



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMYOI Cookham Wood

**For reporting year
1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023**

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Introductory sections 1 – 3

1. Statutory role of the IMB

The Prison Act 1952 requires every prison to be monitored by an independent board appointed by the Secretary of State from members of the community in which the prison is situated.

Under the National Monitoring Framework agreed with ministers, the Board is required to:

- satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody within its prison and the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release
- inform promptly the Secretary of State, or any official to whom authority has been delegated as it judges appropriate, any concern it has
- report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and what impact these have on those in its custody.

To enable the Board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have right of access to every prisoner and every part of the prison and also to the prison's records.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill-treatment through establishing a system of visits or inspections to all places of detention. OPCAT requires that states designate a National Preventive Mechanism to carry out visits to places of detention, to monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees and to make recommendations for the prevention of ill-treatment. The IMB is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism.

2. Description of the establishment

HMYOI Cookham Wood is a young offender facility in Kent capable of holding 120¹ boys between the ages of 15 and 17, although some 18-year-olds are currently being retained due to population pressures in the adult estate. The institution dates from the 1970s. Most boys reside in a residential block opened in 2014. All boys reside in single-occupancy cells.

For much of the year occupancy has been far fewer than its 120 capacity, with fewer than 80 boys held at the end of August.

¹ Figures included in this report are local management information. They reflect the prison's position at the time of reporting, but may be subject to change following further validation and therefore may not always tally with Official Statistics later published by the Ministry of Justice.

3. Key points

In its April 2023 Inspection Report, HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) graded Cookham Wood “poor” on two of its key “healthy prisons” tests: “Safety” and “Purposeful Activity”. “Poor” means “There is a failure to ensure even adequate treatment and/or conditions for children”.

HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) immediately submitted an “Urgent Notification” to the Secretary of State, requiring “*a concerted and urgent response... to make the institution a safe and decent place to hold children*”.

This is our IMB Annual Report for the year 1 September 2022 to 30 August 2023. It covers periods both before and after the HMIP inspection. We hope that it complements and contextualises HMIP’s findings.

3.1 Main findings

Throughout this year, as last year, the IMB was seriously concerned about the small amounts of time out of cell that boys were offered daily. These were consistently and significantly below acceptable levels – indeed, ***inhumane, in the IMB’s view***. This impacted on the delivery of the entire regime and created a volatile environment for boys and staff. Improvements were made in the late spring/early summer, but deteriorated in the last months of the reporting year.

Prison officer numbers often appeared inadequate and the complexity of their day-to-day work was greatly increased by the high number of separations and the very high number of “Keep Apart” directions (lists of boys who are not allowed to meet each other in case they fight).

Inconsistency and last-minute changes to the regime meant the boys lacked clarity about what to expect daily. The IMB witnessed the negative impact this had on boys’ mental health and anxiety, and their sense of loneliness, because of the limited opportunities to build trusting relationships.

The wider ramification of a regime in which boys could go for days with less than two hours out of their cells disrupted educational and recreational opportunities, and significantly impacted the work required to offer and deliver interventions that would improve their long-term outcomes.

Safety

- On many occasions IMB members have observed staff making contact with boys through locked cell doors, without any face-to-face interaction with the boys (we were told this was for safety reasons: “insufficient staff on wing to permit doors to be unlocked”).
- Following the removal of Covid-19 restrictions, officers had worked hard to build healthy communities of boys on their landings. From autumn 2002, this hard work was repeatedly undermined by opportunistic group assaults. Violence escalated and making and carrying weapons became widespread.

Implementation of a robust Safety Action Plan from April reduced the number of boy-on-boy assaults and the incidence of weapon carrying by June/July. But the behaviour of many boys remained volatile and there were 12 assaults on staff in August.

- In the IMB's view, assaults on staff were often triggered by frustration at boys' excessive time in cell and frequent regime restrictions and cancellations. The IMB considered Cookham Wood a much safer place when boys accessed education, recreation and interventions regularly and consistently, and were able to mix more.
- Separation of boys from each other – through Keep Apart directions, not mixing landings, creating landing sub-groups – increased time in cell and, therefore, frustration. In the IMB's view, it also generated fearfulness and an expectation of violence among the boys. Too many boys have stated that they feel unsafe.

Fair and humane treatment

- Cookham Wood was unable to provide a consistently fair and humane regime this year. The regime provided to boys was regularly inhumane. Inadequate time out of cell, last-minute regime changes and cancellations (including education, family visits, exercise and therapeutic interventions) caused real distress to boys.
- In the three months May to July, an average of 12 boys each day were separated (unable to mix with others). This was too high a number to provide them with a proper regime. Most of their time whilst separated was dead time. They regularly had less than two hours a day out of their cells and often received only 30 minutes in the fresh air.
- The very high number of Keep Apart directions presented a complex and significant challenge for regime management. The IMB did not believe that measures to oversee and reduce this number were adequate.
- The "Rewarding Positive Behaviour" incentive scheme and "yellow card" sanctions scheme lost credibility for many boys. Given their already impoverished regime, they felt rewards were undeliverable and sanctions meaningless.
- Although all the boys had individual "personal officers", the frequency and content of meetings with them was variable. Structured personal officer support meetings, known as Custody Support Plans ("CuSP"), were not available to most boys – again due to staffing difficulties.
- Both officers and boys wanted to develop closer relationships. Officers repeatedly told IMB members they needed more personal contact with the boys to build healthy relationships, but felt "constantly on the back foot" because of competing demands on their time. Boys told the IMB that they wanted predictability in their daily activities, consistency in their officer team (daily contact with officers they knew and trusted) and not to be "treated like kids".
- The IMB judges the length of time that boys have been held on remand to be totally unfair, and in many cases inhumane (over a year held on remand is not uncommon). Some boys serve longer on remand than their final sentence, and planning and support for rehabilitation is constrained due to uncertainty around sentencing.

