RECEDE

REgulating Criminal justicE DEtention: glocal prospects for improving health and safety in detention and society

‘Volunteer Monitoring in Prisons: Purpose, Strengths and Challenges’ Workshop 30 September 2026

Introduction

The **Volunteer Monitoring in Prisons: Purposes, Strengths and Challenges** event was held on 30 September 2026 at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC), Scotland. The event was delivered in **partnership by the University of Nottingham and HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland (HMIPS)**. The event sought to explore applications of RECEDE research findings on volunteer monitoring and prison regulation. It bought together over 60 volunteer Independent Prison Monitors from across Scotland, HMIPS staff and National Preventative Mechanism- Scotland representation. The day included presentations, discussion and feedback sessions and interactive exercises.

We are most grateful to HMIPS for the invitation to share our research and to all attendees for investing their time and input into the event. For further project information, please see https://regulatingdetention.ac.uk/ .

This project has received funding from the European Union’s, Horizon 2020 research and innovation framework programme under grant agreement No. 949289

Summary of content and discussion themes

The event was expertly chaired by Chris Collins (HMIPS) throughout and opened by Sara Snell (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland).

Introduction

Professor Philippa Tomczak introduced the research project, set out the penal contexts in Scotland and England and Wales – including their outlying high imprisonment rates in comparison to the rest of Western Europe, and provided an overview of findings. Our core messages were that:

1. Detention regulation/ oversight – including volunteer monitors – is an important community working to identify and communicate problems in incredibly difficult, closed prison contexts
2. Current ways of doing monitoring have been limited in their ability to improve prisons. We see persistent and indeed worsening conditions and an increasing rate of imprisonment.
3. Oversight has the potential to be more impactful. We identified the multiplicity of purposes that prison regulators attempt to fulfil and regulators' limited constructions of prison problems as areas for attention.

The 'river dilemma' or 'upstream parable' provided an opening reflective metaphor for the event, highlighting that frontline or 'downstream' work can be lifesaving, but is reactive and crisis-driven and can deflect attention from the 'upstream' or systemic issues that produce harms.

Quinn and Tomczak (2021) Practitioner niches in the (Penal) voluntary sector: Perspectives from management and the frontlines. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations 32*(1): 78-89.

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Workshop 1: The purposes, strengths, and challenges of prison monitoring

Dr Matty Hall and Dr Tom Kemp presented and facilitated Workshop 1 which explored the multiple purposes of prison regulation, which may sit in tension. Group discussions reflected on the strengths, purposes, challenges to and limits of volunteer prison monitoring.

Findings were shared from two articles:

- Hall M and Tomczak P (2026) Resisting and enabling domination: voluntary organizations' efforts to regulate prison and police detention. *The British Journal of Criminology*.
- Kemp T and Tomczak P (2026) Volunteer monitoring of police and prison detention: Independent custody visitors and independent monitoring boards in England and Wales. *European Journal of Criminology*.

The discussion acknowledged, e.g.:

- The scale and gravity of issues that can occur in prison, and that seeking to address e.g. prisoners' mental health needs likely requires communicating with multiple different staff and is challenging.
- That choosing what to prioritise, i.e. individual or wider problems, can be difficult.
- That the work can induce feelings of helplessness and sometimes there is little that can be done to assist prisoners in need. The emotional load can be heavy.

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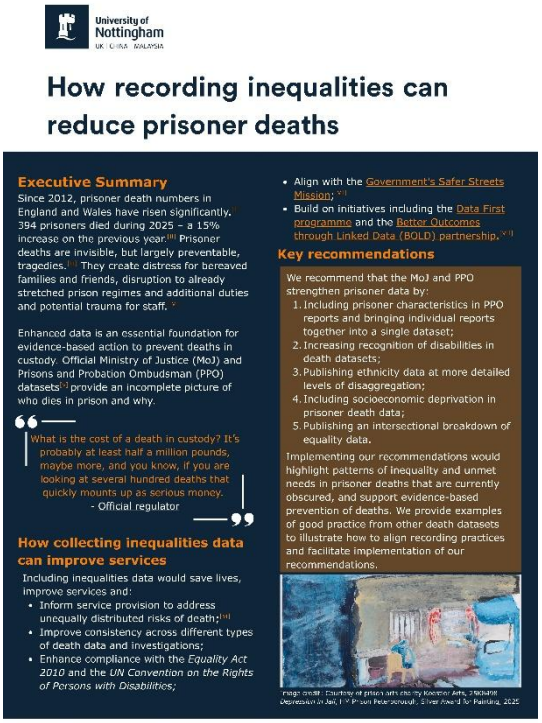
Workshop 2: Prison oversight - Identifying problems and using evidence

