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Lord Timpson
Minister of State for
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PUBLICATION OF THE IMB NATIONAL ANNUAL REPORT 2024

Dear Elisabeth,

Thank you for your national annual report which was published on 19 June 2025. I am grateful for the vital independent scrutiny that continues to be provided by the Independent Monitoring Boards.

I am pleased that the report has noted some positive findings in relation to improvements in staffing levels and regime and has highlighted some positive initiatives at a local level. However, I acknowledge the challenges that the prison system continues to face. We inherited a prison system in crisis, where prisons were on the edge of collapse. This is evident from the concerns raised in your report, which I take incredibly seriously.

To tackle this, we have embarked on a sweep of flagship reforms to the Criminal Justice System. These are guided by a number of landmark reviews, such as the Independent Review of the Criminal Courts, led by Sir Brian Leveson, and the Independent Sentencing Review, led by David Gauke, as well as Jennifer Rademaker's HMPPS Professional Standards & Behaviour Review, of which we have accepted the recommendations.

This Government has developed evidence-based plans and investing accordingly to address the issues raised in this report and I am committed to driving forward the changes needed. In the annex to this letter, I have outlined the action already being taken and further action we plan to take to tackle these issues.

Thank you again for the invaluable work that you and the local Boards do across the prison estate and youth custody service.



Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending

Annex

Managing population challenges

We are building prisons at an exceptional rate, but the prison population is rising too fast. The Lord Chancellor has been clear that we simply cannot build our way out, so we must reform sentencing. We are aiming for a sustainable solution to the prison capacity crisis, to ensure there are always enough places for the courts to be able to send people to custody in order to keep the public safe. To address this, in October 2024, we launched the Independent Sentencing Review, led by David Gauke, to ensure we are never forced to rely on the emergency release of prisoners. On 22 May, the Lord Chancellor accepted in principle the majority of David Gauke's recommendations. The major reforms proposed include:

- **An “Earned Progression” model for standard determinate sentences.** Introducing a new three-part model for standard sentences – prison, intensive supervision then a final stage where offenders can still be recalled to prison if a new offence is committed. Offenders will be on a combination of custody and post-custody supervision. 33% is the earliest any prisoner can be released, with those serving sentences for more serious sexual and violent offences spending at least 50% in custody.
- **Expansion of the range and use of community punishment and increased probation support.** This will likely include the expansion of tagging, curfews and exclusion zones, alongside new unpaid work orders. To support this, the Probation Service will receive up to £700 million by the final year of this spending review. Furthermore, there will be an expansion of intensive supervision courts to tackle the root causes of crime.
- **Reducing the use of short custodial sentences.** Introducing a presumption in favour of courts suspending custodial sentences of one year or less for adult offenders unless there are exceptional circumstances that would justify not passing a suspended sentence, or in cases where a previous court order has been breached.

The safety and decency of our prisoners is paramount. We continually monitor prison conditions, and take places on and offline depending on safety, stability, staffing levels and maintenance needs. We will not take decisions that create unacceptable risks to prison safety – but it is right that we had to explore every measure to deal with capacity pressures, as the public would expect, while we continue with delivering new prison places.

In prisons where we have crowding in place, HMPPS have a cell certification process that ensures that use of cells is subject to a formal assessment of safety and decency. This requires that cells are only shared where a Prison Group Director deems them to be of adequate size and condition.

A number of measures have also been put in place to manage capacity pressures, including Operation Safeguard, SDS40, and expanding the use of the open estate (Category D prisons). Operation Safeguard (deactivated on 3 June 2025) allowed

HMPPS and police forces to jointly plan which police cells may be required to hold offenders to help meet the demand on prison places and prevent undue disruption to frontline policing. It did not involve sending prisoners to Immigration Removal Centres. Amending the automatic release point for eligible standard determinate sentences to 40% under SDS40, allowed the probation service to prepare and put release plans in place for offenders and ensure more structured implementation of licence conditions. Allowing less serious, risk-assessed offenders, who are within 24 months of the end of their sentence to move to the open estate enables the efficient use of all available spaces across the estate.

Safety concerns: self-harm and violence

Population pressures and the capacity crisis have presented persistent challenges to safety and stability within the prison estate. Nevertheless, we are working hard to ensure prisons are as safe as possible.