Health and wellbeing

- In April, the Care Quality Commission found Cookham's health services to be "well led and well resourced... a caring team committed to the delivery of a service focussed on the needs of the child". The IMB strongly agrees.
- Primary Care nurses were highly visible and well known to the boys. All staff, officers, as well as healthcare professionals, responded quickly and with compassion to physical healthcare issues.
- The Health and Wellbeing (mental health) team were available to provide high-quality therapeutic support to the boys, but were often frustrated in gaining regular access to boys for one-to-one sessions. The IMB believes delaying, cutting short and cancelling Health and Wellbeing sessions with the boys is unacceptable. It is insulting and dispiriting to the boys and not only undermines their trust in Cookham Wood's care but also delays the progress they can make in addressing their long-term physical and mental health.
- Each landing had dedicated healthcare professionals to engage with landing officers and, with them, to monitor and plan support for vulnerable boys. Their proactive support for officers and boys was very helpful and reassuring at this difficult time.
- As the PE instructors' team was understaffed for much of the year and had to comply with boys' Keep Apart restrictions, arranging and delivering a PE programme to meet all the boys' entitlements and needs was very complicated. Many sessions were curtailed and boys did not receive their full entitlement. The IMB considers generous and predictable PE to be essential to the boys' wellbeing, and personal and social development.

Education and training

- When education was working well, IMB members saw boys fully engaged and excited about their achievements, especially in classes that built life skills.
- However, the education programme was severely disrupted this year. There were staff shortages – of teaching staff but also of prison officers to escort boys to class and supervise their safety once there. Responding to serious incidents elsewhere on the estate necessitated half-day education shutdowns. Separated boys were unable to attend education. In June, the number of education hours actually delivered (an average of 11 hours per boy, per week) was less than half the number of hours promised and planned for, and significantly below an acceptable provision.
- Difficulty in recruiting and retaining vocational education trainers led to a significant unmet demand from the boys for more vocational training.
- Boys from different landings, as well as boys on the Keep Apart list, were not allowed to mix in education classes. This was considered necessary for safety reasons but greatly restricted the boys' choice of courses. Many boys were frustrated at not being given their first or second choice.

- Many of the boys at Cookham Wood have been disengaged from education for years. The IMB would wish to see a consistent and differentiated education offer to meet their individual needs, especially for those boys over 18 years of age.

Progression towards transfer or release

- Cookham's Resettlement Team won national recognition for ground-breaking initiatives this year. These included:
 - A substantial increase in the number and range of ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence) opportunities for boys approaching the end of their sentences
 - Liaison with adult prisons leading to approval for the transfer of appropriate 18-year-old boys to open prisons
 - Open days for members of YOT (Youth Offending Teams) in Cookham's catchment area, to build professional relationships.
- But there was a sense of drift and delay in sentence planning for boys who were not approaching release. Much of this was due to circumstances beyond Cookham's control. Three large groups of boys appeared to be stuck marking time:
 - Boys held on remand (sometimes for more than a year) because of delays in the Courts system
 - Boys over 18 years old (an increasing number since the age for transition was raised to 19 years)
 - Foreign national boys (needing but not receiving advice and support from the Home Office Immigration Service).
- In the IMB's view, all sentence plans were greatly impoverished by the lack of group and individual intervention programmes (e.g. "A-Z" for purposeful activity; "Feeling It" for emotional self-management; and "JETS" for problem solving with others).
- Social visits were frequently cancelled or rearranged and the IMB was very concerned about the impact of this on boys and their parents/carers. More positively, IMB members found quarterly, landing-based family days to be heart-warming. We also found that Cookham Wood was excellent at arranging private compassionate visits for families to talk with and reassure vulnerable boys.

3.2 Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- In our annual report last year, the IMB flagged that the **regime** was **inhumane** at Cookham Wood, with boys held in their cells for very long periods. Over the year since then, this situation got worse, not better.
When will urgent action take place to enable boys in Cookham Wood to receive a humane regime?
- In our annual report last year, the IMB flagged that too many **boys** were **held on remand** for long periods at Cookham Wood. This situation has continued again this year. This situation is totally unjust and inhumane.
When will urgent action take place to reduce court backlogs and thus the length of time children spend on remand before sentencing?

- There has been a marked increase in the number of **18-year-olds** held at Cookham Wood for up to a year (potentially until their 19th birthday) to ease pressure on the adult estate. Cookham Wood does not have a separate programme and regime for adults – and thus their regime is inadequate.

When will this group be offered an appropriate regime?

TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES

- Securing **accommodation** for boys unable to return to their parents **on release** remains a challenge. It is very important to the boys that their accommodation is arranged and confirmed in a timely way (at the very least, two weeks prior to their release). IMB members have seen too many boys in local authority care without timely information regarding their accommodation when they are released from Cookham Wood.

When will local authorities improve their communications regarding accommodation to the boys in Cookham Wood?

TO THE YOUTH CUSTODY SERVICE (YCS)

- The **attrition rate for officers** at Cookham Wood has been very high. What urgent plans does the YCS have to recruit, train and retain more youth estate officers? What outside support will be provided (e.g. detached duty officers) if Cookham's officer numbers become dangerously low?

When will the YCS be able to ensure that boys held in Cookham Wood are offered a humane regime?

- Education delivery at Cookham Wood has been very poor.
When will the education provision at Cookham Wood be improved – both in the quantity of teachers available and the number and range of subjects provided (including vocational subjects) – to make sure it delivers an appropriate and consistent range of learning opportunities, differentiated to meet boys' individual needs?

- Progress on the landing refurbishment has been slow, with only two landings refurbished and one chained shut for months, awaiting Government Facility Services Ltd (GFSL) to start the work. The Board is particularly concerned about the length of time eight cells on the Cedar resettlement unit have been out of action, pending major repairs.

What will the YCS do - and when - to get this much-needed and vital refurbishment back on track?

