused early or temporary release due to a lack of available accommodation. IPRT has also heard mixed views from people with lived experience on the support they received during preparation for their release and upon release. While some highlighted positive experiences with release and reintegration planning support, others – particularly those exiting prison at short notice on temporary release – felt ill-prepared for their release.

A positive initiative which assists women leaving the Dóchas Centre is the Outlook Programme, which commenced in 2019 and is run by Focus Ireland in collaboration with the IPS and Probation Service. Outlook provides women referred by the

¹¹ See, for example, Department of Justice, *Criminal Justice Policy: Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024* (2022), 9; and Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 658, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 10 February 2021. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-02-10/658/>>

¹² Irish Prison Service, *Irish Prison Service Strategy 2023-2027* (2023), 7.

¹³ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 772, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 5 February 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-02-05/772/>>

¹⁴ Data taken from responses to PQs, including: Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ Nos 1362 and 1363, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 14 June 2022 <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2022-06-14/1362/>>; and Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 2103, Dáil Éireann Deb, Tuesday 29 July 2025. <<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2103/>>

¹⁵ Minister for Justice, Written answer to PQ No. 123, Dáil Éireann Deb, Wednesday 24 April 2024. <<http://oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2024-04-24/123/>>

¹⁶ Nicholas Placece, *Housing First* (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2023).

IPS the opportunity to complete their sentence in supported, short-term housing in the community. **IPRT would encourage consideration of expanding the Outlook programme beyond Dublin, or for a similar initiative to be established for women released from Limerick Women's Prison.**

Another key challenge faced by people leaving prison is their ability to (re)enter the workforce. IPRT explored this issue in-depth in our report *The Secondary Punishment: A Scoping Study on Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Criminal Convictions*.¹⁷ An important way in which people can move on with their lives after serving a prison sentence is through an effective spent convictions regime. In April 2016, the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016 came into effect, meaning that certain minor convictions more than seven years old become 'spent', and therefore are excluded from a person's personal records.¹⁸ There is wide consensus, however, that the legislation is excessively narrow in who it applies to. As such, the Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 was introduced to amend and extend the Spent Convictions Act by broadening the range of convictions which may be regarded as spent and provide for proportionality in determining the period before a conviction becomes spent.¹⁹ However, despite passing all stages in the Seanad, the Bill lapsed in November 2024 with the dissolution of the Dáil, and its future remains uncertain. **IPRT strongly believes that an effective spent convictions regime is essential to help people who have demonstrated genuine commitment to change to move on from their convictions and, as such, urges the Government to implement the Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill as a matter of priority.**

In November 2024, the Department of Justice released its *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment*

Strategy 2025-2027, developed in conjunction with the IPS and Probation Service. The stated aim of the strategy is to "provide effective support to help people who have stopped offending, or are seeking stability to avoid offending, find the opportunities and resources needed to succeed".²⁰ IPRT was encouraged to see that many of the recommendations contained in IPRT's *The Secondary Punishment* report were reflected in the strategy.

It is clear that what is needed now is a whole-of-government strategy – with significant input from the Departments of Health, Housing and Social Protection – to support and promote the rehabilitation and reintegration of people leaving prison.

Assessment of Standard 34 & 35: No Change

People leaving prison continue to face significant barriers to reintegration following their release from prison, including access to accommodation and employment opportunities. Initiatives such as the Outlook Programme and other step-down facilities and services should be developed and expanded, and opportunities for greater interagency collaboration identified and harnessed. The necessary support for people on release from prison is wider than simply the responsibility of one government department and requires a whole-of-government approach.

¹⁷ Irish Penal Reform Trust, *The Secondary Punishment: A Scoping Study on Employer Attitudes to Hiring People with Criminal Convictions* (2024).

¹⁸ Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016.

¹⁹ Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018.