We recognise the high rates of self-harm across and are addressing this through the ACCT (Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork) case management process, which provides tailored support based on individual risks and needs. All frontline staff receive suicide and self-harm prevention training, with additional specific training for those in key risk assessment and case management roles. We also partner with Samaritans to support post-incident response and deliver the Listener scheme, where selected prisoners are trained to offer peer support.

Violence reduction remains a priority. Those who are assessed as high risk of violence are supported through a personalised case management process to address their specific risk factors. Staff are trained to understand and manage the drivers of violence, including awareness of gang-related and harmful group behaviour.

We recognise the link between experienced staff and lower assault rates. To improve retention, we have introduced a number of measures including a toolkit to help Governors address the drivers of attrition.

Disproportionate use of force

I welcome the IMB's continued scrutiny of the use of force across the prison estate and share their concerns regarding the disproportionate application and inconsistent oversight of force, particularly in relation to young adults, neurodivergent individuals, Muslim prisoners, and Black prisoners. We are already taking forward a range of actions to address these issues by improving data capability, updating policy and training, supporting governance and local assurance processes, and improving data analysis linking injury data to use of force records.

These actions reflect our commitment to ensuring that force is used only when absolutely necessary, proportionate, and with full accountability. We recognise that reducing the need for force is not only a matter of policy but of culture, training, and trust. The IMBs' findings reinforce the urgency of this work, and we will continue to

engage with oversight bodies and stakeholders to drive improvements in practice and culture across the estate.

Safety & security concerns: drugs and other illicit items

The availability of drugs and other illicit items within prisons continues to pose safety and security risks across the estate, impacting the wellbeing and safety of both staff and prisoners.

Prisons have a range of physical, technological and procedural countermeasures to prevent the smuggling of contraband, such as drugs, which can fuel violence and instability. This includes equipment such as X-ray body scanners and baggage scanners, airport-style Enhanced Gate Security, and drug trace detection machines, enabling the routine searching of prisoners, staff, visitors, and prison mail. HMPPS' Counter Corruption Unit aims to prevent corruption by delivering training and taking action against the small minority of staff who engage in corrupt behaviour, often as a result of prisoner manipulation.

We are working hard to deter, detect and disrupt the illegal use of drones across the estate. This includes deploying physical security countermeasures, exploring technology, exploiting intelligence, exploring additional legislation, upskilling staff, and working across Government and with international partners on this global issue. Additionally, HMPPS' dedicated Serious and Organised Crime Operations Team work with the police, National Crime Agency, HMRC and others to support criminal proceedings in prison and community settings.

In addition to tackling the ingress of drugs, we also need to address the demand. Supporting prisoners with drug or alcohol problems is vital to reduce reoffending and improve the stability of our prisons, and we recognise that there is more to do. We work in close partnership with NHS England (NHSE) to ensure that prisoners can access the treatment they need.

We are working to improve the quality and consistency of our Incentivised Substance Free Living (ISFL) units by providing comprehensive guidance and support to meet the required standard. We work with prisons, treatment providers, and security departments to ensure the appropriate placement of prisoners on our ISFLs and Drug Recovery Wings to maintain the integrity of the recovery culture.

We are aware that in some prisons, Governors are having to make difficult decisions on how to balance the drug testing regime with other pressures and priorities. We are exploring the challenges to the implementation or effectiveness of drug testing, including through our recent study on drug misuse in prisons, which explored staff and prisoners' experience of drug testing.

Poor living conditions

We acknowledge the impact overcrowding and capacity pressures have had on the living conditions of prisoners. General maintenance projects were paused by the

previous Government due to the increased prison population; only allowing the most essential maintenance work to take place.

This Government is investing up to £300 million in 2025-26, to keep prisons safe and secure. This is an increase in spending on 2024-25, which will support essential repairs, ongoing maintenance, and efforts to minimise future cell losses. The Prison Estate Condition Survey Programme (PECSP) helps predict the necessary maintenance spend over the next few years. This helps us to plan and prioritise future maintenance work.

Staffing levels

Ensuring sufficient and skilled frontline staffing is fundamental to maintaining safe, secure, and rehabilitative prisons. As of 31 March 2025, there are 22,737 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Band 3-5 Prison officers in post, with national staffing at 96% of the national Target Staffing Figure (TSF) (when using hours adjusted FTE). This is an expected decrease of 878 FTE (3.7%) since 31 March 2024, due to actively managing down surplus staff at prisons where we had over-recruited. Substantive recruitment efforts will continue at all sites where vacancies exist or are projected, with targeted interventions applied to those prisons with the most need.

