Given the choice, and unless they were being paid, why would anyone want to spend time in prison? In fact many people have made the decision to do just that by joining an Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) at their local prison or immigration removal centre. These men and women come from all backgrounds and are appointed by the Ministry of Justice or the Home Office to monitor that prisoners and detainees are being treated fairly and with respect.

The idea of prison monitors is not new. It was Queen Elizabeth the first who decreed that magistrates should visit jails to monitor conditions. Today there are over 1800 members of IMBs attached to 143 prisons and also 10 immigration removal centres (IRCs) in England and Wales. Kent has 9 prisons and one IRC. An unannounced inspection visit is made by the member on duty that week and he or she will monitor all areas including Healthcare, Kitchens, Accommodation and Education; there will also be written and verbal applications from individual prisoners or detainees asking for help with a particular problem. IMBs are not able to change any prison or immigration centre rules but can advise, mediate or check that procedures have been carried out correctly and when necessary will contact Ministers with matters of concern.

Life after release from jail probably wasn’t an issue in Good Queen Bess’s day but in order to reduce re-offending, part of a modern IMB’s remit is to look at the provision of an effective resettlement programme for prisoners. Those members of the public who say ‘lock ‘em up and throw away the key’ should remember that only a tiny number of offenders, around 30, will never be released; so it is sensible that the others be given a chance to turn their lives around before they re-join the rest of us in the community.

Being part of an IMB is a unique opportunity to act as watchdogs for the local community and to raise awareness of issues that are of concern. We have access to our designated establishment
at any time and are able to look at virtually all records. We have the right to talk to prisoners or detainees out of the sight and hearing of staff and we carry keys so do not need an escort. All of us are volunteers, so no one does it for the money but it is a very worthwhile job and if you are a 'people person' it could be right up your street. And just a thought, if someone in your family was in custody wouldn’t you want to know that they were being treated properly?

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ENDS

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