Dr Laura Haas and Dr Tom Kemp presented and facilitated Workshop 2, which explored the range of ways in which prison problems can be framed, and the political effects of particular framings and absences. Human rights-informed standards were problematised as a potential deflection from the systemic limitations of imprisonment e.g. as a means of rehabilitation. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture's critique of high prison populations as a barrier to regime improvements was praised as an example of good practice in prison regulation. Group discussions reflected on potential ways that regulators could connect prison standards with social outcomes. The discussion noted the criminalisation of drugs as a key driver of imprisonment and social harms.

Findings were shared from two outputs:

- Kemp T and Tomczak P (2026) How regulation constructs and constrains the problems of imprisonment: A case study of prison regulation in England and Wales. *Punishment & Society*.

- Haas L, Tomczak P and Canheo R (2026) How recording inequalities can reduce prisoner deaths.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How recording inequalities can reduce prisoner deaths

Executive Summary

Since 2012, prisoner death numbers in England and Wales have risen significantly.[i] 394 prisoners died during 2025 – a 15% increase on the previous year.[ii] Prisoner deaths are invisible, but largely preventable, tragedies.[iii] They create distress for bereaved families and friends, disruption to already stretched prison regimes and additional duties and potential trauma for staff. [iv]

Enhanced data is an essential foundation for evidence-based action to prevent deaths in custody. Official Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) datasets[v] provide an incomplete picture of who dies in prison and why.

"What is the cost of a death in custody? It's probably at least half a million pounds, maybe more, and you know, if you are looking at several hundred deaths that quickly mounts up as serious money."
- Official regulator

How collecting inequalities data can improve services

Including inequalities data would save lives, improve services and:

- Inform service provision to address unequally distributed risks of death;[vi]
- Improve consistency across different types of death data and investigations;
- Enhance compliance with the *Equality Act 2010* and the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*;
- Align with the Government's Safer Streets Mission; [vi]
- Build on initiatives including the Data First programme and the Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD) partnership. [vii]

Key recommendations

We recommend that the MoJ and PPO strengthen prisoner data by:

1. Including prisoner characteristics in PPO reports and bringing individual reports together into a single dataset;
2. Increasing recognition of disabilities in death datasets;
3. Publishing ethnicity data at more detailed levels of disaggregation;
4. Including socioeconomic deprivation in prisoner death data;
5. Publishing an intersectional breakdown of equality data.

Implementing our recommendations would highlight patterns of inequality and unmet needs in prisoner deaths that are currently obscured, and support evidence-based prevention of deaths. We provide examples of good practice from other death datasets to illustrate how to align recording practices and facilitate implementation of our recommendations.

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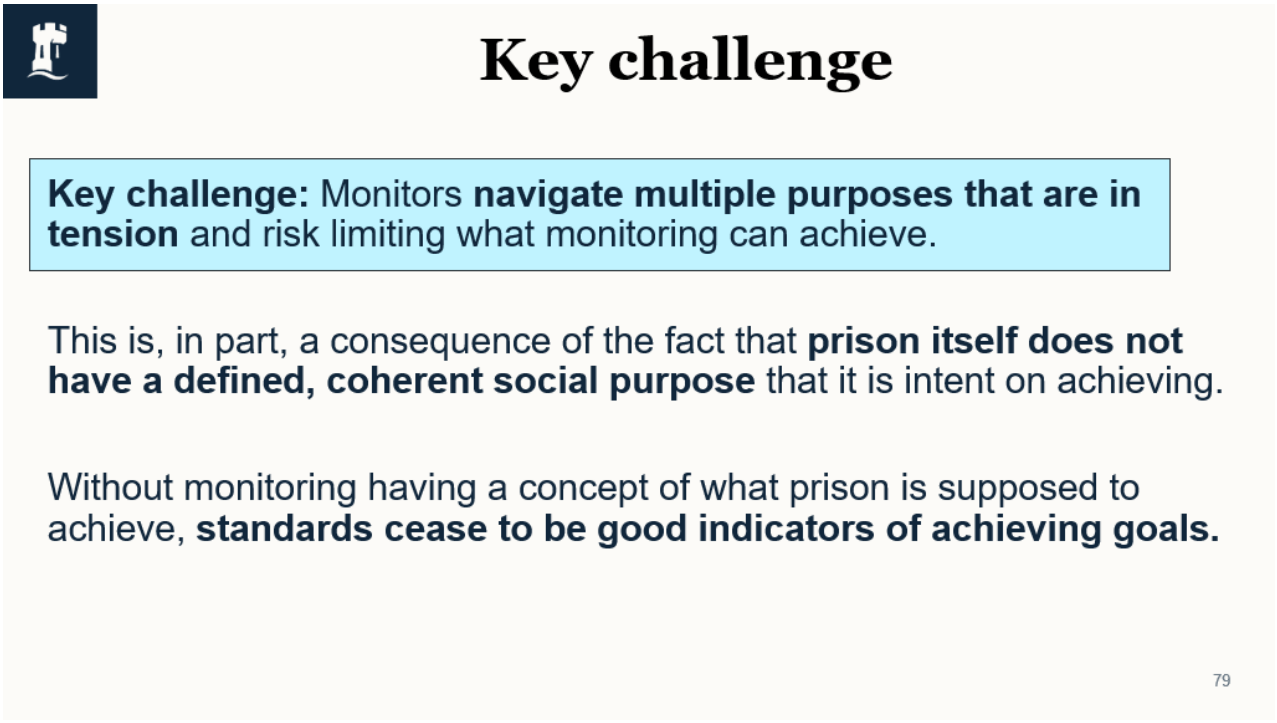
Workshop 3: Summary and Recommendations