TO THE GOVERNOR

- What urgent steps will Cookham Wood take to ensure a **stable and predictable regime for the boys**, with improved time out of cell and minimal last-minute changes and cancellations?
- What steps will be taken to manage and reduce the **separation** of boys, and to monitor, review and reduce **Keep Apart** restrictions?

- Will there be more opportunities for **officers** to develop their **relationships with the boys** and to strengthen landing communities? Will **personal officer support** for the boys be increased and monitored?
- Will emotional self-management and problem-solving courses for individuals and groups of boys (e.g. “A-Z”; “Feeling It”; and “JETS” **intervention programmes**) be re-introduced as part of sentence and remand plans?

When will boys held in Cookham Wood be routinely offered a humane regime?

3.3 Response to last report

Issue raised	Progress
Number of boys on remand	No progress: circa 58% of population
Smooth transition of 18-year-old+ boys	Much improved until transfer age raised to 19
Appropriate staffing levels	Officer numbers worsened
Time out of cells - inhumane	Some weekday improvement but has slipped back. Remains inhumane
Access to faith services and classes	Improved

Evidence sections 4 – 7

4. Safety

4.1 Reception and induction

Board members have seen Reception and Induction officers at Cookham Wood being friendly, reassuring and perceptive. New boys also meet with Healthcare professionals to develop their care plans and to help them write “formulations” explaining their hopes and concerns.

Nonetheless, many boys are scared and confused on arrival, wary of trusting new people and joining new groups. This makes them vulnerable to the few boys (often gang affiliated) who are actively anti-social – willing and able to use violence to assert themselves.

All boys come with a risk assessment, but mixing them in an uncertain environment will always carry risks. In December, eight of the nine boys on the induction landing were involved in a nasty brawl with each other. For this reason, new boys are asked to say who they would feel unsafe with, such as individuals known to them or members of particular gangs. Keep Apart directions are drawn up, which the boys carry with them onto their main landing.

This sets an unfortunate pattern of keeping boys safe by keeping them apart, which continues and grows as their sentence progresses. This risk-averse strategy, while designed to keep boys safe, greatly reduces their opportunities to develop their social awareness and their ability to understand and trust others.

There is no mention of forming new, healthy friendships or getting to know new groups in the boys’ induction pack. On paper, there is a very full induction programme – a series of meetings to cover every aspect of the regime and every kind of support available (too much too soon in the view of some IMB members). However, because of staff shortages throughout the year and the consequent abstraction of induction officers to support other, bigger landings, it was frequently not possible to hold these meetings face to face. They were often conducted by phone and, in one case, IMB members saw a meeting being carried on through a locked cell door.

4.2 Suicide and self-harm, deaths in custody

There were two instances of self-harm by boys in August. There had been 21 instances over the previous three months (note: this does not mean 21 boys self-harmed, as some did so a number of times). None of these self-harm incidents resulted in serious injury and none was a suicide attempt.

Staff are quick to pick up on indications of depression and warning triggers (e.g. receipt of a heavy sentence) and unhesitatingly raise assessment, care in custody and teamwork (ACCT) plans, used to support prisoners who are at risk of self-harm and suicide, in these cases.

IMB members found, in conversations with these at-risk boys, that the quality of their ACCT plan was good. The boys confirmed that officers visited them regularly and were cheerful, attentive and encouraging, which they found calming and helpful.

However, the IMB’s monitoring of ACCT paperwork has shown a wide variability in the quality of written records. This has been addressed by tight new guidelines (requiring detailed observation and handover records and thrice-daily manager’s checks) implemented in mid-August.

4.3 Violence and violence reduction, self-isolation

In April, HM Inspectorate of Prisons' (HMIP) inspection team found that there was "a near total breakdown in behaviour management" at Cookham Wood. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) submitted an Urgent Notification to the Secretary of State requiring "*a concerted and urgent response... to make the institution a safe and decent place to hold children*".

There were 34 assaults in March and 24% of boys surveyed said they felt unsafe. Searching procedures were lax, and making and carrying improvised weapons had become normal. Inexperienced officers appeared to lack "jail craft" and the confidence to challenge bad behaviour – some felt the prison officer role had been misrepresented to them (as "youth work") when they applied to join the Prison Service.

IMB members endorse these findings. However, it is important to add that, throughout the year, members have regularly witnessed officers putting themselves in harm's way to protect boys, and have seen many examples of skilled, patient de-escalation of potential violence.

It is also relevant that there has been a 30% shortfall in the number of Band 3 (front line) officers throughout the year and rapid staff turnover (20% of officers resigned during the reporting year September 2022 to August 2023). Abstractions for sickness and essential training further reduced the number of officers available.

Following the removal of Covid-19 restrictions, officers had worked hard, and with much success, to build healthy communities on their landings: boys on the same landing mixing comfortably with each other as their regime opened out. From autumn 2022, however, this hard work was seriously undermined by:

- Opportunistic group assaults between boys from different (antagonistic) landings
- Group assaults targeting individual boys on the same landing. A Custodial Manager commented: "The boys think they can choose their landing and who they mix with and use threats to get their own way. We have to take control back".

The IMB was shocked by how quickly things could unravel.

Cookham Wood now has a robust Safety action plan, agreed with HMIP. It focuses on preventing weapon making, carrying and use, and setting and maintaining clear standards of behaviour (for staff and boys). As of August 2023, it was progressing well.

Searching for weapons had become disciplined and thorough, as well as appropriately respectful: the IMB found that it was accepted by all boys and welcomed by most.

Security measures had closed access for landing-on-landing attacks.

The number of assaults recorded each month dropped from 34 in March to 14 in June and July.

But, although Cookham Wood was safer than in the spring, the behaviour of many boys was still volatile. In August, there were 21 recorded assaults, 13 of which were assaults on staff. As a result, one boy and three staff members needed hospital treatment.

In the IMB's view, assaults on staff were often triggered by a build-up of frustration at the inhumane amount of time that the boys were held locked in their cells and regime restrictions and cancellations.

There has also been regular passive disobedience (slow return to cells, and “incidents at height”), which indicates a continuing discontent at the unpredictability of the boys’ regime. The IMB fears this could escalate.