Although the national staffing position is stable, retaining and upskilling new staff remains a focus. The resignation rate has improved over time, with a 0.4% decrease compared to the previous year to a rate of 8.2% for the year ending 31 March 2025 and a marked improvement from 11.5% in September 2022. However, as of 31 March 2025, 37.5 % of Band 3-5 prison officers had less than three years of experience. We are aiming to upskill staff through the 'Enable Programme', a dedicated HMPPS workforce transformation programme, which aims to support the creation of conditions for change in prisons.

Given the challenges of prison work, we provide extensive mental health support, including a 24-hour helpline, confidential counselling, and online wellbeing services. Our Trauma Risk Management practitioners and Care Teams provide further support following any incidents while on duty. The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) offers confidential 24/7 telephone helpline for counselling and provides a range of wellbeing and health promotion workshops. EAP also delivers reflective sessions which are a proactive mental ill health preventative intervention, which focus on the impact of traumatic events at work, helping employees to develop coping strategies and prevent an adverse impact on their professional and private life.

Unfair treatment of prisoners from minoritised ethnicities and religions

We are committed to tackling disparities within prisons and probation, including those faced by staff. HMPPS have focused on these issues and are seeking to address them, such as using the Prison Performance Tool, which includes a measure of racial disproportionality. This increases transparency and ensures change in frontline practice is evidence-led. We have also increased staff diversity, with ethnic minority

representation in prisons and probation rising over the last three years, from 11.8% in December 2021 to 15.6% in December 2024.

We launched the HMPPS Disparities Unit (HDU) as a national centre of inclusion expertise supporting senior leaders to build capability and address pervasive and persistent problems. The HDU led on developing three core policies, Equality Analysis, Advancing Equality for Staff and Advancing Equality for Offenders. The HDU are also implementing the four key recommendations on the Discrimination Incident Reporting Forms (DIRF) process, namely introducing new governance, improving training for case investigators, enhancing external scrutiny, and improving data.

We have introduced the HMPPS National Inclusion Priorities. This small set of data-driven priorities provides national, regional and local focus to improving outcomes in areas of greatest disparity, hold senior leaders to account, share best practice and build a better understanding of what works.

Lack of purposeful activity

We know that purposeful activity can help to enable safe and decent prisons and have a transformative effect on reoffending rates, with in-prison education and finding employment after release both known to reduce the chance of reoffending by up to 9 percentage points. This is why the Government committed to working with prisons to improve access to purposeful activity in its manifesto and is actively exploring the best approaches to do so.

We have seen some improvements in attendance of education in workshops. We will see new prison education contracts go live in October this year, and have already implemented the new Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance contracts across the estate. We continue to look at ways to improve reading and literacy rates as a key priority. Every prison now has a reading strategy and achievement rates for English and Maths qualifications have increased from previous years.

We have continued to utilise key employment roles across all 93 resettlement prisons to prepare prisoners for work on release, match them to jobs, and provide critical ID documents to secure work and a home. We have seen outcomes stabilising at over 30% for prison leavers in employment within 6 months post-release for the year to March 2024. Prisoners across the open and closed estate are now able to access an apprenticeship programme, and we are working to increase these numbers. We have also been testing the Future Skills Programme in several prisons to further improve employment outcomes.

In January 2025, we launched regional Employment Councils, bringing businesses together for the first time with prisons, probation and the Department of Work and Pensions to support offenders in the community. This builds on the work of Employment Advisory Boards, linking prisons with business leaders to ensure prisoners have the skills and training employers need to meet labour market demands.

Prisoners' property concerns

I am conscious of the continuing issues around prisoners' property and grateful for the work IMBs have done in highlighting these. I want to thank you again for the helpful thematic report you provided last year on how property loss impacts prisoners. In addition to your report, Independent Prisoner Complaint Investigations have undertaken a thematic review of the property complaints they have received in the last five years.

Since receiving the reports, HMPPS has amended the Prisoners' Property Policy Framework and written to Governors and other senior leaders to remind them of key property handling points. This includes the importance of ensuring compliance with volumetric control limits. In line with the concern expressed in your thematic about remand prisoners being particularly affected by property loss on transfer from prison to court, the Framework now clarifies that staff must sign the property card to confirm property accompanying prisoners leaving a prison for any reason has been checked. The cell clearance certificate has also been annexed to the Framework to help address the concerns raised about staff completing the correct form. A reminder was also issued that old property cards must be retained. Consultation will take place with prisons over the coming months on further areas raised in the reports. HMPPS will continue to work closely with IMBs as it explores options to tackle issues in relation to handling prisoners' property.