Dr Laura Haas, Dr Matty Hall and Dr Tom Kemp then presented final reflections on the strengths and key challenges of prison regulation, advocating further reflection on its key purpose – be that preventing inhumane treatment, improving prisoners' experiences, continuously evaluating prison performance against standards or tying standards to a defined purpose of imprisonment.



An interactive exercise facilitated by HMIPS then explored **'identifying means for strengthening monitoring practice and impact'** and **closing words** were given by Sam Gluckstein (HM Deputy Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland).

Next Steps and Conclusion

The event concluded with agreement on the importance of creating collective spaces to reflect on volunteer monitoring and detention oversight more broadly, to enable support and stimulate ongoing debate within the sector. Attendees highlighted the value of the discussions in shaping future practice, enhancing collaboration, and supporting monitors to navigate the complex penal environment with integrity and purpose.

Feedback (via on online survey) collected by HIMPS suggested that the research presented was generally viewed as interesting, challenging and thought-provoking. Many attendees appreciated being exposed to external perspectives and recognised the value of considering wider questions about issues such as independence, accountability, regulatory capture, monitoring effectiveness and the limitations and strengths of volunteer monitoring.

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Several respondents specifically noted that the research encouraged deeper reflection on the purpose of monitoring and generated valuable discussion.

Some selected responses from participants:

- *"An interesting and useful day that felt like it is the beginning for further discussion and change."*
- *"A great day and chance to network with IPMs, other partners and academics."*
- *"The best HMIPS event I have attended!"*
- *"An engaging and informative overview of the monitoring role today and how it could be developed into the future."*
- *"Provocative and brain hurting - but very worth while."*
- *"This changed the way I think about my role as an IPM."*
- *"Insightful event. Good to rethink our role and impact."*
- *"Enjoyed the challenges being posed by the UoN"*
- *"Engaging and thought-provoking event and I really enjoyed it."*

Please see the appendix below for a full summary of the group discussions and feedback

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Appendix:

We are pleased to provide the following summary of the discussion sessions.

Discussion 1a: Purposes of monitoring

Prompt: What is monitoring for? Make a list of the purposes that monitoring serves. (10 sheets were collected)

- Protecting prisoners from harm, inhumane treatment and rights breaches; upholding dignity (6 sheets mentioned this topic)
    - "Ensure humane treatment / uphold dignity of prisoners & treated fairly"
- Communication between prisoners, staff and management; giving prisoners a voice (6)
    - "Link between prisoners & management."
    - "Two-way communication with governor."
- Regular, consistent monitoring rather than intermittent visits (10)
    - "Regular & consistent inspections of standards"
- Checking compliance with standards, law and administrative procedures (5)
    - "Evaluation against standards."
- Identifying issues, trends and problems that have become normalised or go unnoticed (5)
    - "Identifying issues + what works well."
    - "Identify issues promptly – timely interventions"
    - "Identify problems."
- Prevention and deterring poor practice (4)
    - "Protection and prevention of harm"
    - "Preventative function"
- Bringing a variety of perspectives and backgrounds (4)
    - "Different perspective → no one answer"
- Improving conditions, practice, policy and outcomes (4)
    - "Improving outcomes for prisoners"
    - "Contribute to better policy/practice."
    - "Improve prisons and conditions"
- Independent oversight - Transparency and accountability (4)
    - "Transparency of prison operations & accountability"
    - "Independent, external, objective oversight"
- Source of evidence and intelligence (2)
    - "Intelligence gathering / additional source of evidence"
- Helping staff (2)
    - "Assist prison officers"
    - "Ensures staff being heard."
- Time with prisoners
    - "Company + prisoner a voice"