4.4 Young people with specific vulnerabilities

Cookham Wood’s support systems for boys with complex needs and vulnerabilities are impressive and well established. Isolated and disengaged, these boys (generally around 10 at any one time) each have a bespoke support plan, reviewed weekly by their Enhanced Support Team (Health and Wellbeing and other professionals, with input from landing officers). The plan builds their self-esteem and ability to trust others, so they can re-join their landing groups.

The Phoenix Day Care Unit, for boys with complex needs, is, potentially, a tremendous asset. It is very welcoming, with lots of space: five pleasant “holding” rooms, four rooms for one-to-one therapy and support, and an attractive communal area.

In June, of seven boys attending Phoenix regularly, four had been separated for their own protection and/or the protection of others (in accordance with Rule 49, The Young Offenders Institution Rules), and three had self-separated. They came from two different landings. Yet the IMB found them mixing comfortably and confidently, and talking about sharing their “time in the open air” on the residential exercise yards. Asked why, one boy said: “This is the real me. The one you see up on the wings is the one I have to be up there.” Another agreed: “It’s calm, calm. Things go wrong on the wings because of the verbals.”

It is very regrettable that Phoenix has had to close, frequently and without warning, to cover officer shortages elsewhere. Promises should not be made to vulnerable and complex needs’ boys if they cannot be kept.

Cookham Wood does not have a segregation unit. Separated boys (“Rule 49” and self-separating) remain in their own cells on their own landings. This complicates day-to-day regime management, but also shortens the boys’ separation time and makes their reintegration easier.

Separation is an unhappy experience and separated boys need support, both during their separation and when it ends. Similarly, boys who have received Enhanced Support Team (EST) support need continued lower-level support on landings when their EST programmes end.

To monitor and develop support for vulnerable boys on landings, and to foster healthy relationships within landing groups, each landing has a mixed Core Support Team (CST), of healthcare, teaching and casework professionals, chaired by the landing’s Custodial Manager. This Team meets weekly with landing officers. IMB members have observed CST meetings and been greatly impressed by the depth and richness of the information shared.

The IMB believes that CSTs play a crucial role in bridging the gap between one-to-one therapeutic support and community support for vulnerable boys. This role needs to be reasserted. It was disappointing to find attendance at CST meetings slipping towards the end of the year.

4.5 Use of force

Restraint to protect boys and staff from injury (“use of force”) was closely monitored and immediately reviewed. The IMB has access to reviews and CCTV of incidents. Members find that, except in emergencies, boys are only restrained after (frequently protracted)

attempts have been made to de-escalate volatile situations, and that officers comply fully with MMPR (minimising and managing physical restraint) youth custody guidelines.

In the three months to August 2023, there was a decrease of 33% in the number of use of force incidents and, in August, Cookham had the lowest use of force rate in the Youth Estate. The IMB finds this impressive and praiseworthy.

However, the IMB is concerned that the National Tactical Response Group, which is deployed in the event of serious incidents, such as protracted group disorder, or climbing to height), does not have staff trained in MMPR and therefore there is a risk that children held at Cookham Wood will be subject to adult use of force techniques in such situations.

4.6 Substance misuse

It is very rare for boys entering Cookham Wood to be addicted to hard drugs or alcohol and/or to require clinical treatment for dependency. However, many have used cannabis, alcohol and nitrous oxide (laughing gas) in the community on a regular basis, and some have been involved in county lines drug dealing (where organised criminal gangs use young people to deliver and sell drugs). These boys are vulnerable to developing dependencies on their release.

The small substance misuse team, therefore, focuses on educating and counselling boys about the risks of alcohol and drug abuse. The IMB has found that boys are interviewed on arrival and those who seek or need help have a six-to-eight-week education programme. The IMB considers this preventative work exemplary.

Occasionally, boys are found to have received and secreted small quantities of cannabis for personal use, but there is no evidence of widespread drugs use or a market for drugs in Cookham.

5. Fair and humane treatment

5.1 Accommodation, clothing, food

Cookham's Residential Unit was purpose-built and state of the art when it was opened in 2014. It has six landings, each with a wide communal area for boys to associate and dine together. The boys' cells each have a phone (to ring family) and a shower, and each boy has a laptop (intranet access only).

This year, because of restrictions on time out of cell, the landing communal areas have been sadly under-used.

There is a landing refurbishment programme but progress on implementing it has been very slow. So far, only two landings have been refurbished, with one landing chained shut for months, awaiting Gov Facility Services Ltd (GFSL) to start the work.

Of particular concern to the IMB was the length of time eight cells on the Cedar resettlement unit have been out of action pending major repairs. The Cedar unit, which prepares boys for release, was described by HMIP in April as "an oasis of calm and effective behaviour management" in Cookham Wood. It provides a respectful, open regime with lots of time out of room, excellent personal support from a dedicated officer team, and an outstanding range of ROTL (release on temporary license) opportunities for its boys.

IMB members find the Cedar unit a joy to visit. With its cells repaired and refurbished, it could accommodate 17 boys. However, throughout this year, it has only been able to accommodate eight or nine.

In April, HMIP found that the landings were dirty and that there were delays in day-to-day repairs and maintenance. This has been partially addressed. Officers keep their landings tidy and the Governor has fortnightly meetings with the private contractor (GFSL) to progress-chase repairs.

However, the interiors of the boys' cells remain grubby and impersonal. Boys complain that the showers are often blocked. They are urged to "take pride in your room", but find themselves unable to carry out basic cleaning tasks (e.g. floor, shower, toilet area) if they need the cell door open to do so. The Security rules are that boys cannot have their cell door open unless there are two officers and no other boys out on the landing. The condition of the boys' cells is dispiriting.

5.2 Separation

In the three months February to April, an average of 17 boys per day were separated. This is a very high number. Over the following three months, May to July, it was reduced to an average of 12 boys per day – an important achievement but still too high to provide the boys with a proper regime. The average time boys spent separated was five days, although it was considerably longer for some (see 6.5 below).