Support for prisoners with complex mental health and social care needs

Together with NHSE, we will continue to improve services in prison to ensure that people have access to timely and effective mental health care that is tailored to their needs. This is reflected in the National Partnership Agreement on Health and Social Care in England, published in February 2023.

All people in prison, including those held on remand, have access to integrated mental health services commissioned by NHSE, including a range of treatments and interventions set out in the national service specification for mental health care in prisons. NHSE are also refreshing this service specification, following their national mental health needs analysis of all prisons, to ensure these services are tailored to the needs of people in prison.

We recognise that prison is not the right environment for people with severe mental illness and vulnerable people in prison, who may require treatment in hospital under the Mental Health Act, continue to experience delays. The Mental Health Bill, introduced to Parliament on 6 November 2024, includes several flagship reforms to improve access to mental health care and treatment, including, but not limited to, provisions to:

- Introduce a new statutory 28-day time limit for transfers from prison and other places of detention to hospital. This time limit, together with operational

improvements, aims to reduce unnecessary delays and deliver swifter access to treatment.

- Stop courts temporarily detaining people with severe mental illness in prison as a 'place of safety' whilst awaiting a hospital bed for treatment or assessment under the Mental Health Act; and
- End the use of remand for own protection under the Bail Act where the court's sole concern is the defendant's mental health.

We recognise that operational improvements are required to ensure the statutory 28-day time limit is implemented safely and effectively. We are working with the Department of Health and Social Care, NHSE, the Welsh Government, the Home Office and the Youth Custody Service (YCS) to create an implementation plan which sets out the necessary operational improvements to fulfil our commitment to commencing these reforms 18-24 month post-Royal Assent. We are also working closely with our health and justice partners to support the recently established Mental Health and Justice Strategic Advisory Group. This group will improve oversight and scrutiny of the transfer process, as well as identifying and delivering solutions to address common causes of delays.

Inadequate resettlement work and preparation for release

A critical element of reducing reoffending is ensuring offenders leaving prison can access the necessary support to resettlement effectively into the community. This includes making sure someone has a home, family links where appropriate, access to healthcare, a job or further education, and/or access to benefits.

Community probation practitioners coordinate the overall rehabilitation of an offender, supported by pre-release teams. They work proactively with all prisoners to ensure the right support is available prior to release to address resettlement needs such as accommodation, employment, dependency and recovery, personal wellbeing and finance, benefit and debt. Pre-release teams will identify and address any immediate resettlement for all people in prison, including tailored support for those on remand. This government has committed to strengthen release planning by creating pre-release plans for those leaving custody, to ensure the early identification of individual needs and robust plans are in place to address these. We are developing a digital tool to bolster this process, enabling staff to organise, plan and record key resettlement information and services needed to support prison leavers on release, and address their known drivers of repeat offending. This is currently being tested in nine prisons and three probation regions.

Support is provided to individuals both pre- and post-release through prison-based services and Commissioned Rehabilitative Services (CRS). CRS providers apply their specialist knowledge to support individual accommodation needs and work alongside prison teams and probation to prevent homelessness on release.

We are reviewing the design and commissioning of the rehabilitative services to ensure our future CRS provision more effectively delivers services to people leaving

custody and aligns with wider services to best meet people's resettlement and rehabilitative needs. Future services will be commissioned as combined services, bringing together support for different rehabilitative needs (such as housing, employment, and support with money issues like debt). They will also include specialist support to help build and maintain positive relationships within their families and communities, developing new lifestyles away from crime and substance misuse.

We are also expanding the Probation Service's community accommodation service to support more people at risk of homelessness each year. We are working closely with MHCLG and other departments to develop a new cross-government strategy to end homelessness. HMPPS has introduced Strategic Housing Specialists across all prison groups to reduce the number of individuals released into homeless. At the Governor's discretion, a payment (to a genuine accommodation provider) of up to £50 can also be provided to help the prisoner secure a release address. CRS Accommodation (men) and Women's Services have also been extended to include remanded and unsentenced people in prison. Additionally, those who have been on remand, subsequently convicted and released under probation supervision, are eligible for Community Accommodation Service Tier 3 (CAS-3) temporary housing.