Discussion 1b: Strengths of volunteer monitoring

Prompt: What are the strengths of IPM practice? (10 sheets were collected)

- Diversity of monitors' backgrounds, skills and perspectives (8)
    - "Range of skills and experiences."
    - "Diversity of IPM experience/backgrounds"
- Independence and impartiality (7)

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    - "Independent, free of bias, not paid by Govt."
    - "Independent → not inspectors / not staff"
- Listening and representing prisoners who otherwise have no voice (6)
    - "Ability and time to listen"
    - "Value of being heard (but does it result in change?)";
    - "Being heard"
    - "Emotional comfort for prisoners."
- Accessibility and Prisoners speak more openly to monitors (5)
    - "Authenticity & openness increased for IPMs"
    - "Ability to request, accessibility for prisoners"
- Unrestricted access to all areas, backed by statutory powers (4)
    - "Access to all areas on statutory footing."
    - "Access 24/7 etc."
- Regular presence allowing timely identification of issues (3)
    - "Regular insight"
- Practical problem solving, including talking directly to governors (3)
    - "Can talk to anyone to solve issues, including governors."
- Direct link to the Inspectorate (HMIPS) (2)
    - "Link with HMIPS. – Direct and inform inspections"
- Fresh eyes that notice problems others have become desensitised to (2)
    - "Fresh eyes."
    - "Highlight problems that may go unnoticed/missed due to becoming de-sensitised to them."
- Representation of views (2)
    - "Represent people who have not had a voice."
- Freedom to step outside the standards (2)
    - "Can step outside monitoring against standards"
    - "Not restricted by standards."
- Lay background seen as a strength (2)
    - "Lay background / Not salaried."

Discussion 2a: Challenges of volunteer monitoring

Prompt: What challenges do you face as Independent Prison Monitors? (10 sheets were collected)

Limited time and capacity, with prisoner requests crowding out monitoring (5)

    - "Too caught up with requests – Not enough monitoring time"
    - "Resource and time to do everything"
    - "Scale of certain issues, i.e. mental health.
- Limits of the role: no powers, can't help everyone, feelings of helplessness (5)
    - "IPMs aren't advocates – hold no powers on that → must wait until all channels followed, need to avoid introducing bias."
    - "Cannot help everyone"
    - "Lack of belief that we can initiate change."
    - "Not an agent of change."
- Working as a team: coordination, joint visits, differing monitoring styles (4)
    - "Coordinating w/ other IPMs for same establishment, building a 'team' approach."
    - "Working as a team."
    - "Not knowing who your team is."
- Issues with staff (3)
    - "Staffing issues + morale – varying attitudes."; "Staff not understanding our role."

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- Knowing what to prioritise and how much structure to use (3)
    - "Choosing what to prioritise"
    - "Difficulty knowing priorities / Lack of direction!"
- Emotional load and criticism from prisoners (3)
    - "Heavy mental/emotional load for a volunteering position"
    - "Constant criticism from prisoners"
- Access constrained by regimes and lockdown hours (3)
    - "Getting access + prisoners due to lockdown hours."
- Turnover of monitors (2)
    - "Turnover of IPMs"
- Keeping all standards in mind and covered over time (2)
    - "Keeping all the standards, rules, and regulations in mind"
- Staying neutral and independent over the long term (2)
    - "Do you remain independent after a long time at an establishment?"
    - Balancing work with prisoners/staff and remaining neutral"
- Other:
    - "Lack of joined up approaches – individual prisons work in silo"
    - "Dependent on which purpose you want to contribute to."