²⁰ Department of Justice, *Building Pathways Together: Criminal Justice Reintegration Through Employment Strategy 2025-2027* (2024), 4.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:
Section F: Release and reintegration

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
33. PAROLE SYSTEM: Following the establishment of the Parole Board in 2021, it has increased the number of applications it has reviewed and decisions finalised. It is also positive to note the Board making alternative recommendations where parole has not been granted, and for the Board to be providing information sessions in prisons across the country on the parole process. However, to ensure that all applications are processed and decisions reached in a fair and timely manner, the Parole Board must be fully resourced and receive parole reports from external bodies without undue delays. The Regulations to extend parole to people on determinate sentences of eight years or more should also be progressed as a matter of urgency.	PROGRESS 
34. & 35. RELEASE PLANNING: People leaving prison continue to face significant barriers to reintegration following their release from prison, including access to accommodation and employment opportunities. Initiatives such as the Outlook Programme and other step-down facilities and services should be developed and expanded, and opportunities for greater interagency collaboration identified and harnessed. The necessary support for people on release from prison is wider than simply the responsibility of one government department and requires a whole-of-government approach.	NO CHANGE 

Summary of
assessment of
**Standards and
Recommendations**

Summary of assessment of **Standards and Recommendations**

Spotlight Focus: **Engaging in Oversight**

IPRT Recommends:



1. The Government ratify OPCAT as a matter of urgency in advance of the enactment of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill and seek a postponement of their obligations until the legislation is commenced at a national level. Alternatively, the Bill should be published as a matter of priority and enacted in 2026.
2. The Government and IPS set out a plan of action to implement the recommendations made by the CPT within clearly defined timelines.
3. All recommendations made by international oversight bodies, including the CPT, are considered and responded to by all appropriate and competent State authorities.
4. Office of the Inspector of Prisons inspection reports are published in a timely manner as a matter of course. Where an inspection report is not published, that decision, and reasons for the decision, should be recorded and published.
5. The IPS establish a clear and transparent procedure for handling information and data requests, including outlining fair and reasonable timeframes.
6. The IPS undertake a robust and meaningful consultation process with civil society organisations, academics, and other key stakeholders to understand the data requirements of these bodies, and agree on data to be published on a regular basis above and beyond what is currently available.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT:

An effective and humane penal system

PIPS STANDARD

Assessment

1. PROGRESSIVE PENAL POLICY: Throughout 2023 and 2024, a number of strategies and policies related to penal policy have been developed and published containing many progressive proposals and commitments. While the vision and action points within these documents comprehensively build on previous recommendations for penal reform, the State failed to deliver throughout 2024 on a number of key prior penal policy commitments, including establishing the Penal Policy Consultative Council, OPCAT ratification, updating the Irish Prison Rules 2007 and establishing the IPS as a statutory State body.

MIXED



2. IMPRISONMENT AS A LAST RESORT: While there is increasing acknowledgement of the last resort principle in Irish penal policy documents, the overall number of people imprisoned in Ireland continues to rise, while the proportion of people who receive a short prison sentence has not meaningfully declined. Until the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 is progressed to legislate for the principle of imprisonment as a last resort, this commitment will not be delivered in practice. While the number of people receiving community service orders has increased since 2022, this remains far lower than pre-pandemic levels, and Probation Service funding remains a small proportion of that of the Irish Prison Service, meaning that the emphasis for funding continues to be on custodial sanctions rather than community-based alternatives.

MIXED



3. SAFE CUSTODY LIMITS: Throughout 2024, only two prisons in Ireland operated within safe capacity levels. Since 2022, the average daily number in custody as a percentage of system capacity has risen from 102 per cent to 109 per cent, with occupancy rates as high as 147 per cent in Limerick Women's prison in 2024. While the IPS is required to accommodate all individuals sent to prison by the courts, this situation is untenable as the system is operating at unsafe and unsustainable levels.

REGRESS



4. PRISON SIZES: The addition of 76 more beds in Limerick Men's Prison in 2023 increased operational capacity from 210 to 286. Therefore, at the end of 2024 only seven Irish prisons had an operational capacity of less than 250 beds, down from eight in 2022. While IPRT recognises the current pressure on the IPS in terms of capacity, increasing the size and capacity of closed prisons, even in a time of overcrowding, runs counter to the EU Council's Conclusions.

