



Ministry
of Justice

Rapid Deployment Cells Process Evaluation

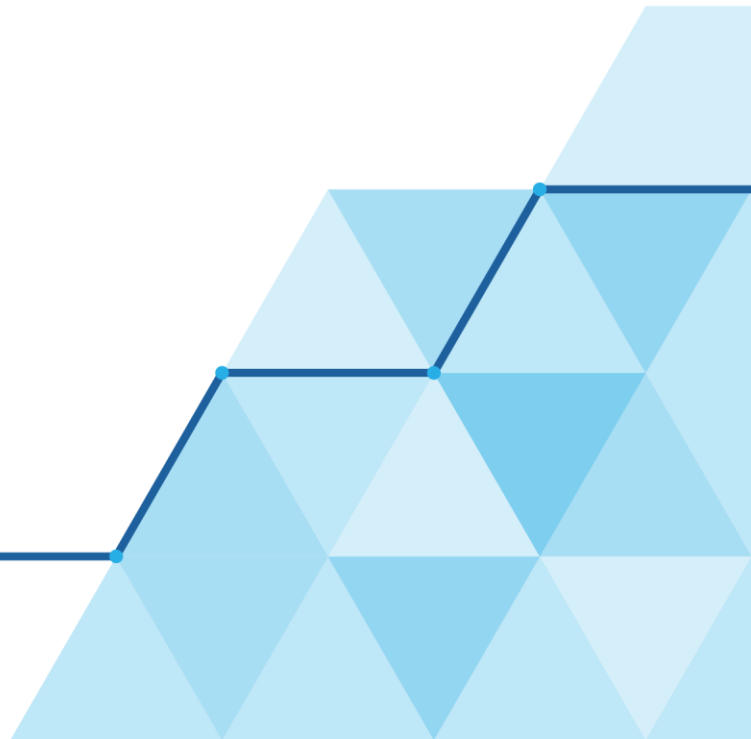
**Research to explore perceptions of the
implementation and outcomes of the
Rapid Deployment Cells Programme and
lessons learnt**

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Glossary

ACCT	Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork – the care planning process for prisoners identified as being at risk of suicide or self-harm that requires certain actions are taken to reduce the risk of suicide or self-harm.
Cat C	Category C – these prisons house prisoners who are deemed low risk of escape and threat.
Cat D	Category D – these prisons have minimal security and only house prisoners that have been risk-assessed and deemed suitable for open conditions.
HMP	His Majesty’s Prison
HMPPS	His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service – an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice that carries out custodial and community sentences given by the courts and rehabilitates individuals through education and employment.
IEP	Incentives and Earned Privileges – a system that allows Governors to incentivise good behaviour and tackle poor behaviour by allowing prisoners to earn privileges.
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
PCOSO	Persons Convicted of Sexual Offences
RDC	Rapid Deployment Cell
RDCP	Rapid Deployment Cell Programme
TOC	Theory of Change – a diagram detailing how a programme works and how planned activities should lead to intended outcomes.
VP	Vulnerable Prisoner – prisoners deemed vulnerable, including those with mental or physical ill-health needs or substance misuse issues, and those at risk of isolation or harm from others, suicide or self-harm.

1. Executive summary

1.1 Background and rationale

The Rapid Deployment Cells Programme (RDCP) was announced as part of the last Government's wider commitment to deliver 20,000 additional prison places. As referenced in the 10 Year Prison Capacity Strategy, this Government has committed that Rapid Deployment Cells (RDCs) will deliver around 1,800 of these places.

“These are modular, self-contained units with a 15-year lifespan placed in existing Category C, Category D and women’s estate prison grounds and designed for low-risk prisoners. We have delivered around 800 RDCs across 14 sites and have around 1,000 more planned. The units give prisons the opportunity to further support prisoners in their transition from closed to open conditions (e.g. independent living for those prisoners who are nearing the end of their term and/or are assessed as low risk).”

Ministry of Justice – 10-Year Prison Capacity Strategy (2024)

RDCs provide a quicker deployment route on existing prison grounds, utilising small parcels of land that are unsuitable for larger houseblocks. These single and double storey units aim to provide decent accommodation, incentivise good behaviour and prepare prisoners for resettlement.

Current plans are for RDCs to be delivered over time in four tranches, with iterative design improvements and applying learning to latter tranches. As of June 2025, 788 places have been delivered across 15 sites, with the five prisons included in this evaluation contributing 336 of these places.

This evaluation assesses how the programme in the five sampled prisons was delivered, perceptions of its outcomes, and key lessons learnt. These sites were in the first and second tranches of delivery. It draws on 96 interviews with 69 prisoners, 16 officers and 11 governor grade leaders across five prisons in England between September 2024 and February 2025, supported by observational data. Findings reflect the views of those interviewed.

1.2 Key findings

1.2.1 Purpose and identity

- **Critical relief:** RDCs provided timely capacity at a time the prison estate faced near-maximum occupancy.
- **Net capacity gain varied:** RDCs provided additional capacity at most sites included in the evaluation. However, in one prison, RDCs replaced decommissioned accommodation, improving quality but resulting in no net capacity gain.
- **Enhanced prison management:** RDCs were perceived by prison staff to reduce violence and self-harm, improving efficiency and safety.
- **Behavioural incentive:** RDCs were seen by prisoners as aspirational, functioning as de facto rewards incentivising good behaviour.
- **Variation in eligibility criteria:** At all sites risk-assessed prisoners were considered suitable for RDCs if they demonstrated good behaviour, but other criteria (e.g. offence type, sentence length, employment) varied significantly across sites at governor discretion. Some prisoners reported inconsistent criteria within their prison leading to perceptions of unfairness. As prisons are dynamic environments, eligibility criteria are kept under review according to operational circumstances and the prisoner cohort.
- **Enhanced regimes:** Later curfews and more autonomy created more progressive environments compared to main wings.

1.2.2 Prisoner and staff outcomes

- **Independent living:** Self-cook kitchens, laundry rooms and ensuite bathrooms supported practical life skill development and autonomy for prisoners assessed as safe to access them.
- **Improved release preparedness:** Prisoners described feeling more equipped to transition to community life, citing increased control and reduced institutionalisation.

- **Safer environments:** Strict entry criteria and good behaviour fostered a calm, respectful culture with minimal violence or drug use.
- **Better relationships:** Both prisoner-prisoner and prisoner-staff relationships reportedly improved, marked by trust, respect, and informal, humanising interactions.
- **Wellbeing benefits:** Prisoners and staff reported improved mental health and reduced stress in RDCs compared to main wings.
- **Design strengths and limitations:** RDCs offered dignity and accessibility, but, in some sites, concerns were raised about storage, lack of in-cell call bells, limited communal space, and outdoor exposure during poor weather.
- **Staff experience:** Officers appreciated improved CCTV and space, but some cited poor layout visibility, lack of Tannoy systems, and inadequate rest facilities for staff as design issues.

1.2.3 Implementation

- **Delivery timelines were ambitious:** Timeline assumptions for tranche 1 and tranche 2 sites were overly ambitious, having been set with limited available information due to their innovative design and delivery, and need to expedite deployment. Timeline assumptions did not factor in enough time for risks that materialised such as planning or ecological issues. These issues led to programme extensions at some sites.
- **Delivery challenges:** Some deployments ran smoothly, however some hit delivery challenges such as contractor vetting delays.
- **Security and logistics:** Prison-specific constraints like gate access procedures and operational priorities were not fully factored into timeline assumptions.

1.3 Lessons learnt

1) Clarify RDC purpose: RDCs work well as behaviour-focused incentive schemes and preparing prisoners for release. To maximise impact, HMPPS should work closely with prison governors to identify and share best practices with future sites to inform eligibility criteria for latter RDC tranches.

2) Continue to use data to inform delivery: Draw on learning from tranches 1 and 2, alongside wider programme data, to further inform the delivery of future tranches. Enhance post-occupancy reviews to also assess RDC performance in practice and feed insights into future design improvements.

3) Continue engagement with frontline staff: Continue to work with governors and prison point of contacts. Ensure the governor responsible for the site is content that sufficient prison-specific communication is in place. This should keep staff informed on RDC progress, timelines, and changes. Ongoing engagement will enable frontline staff to ask questions, provide feedback, and flag design issues, drawing on their operational expertise.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background

The Rapid Deployment Cells Programme (RDCP) is part of the wider prison capacity portfolio and will contribute around 1800 prison places. Rapid Deployment Cells (RDCs) are the swiftest deployment route to add additional capacity, but the objectives go beyond simply expanding capacity. RDCs aim to utilise innovative construction methods and a first-generation accommodation design¹ on very small parcels of land too small for other expansion. Current plans are for RDCs to be delivered in four tranches across c.30 prison sites with an iterative design process benefiting the latter tranches. As of June 2025, 788 places have been delivered across 15 sites, with the five prisons included in this evaluation contributing 336 of these places. These were within the first and second tranches of delivery.