More broadly, we are reforming sentencing for short sentences and recalls, to respond to shifts around offender risk, in line with the recommendations of the Independent Sentencing Review.

Under 18 Youth Offender Institutions (YOIs)

YOI performance concerns

We recognise that the current performance in our public YOIs is not where we need it to be. To drive performance improvements, the Youth Custody Service (YCS) has developed clear roadmaps to effective practice in partnership with NHSE, education providers and psychology services in the public sector YOIs. These focus on critical outcomes, such as safety, behaviour management, and education. Every YOI site also has a plan with clear performance metrics to help drive change and improve relationships between children and staff.

Rise in levels of self-harm, violence and weapons

The rate of self-harm in the Children and Young People Secure Estate has been steadily increasing since records began in April 2014. However, in the most recent reporting quarter, we saw a 21% decrease in self-harm rates when comparing the 3 months to December 2024 to the same period a year prior.

Despite making up around 1.9% of the total average population over the 12 months ending December 2024, girls were responsible for almost half of all self-harm incidents (994 incidents out of a total 2,030). In November last year, Minister Dakin commissioned an independent review into the current placement options for girls in the youth secure estate, led by Susannah Hancock. The review has now been concluded, and the final report was published on Tuesday 4 March 2025. Having not

placed girls at HMYOI Wetherby for several months, we announced our acceptance of the recommendation to end the placement of girls in the YOI sector, and officials are now examining the findings carefully and will set out the response to these recommendations in due course.

We know levels of violence in the YOIs are too high and are committed to keeping everyone on these sites safe, both children in custody and the staff who care for them. Staff are trained and supported to develop the skills and resilience to build mutual trust and improve relationships with children to better resolve conflict, reducing the need for restrictive interventions. This includes delivering our Framework for Integrated Care, known as 'SECURE STAIRS', delivered in partnership with NHSE. It is integral to improving safety within the youth estate. Work is also being done to tackle local drivers of violence, including use of weapons at each site through local safety strategies. We have put in place dedicated conflict resolution practitioners to repair harm caused by conflict between individuals and groups. We are also investing in education provision to give young people access to skills that help them towards better choices and outcomes.

The YCS has placed '*What makes a child or young person feel safe in custody?*' as the first priority for upcoming research, to better understand why children create, carry and use weapons and whether there are factors, such as neurodiversity, which impact on this.

Education concerns

The YCS is driving improvements in the quality of education provision by working alongside subject matter experts, Governors, and education providers to develop broad and balanced curriculums. Many children and young people in custody have had a disrupted education before coming into the YCS and may have spent years out of school prior to their admission.

We also opened the first Secure School last year which is a first-of-its-kind school with security, providing alternative placement options for children aged 12 to 18 with a fully integrated care, learning and health and well-being offer.

Introduction of PAVA in the youth estate

I am very clear that the introduction of PAVA will not reduce violence. Its aim is to reduce the risk of a serious or life-threatening injury from violence against both staff and children, allowing staff to safely bring violent incidents to a conclusion. Those in our care have the right to life first and foremost, as well as our wider duty to protect the rights of the child. I can assure you that our focus is on improving the safety of children and young people in custody, as well as the staff who supervise and care for them. This decision has not been taken lightly and is responding to the serious risks we have identified.

I understand the concerns that PAVA could be used disproportionately against Black and racially minoritised children and young people. However, we have been very

careful to address this in the policy, which includes only having a selected group of staff who are permitted to use PAVA, as well as training and briefings that focuses heavily on the risk of disproportionality and very rigorous scrutiny and oversight.

The YCS and HMPPS will review all uses of PAVA under this policy. Minister Dakin has personally asked to be provided with weekly and monthly reporting on every use of PAVA being drawn or used. This will include data on the characteristics and ethnicity of those children and young people. The host and home Local Authorities for the child will be notified of any use and will be able to offer further review or scrutiny. The Independent Restraint Review Panel will also provide oversight of every PAVA use and will provide their findings to the Local Authority, Youth Justice Board and HM Inspectorate of Prisons, as well as the YCS, which will also be included in their annual report to Ministers which is published externally. Any concerns regarding any inappropriate use of PAVA will be subject to investigation, referral through safeguarding procedures, and further action where required.

Ultimately, PAVA is only authorised for use in exceptional circumstances where appropriate, proportionate, and necessary in response to an immediate threat of serious harm. PAVA use has been authorised for a 12-month period and will be subject to further Ministerial review at that point.