REGRESS



5. MINIMUM SECURITY SETTINGS

NOT ASSESSED

6. OPEN PRISONS: There has been no progress on expanding the number of open prison spaces in 2024. Further, given the addition of beds in closed prisons, the number of beds in open prisons as a proportion of all beds in Irish prisons has decreased, meaning that the prison estate is moving even further away from realising the PIPS goal of increasing open prison spaces to 30 per cent of overall capacity.

REGRESS



IPRT Recommends: An effective and humane penal system



7. The Penal Policy Consultative Council is established without any further delay.
8. The Department of Justice include the principle of prison as a last resort in the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 and prioritises the publication of the Bill.
9. The Government sets maximum occupancy limits on each prison to ensure the safe operation of each prison that ensures adequate prison conditions and access to rehabilitative services.
10. The Government replace current closed prison spaces with spaces in open prisons and establishes an open prison for women.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT:

Prison conditions

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
7. HUMANE PRISON CONDITIONS: The increase in the number of people required to sleep on mattresses on the floor and the overcrowding of cells more generally has had a significant impact on humane prison conditions across the entire prison estate. While the new Limerick Women's Prison is a significant improvement in terms of material conditions, the positive elements of the new facility are undermined by the severe level of overcrowding.	REGRESS 
8. IN-CELL SANITATION: The significant decrease in the number of people 'slopping out' is welcome, however the practice should be eliminated entirely. There has also been an increase in the number of people toileting in the presence of others across the prison estate, with no indication from the IPS or Government that this will be addressed substantively in the short to medium-term.	REGRESS 
9. SINGLE CELL ACCOMMODATION: The number of people accommodated in single occupancy cells has decreased from 48 per cent of the total prison population in October 2022 to 36 per cent in October 2024. There was also a notable increase in the use of triple and quadruple occupancy cells between October 2022 and 2024.	REGRESS 
10. PRE-TRIAL DETENTION AS AN EXCEPTIONAL MEASURE: Since 2022 there has been a steady increase in the number of people held in pre-trial detention and a significant increase in the number of people on remand cell-sharing with sentenced individuals. While the average number of people detained on remand for greater than two years has decreased slightly since 2022, there remained a number of people held on prolonged pre-trial detention as at June 2024.	REGRESS 
11. FAMILY CONTACT: The increasing provision for videocalls for people in prison is a positive step, as is the rollout of in-cell telephones. However, there is an increasing number of people in prison who received no in-person visits in 2024, and access to visits have been impacted by high prison occupancy.	MIXED 
12. ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE SERVICES: The completion of the Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service, and the subsequent establishment of a Health Needs Assessment Steering Committee and the drafting of a Health Action Plan, all demonstrate a commitment to improving health outcomes for people in prison and is to be commended. However, resourcing of health services in the context of acute prison overoccupancy remains a challenge.	MIXED 
13. MENTAL HEALTHCARE: Some good progress has been made on implementing the recommendations High Level Taskforce on Mental Health and Addiction, including establishing a Clinical Lead for Mental Health and Addiction position and work to establish a dual-diagnosis pilot service within Cork Prison. The average wait time for transfer to the Central Mental Hospital for people with serious mental health conditions was also lower than previous years. However, serious concerns remain regarding the treatment of people with severe mental health conditions in Irish prisons, including access to services and conditions of detention.	MIXED 

PIPS STANDARD

Assessment

14. DRUG AND ALCOHOL TREATMENT: The introduction of the new *IPS Drugs Strategy* provides a firm foundation to reduce the harms associated with drug use in Irish prisons, and the IPS has implemented a number of harm reduction measures, including the provision of naloxone kits and establishing an awareness raising campaign of risk factors for drug overdoses. However, there remain long waiting lists for the provision of addiction counselling services, and there was a decrease in the number of unique clients reached in 2024.