RDCs are modular,² single and double storey, self-contained units that can be more quickly deployed within existing prison grounds³ than other expansion options, specifically across Category C, Category D, and the women's closed estate. The RDCs included in this evaluation are sited in prisons where there was available land, sufficient ancillary capacity, and, for most prisons, where planning fell under permitted development. Due to their design, RDCs are only suitable for offenders who are Category D or risk assessed Category C and aim to provide decent accommodation, incentivise good behaviour and prepare prisoners for resettlement.

For the sites evaluated in this report, RDCs were a first-generation design and had never been designed or delivered before. The design is standardised to a point but can be delivered as different configurations (double stacked, single stacked). There are standardised designs for laundry, kitchen staff room, with specifics of what the prison site requires agreed with the governor. Unlike new prisons, RDCs are delivered onto the

¹ This was the first time prison accommodation had been designed and delivered into the prison estate.

² Constructed off site and transported as ready assembled buildings.

³ The outdoor space being repurposed for RDCs had no negative impact on prisoners.

existing footprint of prison sites, which makes operational complexities for delivery and implementation much more likely. The delivery approach for RDCs has been to have a single point of contact (SPOC) prison project lead at each site who is part of the prison staff, and who leads communication and engagement with the project team on behalf of the governor.

In Category D prisons, RDCs also support prisoners' preparation for release and resettlement into the community.

Summary of the RDCP's aims and RDC design

- RDCs are prefabricated, self-contained units built off-site and installed on prison grounds.
- They are constructed with a steel frame and can be double stacked where suitable.
- Each unit has an estimated 15-year lifespan.
- They are purpose built as prison rooms, similar to cells but are self-evacuating.⁴
- They support progressive regimes by enabling independent living for prisoners nearing release.
- The accommodation is modern and decent.
- They are suitable only for Category D and risk-assessed Category C prisoners.

More information on the design features of RDCs can be found in Appendix A.

2.2 Evaluation rationale and aims

This process evaluation was conducted by analysts in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Analysis Directorate. It aimed to understand quickly how the RDCP was delivered and implemented, identify strengths and areas for improvement in the design, explore

⁴ Rooms cannot be locked so prisoners can exit themselves.

perceived benefits and unintended consequences, and capture lessons for future prison expansion.⁵

The Theory of Change (TOC) that guided this evaluation can be found in Appendix B.

Research objectives:

- 1) Explore the use of RDC space from staff and prisoner perspectives.
- 2) Understand life in RDC-expanded prisons, including causal mechanisms, risks, barriers and facilitators to outcomes.
- 3) Assess how RDCs are used in practice – what works well, what does not, and why.
- 4) Identify good practice for future tranches of the RDCP and the wider prison estate.

This report is structured around three parts:

Part I: Purpose and identity

- 1) How are RDCs used across different prison contexts?
- 2) How well do RDCs support mobilisation and population management?
- 3) How effective is the eligibility assessment process for RDC placement?

Part II: Prisoner and staff outcomes

- 4) To what extent do RDCs support independent living and preparation for release?
Which design features help?
- 5) Are there improved prisoner-prisoner and prisoner-staff relationships?

⁵ Given that RDCs are, and have been, added to existing prisons with other prison designs present, an impact evaluation was not feasible as it would not be possible to reliably quantify and isolate the specific impact that the RDCs might have on prisoner and/or prison staff outcomes within the relevant prison. Additionally, this expansion is limited in scope and scale and cannot therefore be expected to have a statistically measurable impact on prisoner or prison staff outcomes.

- 6) How do staff experience the RDC expansion?
- 7) Does the RDC design meet technical specifications, and what improvements do staff or prisoners suggest?

Part III: Implementation

- 8) How were RDCs delivered and implemented?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

This evaluation used a qualitative research approach to gain an understanding of how the RDCs were delivered, the key contextual factors influencing their implementation, any unintended consequences, and lessons for improving the programme.

The Theory of Change (Appendix B) was developed through workshops with key stakeholders in HMPPS and MoJ. It outlines the primary outcomes the RDCP sought to achieve, including improved prisoner and staff outcomes, better intra-prison relationships, and better preparation of prisoners for release.

Observations provided a view of how the RDC spaces were used in practice. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with 99 participants captured rich qualitative data on experiences and perspectives of the RDCs. Data collection took place between September 2024 and February 2025. Fieldwork at each site lasted one to two days, depending on the prison's regime and capacity, and was conducted by the Rapid Deployment Cells and Category D Expansion Evaluation team, supported by analysts from the wider Government Social Research community. It is important to note that three prisoner transcripts were excluded from the analysis due to poor quality. Therefore, the data presented in this report is based on 69 prisoners, 16 prison officers, and 11 governor grade leaders. **More information on the methodology can be found in Appendix C.**

3.2 Approach to sampling, recruitment and analysis

3.2.1. Prison selection

Of the 15 prisons in tranches 1 and 2 participating in the Rapid Deployment Cells Programme, five were selected for evaluation – one from tranche 2 and four from tranche 1 with an emphasis on early delivery sites. The sample included Category C, Category D and a women's prison.

Prisons were selected using purposive sampling, based on characteristics such as prison category, population size, geographical location, time since RDC implementation, and offender population. This method was used to ensure diversity in the sample. More information about the prison categories can be found in Appendix D.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

Prisoners and prison officers were selected for interviews either by direct invitation from the prison or through voluntary self-nomination. This helped minimise researcher bias while ensuring participant access. To ensure consistent recruitment across sites, the evaluation team briefed each prison on the recruitment process and provided relevant materials. Where this was not feasible, researchers employed opportunistic sampling during site visits.

To ensure informed consent, participants received an information sheet, privacy notice, and consent form at recruitment outlining the study's ethical considerations and data protection measures. Before each interview, researchers provided physical copies of these documents, verbally reiterated the key points, and invited questions, securing verbal consent before proceeding.

Governors were recruited through purposive sampling, with researchers contacting them directly by email to capture relevant expertise and insight into the RDCP.

Table 1. The sample of participants involved in semi-structured interviews.

Prison	Prisoner	Prison Officer	Governor grade leaders
Prison A	14	3	1
Prison B	13	2	4 ⁶
Prison C	17	4	2
Prison D	16	3	2
Prison E	12	4	2
Total	72	16	11

Note: Three prisoner transcripts were removed due to poor quality.

3.2.3 Analytical approach

The semi-structured interviews were analysed by the core evaluation team using thematic analysis. Two researchers independently coded each interview transcript, then codes were compared to identify, review, and resolve discrepancies. Observation notes were summarised, and thematic analysis was conducted. Further details of the analysis and quality assurance can be found in Appendix C.

3.3 Limitations

The main limitations of this research include:

- The research was dependent on access to participants and was limited by the capacity of prison sites to facilitate visits and the research team capacity. The approach to sampling and recruiting introduced a risk of gatekeepers pre-selecting prisoners with perceived desirable attributes and therefore introducing selection bias. This limitation was minimised by emphasising to gatekeepers that this was a

⁶ At Prison B, a larger number of governors were interviewed due to the presence of multiple individuals with direct involvement in or significant knowledge of the RDCP. Prisons often have several governors with different responsibilities, and those selected for interview at this site were identified as particularly relevant to the evaluation.

research project aiming to work with prisons to better understand ‘what works’ in the delivery of the RDCP and was not an audit or inspection.

- Prison sites were selected based on a variety of prison characteristics to increase heterogeneity of the sample, however the specific participants selected within each prison may not be representative of the wider population. The semi-structured interviews were voluntary and captured the range of experiences and views of the research participants. Their responses may not reflect the views or experiences of all involved in the RDCP and have not been triangulated to confirm factual accuracy with the documentary evidence from the RDC Programme due to scope limitations.
- A small minority of prisoners mentioned concerns about being removed from the RDCs if they voiced complaints, which could have influenced their responses. This risk was minimised by assuring participants all responses would be anonymised, and participation would not affect their sentence or relationship with staff.
- The research does not generate information on attribution of impact and causality, instead findings should develop an understanding around what has worked well and less well, what could be improved, and how the context influenced delivery (HM Treasury, 2020).