All separated boys remained on their own landings. They had interventions to help them end their separation (e.g. conflict resolution, therapy, etc) but responsibility for their day-to-day care remained with their landing staff.

IMB members monitored separation review meetings, held at least weekly. They found every avenue is explored to give the boys additional support and that the boys have lots of space and time to talk freely: these are adult conversations.

Regrettably, the Board also found a frequent lack of progress in delivering promised interventions between review meetings.

Members noted, too, the hard work of landing teams to reintegrate self-separating boys by rearranging landing groupings to accommodate them. Nonetheless, most of the time the boys spent separated was dead time. They regularly had less than two hours a day out of their cells.

Officers' conversations with them, though well meant, were frequently brief. They had no one-to-one outreach education (a Learning Support Teacher kept in touch and offered them distance learning packs). They could not be let out of their cells for interventions unless there were two free officers on the landing.

Providing boys with adequate daily time in the open air was a particular difficulty if staff numbers were low (solo time outside for boys requires two officers per boy) – they often received only 30 minutes.

There are two more, less extreme, forms of separation: keeping individual boys apart from each other and creating sub-groups on landings.

Like other Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), Cookham maintains a non-associate ("Keep Apart") list, which is made up of pairs of boys who are not allowed to meet each other for fear they will fight. There were around 600 Keep Apart directions (300 pairs of boys, for an average total population of only around 80 boys) at any time this reporting year. Some boys were not on the list, some were on the list purely for their own protection, while some violent boys had upwards of 25 Keep Aparts each.

The IMB thinks that the number of boys kept apart from each other is extraordinarily high, and does not believe that measures to oversee, review and reduce this number have been adequate.

It has been necessary, on some landings, to divide the boys into several sub-groups for association, exercise and dining out. The IMB has seen benefits in this: the boys are comfortable, integration of vulnerable boys is easier, and the groups are fluid and can be adjusted. But, since the groups do not mix, it becomes a logistical pressure and significantly reduces the boys' time out of cell.

All these different separation arrangements made management of the boys' day-to-day regime very complex and demanding. In July, one landing had three sub-groups (of three, four and six boys), plus five separated boys, to be managed as separate regimes. A Governor commented: "Too many children separated grinds our regime into the ground."

5.3 Staff and young people relationships

Officers repeatedly told IMB members that they badly needed more personal contact with the boys, to build healthy relationships on landing communities. But they felt "constantly on the back foot" because of conflicting demands on their time.

Groups of boys told IMB members that they wanted predictability in their daily activities, consistency in their officer team (daily contact with officers they know and trust), and not to be "treated like kids".

On weekdays, IMB members saw officers chatting cheerfully and encouragingly to boys in passing, but failing to seize opportunities for longer conversations (for instance, during the boys' daily time in the open air). There was more positive, relaxed engagement with the boys at weekends (despite their very limited time out of cell).

Landing community meetings were held intermittently (with the boys often given association time instead). The IMB believes they should be held weekly. The boys may be

troubled teenagers, but they are also on the cusp of becoming adults and need to be listened to and encouraged to speak.

In the Board's ad hoc conversations with groups of boys, IMB members have found them polite, welcoming and thoughtful.

A total of 30 boys (in focus groups) made very positive contributions to Cookham's Safety Summit in May.

Community meetings were held weekly, with great success, on the Cedar resettlement unit.

All boys had named personal officers, but IMB conversations with the boys suggested that the frequency of meetings with their personal officers was variable (there are few records).

Structured personal officer support meetings were only available to boys receiving Enhanced Support and to boys in the Cedar resettlement unit.

5.4 Equality and diversity

Cookham's small Diversity and Inclusion (D+I) team and the Novus Education Department promoted respect for diversity through month-long celebratory programmes (e.g. Black History Month; Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities' Month).

The D+I team also administered the investigation (by Governors and Custodial Managers) and resolution of Discrimination Incident Referrals ("DIRFs") submitted by boys and staff.

The IMB found that responses to DIRFs were considerate and respectful, but that few DIRFs were submitted (28 in the six months September to April, almost all by staff drawing attention to racist insults by and among boys).

An Equality Action Team of managers analysed data to identify and address systemic inequalities, but may need to broaden and deepen its analysis. For instance, the data showed that black, Asian and minority ethnic boys were not disproportionately separated – but were they separated for longer?

There were no peer representatives for diversity matters, and boys with Protected Characteristics (including race, religion, gender and sexual orientation, which it is unlawful to discriminate against) rarely complained to the IMB about discrimination or unequal treatment. The IMB believes there may be complacency and hidden inequalities: it urges Cookham to re-launch the DIRF system to boys and staff.

5.5 Faith and pastoral support

Cookham has an active and optimistic multi-faith team of chaplains. They are highly visible and easily accessible to the boys. Their pastoral work with boys of all faiths and none is very important for the wellbeing of the institution: it provides solace to individuals and generates tolerance and respect.

For the first half of this year, boys' attendance at weekly group worship and faith classes was impaired by a policy of not mixing boys from different landings and groups (for security reasons). Muslim boys, for instance, could only attend Friday prayers once every five weeks. Thankfully, there has since been some relaxation of this policy and attendance has improved. The boys have faith material on their laptops for private contemplation and prayer.

The chaplains' encouragement and support for Muslim boys (and others choosing to fast) during Ramadan was, as usual, outstanding. Special Eid food was shared with all the boys, not just Muslims.

Christmas services were warm and welcoming.

5.6 Rewards and sanctions

Cookham's "Rewarding Positive Behaviour" (RPB) incentive scheme lost credibility with the boys this year. It previously offered two privilege levels: Silver (ordinary) and Gold (enhanced).

The "yellow card" system, which allows instant sanctions for bad behaviour, also lost credibility. Sanctions include loss of dining out, evening association or recreational gym for 1-3 days. Some boys felt that they only lost what they would not have got anyway.