MIXED



15. PRIVACY

Not assessed

IPRT Recommends: Prison conditions



11. The decommissioning of prison cells which do not uphold basic standards of living for people in prison.
12. The IPS dedicate ring-fenced staff resources for intra-prison escorts to ensure all people in prison receive their statutory minimum visiting entitlements.
13. The IPS undertake research to understand barriers to in-person visits that contribute to the rising number of people not receiving visits, and work towards reducing these barriers and further supporting people who do not receive in-person visits.
14. When videocalls are chosen as an alternative to in-person visits, these meet the statutory minimum duration of in-person visits.
15. The duration of both in-person and video visits be provided beyond the minimum statutory duration.
16. The IPS implement improvements to its ICT infrastructure and security resources to be able to increase the duration of outbound calls.
17. The recommendations contained in the *Health Needs Assessment for the Irish Prison Service* are implemented as a matter of priority.
18. The PICLS models is fully resourced and expanded to all committal prisons nationwide.
19. The Mental Health Needs Analysis commissioned by the IPS also consider the needs of those with addictions in Irish prisons from a health-based perspective.
20. Greater emphasis is placed on a health-based approach to drug use in practice, including providing timely and effective supports, education, and meaningful activities that can reduce drug dependency.
21. The IPS and the Government to appropriately resource drug and alcohol addiction counselling services in all Irish prisons to ensure all people in prison have access to addiction services in a timely manner and on an equitable basis.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT:

Prison regimes

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
16. TIME OUT-OF-CELL: Both the total number and proportion of people restricted to their cells for 19 or more hours a day increased throughout 2024. Furthermore, there is no publicly available data on time-out-of-cell generally, including where an individual may have limited time out of their cell without being placed on a restricted regime.	REGRESS 
17. SENTENCE MANAGEMENT: There continues to be a relatively low number of ISM Coordinators compared to the number of people eligible for sentence management. For the ISM system to work as envisioned, IPRT believes that additional ISM Coordinators positions must be established and provided with specific, protected time to undertake these functions.	NO CHANGE 
18. LIFE SKILLS: The proposal to establish new Independent Living Units in Castlereagh Prison, Shelton Abbey and Loughan House are positive steps that will assist people accommodated there to develop and maintain life-skills essential for exercising personal autonomy and successful reintegration into the wider community. However, it is disappointing that the Mountjoy Progression Unit, which prioritised preparation for life post-release and supported meaningful reintegration, has been repurposed due to the impacts of prison overcrowding.	MIXED 
19. EDUCATION AND TRAINING: There has been a year-on-year increase in the number of people in prison engaging in education programmes, and the establishment of the Prison Education Taskforce is a positive initiative to promote engagement with prison education and supporting work and further/higher education opportunities post-release. However, the IPS must ensure that access to education programmes is equitable across the prison estate (including for those on restricted regimes) and is sufficiently resourced in the context of acute prison overcrowding.	PROGRESS 
20. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INVOLVEMENT: There continues to be some good examples of community engagement in Irish prisons, including the Irish Red Cross's engagement through its 'Community-Based Health and First Aid' programme. However, the IPS must ensure that all community organisations continue to have full access to prisons for pre-arranged programmes and activities. Further, while temporary release can help to reduce the overall number of people in prison, it must be used in a way that supports community engagement and reintegration and meets the specific needs of the individual.	MIXED 
21. POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION: People in prison are wholly reliant on the support of prison staff to exercise their right to vote while in prison. IPRT was pleased to note the proactive measures to support this in a number of prisons in 2024, including a voter registration drive and the provision of information through leaflets, posters, and the internal prison TV channel. IPRT would urge the IPS to take further initiatives to empower people in prison to vote, including consulting with people in prison on what supports should be in place to encourage voting, and the collation of statistics on registration and voting rates.	PROGRESS 