Additionally, this evaluation was designed to focus on the perspectives of prisoners, officers, and governors involved in the RDCP. Consequently, the evaluation scope did not include the RDCP team responsible for deployment and project documents, which could have provided additional insights into the construction challenges that the programme faced in implementing a first-generation design at pace. Future research on prison estate expansion should include the views of this team and relevant project documentation to enable triangulation with the experiences of prison staff and prisoners, offering valuable contextual insight, particularly in relation to implementation processes. It would also be beneficial to draw from the wider delivery partners (private sector constructors) when exploring deliverability.

4. Purpose and identity

A key purpose of the RDCP was to rapidly increase prison capacity during a period of near-maximum occupancy. As the fastest available solution, the RDCP aims to address medium-term capacity shortfalls. The RDCP aims to deliver approximately 1,800 places in total. As of June 2025, 788 places have been delivered across 15 sites, with the five prisons included in this evaluation contributing 336 of these places.

This section explores other perceived purposes of the RDCs raised by participants, such as supporting operational delivery, functioning as progressive and incentivised units, accommodating vulnerable prisoners (VP), and housing prisoners serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) or life sentences. In many of the sampled prisons, these purposes overlapped rather than operated independently. This section examines how participants viewed the RDC regime compared to the broader prison environment.

Summary

How well do RDCs support mobilisation and population management?

RDCs eased capacity pressures – Participants broadly agreed that the units were introduced at a critical time, providing fast, safe and decent accommodation amid rising prisoner numbers.

Staffing challenges remain an issue at some sites – A minority of officers reported being stretched more thinly despite, in the main, additional staffing being provided to the establishments to support the expansion.

Net capacity gain varied – RDCs provided additional capacity at most sites included in the evaluation, however in one prison RDCs replaced decommissioned accommodation. This resulted in an improvement in quality but no net increase in capacity.

Improvements in prison management – RDCs enabled safer conditions and better sentence progression, reportedly freeing up officer time.

How are RDCs used across different prison contexts?

Core eligibility criteria were consistent – All sites required prisoners to be risk-assessed and demonstrate good behaviour (e.g. enhanced Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP), no recent adjudications or failed drug tests).

Behavioural incentives – RDCs were widely used as rewards for good conduct and integral to a progressive prison regime.

Regimes promoted autonomy – Prisoners often had later curfews and more out-of-cell time. Many walked unescorted to work, managed their own routines, and handled tasks like cooking and laundry.

Beyond the core criteria, eligibility varied, in part due to differing operating environments:

- **Offence type:** Some units were vulnerable prisoner (VP) only, while others were mixed. Certain offences (e.g. arson, assault, drone use) often led to exclusion.
- **Medical needs:** Some units excluded prisoners with high medical needs (e.g. methadone users), while others admitted individuals based on specific health needs.
- **Work/education status:** Many sites required participation in work or education; some only allowed prisoners with specific job placements.
- **Sentence length** - Some units prioritised life or Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) prisoners but later adjusted to allow more turnover by including mixed sentence lengths.

How effective is the eligibility assessment process for RDC placement?

Incentive-driven behaviour – RDCs offered a visible goal that positively impacted wider prisoner behaviour. Once placed, prisoners were motivated to maintain their place.

Fairness of criteria – Most participants felt the criteria were fair, but some prisoners noted inconsistent application, leading to perceptions of unfairness. Operational circumstances influenced decisions and governors sometimes adjusted criteria when filling units became challenging, which complicated matters further.

4.1 Operational capacity

Beyond increasing capacity, a key aim of the RDCP was to support prison operations and management. Participants generally agreed that RDCs had a positive impact on managing pressures, especially as the total estate was operating between 98% to 99% capacity from 2023 and 2024 (MoJ, 2023; MoJ, 2024a).⁷ Governors and officers described RDCs as critical in providing quick, safe and decent accommodation at a time of urgent need:

“Nobody here can remember us being so absolutely full we got so close [that] we had five spaces [available]..... we would have been bust had we not had [the RDCs] in.” – Governor

However, a small number of the prison officers interviewed felt that there weren’t enough staff and reported being “*spread thinner*”. Where capacity overall increased there was an uplift in staffing at the establishment, but governors have autonomy as to how this is deployed so experiences and perceptions differed.

While RDCs provided additional capacity at most sites included in the evaluation, in one prison, RDCs replaced decommissioned accommodation. While they brought local relief, the wider system in some prisons saw little sustained reduction in overcrowding, although this was driven by broader population pressures:

“There were single cells being used as doubles and over the years that had crept up and up.... The RDCs [are] single rooms, but we didn't decrease the doubling anywhere else as a result of having the RDCs, so it [just] increased our capacity.” – Governor

⁷ Figures were derived using the usable operational capacity on the first prisoner dates at the initial and final RDC prisons sampled in this evaluation, based on weekly estate data published by the Ministry of Justice.

Several governors found that RDCs enhanced overall prison management. For example, where the RDCs were used as a wing for Prisoners Convicted of Sexual Offences (PCOSOs), it allowed a safer environment for them to progress through their sentences, as well as safer for the officers and wider prison community. Similarly, governors noted that RDCs used as enhanced wings were perceived to have fewer issues related to violence, debt, and drug misuse, thereby freeing officers to focus on higher-need areas:

“[The RDC] is one unit that in terms of order and control, we don't have to worry about that too much.... we don't really have to worry about issues on there around violence, around debt, around drug misuse.” – Governor

4.2 Incentivised progression

As well as providing urgent and additional accommodation to support population pressures, the RDCs also provided an opportunity to incentivise positive prisoner behaviour. In several prisons, RDCs were part of a progression model, where prisoners moved from induction to enhanced wings and ultimately to RDCs. Their superior accommodation made them an aspirational goal.

“Everyone's trying to get up here, but they need to understand it is a progression wing, you have to prove yourself before you come up here.” - Prisoner

Participants suggested that the RDCs instilled a sense of hope among the wider prison population, acting as an aspirational goal for those seeking better conditions. For example, governors identified better behaviour from the wider prison population and individuals who were aspiring to move to the RDCs.

“Prisoners have more hope. People want to come here now. People want to work hard to get here, people who didn't care before.” - Prisoner

Once in the RDCs, many prisoners made efforts to stay, though some reported stress due to the threat of removal being used as a disciplinary tool.

Overall, while the RDCP was not initially designed as an incentive programme, it effectively functioned as one by encouraging and rewarding good behaviour leading to

additional benefits of improved behaviour. In addition, the RDCP instilled a sense of hope and aspiration among the broader prison population, with prisoners striving to meet the criteria to move to the RDCs.

4.3 Eligibility for the RDC programme

The eligibility criteria varied between prisons, partly due to the three establishment types⁸ included in the evaluation having differing operating environments and cohorts. Some core requirements were consistent, such as:

- Prisoners had to be risk-assessed.
- Prisoners had to demonstrate consistent good behaviour, typically by being on enhanced Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) status.⁹

“Because of the buildings, the cells and the whole locking mechanisms on the doors, we realised that... [the RDCs are not] there to support violent, disruptive prisoners that we all have within the prison system.” – Governor

Aside from these two shared criteria, there was no standard criteria for the RDCP. The eligibility criteria differed between prisons as they were determined by each prison based on their perceived needs. These were decided by governors, with varying levels of input from senior staff and officers. Variations included:

1. Offence type: Some prisons limited RDCs to VPs (e.g. PCOSOs) for safety reasons,¹⁰ others admitted a mix. Certain offences (e.g. arson, assault) often led to exclusion.

⁸ The sample included Category C, Category D and a women's prison.

⁹ An enhanced IEP level is for “those prisoners who exceed standard level by abiding by the behaviour principles and demonstrating the required types of behaviour to a consistently high standard, including good attendance and attitude at activities and education/work and interventions” (Ministry of Justice, 2024b, p.20).

¹⁰ Vulnerable prisoners are prisoners who are at risk from others in the prison. *This includes but is not limited to PCOSOs.* PCOSOs can be offered Rule 45 status, which enables the segregation of individuals deemed vulnerable from the mainstream population. Consequently, the VP populations often comprise a mix of those with a sexual conviction and those with non-sexual convictions (Nicholls and Webster, 2018)

2. Medical needs: Some sites excluded prisoners on daily medication (e.g. methadone) or with mobility needs, while others prioritised placement based on proximity to the wider prison's healthcare unit.

3. Work and education requirements: Participation in work or education was often a requirement. In mixed units, mainstream prisoners had to accept specific roles (e.g. working with VPs) to gain access.