The new "Rewarding Positive Behaviour", published in June 2023, offers three incentives scheme levels. Sanctions are not issued with yellow cards or within the policy. The weapons and violence policy links into the RPB.

Boys who have achieved Gold level have behaved in an exemplary way and are entitled to extra privileges, including increased recreational gym and enrichment activities in the evening. But delivery of these extra privileges assumes adequate staffing and a stable, predictable regime. Over the past year, time out of cell has been seriously limited and recreational gym and evening association regularly cancelled – for everyone. Gold level boys have told the IMB they feel let down.

5.7 Complaints

Complaints by the boys were answered within five working days. IMB members were able to view the responses and found them to be polite, detailed and to the point. They were all quality checked by the responsible Head of Function and 10% were checked by the Governor.

5.8 Property

Boys frequently complained to IMB members about delays in delivering parcels and letters to them (typically 10 days from their receipt at Cookham). They were eagerly awaiting these (their parents had told them they were coming). This was a much higher priority for the boys than it was for staff.

Boys' applications for access to their stored property (e.g. swapping a CD) also took a long time – and was a source of significant upset.

6. Health and wellbeing

6.1 Healthcare general

Physical healthcare (“primary care”) and mental healthcare (“health and wellbeing”) services are integrated at Cookham Wood, with a single (NHS Foundation Trust) provider for both. As a result, the IMB has found that the two teams work closely and effectively with each other.

In April this year, a joint Care Quality Commission (CQC) and HMIP team carried out a full inspection of Cookham’s health services and found that: “The head of healthcare, deputy head of healthcare and clinical leaders provided clear leadership and accountability to an enthusiastic and caring team who were committed to the delivery of a service focussed on the needs of the child.” Primary Care services were “well led and well resourced”, while the “richly multidisciplinary” health and wellbeing team was similarly “well led and resourced”.

The IMB strongly endorses these positive findings. It believes the standard of healthcare at Cookham Wood has been markedly better than the boys could expect in the community, which is as it should be given young people in custody are likely to need more services, or reduced waits, to achieve the same health outcomes as those in the community.

Each landing is assigned a team of healthcare professionals (therapist, primary care nurse, substance misuse counsellor, healthcare assistant) to engage with officers and, with them, to monitor and plan support for vulnerable boys. The IMB has found these teams to be commendably hands on. It believes their proactive support and advice for officers and boys has been very valuable amidst the difficulties of the last year. There have been weekly Core Support Team meetings (see 4.4 above), and Group Reflective Practice meetings (facilitated by the landing therapists) for officers.

Regrettably, although access to boys for Primary Care has remained good, there have been repeated difficulties in accessing boys for Health and Wellbeing therapy (see 6.3).

6.2 Physical healthcare

The IMB has found that Primary Care nurses provide a highly professional triage and first-response service seven days a week (7am-9pm on weekdays and 7.45am-7.30pm at weekends). They also dispense medication, run health promotion clinics, attend all incidents involving the use of force, and, with other healthcare professionals, screen boys on arrival using the national CHAT (Child Health Assessment Tool). They are highly accessible and well known to all the boys. In the past year, as members of the landing support teams, they have been encouraged to share their knowledge and understanding of the boys with healthcare colleagues and landing staff. The IMB thinks this has been very valuable.

Primary Care clinic rooms are in the residential building, close to the boys’ landings. There are GP surgeries on three weekdays, plus Saturdays for emergencies. Dental surgeries are held weekly, with no waiting lists. Delays to hospital appointments for operational reasons have been rare this year and there has been no hesitation or delay in taking injured boys to A&E for examination and treatment.

6.3 Mental healthcare

Boys at Cookham Wood suffer from a wide range of emotional and behavioural issues, many of them attachment and trauma related. The Health and Wellbeing team within healthcare is exceptionally well resourced, both in the number of its staff (19 full-time equivalent) and its range of skills.

Team members provide one-to-one therapeutic support to more than half the boys. They also work closely and effectively with other departments, providing speech and language therapists to support teaching staff and advising and supporting officer teams on landings.

But, as in previous years, they have been repeatedly frustrated by limitations on their access to boys for one-to-one sessions. Suitable rooms are at a premium and there have been daily delays in officers escorting boys to them. A typical scenario could be: room booked for 9.15am, boy arrives 9.45am, room has to be vacated for another appointment at 10am.

The IMB considers that repeatedly delaying, cutting short and cancelling Health and Wellbeing sessions with the boys is unacceptable. It is insulting and dispiriting for the boys and undermines their trust in Cookham Wood's care. It is also extremely frustrating for the practitioners.

6.4 Time out of room, regime

Poor time out of cell for the boys has been a significant concern of the IMB for some time; indeed, in last year's report we stated:

"Time out of cell has been extremely poor at times for most boys (particularly over some weekends and evening periods). It has been positively inhumane for a few boys who have been held separated (under Rule 49 or by personal choice) in their cells for up to 23 hours per day."

IMB Cookham Wood YOI, Annual Report 2021-2022

The situation, sadly, has remained "positively inhumane" for at least some boys – and, at times, most of the boys – throughout this reporting year (2022-2023), too.

In April, HMIP reported:

"The separation of boys had led to a situation where solitary confinement had become normalised. Many were locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day with hardly any meaningful human interaction. Some did not come out of their cells for days on end, a situation that amounted to solitary confinement. During the inspection, for example, we came across two boys requiring protection from their peers who had been subjected to these conditions for more than 100 days. The lock up and isolation meant the daily regime for all had become sclerotic, stifling any attempt at meaningful and sustainable access to education, work or activity. It was no surprise that our Ofsted colleagues judged education, learning and skills provision to be 'inadequate' in every regard."

HMIP, Report, April 2023

Since the inspection in April, there have been some attempts to improve time out of cell. The prison's leadership now routinely monitors the length of time that boys are being held separated in their cells for consecutive days. This has drastically reduced the number of consecutive days that most boys spend held separated in their cells under Rule 49. The regime has also been adapted to provide a better focus on weekday activity. This has led to average weekday times out of cell of 5 to 6 hours per day, with some boys (typically on the Cedar wing) often receiving significantly more time out of their cells than that.