IPRT Recommends: Prison regimes



- 22.** The length of time that each individual spends on a restricted regime is recorded and published as a matter of priority.
- 23.** The IPS take immediate steps to ensure that people on restricted regimes can spend an increased amount of time out-of-cell, particularly those on 22+ hour restricted regimes.
- 24.** Additional ISM Coordinator positions are established and provided with specific, protected time to undertake these functions.
- 25.** The IPS to consider expanding sentence management to all people in prison, and resource the ISM system appropriately.
- 26.** The Progression Unit is reopened.
- 27.** The IPS, in conjunction with the ETBI, develop an updated Prison Education Strategy to provide a more detailed vision and roadmap for the provision of education in Irish prisons in the coming years.
- 28.** Information on the frequency and rates of school closures is recorded and made available upon request.
- 29.** The IPS explore establishing a formal process allowing for individuals to be placed on an 'education hold' and ineligible for transfer in certain specific circumstances.
- 30.** The IPS implement all of the OIP's recommendations from its Thematic Inspection on *Education & Work Training* report, and report on progress and outcomes for people in prison.
- 31.** All prisons keep a register of instances where people in prison have been unable to participate in programmes and activities, including those organised by community-based organisations, and the reasons for these.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT:

Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
22. COMPLAINTS SYSTEM: While work progressed throughout 2024 between the Department of Justice, the IPS, the OIP and the Office of the Ombudsman, there was no tangible progress towards introducing and implementing an improved prison complaints system in 2024.	NO CHANGE 
23. INDEPENDENT COMPLAINTS REVIEW AND APPEALS SYSTEM: While work progressed throughout 2024 between the Department of Justice, the IPS, the OIP and the Office of the Ombudsman, there was no tangible progress towards introducing and implementing an improved prison complaints system in 2024, including establishing an independent complaint review and appeals system.	NO CHANGE 
24. INSPECTIONS AND MONITORING: A number of positive steps have been made in prison oversight since 2022, including the first general inspections of Irish prisons since 2014 by the OIP, significant progress on its programme of inspecting all prisons, and the publication of its Inspection Framework. However, delays in the publication of PVC reports, as well as the complete absence of published general inspection reports, undermines the purpose of external scrutiny of the prison system.	MIXED 
25. INVESTIGATIONS INTO DEATHS IN CUSTODY: Sadly, 2024 saw a substantial increase in the number of deaths in Irish prisons. The timeliness of publication of reports from the investigation of deaths in custody remains an issue, while the CPT highlighted that some deaths may have been prevented had effective, prison level reviews taken place immediately. Given the immense pressure the prison system is currently under, swift implementation of learnings from all deaths in custody is more important than ever.	REGRESS 

IPRT Recommends: Complaints, accountability, and inspection mechanisms



- 32.** The establishment of a more effective prison complaints system is completed as a matter of priority.
- 33.** Work on a new prison complaints system is expedited, and, when it is introduced, that it is fully accessible, including to people with literacy issues or learning and other disabilities, and resourced appropriately to gain the trust of people in prison as an effective protective mechanism.
- 34.** The OIP is sufficiently resourced to be able to undertake full inspections of all Irish prisons at least once every three years.
- 35.** The OIP is fully resourced to undertake and complete investigations into deaths in custody in a timely manner.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT:

Safety and protection in Irish prisons

PIPS STANDARD	Assessment
26. SOLITARY CONFINEMENT: IPRT is deeply concerned that the data on the use of solitary confinement, including prolonged solitary confinement, is unavailable and has not been published upon request. This inhibits external scrutiny of the use of solitary confinement in Irish prisons. While it is positive that there has been a reduction in the number of people subjected to 22+ hour restricted regimes compared to October 2022, this number has risen steadily throughout 2023 and 2024. Overall, IPRT maintains that the IPS and the Department of Justice must take immediate steps to prohibit the use of prolonged solitary confinement in both statute and in practice, and ensure measures are in place to reduce and ultimately eliminate the use of solitary confinement in Irish prisons.	UNABLE TO ASSESS
27. SAFETY AND SECURITY: There was a significant increase in assaults between people in custody between 2022 and 2024, as well as an increase in the number of people requesting to be placed on voluntary separation. This is indicative of a worsening safety situation in Irish prisons, which must be addressed through an easing of overcrowding and investing in violence reduction and conflict mediation programmes in Irish prisons.	REGRESS 
28. PRISON ESCORTS	NOT ASSESSED
29. STAFF TRAINING	NOT ASSESSED
30. DEVELOPING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND WORK CULTURE: Both the CPT and the OIP have highlighted generally positive relationships between staff and people in custody in prisons visited, and people with recent experience of prison that IPRT has engaged with have all generally agreed that there was a staff member they trusted and could turn to for help. However, outcomes from inspections and staff surveys conducted by the OIP have highlighted low morale among some staff. The IPS has committed to undertaking a 'Culture Audit', and while work on this progressed throughout 2024, it had not yet been completed by the end of the year.	NO CHANGE 
31. USE OF FORCE AND RESTRAINTS: The CPT has highlighted its concerns related to the use of force in Irish prisons, including allegations of abuse and excessive use of force. Further, IPRT has significant concerns about the IPS tender for devices such as 'anti-spit masks' and 'hook and loop straps/limb straps', and the lack of transparency around their potential use in Irish prisons.	REGRESS 
32. COHORTS AT RISK OF DISCRIMINATION: There has been little apparent progress on implementing a number of recent key actions the IPS has committed to, including publishing bespoke strategies to address potential discrimination against at-risk groups. While work has continued on the IPS transgender policy, it was not published and implemented in 2024.	NO CHANGE 