4. Sentence length: Some RDCs were initially used for life or IPP prisoners but later adapted to include shorter sentences to ensure turnover.

4.3.1 Perceptions of the eligibility criteria

Most participants felt the criteria were fair:

"I think it was fair, you look at the criteria, it was what the prison wanted to see in people, I don't think it was overly critical." – Prisoner

However, some prisoners saw inconsistencies in how the criteria were applied, which undermined confidence in the process:

"How they choose people is not fair... They said I couldn't have a negative IEP, but they moved someone else [to the RDCs] who had a negative." – Prisoner

Several governors mentioned the challenge of creating criteria that ensured a stable inflow of prisoners while maintaining the principles of safety and progression. Some relaxed the criteria when they struggled to fill the RDCs, with one governor explaining that they had initially *"narrowed the field a little bit too much"*.

In summary, core eligibility criteria ensured safety and stability. However, perceived variation within prisons in some cases led to perceptions of unfairness. Criteria were kept under review due to the dynamic environment, and governors sometimes adjusted criteria in response to operational issues.

4.4 Life on the RDCs

This section outlines the RDC regime and how it differs from the wider prison estate. Although RDC prisoners followed similar routines, the units operated with greater autonomy. Key differences include:

- **Roll checks:** Prisoners stand at doors rather than being checked inside cells
- **Curfews:** Later curfews
- **Time out of cell:** More free time and fewer restrictions

A typical day:

- **Morning:** Prisoners wake themselves and walk unescorted to work
- **Work:** Jobs include workshops, gardening, admin, or RDC-specific roles
- **Lunch:** Return to RDC for lunch; cook for themselves or use the canteen
- **Evening:** Free time for socialising, chores, and personal activities

While practices varied by site, a key theme was that the unit functions more autonomously than the main wings. One officer described the unit as “*self-contained*” explaining that even if the rest of the prison were empty, the RDCs would still function independently.

Overall, while the RDC regime mirrors the main prison in structure, it offers more personal autonomy within a secure setting, responsibility, and self-management, supporting release and making it distinct and desirable for many prisoners.

5. Prisoner and staff outcomes

The findings suggest that participants have observed several key outcomes from the RDCs, such as increased prisoner independence, improved readiness for release, enhanced wellbeing and safety for both prisoners and staff, and strengthened intra-prison relationships.

This section will also explore how the RDCs addressed the needs of both officers and prisoners, focussing on unit design and suggested improvements. Further information on design can be found in Appendix A.

Summary

**To what extent do RDCs support independent living and preparation for release?
Which design features help?**

RDCs were widely seen to support independent living by giving prisoners autonomy over daily routines, such as waking, cleaning, cooking, and managing personal schedules. Facilities enabled prisoners to develop key life skills not typically fostered on main wings (e.g. cooking, cleaning).

At some sites, disabled prisoners reported increased independence, citing accessible in-cell facilities.

Participants widely agreed that RDCs improve preparedness for release, as the environment and design of the RDCs resembles life post-release, fostering time management, initiative, and decision-making.

Mental wellbeing improved for many prisoners, who felt better equipped to transition into society. The open design and quieter atmosphere (no fighting, shouting, or unlocking cells) help foster a peaceful and positive culture.

Overall, RDCs were viewed as an effective bridge between custody and community, supporting the development of independent living skills crucial for release.

Are there improved prisoner-prisoner and prisoner-staff relationships?

Prisoner-prisoner relationships – These relationships were characterised by greater tolerance, reduced conflict, and mutual respect.

- **A strong sense of community developed**, supported by communal events (e.g. shared meals) and peer cooperation.
- **Absence of bullying, violence, and theft** was consistently reported, with many prisoners feeling comfortable leaving doors open and sharing communal spaces. This contributed to feelings of safety among prisoners.

Prisoner-staff relationships – Participants widely viewed this dynamic as positive, with enhanced mutual respect and more personable, informal interactions.

- **Reduced prisoner misconduct** allowed officers more time to focus on relationship-building.
- **Prisoners noted increased trust from staff**, with less visible surveillance and more autonomy over personal spaces, encouraging responsibility.

How do staff experience the RDC expansion?

Changes in officer wellbeing – Some participants felt that the RDC's peaceful environment had a reflective effect, making the overall atmosphere much easier to work in, reducing officer stress.

Improved officer safety – RDCs were widely viewed as safer working environments compared to the main wings. The strict eligibility criteria and positive prisoner behaviour were key factors in the overall sense of safety.

Does the RDC design meet requirements, and what improvements do staff or prisoners suggest?

Meeting prisoner needs – Participants broadly agreed that the RDC design met prisoner needs, particularly through accessible cells, modern communal facilities, and green, well-lit outdoor spaces.

- **Areas for potential improvement:** some participants reported slippery gantry walkways, lack of in-cell call bells, limited in-cell storage, poor accessibility at one site (e.g. upstairs association rooms without lifts), small communal areas, and the absence of outdoor canopies.

Meeting staff needs – Officers and governors widely agreed that the RDC design met staff needs, offering improved space and room capacity for meetings, and a more effective CCTV system.

- **Areas for potential improvement:** some officers reported poor layout visibility, absence of a Tannoy system and inconsistent staff facilities (e.g. no rest areas, poor lighting, toilets inside offices, inhibiting privacy).

5.1 Independent living

RDCs were widely regarded as an effective means of enabling prisoners to practice independent living. This was largely attributed to their open design, self-directed regime, and accessible facilities.

“The [RDC] units give real control at a proper level, which gives a prisoner a feeling of autonomy, a feeling of self-esteem, a feeling of worth, a feeling of ‘I have some control’ - that’s really important.” – Governor

Prisoners were responsible for managing their own routines, including waking up, cleaning, doing laundry, and cooking. This promoted the development of life skills such as time management, ownership, and personal responsibility, which are harder to cultivate on the main wings.

“You are responsible for all your own stuff, the majority of others [in the main wings] don’t have their own bathrooms [and] they have unit cleaners. But here it’s your responsibility.” – Prisoner

Accessible and well-equipped kitchens enabled prisoners to cook for themselves and teach others, helping build confidence and independence.

“For [prisoners] who can’t cook at all, they are learning through other prisoners, picking up skills here that you could not pick up so much on the [main] wings.” – Prisoner

Additional autonomy came from ensuite bathrooms and control over in-cell air conditioning and heating, contributing to a sense of privacy and dignity.

“You have that space that’s yours, not having to shower or undress with others is a big deal.” – Prisoner

Prisoners with disabilities generally viewed the RDCs positively, as they supported greater independence. This was largely due to improved mobility within the unit without requiring officer intervention, as well as access to accessible showers and toilets, which allowed them to use facilities at their own pace and generally on their own schedule.

“Having my own shower during locked hours [has helped with independent living], I used to have to rush to get to the disabled friendly shower.” – Prisoner

“For me it was nice because it helped me establish a bit more with my disability. Here in the RDCs, [I am] more independent, it’s given me the strength to establish how I will cook by myself as a disabled person, carry things for myself.” – Prisoner

Overall, RDCs were widely praised for fostering independent living through a self-managed regime, modern facilities, and privacy-enhancing features.

5.2 Preparedness for release

In enabling prisoners to practice independent living, participants widely felt that prisoners were better prepared for release.¹¹ Participants felt the break from the rigid routines of the main wings, combined with increased autonomy, would support a smoother transition into society once released.

¹¹ Release refers to both release from custody and release into the open estate (recategorization).

Prisoners practised decision-making, self-reliance, and time management, making them feel less institutionalised and more ready for independent life post-release. Officers noted that RDC routines resembled typical workdays, and governors observed that the skills gained could be presented at parole hearings.

“After coming into the RDC there is a lot more autonomy which has helped [me] prepare for leaving...far less reliant on the system.” – Prisoner

Some officers made direct comparisons between the RDCs and approved premises accommodation,¹² and prisoners agreed that the improved living standards and more realistic home-like design helped them adjust. Though additional support (e.g. digital literacy) was still needed, the psychological and practical preparation RDCs offered was widely appreciated.

“If you were on the [main wings] and went straight home.... you would struggle. I didn’t realise the mental effects [the RDCs] would have on me until I came here.” – Prisoner

Governors highlighted that exposure to diverse peer groups within RDCs also helped build patience and social tolerance, aiding reintegration.

“We mix PCOSOs and Cat Cs, which is risky... but that hasn’t caused any issues, to me that is really important. For people to live with other people in the community...from various backgrounds... without fighting.” – Governor

“You’re not going to always like your next-door neighbour, but this is how you’re going to have to work with someone as if you were in the community.” – Governor

5.3 Improved wellbeing

The relaxed, open, and quieter environment of the RDCs was widely credited with improving prisoners’ mental wellbeing.

