



Ministry
of Justice

Rt Hon Edward Argar MP
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP The Verne
Portland
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5th March 2024

**HMP THE VERNE: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 AUGUST 2022 – 31 JULY 2023**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP The Verne. I commend the Board for carrying out its statutory role effectively, especially as you continued to operate with several vacancies and with a few members in training. I was deeply saddened to hear five prisoners died during the reporting year, and I would like to reassure the Board that recommendations made by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman are taken very seriously.

I have read your report with care. Thank you for recognising the extensive efforts undertaken by the Prison Group Director and Governor in seeking resettlement funding. It may be helpful to the Board if I briefly explain that across the adult male prison estate there are acute population pressures, predominately since September 2022. The remand population has grown to unprecedented levels because of the courts backlog and industrial action taken by the Criminal Bar Association and the impact is being felt in the training estate. The convicted unsentenced population has also had a direct impact on spaces in reception prisons. To address the ongoing pressures, prison Governors and Directors of Category B and Category C training prisons have been instructed to continue holding certain cohorts of men so spaces in the resettlement estate can be prioritised for use by reception prisons. Although HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) continues to strive to maintain offender flows as much as they possibly can, the priority is to maximise capacity in reception prisons to serve the courts. The request for flexibility should be mitigated in the long term by the continued ramp up of HMP Fosse Way and by other recent initiatives to relieve some of the pressure experienced in the prison population.

HMP The Verne was designed as a training function, rather than a resettlement facility and at this present time, I am afraid HMPPS is not in the position to embark on the future plans for the prison given the current challenges faced in the prison estate. I can assure the Board that the staff at HMP The Verne are wholly committed to doing their utmost to assist prisoners in preparation for a purposeful release and is focused on the national reconfiguration strategy. On 26 January 2024, 77% of the prisoner population in HMP The Verne were correctly in line with the function of the prison. A new Band 4 resettlement post has been created at a considerable cost but is beneficial to support prisoners with banking, accommodation, and employment matters. It is acknowledged that the number of prisoners at HMP The Verne eligible for an offending behaviour programme has continued to grow and thank you for drawing this to my attention. However, it is not unusual for prisoners to be transferred to another prison to enrol on an accredited programme. A proposal for programme funding for this financial year (2024/25) is currently under review, the Governor will keep you updated.

I note the probation staffing recruitment challenges, the Governor is working hard with South West Probation to address the staffing shortages and to support pre-release activity through support from

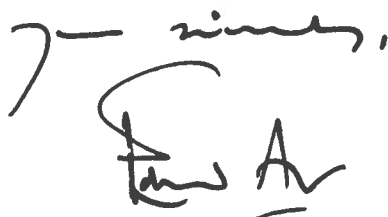
neighbouring establishments (HMP/YOI Portland) and employing agency staff. The Probation Service is confident that through joint working with the Pre-Release Team at HMP/YOI Portland it has sufficient operational capacity to identify resettlement needs and support necessary referrals for resettlement services, for the relatively small number of low and medium risk prisoners being released from HMP The Verne. High-risk prisoners will continue to have their resettlement needs addressed by community offender managers. The Hub model is embedded which provides outside support with offender management. I hope to reassure the Board that staffing levels is on the risk register and is being monitored through the monthly Local Leadership Forum. Moreover, resettlement performance and the outcomes for people leaving prisons across the South West is monitored monthly and where necessary action is taken to address ongoing delivery concerns.

Dorset Probation Delivery Unit is experiencing high vacancy levels within the community teams across the unit. Of the many actions to address this issue, includes funding to support an uplift in prison offender managers to offset the probation offender managers deficit and prioritising probation officer vacancies at HMP The Verne when deploying newly qualified probation officers (next qualifying cohorts to take place in June and December 2024). This will strengthen pre-release planning and enable stronger continuity of support from custody to the community. A detailed paper setting out HMP The Verne's current, potential, and aspirational staffing position was submitted to the Prison Group Director in January 2024 for review.

Despite the Board's concerns raised during the reporting year, it was encouraging to read that HMP The Verne is generally a safe prison. It was pleasing to note each wing has a violence reduction representative and the wings provide the largest number of paid jobs. I appreciate the Board for highlighting that at HMP The Verne there is a good atmosphere of trust and mutual respect between staff and prisoners. It was pleasing to note the Chaplaincy service is valuable and healthcare provides a high-quality service.

I note you have raised a local issue of concern in your report which the Governor will keep you updated.

I value enormously the contribution from members of Independent Monitoring Boards, and I am grateful for the work you do.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Argar', with a stylized flourish below it.

RT HON EDWARD ARGAR MP