Discussion 2b: Problems monitors felt less able to respond to

Prompt: Which problems are IPMs unable to respond to (e.g. due to remit and/or practical limitations)? (10 sheets were collected)

Healthcare, mental health and NHS provision (6)

    - "Seriously ill prisoners being held in isolation – how to escalate."
    - "NHS or any other 'outsourcing' issues"
- Systemic and estate-wide problems such as overcrowding and space, which need bigger-picture solutions rather than sticking plasters (5)
    - "Cross estate problems + trends."
    - "Overcrowding and problems this can cause"
    - "Global issues that physically cannot be resolved (space, overflow)"
- Lack of powers, status and advocacy role; issues outside remit or not yet through proper channels (5)
    - "Statutory responsibility but no status."
    - "Lack of powers or resources."
- Food and canteen provision (2)
    - "Food and how it feeds into the wider systemic issues"
    - "No healthy local food (contract/procured)";
- Other:
    - "Lack of purposeful activity"
    - "Cost of calls."
    - "Sense of hopelessness, disenfranchised (staff + prisoners + partners)"

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Discussion 3: Reasons for recurring issues in prisons

Prompt: What explains the recurrence of issues in prison? (9 sheets were collected)

- Staffing (6)
  - "Limitation of resources e.g. staffing + sickness"
  - "Staffing levels / turnover / absence"
  - "Inexperienced staff / Staff confidence."
- Political will, politicisation and public or media perception (5)
  - "Political – decisions on where to spend money"
  - "Lack of political will → not for the public and so not for the politicians"
  - "Differences between political and administrative will.";
- Weak accountability, leadership and strategic direction (5)
  - "Strategic direction or the lack of it"
  - "Lack of accountability from Prison management."
  - "Attitude of the officials towards solving problems"
- Prison organisational structures haven't changed (5)
  - "Regulations – Historical, Tunnel visioned, Unable to change, Immovable"
  - "Minimal change in organisational structure leading to improvement"
- Overcrowding, too many people sent to prison, and old buildings (5)
  - "Overcrowding – society – whole: Preventing services, Housing, Social care/work, NHS waiting list, CAMHS waiting list"
  - "Too many going to prison."
- Underfunding and limited resources (4)
  - "Maintenance issues (old buildings etc.)"
  - "Lack of funding for prisons"
- Wider social failures undermining rehabilitation (4)
  - Rehabilitation – no housing, no help, no money, no through care"
  - "Cycle of reoffending – how internal opportunities can't be equalled/maintained outside."
- Inconsistent procedures across and within establishments (3)
  - "Lack of consistency across prison estate e.g. issues arising out of transfers – lost property / missed visits"
  - "Misalignment of procedures across establishments – resulting to inconsistent experiences of prisoners"
- Limits of oversight itself: HMIPS reports repeat year on year; standards may not measure whether functions are delivered (2)
  - "HMIPS reporting is similar over the years."
- Also raised once each: drugs and contraband, poor communication between departments, and subcontracted services

Discussion 4: Functions and harms

Prompt: This discussion followed presentations on the potential for prison 'standards' to be disconnected from prison 'functions' and on the ways that prison system and broader socio-economic issues may be obscured by current oversight and data practices. It asked participants to discuss how these topics could influence monitoring. (9 sheets were collected)

- Monitors' data feeding up through oversight system to act on (HMIPS, Chief Inspector, NPM) (5)
  - "Discussion took place on our role and remit and how we can influence wider issues. We struggled with this but do acknowledge that our data informs fuller inspection reports."

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    - "IPMs feed into the system + play a key role"; "Different in Scotland → system IPM → HMIPS → NPM"
- Doubt about whether this topic is within the monitors' remit (4)
    - "IRRELEVANT"
    - "Beyond the remit of IPMs – bigger issue than we can support within role"
- Data is lacking, hard to record or recorded inconsistently + monitors could push for better collection (4)
    - "So many variables and different types of data which isn't always recorded well"
    - "Lack of data. – Strategic objectives to improve data available"
    - "We would also encourage better data collection."
- Things to assess that would be better at assessing function (3)
    - "Transition support"; "Structured person centred support"
    - "Prison-based social workers."
    - "Purposeful activity – education. Mitigating factors (employment, housing, relationship, etc.)"; "Equity – Share practice – equitable access – where is the need?
    - "Longitudinal study, similar to what Lesley McAra + Susan McVie with school exclusion + correlation of offending [?] prison"
- Things to assess that would be better at assessing equality (2)
    - "Are there chaplaincy services for all faiths? Are there dietary options for all faiths"
    - "Is education in prisons introduced at an accessible level."
    - "Engagement forums"
    - "Reviews/deep dives in x topic inequalities therein."
- Other:
    - "We cannot build ourselves out of a crisis"

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