¹² Approved premises offer an enhanced level of public protection in the community and are used primarily for high and very high risk of serious harm individuals released on licence from custody. This is typically following serious violence and/or sexual offences.

“On the RDC...I am in a happier place physically and mentally.” – Prisoner

Participants described a calmer culture, supported by improved behaviour and lower exposure to stressors like shouting, violence, or drug use. Both officers and prisoners observed that prisoners were able to ‘be themselves’ in the RDCs, no longer having to adopt a ‘survivalist’ mentality. As one officer noted, prisoners *“don’t have to keep up a mask or a façade”* in the RDCs.

The reduced noise levels, enhanced design features (e.g. bar-free windows, private spaces), and ability to access fresh air contributed to the calmer environment.

“Here is a place where they can relax, there’s no banging or loud noises. It’s quite calm, I think a lot of prisoners appreciate it.” – Officer

Another key factor identified in enhancing prisoner wellbeing was increased access to meaningful activities, including gardening, volunteering, craft and communal clubs, cooking, and seasonal events. Similarly, an officer emphasised that these activities were not just beneficial for the prisoners but also enriched the experiences of officers working on the unit, fostering a more positive and engaging environment.

“There’s a better sense of community, I think the staff and prisoner relationships are really strong on there, [they] work together as a community.” – Governor

“Prisoners seem happier which rubs off on officers who are less stressed as a result.” – Officer

5.4 Improved relationships

5.4.1 Prisoner-staff relationships

Relationships between prisoners and staff were widely perceived as improved. Participants cited a shift towards mutual respect, informal language, and increased trust.

“Staff call [us] by first names only, [it is] very humanising, gives [us] a touch of normality.” – Prisoner

“It's really nice to see the difference in some of the prisoners' attitude. They see a different side to staff and the staff see a different side to them.” – Governor

Many participants acknowledged that due to the self-sufficient nature of the RDC unit, officers have more capacity to develop stronger relationships with prisoners. In comparison to the main wings, participants recognised that the improved behaviour of prisoners on the RDCs meant that officers did not have to deal with as much ‘grief’ or ‘negative attitudes’ from prisoners.

“[Officers] arguably got the better cohort of prisoners as well. They are better behaved. So, they're probably encountering less conflict [and] less problems.” – Governor

This reduction in conflict gave officers opportunities to develop personable relationships with prisoners. Several governors and officers recognised that the additional time officers have has allowed them to contribute more effectively to prisoners' rehabilitation and progression. For example, one officer noted that with the extra time they had, they were able to hold arts and crafts workshops with prisoners.

Research participants widely viewed prisoner-staff relationships on the RDCs to be built on trust. Officers and governors emphasised the significant amount of trust they place in prisoners to follow the rules and remain in their cells during curfew.

“Some people might not like it and might think that we need to be very disciplinarian, but I think you need to put some trust in the [prisoners] and let them prove themselves.” – Governor

Some prisoners did express concerns over perceived inconsistency in rule enforcement, which occasionally strained relationships. Some prisoners did not trust officers to investigate issues within the site impartially due to perceived favouritism and feared being removed from the RDCs for voicing complaints.

5.4.2 Prisoner-prisoner relationships

Participants described prisoner relationships as more respectful, tolerant, and cooperative than on the main wings.

“On other wings, there is a hierarchy, people always want to ‘be something’, but on this wing, people respect you, no matter [what].” – Prisoner

The absence of violence, bullying, and theft fostered a sense of safety and trust. This contrasts with the main wings where these things were reported to be common. Officers emphasised that prisoners are encouraged to resolve minor disputes independently, *“as they would if they weren’t in prison”*. As such, there is a shared understanding and practice of de-escalation and constructive conflict resolution.

“[We work] around strengthening that community ethos, so conflict resolution.... if someone’s displaying a behaviour [and] you’re not quite sure of them, work with them, don’t work against them, learn to understand.” – Governor

Prisoners highlighted fewer instances of theft compared to the main wings, with some stating that they leave their *“door[s] open all day”* without fear. Officers agreed that prisoners are more trusting of each other regarding crimes and exhibit greater tolerance, particularly where vulnerable prisoners (VPs) and main prisoners are mixed.

“Don’t have to worry about leaving your door open [and] someone going and stealing. [We’ve] all got food in the fridge, [and] nobody touches it.” – Prisoner

Communal activities and shared responsibilities supported community building. Some officers emphasised that the community spirit is essential to the functioning of the RDCs - prisoners are required to sign an agreement before moving in, committing to live as part of a community. During observations, researchers noted this sense of community, describing interactions between prisoners on the RDCs as friendly and calm. Prisoners were observed laughing, cooking together, and offering to help one another.

“Communities develop in the real world, that’s what’s happened here. It’s formed organically.” – Prisoner

However, a minority noted that the RDC layout could be socially isolating, especially in winter. For example, unlike the main wings with their open landings, individual pods of the RDCs makes it easier for prisoners to stay in their rooms. Some prisoners reported the formation of cliques, which created social divides and tensions. Others contended that the

RDCs encouraged a sense of self-entitlement among prisoners, creating an environment of marginalisation for prisoners not deemed "[RDC]-worthy". Despite these tensions, the overall impact on prisoner relationships was seen as positive.

5.5 Improved safety

The RDCs were widely regarded as safer environments than the main wings. Prisoners were selected based on good behaviour, and all participants attributed the calm atmosphere to this eligibility requirement.

"[I feel] safe because you have to be enhanced to be on here. You have to earn your place, and you don't want to lose your place. So, you don't have the fear of harm like on [the main wing]." – Prisoner

While some officers acknowledged that it could be "*unnerving*" knowing prisoners could come out of their rooms at any time, the positive behaviour of the prisoners and the presence of CCTV contributed to a sense of safety and security.

5.6 Meeting prisoner and officer needs

5.6.1 Meeting Prisoner needs

The RDCs were generally viewed as well designed to meet prisoner needs. Participants cited benefits in:

- **External layout:** Easy and convenient access to facilities.
- **Cells/rooms:** Spacious, well-lit, accessible, with ensuite and climate control.
- **Communal areas:** Kitchens, association rooms, and wider facilities were appreciated.
- **Outdoor spaces:** Green and pleasant.

However, participants did raise several concerns around the RDC design and how it may not fully meet prisoner needs:

- 1. Layout accessibility:** At one prison with double-stacked RDCs, the association room, equipped with a pool table and a TV, is located upstairs. The absence of ramps or lifts means that wheelchair users cannot access this room.
- 2. Gantry walkways:** At several prisons with double-stacked RDCs, gantries can become icy and slippery during rain or cold weather, increasing the risk of falls and injuries.
- 3. In-cell call bells:** Standard RDC cells lacked in-cell call bells or alarms which made some officers and prisoners feel uneasy. They felt that if a prisoner required urgent help or attention and could not access an officer, there would be limited ways to alert staff. However, all cells are self-evacuating therefore in an emergency a prisoner could leave the room. For accessible cells, a prisoner noted that while there is an emergency call button in the bathroom, there are no alarms next to the bed. This poses a potential safety risk in the unlikely event any prisoner is incapacitated.
- 4. Cell storage space:** At several sites, participants emphasised inadequate storage space for clothing within the cells.
- 5. Locks:** One governor explained that the RDC locks at their prison are not standard prison locks. Consequently, if they break, replacing them is very difficult and time-consuming, meaning that prisoners would not be able to lock their cell doors.
- 6. Size:** Several participants pointed out that communal spaces are too small to accommodate all prisoners comfortably, especially when compared to similar spaces in the main wings. This limited size restricts the number of communal activities prisoners can engage in, with several prisoners noting that they often return to their rooms to eat if it is too cold to sit outside and there is no space in the kitchen or association room.
- 7. Insufficient cover:** Since the unit itself is not enclosed or roofed, prisoners at most prisons need to navigate between cells, facility rooms and the rest of the wing outdoors. This meant that prisoners often got wet when queuing for food and returning to their cells.

5.6.2 Meeting officer needs

The RDCs were generally viewed as well designed to meet staff needs. Officers and governors cited benefits in:

- Larger, cleaner staff offices
- More available rooms for private meetings or activities
- High-quality CCTV

However, they also noted areas for improvement:

1. Visibility: Despite the positive feedback about CCTV, some officers felt that overall visibility in the unit was poor due to the layout of the rooms and the openness of the unit. Several officers across sites proposed relocating the office to a corner for better visibility of prisoners.