To achieve these improvements to the weekday regime, staffing levels were adjusted, and so the evening and weekend regimes have still been extremely poor. And, sadly, for those boys held on Rule 49, their time out of cell has still been inhumanely poor (with time out of cell often little more than being let out for exercise).

While the IMB considers five or even six hours out of cell per day to be inhumane, interestingly, when we talk with the boys, many of them state that they can cope with that length of time out of cell. What consistently upsets the boys is when there are last-minute changes to the promised regime (for example, the removal of a gym session over a weekend due to staff absence).

In July, the IMB National Chair wrote to the Minister of State for Justice, outlining serious concerns across all of the YOIs in England:

“Many children and young people experienced very little time out of their room and those separated could spend over 23 hours a day in their rooms. Children and young people also experienced a limited and unpredictable regime, and a lack of education and other purposeful activity.”

Elisabeth Davies, IMB National Chair, 24 July 2023

The Prison Service has been promising improvements to staff retention and improved recruitment to provide a dramatic improvement to the quality of regime. Sadly, throughout last year (2021-2022), and again through this reporting year (2022-2023), there appears to have been an on-going staffing crisis in the Prison Service, which has had an appalling knock-on effect on the quality of the regime available to the boys.

There has been much promise of improved incentives for staff, improved retention, and improved recruitment. However, staffing – both of prison officers and for the education team – has continued to be the key reason offered to the IMB for the dreadful regime offered to the boys. This situation would appear to be nothing short of a national crisis and one that has received much ‘promise’ – but for the boys held in Cookham Wood over the last year – all to little effect, as this reporting year has ended in a not dissimilar situation to the one we reported last year – ***an abysmally poor regime being offered to the boys.*** And for some boys – a regime that amounted to solitary confinement.

Many of the boys look forward eagerly to their gym and PE sessions. When the IMB has observed these sessions, boys typically apply themselves with serious effort and can be seen enjoying the activities and the sense of comradeship they engender. Cookham has a good range of weights and apparatus available in its gym and often offers football on its multi-use sports field.

Boys who could mix were scheduled to attend 2 x 90-minute PE sessions each week this year, as part of their education programme, plus weekend recreational PE as staff numbers allowed. Boys who could not mix were entitled to attend the gym on their own, but fitting all these solo gym sessions in proved very difficult.

Because the PE instructors’ team was understaffed for much of the year (6 instructors rather than 9) and because they had to comply with boys’ Keep Apart restrictions, arranging and delivering a PE programme to meet all the boys’ entitlements and needs was an exceptionally complicated task. Many sessions were curtailed and boys did not receive their full entitlement.

The IMB considers generous and predictable PE to be essential to the boys’ wellbeing and personal and social development.

6.5 Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

See 4.6, above.

7. Education and training

7.1 Education

There is a separate, two-storey education building. Education services are provided by an external contractor, with the expectation that all boys will be given a full-time curriculum during the week (25 hours + three hours of PE).

All boys were required to attend English, Maths and PHSE (personal, social and health education) classes. In addition, they were offered a range of vocational “pathway” courses. Music and radio production, fitness and catering were extremely popular choices. The boys on these pathways appeared to enjoy their classes. Indeed, the boys on the catering pathway could often be seen proudly carrying their cooking back to their cells at the end of a session.

While the boys were able to make their curriculum choices known, the Education Allocations Board was driven by the extremely large number of Keep Apart when making its decisions. This resulted in disappointment for many boys who were not offered the pathway of their choice.

Boys from different landings, as well as boys on the Keep Apart list, were not allowed to mix in education classes (this was considered necessary for safety reasons). Because of this, class sizes were often small and some of the most popular pathway courses had to hold vacancies. In the week commencing 21 August, five boys had been awaiting allocation to a pathway for more than three weeks.

Even when Keep Apart were not a factor, the lack of teachers for vocational courses (see 7.3 below) greatly restricted the boys’ range of choice. Boys often expressed their frustration to the IMB at not being able to follow the curriculum subject choice(s) they had requested.

Education provision suffered badly from staff shortages - of teachers, learning support staff, and prison officers to escort boys to class and supervise their safety once there. The provision often suffered from last-minute cancellations due to staff shortages. The dreadful average time out-of-cell statistics showed clearly how little time was available to provide full-time education to the boys. The average education delivery statistics fell far short of the boys’ entitlement: in June, the number of education hours delivered (an average of 13 hours per boy, per week) was less than half the number of hours promised and planned for (25 hours).

Separated boys were only given, at best, an occasional on-wing individual tutorial, plus work to do in their cells (if they were motivated to do it).

In April, Ofsted inspectors found education provision at Cookham Wood to be inadequate against each of its five tests (see HMIP Inspection Report 2023). They also found that most boys failed to achieve an acceptable level of progress in education. However, a few boys did show a determination to succeed – in spite of the poor amount of classroom time provided – and those boys sat examinations and did well.

One whole floor of the education building was mothballed at the peak of the most challenging staffing period to enable staffing to be deployed more efficiently.

7.2 Library

There is a well-stocked library, located on the first floor of the Education building, staffed by Medway Council librarians. The library is popular with the boys. They are generally very well behaved when they are in the library. In addition to the books and audio books

available for loan, boys often spend their library time socialising in groups playing board games or card games. There are computers available for boys to conduct careers-related searches.

As the library is contained within the Education building, it is generally only available to those boys eligible to attend education classes. Boys who are held back in their cells during education/library sessions are not able to visit the library, and use its resources, in person. The librarians make books available on the wings for those boys not allowed to visit the library; in addition, they respond to specific requests for books that are passed on by wing officers.

