



Ministry
of Justice

Lord Timpson
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP/YOI Stoke Heath
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28 January 2025

Dear Chair,

**HMP/YOI STOKE HEATH: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 MAY 2023 – 30 APRIL 2024**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP/YOI Stoke Heath, which I have read in detail. I would like to express my gratitude to you and your colleagues for your work in producing the report and for capturing such helpful observations, particularly as you were short of members during the reporting period.

I was saddened to hear of the deaths of three prisoners during the reporting period, one of which was in custody and two that occurred after release from HMP/YOI Stoke Heath. Any death is a tragedy, and I offer my condolences to their friends and family. I would like to reassure the Board that recommendations made by the PPO are taken very seriously.

I acknowledge the concerns you raise around the pressures on prison capacity. Unfortunately, we have had to implement crowding measures as a way of dealing with these pressures, but the safety and decency of our prisoners is always paramount. Prison conditions are continually monitored with places taken on and offline depending on safety, stability, staffing levels and maintenance. HM Prison and Probation (HMPPS) cell certification framework requires that cells are only shared where a Prison Group Director has assessed them to be of adequate size and condition to ensure that prisoners are accommodated safely.

We are committed to addressing the capacity pressures - on 12 July 2024, the Lord Chancellor announced a package of measures aimed at addressing these, which included a commitment to publish a 10-year prison capacity strategy. This will allow the department to consider longer term reform of the system, including decency across the estate and delivery of 20,000 additional prison places through the construction of a further four new prisons, as well as the expansion and refurbishment of the existing estate, including through temporary accommodation. These new places will have a positive impact on lowering the proportion of crowding in the prison estate.

I share the Board's concern around the impact that the rising population has on the ability to educate and provide skills for prisoners to reduce reoffending. Despite these challenges, HMP/YOI Stoke Heath has expanded their offending behaviour programme provision in recent years to become a specialist site for those with learning difficulties and challenges. They have had increased investment from a single delivery team in 2019/20 to now having three delivery teams. In terms of offending behaviour

programmes, HMPPS has developed a new programme Building Choices which is now accredited following completion of a Design Test phase and will replace many of the existing programmes. Building Choices is a single programme with different formats depending on whether the population demand is high, moderate with or without a learning disability or learning challenge. This programme will enable HMP/YOI Stoke Heath to better cater for their local demand for offending behaviour programmes with a planned full roll out in custody from July 2025. In relation to education, as the Board observed, there has been increased engagement and achievement rates in Maths and English in the year covered by this report. Enrolments in English showed an increase of 32% from the previous year, and Maths enrolments had doubled. The numbers achieving their qualification also increased by 45% in English and doubled in Maths.

I appreciate the Board's continued concerns about prisoners serving Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. On 5 September, the Lord Chancellor announced that the Government would implement reforms we supported in opposition to the IPP licence period in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. These commenced on 1 November, when the licences for 1,742 IPP offenders in the community were terminated. The remaining reforms will be implemented on 1 February 2025, when the reduced qualifying period for consideration of licence termination will see around 600 additional referrals made to the Parole Board.

The Government wants to continue to focus on the rehabilitation of those serving an IPP sentence through a refreshed and updated Action Plan that was published on 15 November 2024. The refreshed Action Plan puts a greater emphasis on effective frontline delivery and gives clearer guidance on how HMPPS's systems and processes can effectively support those serving an IPP sentence to maximise the chances of a sustainable release and eventual termination of their licence conditions. Whilst it is right that IPP sentences were abolished, I hope that you will understand that we cannot take any steps that would put the public at risk. I can assure you the Government is committed to working with organisations and campaign groups to ensure the appropriate course of action is taken to support those still serving IPP sentences.

Further to my comments above, I was very pleased to read in your report about the high level of prisoners achieving Maths and English qualifications and that these were the best results in HMP/YOI Stoke Heath's comparative prison group. This is an achievement that HMP/YOI Stoke Heath should be proud of as I know how important it is for prisoners to gain qualifications that will help them upon release. I was also encouraged to read about the constructive contact between staff and prisoners you observed on wings and the skills and experience of the officers.

I note you have raised some local issues of concern in your report which the Governor will continue to keep you aware of progress against these. HMPPS's comments in response to other issues raised in your report are set out in the attached annex.

The Lord Chancellor and I are grateful for the valuable role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards throughout the estate, and we greatly appreciate your continued hard work on behalf of HMP/YOI Stoke Heath.



Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending

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HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Prisoner's property

HMPPS note the Board's continuing concerns about the handling of prisoners' property. This is an area to which HMPPS is currently giving further attention. Careful consideration will be given to the findings in the recently received IMB national thematic report on how property loss impacts on prisoners, as well as those due to be received from Independent Prisoner Complaint Investigations in the coming months following a thematic review of the property complaints they have received in the last five years.

As noted by the Board, a common area for problems is when excess prisoner property is forwarded on when a prisoner transfers. It is therefore key that prisoners comply with volumetric control limits, since anything within those limits will transfer with them. HMPPS is focusing on what more can be done to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Framework and will continually monitor the level of complaints.

Safety

HMPPS recognises that safety at HMP/YOI Stoke Heath has deteriorated over the reporting year. On transfer in from another prison, the Searching Policy Framework states for male prisoners in closed prisons, the minimum searching requirement is a basic rub down search with handheld metal detector scan. For young offenders, this is the same except for those who are on the escape list, where the level of search must be individually risk assessed. HMP/YOI Stoke Heath takes a risk-based approach to searching new arrivals and in light of the increased risk, currently 100% of new arrivals are searched with the x-ray body scanner to prevent ingress.

Prison Offender Managers

The recruitment and retention of prison offender managers remain a priority across the Probation Service and HMPPS will continue to focus on its commitment to recruit at least 1000 new trainee Probation Officers across the financial year 2024/2025. Since June 2023 in the West Midlands, Band 4 Probation Officers increased by 54.45 (11%) and nationally between June 2023 and June 2024 there was an increase of 467 full time equivalent (2.3%) Probation Officers.

The 2023/2024 intake of Trainee Probation Officers are due to qualify by the end of 2025 and will begin to take on Probation Officer caseloads.