2. Tannoy: At several prisons, officers noted the absence of a central RDC Tannoy or intercom system. This lack of a central communication system meant officers spent more time locating prisoners due to the unit's openness.

3. Staff facilities: At one prison, officers reported the absence of a dedicated resting area for staff. Several governors also highlighted concerns regarding the placement of staff toilets within the RDCs. They noted that the toilets were located inside the office, adjacent to the kitchenette, which they felt was inappropriate.

Overall, while participants felt design improvements were needed, RDCs were widely seen as successful in supporting both prisoner and staff needs. The RDC design is continuously reviewed and improved on, taking into account feedback as well as space and value limits.

6. Implementation

The RDCs included in the evaluation were delivered and implemented between 2022 and 2024. Innovative construction methods were used and RDCs were constructed off-site and deployed onto prison grounds. This method of prison expansion had not previously been undertaken. RDCs were developed at pace to help respond to serious capacity issues in the prison estate. Delivery timelines were driven by a wider Ministerial ambition to create new prison places at significant speed, using an innovative approach to design, build, and install the units. Given the focus on delivering at maximum pace, early planning for tranche 1 and 2 sites was based on initial high-level assessments, carried out ahead of a fuller understanding of site conditions. As a result, when the first-generation design was installed in live prison environments, unexpected challenges arose that needed quick and creative solutions to maintain delivery speed. RDCs faced several unique obstacles to delivery - as with other complex and innovative infrastructure projects, having to adapt to emerging challenges is to be expected. This section explores participants' experiences of the implementation process.

Summary

How were the RDCs delivered?

Some deployments faced common snagging issues and logistical problems –

While deployments at some sites sampled ran smoothly, others reported delivery issues, common snagging problems, and logistical planning challenges, which are common in construction projects.

Some delivery timelines were not achieved – In some cases, timelines were missed for tranche 1 and tranche 2 sites leading to programme extensions.

Prison staff reported three key factors that caused delays – Contractor vetting, gate access issues, and issues managing risks that materialised during delivery (for example, the time taken to achieve required water quality level). The prison environment added complexity, as these can be common issues in prison settings due to the secure nature of the environment.

6.1 Deployment process

While some of the RDC sites were delivered smoothly, some deployments were delayed and disrupted as deployment of the RDCs had never been done before.

Reported issues included delivery issues, common snagging problems, and logistical planning failures. In cases where deployment proceeded according to plan, governors and officers attributed success to a straightforward installation process and highlighted strong communication among stakeholders:

“It was really quite effective [and] efficient. And I think the delivery of it, the installation, was really good.” – Governor

A challenge on some sites after units were occupied was with water ingress. Where this happened, these units were repaired with minimal disruption to the prisons. Other issues encountered with power supplies impacted the ability to go-live.

Overall, the challenges encountered during the RDC deployment process highlight the inherent complexities and unexpected issues that can arise in first generation design-innovative construction projects, especially those situated within a prison environment. These challenges contributed to issues with delivery.

6.2 Delivery process

In some cases, delivery timelines and assumptions were not always achieved and resulted in the RDCs being occupied several weeks later than initially planned. Based on their experience of the RDCP, participants identified three key factors that contributed to these delivery issues:

1. Clearance and gate access – Participants reported that coordinating contractor and material entry into the prison led to delays, including slow vetting processes, unauthorized building items, and prison operations taking priority (e.g. healthcare and food delivery before letting contractors in). These common issues specific to the prison environment hindered contractor access, especially at Category C prisons.

“The main contractors [need] to have an understanding before they even start.... there will be times when you're not going to get in and out because if an ambulance needs to get in, that's going to be more important than construction materials.” – Governor

2. Stakeholder communication – While several participants described stakeholder interactions as helpful and noted regular updates and meetings, a few governors reported that communication could have been more frequent and streamlined to enable a smoother delivery process. This made it difficult at times for governors to manage the delivery process within their prison.

“So there seemed to be some delays... Sometimes we got answers and other times it was just ‘oh, well, we're just waiting for more surveys.’” – Governor

3. Risks materialising, such as water quality testing, delayed the opening of some RDC units.

Delivery timelines were set with early assumptions due to the need to expedite delivery. As a result, not enough time was always factored in for some risks that materialised, such as planning, ecological issues and at two sites, water quality issues. This contributed to programme extensions at some sites:

“They did tests on the water...and whatever they tested for...was present, so they had to flush the systems and keep flushing it and retesting and flushing and retesting until that level was 0...and that's why there was a big delay in it.” – Governor

These delays highlight the multifaceted challenges of delivering large-scale, first-generation design-innovative projects in prison settings. Addressing issues such as gate

access, communication and water testing is critical for improving efficiency and timeliness in future RDC deployments.

7. Conclusion and lessons learnt

7.1 Conclusion

This evaluation explored perceptions of the delivery and effectiveness of the Rapid Deployment Cells (RDC) Programme among prisoners, prison officers and governors.

What did the RDC delivery look like and were there any challenges?

The RDCs were first-generation accommodation delivered at pace and as such faced a range of challenges. Some deployments in the sampled sites experienced delays, delivery issues, and logistical issues. While some sites benefited from strong communication and smooth installation, some were hindered by unforeseen complications within the prison environment. However, delivery timeline assumptions were overly ambitious. Key factors identified restricted gate access and vetting, challenges with stakeholder communication, and managing risks that materialised during delivery.

What is the purpose and identity of the RDCP?

The RDCP was introduced as a rapid response to critical prison capacity issues, providing urgently needed additional places. The programme delivered 336 new prison places across the five prisons sampled in this evaluation, alleviating pressure during a time of severe capacity pressures. As well as providing urgent and additional accommodation to support population pressures, the RDCs have become a key tool within the evaluated prisons, functioning as reward-based environments that promote and maintain good prisoner behaviour. Many prisoners reportedly viewed placement in the RDCs as an aspirational goal, and felt behaviour and attitudes were much better in RDCs compared to the main wings.

The RDCs also supported prison management by enabling more efficient use of resources and offering safer environments for PCOSOs and other vulnerable prisoner cohorts. Their use has, in some cases, been perceived to reduce violence, self-harm, and drug misuse,

freeing up staff time to focus on other areas of the prison. However, despite these benefits, some of the officers interviewed felt they were being stretched more thinly. In one instance, the RDCs replaced decommissioned accommodation which improved quality but resulted in no net capacity gain due to a change in wider expansion plans at the site.

RDC eligibility across the prison sites shared key criteria, low-risk status and consistently good behaviour, but additional requirements varied across sites, in part due to there being three different establishment types within the evaluation sample. The cohorts of prisons and operational environments therefore were significantly different, and governors considered operational factors when determining suitability for the RDCs. This variability, combined with perceived inconsistent application of criteria, led to perceptions of unfairness among a minority of prisoners. Despite these concerns, most participants acknowledged the general fairness and intended purpose of the eligibility standards. Life on the RDCs is marked by increased autonomy and a more relaxed regime. Prisoners are trusted to manage their own routines, walk unescorted to work, and participate more independently in daily activities such as cooking and cleaning.

What are the perceived prisoner and staff outcomes of the RDCP?

The design of the RDCs was largely successful in meeting both prisoner and officer needs. Prisoners appreciated the modern, spacious, and well-equipped cells, communal spaces, and outdoor areas, which were seen as significant improvements compared to the main wings. However, some participants identified areas for improvement, including in-cell safety alarms, storage, and outdoor cover. Officers reported the RDCs offered more room availability, and improved CCTV coverage, contributing to safer and more efficient operations. Nonetheless, some officers raised concerns around poor internal visibility, the absence of a Tannoy system, and poor staff facilities, such as inadequate rest areas and poorly placed toilets, highlighting the need for refinements to better support staff and operational needs.

The RDCs were widely regarded as effective in enabling prisoners to practice independent living, largely due to the self-managed regime, and accessible facilities. This was perceived to increase autonomy, accountability, decision-making and initiative, mirroring real-world living. Many felt this autonomy promoted independence, reduced feelings of

institutionalisation and enabled prisoners to learn essential life skills, better preparing them for release.

Mental well-being was also reportedly improved in the RDCs due to a calmer, quieter, and more respectful environment, with reduced exposure to noise, violence, and stress.

Features like natural light, unbarred windows, and the ability to step outside contributed to a more positive mental state. These conditions also benefitted staff, who experienced a less stressful work environment and stronger, more positive interactions with prisoners.