7.3 Vocational training

The vocational pathways in music and radio production were both very popular and delivered good results. There were productive links with several employers in construction and music production, which enabled some boys to gain work experience and, in some cases, employment. There were very good opportunities available to a few boys to gain work experience through release on temporary licence (ROTL). In some instances, these links resulted in subsequent employment being offered.

However, there was a significant, un-met demand from the boys for more vocational training. A barbering classroom was developed, but the provider was unable to retain the teacher, resulting in an unused resource that would have been popular with the boys. In August, five vocational pathway courses were running successfully: catering, radio and music production, art and fitness. But five other courses were unable to run, awaiting the appointment of teachers: carpentry, painting and decorating, horticulture, barbering and barista.

Young people who were 18 years old (and over) were poorly catered for, with little vocational training or work experience to prepare them for their release into the community, or for their transition into the adult estate. This group has been a particular concern for the IMB, as their numbers have grown due to the overcrowding in the adult estate (and the consequent need to hold back young people who would normally have transitioned at, or soon after, their 18th birthday). In August, 18-year-olds made up 34% of Cookham Wood's population, up from 23% in April.

8. Progression towards transfer or release

8.1 Case management and progression

Throughout this difficult year, IMB members have been greatly impressed by the confidence, commitment and creativity of Cookham Wood's Resettlement Team. The Board found that caseworkers were very accessible to the boys and to their parents and carers, and that each boy had a personal caseworker who he liked and trusted. The Team worked hard to foster joint working with the boys' Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) and was supported by two full-time social workers allocated by the Local Authority.

In May, the Resettlement Team won "best team" award at the national "Prison Officer of the Year" finals. This was in recognition of their ground-breaking initiatives over the previous year, including:

- A very substantial increase in the number and range of ROTL opportunities for boys approaching the end of their sentence. ROTL is accompanied day release for training and work experience and to strengthen family relationships. There were 478 ROTL opportunities for boys in the Cedar resettlement unit (5.1, above) in the six months January to June.
- Improved liaison with adult prisons, leading to approval for the transfer of appropriate 18-year-old boys to Category 4 open prisons.
- Open days for members of YOT teams in Cookham's catchment area, to build professional relationships and share knowledge and experience.
- Support for NOVUS (the education provider) to design and deliver an inspirational whole-day Careers Fair for the boys, which involved external speakers joining teachers in each classroom and talking to the boys about all aspects of employment and employability.

Regrettably, despite the energy and commitment of the Resettlement Team, the IMB found no improvement in the quality of sentence planning for boys who were not approaching release. This was partly due to circumstances outside Cookham Wood's control.

Three groups of boys seemed to the IMB to be largely marking time:

- Boys held on remand (49% of the population in April)
 - The substantial increase in the number of boys held on remand was due to delays in the Court system. In June, the IMB talked to a boy, three months short of his 19th birthday, who had been on remand awaiting sentence for 15 months.
- Boys over 18 years old (23% of the population in August)
 - The age of transition to adult prison was increased from 18 to 19 this year. Most of these boys were in limbo, awaiting transition.
- Foreign national boys (18% of the population in April)
 - If they are serving sentences of 12 months or more, foreign national boys are liable for deportation after their 18th birthday. It is, therefore, possible, under the Immigration Act, for an 18-year-old foreign national boy, released from Cookham Wood, to be immediately detained in an adult prison as an "immigration detainee". Boys released at age 17, if they have served a 12-month sentence, can be detained as "immigration detainees" as soon as they are aged 18.

Uncertainty about their immigration status has worried the boys and made the provision of resettlement planning, support and training for them very difficult. Prior to the pandemic, an immigration manager skilled in youth immigration cases and procedures held regular workshops and advice sessions at Cookham Wood for the foreign national boys. This stopped in 2020 and has not restarted: the Resettlement Team has been required to support the boys as best it can, albeit with advice from the immigration team at HMP Maidstone.

In the IMB's view, sentence plans were also greatly impoverished by the curtailment of intervention programmes for most of this year.

Intervention programmes are nationally approved behaviour management courses for individual boys and also for carefully selected groups of six boys, working with and learning from each other. They were designed to form part of boys' sentence plans and address motivation and purposeful activity ("A-Z"), anger and emotional self-management ("Feeling it"), and problem solving with others ("JETS").

At Cookham Wood, intervention programme delivery was the responsibility of a seven-person team of treatment managers and facilitators. At the conclusion of each group programme, parents and carers were invited to celebrations of the boys' achievements. The IMB has attended these celebrations: the pride of the boys and their parents and carers was palpable.

At the beginning of this reporting year (September), the interventions team was running one-to-one anger management programmes for six boys and a group "Feeling It" programme for a mixture of six boys from three different landings. Team members firmly believed that more group work was the way forward: "It only takes one person to open up and they all will."

At the end of the reporting year (August), with Cookham Wood experiencing continuous staff shortages and focusing on safety and delivery of the core day, there were only two intervention team members (programme manager +1), with no group intervention programmes planned or feasible.

8.2 Family contact

There was provision for social visits on two or three afternoons each week, with plenty of slots available for the boys' families. The IMB found that staff in the visits hall were cheerful and welcoming, but boys complained that visit sessions were often cancelled at a week's notice (because of a lack of officers). HMIP found that, in the 12 months from April 2022 to March 2023, 24% of social-visit sessions had been cancelled.

Each landing had quarterly "Family Days", extended visits for boys and their families with food, activities and the opportunity to chat informally among themselves and with staff. This initiative was a great success.

IMB members found that Cookham Wood was excellent at arranging private compassionate visits for families to see boys after particularly bad news or their conviction for an offence carrying a long custodial sentence.

8.3 Resettlement planning

Securing accommodation for boys unable to live with their parents on release remained a challenge for the Resettlement Team this year. Most boys did not get a confirmed address until seven days before their release and an unfortunate few only got one on their release day itself.

The work of the IMB

Board statistics

Recommended complement of Board members	12
Number of Board members at the start of the reporting period	7
Number of Board members at the end of the reporting period	7
Total number of visits to the establishment	202



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