IPRT Recommends: **Safety and protection in Irish prisons**



- 36.** Prolonged solitary confinement is prohibited by statute and abolished in practice as a matter of utmost priority.
- 37.** Immediate steps are taken to reduce and ultimately eliminate the use of solitary confinement in all Irish prisons.
- 38.** The IPS further invest in proven interventions that can help address violence in prisons, including violence reduction and conflict mediation programmes run by the Alternatives to Violence Programme Ireland, and the Traveller Mediation Service.
- 39.** The IPS to undertake its Culture Audit as soon as practicable, and explore how other initiatives such as independent Measuring Quality of Prison Life surveys may complement this work.
- 40.** The IPS develop and maintain a register of incidents that are successfully de-escalated through conflict resolution approaches.
- 41.** The IPS publish detailed data at least annually on the use of physical interventions in Irish prisons.
- 42.** The findings of Personal Protective Equipment review group are published.
- 43.** The use of anti-spit masks or similar devices in Irish prisons is immediately prohibited.
- 44.** The IPS develop and publish discrete policies or strategies for preventing discrimination of at-risk groups as a matter of priority.

SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT: Release and reintegration

PIPS STANDARD

Assessment

33. PAROLE SYSTEM: Following the establishment of the Parole Board in 2021, it has increased the number of applications it has reviewed and decisions finalised. It is also positive to note the Board making alternative recommendations where parole has not been granted, and for the Board to be providing information sessions in prisons across the country on the parole process. However, to ensure that all applications are processed and decisions reached in a fair and timely manner, the Parole Board must be fully resourced and receive parole reports from external bodies without undue delays. The Regulations to extend parole to people on determinate sentences of eight years or more should also be progressed as a matter of urgency.

PROGRESS



34. & 35. RELEASE PLANNING: People leaving prison continue to face significant barriers to reintegration following their release from prison, including access to accommodation and employment opportunities. Initiatives such as the Outlook Programme and other step-down facilities and services should be developed and expanded, and opportunities for greater interagency collaboration identified and harnessed. The necessary support for people on release from prison is wider than simply the responsibility of one government department and requires a whole-of-government approach.

NO CHANGE



IPRT Recommends: Release and reintegration



- 45.** The Department of Justice to prioritise the drafting and introduction of Regulations under section 24 of the Parole Act to extend parole eligibility to those serving a sentence of eight years or more.
- 46.** The Department of Justice ensure that the Parole Board is sufficiently resourced and staffed to effectively fulfil its current remit and take on a greater number of parole applications when section 24 Regulations are introduced, and provide commensurate resources to the Probation Service to supervise additional individuals released on parole.
- 47.** The Department of Justice explore best-practice models of Parole Board decision-making, including the use of panels of Parole Board members.
- 48.** Consideration is given to expanding the Outlook programme beyond Dublin, or for a similar initiative to be established for women released from Limerick Women's Prison.
- 49.** The Government implement the Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill as a matter of priority.
- 50.** A whole-of-government strategy, with input from the Departments of Health, Housing and Social Protection, is developed to support and promote the rehabilitation and reintegration of people leaving prison.



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