Relationships between prisoners and staff in the RDCs were widely perceived as more positive, respectful, and humanising compared to the main wings. Participants highlighted an informal and approachable dynamic, characterised by mutual respect, the use of first names, and a reduction in conflict. While most accounts were positive, a few prisoners expressed concerns about the potential fragility of these relationships due to perceived favouritism and the threat of being returned to the main wings.

Prisoner-prisoner relationships were described as noticeably more respectful, tolerant, and community-oriented within the RDCs. The absence of violence and theft, combined with mutual support and constructive conflict resolution contributed to a strong sense of trust and communal living. Communal events and shared goals further fostered this atmosphere, although some prisoners noted that the physical design of the units could be socially isolating.

Participants overwhelmingly viewed the RDCs as safer environments than the main wings. This sense of safety was attributed to the stringent eligibility criteria, consistent good behaviour, and the trust-based culture among prisoners and staff.

7.2 Lessons learnt

1) Clarify RDC purpose:

This evaluation found that RDCs are operating effectively as incentive-based programmes within the sampled prisons, promoting positive behaviour among prisoners. Such schemes are most effective when grounded in clear and consistent principles. While achieving standardisation is challenging in an operational environment, HMPPS should work closely with prison governors to identify and share best practices to inform eligibility criteria for latter RDC tranches. By sharing these insights, it will assist in ensuring the programme's benefits are fully realised across all establishments.

2) Utilise learning and data to inform future delivery:

Leverage benchmark data from tranches 1 and 2 to further inform the delivery of ongoing and future tranches, drawing on lessons learnt from past challenges and enhancing the iterative design that the RDCP has already undertaken. Conduct a thorough review of available data, including this evaluation and wider programme data, to test assumptions, refine timelines, and enhance delivery planning. Ensure that post-occupancy reviews are carried out at existing RDC sites and assess how RDCs are operating in practice as well as how the design is functioning. Use these insights to implement design improvements in future iterations as well as considerations for RDC use going forward.

3) Continue engagement with frontline staff:

Work collaboratively with the governor and the designated prison point of contact to implement a tailored communication strategy that effectively engages wider prison staff and officers around the RDCs. Further ongoing engagement will ensure frontline staff have regular opportunities to ask questions, provide feedback and better understand progress and timescales, including the progress of increasing the staffing levels for the additional capacity. A prison-specific approach will also allow frontline staff, who bring specialist knowledge of the prison environment and a deep understanding of both prisoner and staff needs, to identify and flag potential RDC design issues.

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Appendix A

Design

This section outlines the design features of RDCs at each of the studied prison sites, focusing on external layout, cells, communal spaces, and outdoor areas. The findings will highlight key similarities, particularly in cell design, as well as notable distinctions, such as layout and outdoor space. These observations are based on data collected between September 2024 and February 2025, focusing on the five prisons sampled from tranches 1 and 2 of the RDCP. They do not account for any design changes that may have occurred since the implementation of these RDCs.

What do the RDCs look like?

During observations, researchers examined the RDCs' layout, cells, and key facilities including kitchens, laundries, and association rooms. While there were some notable differences, the units at the different prisons exhibited broad similarities in their appearance.

- **External Layout:** At all prisons, RDCs were connected to each other in terraced rows. The layout, however, varied. At some prisons, the RDCs were arranged in rows and blocks with pathways in the middle. At others, there were two separate units on the RDC wing, each with distinct appearances. Finally, at some prisons, the RDCs were set out in a rectangular layout and were double stacked.



HMP Norwich - Shaun Whitmore, [BBC](#), March 2023

- **Cell:** All cells had a private ensuite, with a shower and a toilet, a desk, chair and bed. At several prison sites, researchers noted TVs and air conditioning, which had heating and cooling features. Overall, cells were consistently described as modern by researchers and prisoners.



HMP Norwich - Shaun Whitmore, [BBC](#), March 2023

- **Communal Areas:** Researchers observed association rooms, laundries, and kitchens at all prison sites. Association rooms featured TVs, chairs, tables, and some had dartboards, pool tables, and fish tanks. Laundry areas included washing machines and dryers. All kitchen spaces were equipped with cookers, hobs, extractor fans and designated halal areas, with some equipped with boiling hot water taps, toasters, and air fryers. These spaces were consistently described as modern and clean.
- **Outdoor Space:** Green spaces varied across prison sites due to the size of available land, but most featured flower beds and plants. One prison site had road signs with different street names directing to various parts of the RDCs, and canopies covering the walkways.
- **Additional Facilities:** At one prison site, researchers observed a storage space repurposed as a gym, equipped with cycling and rowing machines alongside storage utilities like mops and cleaning equipment. Another site featured a room with four phones.

Prison involvement in design process

Governors and senior prison staff engaged with a diverse range of stakeholders during the design of the RDCs, including the MoJ, designers, builders, installers, trade unions, healthcare colleagues and local councils. The RDC scope was signed off by the governing governor at each establishment and the communication with the RDCP was primarily channelled through the single point of contact. However, the extent of governor and officer involvement in the design process of the RDCs varied. Some participants reported having significant involvement and engagement with these stakeholders, whilst others had no input at all. This disparity is due to the application of governor autonomy and will have also been linked to the size of the RDC development at each of the sites within the sample.

Several participants described stakeholder interactions as helpful, respectful, and personable, highlighting the effective teamwork that characterised their experience with the programme. Several governors noted the occurrence of weekly meetings, updates, and regular feedback sessions throughout the RDCP delivery. For these participants, the open-door policy they had with stakeholders facilitated positive communication, allowing them to stay well-informed about any changes or necessary information. For many participants, this positive communication fostered a sense of involvement in the RDC design process.

Many governors shared their involvement on the design of the RDCs within their prisons. This included successfully advocating for extra amenities to enhance security and functionality, for example, additional CCTV cameras, general alarms, canopies and improved lighting. Additionally, governors explained how they had input on the layout and placement of the RDCs. For these participants, the RDCP board were very open to suggestions from governors and actively encouraged them. A few governors explained that they were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the original RDC designs and highlight fundamental issues, such as unsafe locks, lack of visibility, and cell designs. The importance of this input was emphasised in several governor interviews, with the consensus being that their contributions led to a better design and layout than the original proposals, with some suggesting that this involvement was pivotal to the success of the RDCs.

“I would say we pretty much got 98% of what we asked for and we were involved.” –

Governor

On the other hand, whilst senior operational stakeholders like governors were consulted, most junior staff were not – neither by their governors or by the design and delivery team. Several officers reported having minimal involvement, if any, in the design and delivery stages of the RDCs. While acknowledging that governors had input, several officers argued that they possess valuable operational knowledge gained from their daily work on the wings, which could have been beneficial in the design process.

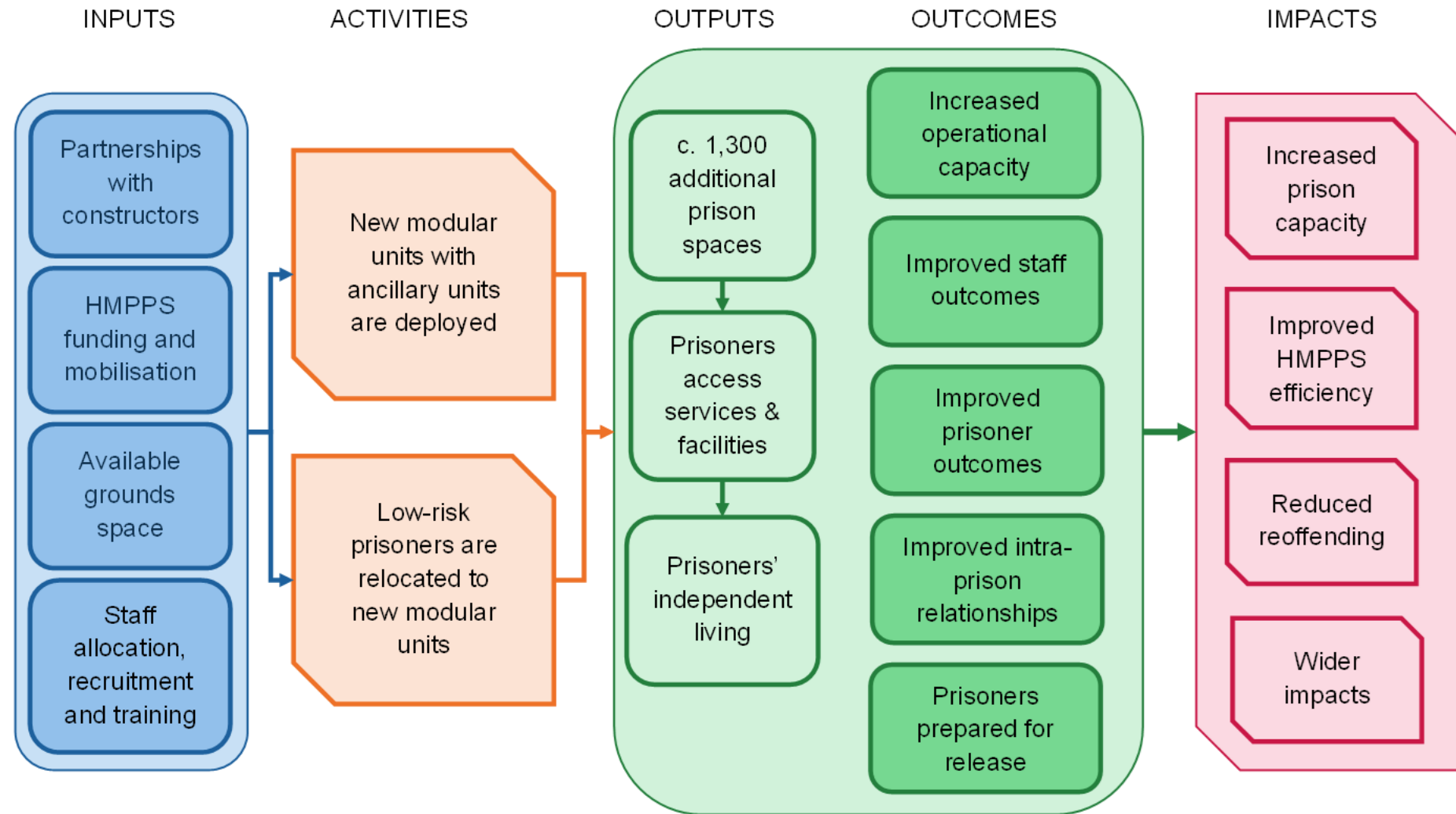
“[There were a] few oversights that [others] did not think about because [project leads] didn’t consult prison staff.” – Officer

Overall, governors overwhelmingly agreed that they had a high level of involvement in the RDC design process, with many describing these interactions as positive and noting that their feedback was welcomed by the delivery teams. However, this consensus did not extend to officers, who reported minimal involvement. Officer participation could have enhanced the overall process as their firsthand experience and insights would have been valuable in shaping the RDC design.

Appendix B

Theory of Change

Theory of Change diagram



Appendix C

Methodology and ethical Considerations

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture in-depth insights into the diverse ways participants experience the RDCP. Interview topic guides were designed to cover key areas including implementation, observed behavioural changes, prisoner and staff relationships and needs, and overall perspectives.

A total of 88 semi-structured interviews with prisoners and prison officers were conducted onsite across the five prisons between October and December 2024. Interviews took place in a private room within the RDCs and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Researchers worked in pairs, with one facilitating the interview and the other taking detailed notes. This approach ensured comprehensive documentation while also fostering a more engaging environment for both interviewers and participants (Velardo and Elliott, 2021). Interview transcripts were then cleaned, anonymised, and sent to the core research team for analysis. It is important to note that 3 prisoner transcripts were excluded from the analysis due to poor quality. As a result, the data presented in this report is based on 69 prisoner participants and 16 prison officers.

Additionally, 11 semi-structured interviews with governor grade leaders were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between December 2024 and February 2025. Online interviews were more appropriate to accommodate governor schedules and minimise the burden for both researchers and participants, as due to scheduling these interviews could not be conducted during researchers' prison visits. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. With participant consent, all interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed through the platform. Interview transcripts were then cleaned and anonymised by the core research team before analysis.

Due to the scope, the evaluation did not include the RDCP team responsible for deployment and project documents, which could have provided insight into the buildability challenges that the programme faced in implementing a first-generation design at pace and would have enabled the triangulation of findings based on perception with project documentation.

Observations

Researchers conducted observations during fieldwork visits. This involved moving around the RDCs, taking detailed notes on physical space, activities, and social interactions with prisoners and staff. Observations took place at different times, depending on the prison's regime, and lasted approximately one hour.

Observation analysis served as a complementary method to support findings from the semi-structured interviews. This method reduced reliance on self-reported behaviour, allowing researchers to directly observe nonverbal expressions, interpersonal interactions, and participants' attitudes toward the RDCs. Observations were primarily conducted individually, though some researchers chose to work in pairs. Multiple observations by different researchers at each prison site allowed for a wide range of perspectives and interpretations to be considered, mitigating observer bias. Notes were handwritten and collected by the core research team at the end of each fieldwork visit before being transcribed.

Conversations with prisoners and staff during observations included high-level questions and follow-ups. This approach provided rich insights by capturing real-time reflections and interactions that might not have emerged in formal semi-structured interviews.

Analytical approach

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method “for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.6). Analysis followed a five-step process as outlined by Naeem et al. (2023): familiarisation with the data, selection of keywords, coding, theme development and conceptualisation through interpretation of keywords, codes and themes.

The core evaluation team conducted the analysis using NVivo Version 14, enabling researchers to manage large volumes of rich data efficiently and collaborate effectively. To ensure analytical rigour, a comprehensive quality assurance process was implemented. A coding framework was initially developed and discussed before coding commenced, though it evolved iteratively throughout the process.

Transcripts were independently coded by two researchers in phases, with discrepancies reviewed and resolved after each phase. Projects were then merged, and a coding comparison was conducted to assess inter-coder agreement and inter-rater reliability. Particular attention was given to data with high disagreement, the five sections of text with the most disagreement in each code, or if the kappa coefficient for individual codes was below 0.40. These cases were reviewed, leading to either a consensus or refinements to the coding framework to enhance consistency and reliability. Following the NVivo analysis, the coded data was exported to an Excel file for further quality assurance. Each researcher individually reviewed and verified the references to ensure accuracy. Any discrepancies were documented in a separate sheet and cross-checked by the other researcher.

Observations

Observation notes were thematically analysed in MS Excel. The data was categorised into three main sections: space, activities, and social interaction. These sections were

identified as areas of interest before the research began, using the theory of change and programme overview.

For each prison, data was summarised according to these categories, identifying similarities and differences across researchers' observation notes, and any differences in researcher perceptions were discussed. Throughout the process, members of the core research team quality assured the observation analysis, checking accuracy and consistency of the data collation, categorisation, and summaries.

Ethics

The Ministry of Justice's Ethics Advisory Group (EAG) was consulted in the design of this research to ensure all possible ethical issues had been considered. During recruitment, participants received an information sheet, privacy notice, and a consent form, outlining key ethical considerations and the protection policies in place for this study. Before the interviews, participants were provided with physical copies of these documents, and researchers verbally reiterated key points. This process allowed participants to give verbal consent and ask any questions before proceeding.

The main ethical considerations of this research were:

- **Right to withdraw** - Researchers reminded participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could pause or terminate the interview at any time. First names were collected solely for withdrawal purposes and securely stored in a password-protected document. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw their data up until 31/01/2025.
- **Protection from harm** - Although the interview topics did not directly address distressing subjects, measures were in place to ensure participants' comfort throughout the process. Researchers offered participants the option to take breaks, skip questions, or access support through officers after the interview. The wider

researcher team were briefed in advance should the participant become uncomfortable. Participants were informed in advance, and reminded on the day, that researchers had a duty to report any safeguarding concerns to staff.

- **Informed consent** - To accommodate varying literacy levels among prisoners, two versions of the information sheets were provided to participants. The prisoner information sheet was adapted from previous prison research examples, containing the same key information as the officer and governor information sheets but in a simplified format. Before the interviews, researchers verbally reiterated the details of the consent form to ensure participants were fully informed and understood the research. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions or raise any concerns before proceeding.
- **Data protection** - All data collected was stored securely at the MoJ and destroyed after analysis was complete. In this report, identifying information has been removed to ensure participants remain anonymous.

Prisoners were also assured participation would have no impact on their sentence, privileges, or relationship with staff.

Researchers received a comprehensive briefing session before attending fieldwork visits, covering logistics, safety, and ethical considerations. At the end of each fieldwork day, they took part in an informal debrief, followed by a formal debrief after each visit to reflect on findings and address any concerns.

Appendix D

Prison Categories

Table 2. The categories of the sampled prisons

Prison	Category	Type	Number of RDCs
Prison A	Closed	Women	40
Prison B	C	Men	48
Prison C	B/C	Men	48
Prison D	C	Men	40
Prison E	D	Men	160