

Lord Timpson OBE
Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending

15 December 2025

Dear Minister

Serious concerns regarding the impact of opening and early operation of HMP Millsike

I am writing to you on behalf of the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) at HMP Millsike to formally escalate our serious and ongoing concerns regarding the impact of the prison's opening and early operational phase on the safety, wellbeing and humane treatment of prisoners.

The Board recognises and wishes to record that staff on site are working extremely hard in challenging circumstances. Our concerns are not directed at the efforts of individual staff. Rather, they relate to systemic issues inherent in the current approach to opening new prisons, which, in our assessment, is having a significant and unjustifiable negative impact on prisoners at Millsike.

Lack of strategic recognition of the impact of new prison openings

The Board is concerned that there appears to be insufficient recognition at senior levels of the profound destabilising effect that opening a new prison has on prisoners. One of the major prompts of this letter, aside from the serious concerns we must raise, is that the Board have been informed that it is accepted within the MoJ that new prisons may take three to four years to stabilise. From our perspective, this is deeply troubling. Prisoners should not be expected to bear the consequences of prolonged operational immaturity, particularly where this results in restricted regimes, compromised safety and inconsistent access to basic services.

Whilst the creation of new prison places is positive in principle, it must be matched by a realistic and sustainable staffing model. The transfer of experienced staff from other establishments risks destabilising those prisons, whilst newly recruited staff inevitably require considerable time to gain the confidence, skills and experience necessary to work safely and effectively in a custodial environment. For instance, staff reported surprise when in early months they asked prisoners to help distribute canteen orders, only to later receive complaints at items going missing.

At Millsike, the cumulative impact of this inexperience is being felt across almost every aspect of prison life, and we set out some detail within this letter, although we cannot list all our concerns in such a document.

Regime instability and operational failures

HMP Millsike currently has four houseblocks open (out of six), accommodating approximately 850 prisoners across two main location houseblocks and two PCOSO houseblocks and we do receive positive feedback regarding the physical standards of the accommodation and facilities.

Whilst the initial regime upon opening did provide for a good duration of time out of cell, particularly in the evenings for association, a new restricted regime has meant major curtailment. The Board consistently observes an inability to maintain even the restricted regime reliably and consistently, with some prisoners spending up to 23 hours per day in their cell, especially at weekends. The inability to adhere to a regime has been a source of significant frustration for prisoners since opening, as they do not know if, or when, they may be unlocked.

Roll checks have, at times, taken between four and five hours to complete. The consequences are severe: prisoners are locked in their cells for extended periods, meals are served late, and prisoners regularly miss healthcare appointments, work, education and visits. Staff are also adversely affected, as officers are unable to take breaks until roll checks are completed, further compounding fatigue and stress.

Safety and security concerns

The Board has serious concerns about safety and security. Members are still observing, some eight months after opening, doors and gates being left open, inconsistent gate security and we currently only visit in pairs due to feeling unsafe on the wings, sentiments which are also felt by some healthcare staff. These issues pose obvious risks to the public, prisoners, staff and visitors alike.

Reception, induction and property

The reception area is inadequate for the volume of prisoners being processed, with insufficient seating and lengthy waiting times. Prisoners typically spend an average of four and a half hours in reception, with some remaining there for up to eight hours. Those arriving mid-afternoon or later may not reach a wing until late evening. The induction process has been widely criticised by prisoners as involving long periods of inactivity.

Prisoners have waited weeks for property to arrive from previous establishments, followed by further delays due to insufficient staff in Millsike to process it. The lack of storage for excess property has resulted in property being returned to previous establishments, preventing prisoners from accessing items or passing them to family at visits. We have recently written to the Head of Prison Contracts Group regarding this matter.

Suicide, self-harm and ACCT management

The level of self-harm at Millsike is high, with a significant number of open ACCTs and the Board is particularly concerned about inconsistent ACCT management.

ACCT observations are not always carried out, and ACCT documents themselves are at times going missing. Cell bells have reportedly gone unanswered for over an hour at times due to staff shortages.

Of grave concern is that prisoners on constant watch have still been able to self-harm and make ligatures. Some prisoners on constant watch have stated that they do not feel safe and have complained about their treatment.

Use of force, violence and illicit items

Levels of use of force are high, with frequent reports of batons being drawn. The Board has concerns about the proposed rollout of PAVA given the inexperience of staff. Numerous use of force reports remain outstanding, and worryingly healthcare staff are not always informed of incidents.

Prisoner-on-prisoner assaults are reported to be high, and PCOSO prisoners frequently raise concerns about the behaviour of main location prisoners towards them, even from a distance.

Drugs are easily available within Millsike, and the instances of prisoners found under the influence are numerous. Indeed, prisoners are reporting they are easily making illicit items from items supplied by the prison, such as floor cleaner.

Food and canteen

The Board continues to receive numerous complaints about the quality, quantity and timeliness of food. Portions are reported to be small, meals are often served late, sometimes as late as 8pm, with the food frequently having been left standing for many hours on end, raising concerns about temperature and safety, which are further compounded by unclean food trolleys.

Initially, prisoners were not provided with prison clothing or basic hygiene and cleaning materials, requiring them to rely on canteen purchases. Which when combined with the higher canteen costs for fresh produce, compared to public sector prisons, placed a significant burden on prisoner finance. Although some of these issues have been resolved, their persistence for many months following opening is concerning.

Segregation

Prisoners in the segregation unit, which is often full, have reported regime failings to the Board, such as not receiving any exercise for four days due to staff shortages.

This is troubling, especially given the high number of prisoners in the segregation unit on an open ACCT, for whom outdoor access and exercise may be particularly beneficial.

Healthcare, mental health and social care

Prisoners regularly report being unable to attend healthcare, mental health and substance misuse appointments due to unlock failures. There are severe delays in medication distribution, which raise significant concerns for time-critical medication, and hospital appointments are routinely being missed. Mental health waiting lists of up to six weeks have been reported, largely due to a shortage of mental health nurses.

Disabled prisoners have raised concerns about the availability of wheelchairs and evacuation arrangements to support them in an emergency. Indeed, officers are sometimes unclear about the support some prisoners require. This could be viewed as only a matter of time until something tragic occurs.

Staff-prisoner relationships and complaints

Many prisoners do not know who their key worker is, and report having had no contact with them. The Board has received repeated reports, and observed directly via body cam footage, instances of unacceptable staff language and behaviour. Prisoners frequently express a lack of confidence in staff, who are often unable to answer basic queries.

Despite the use of in-cell tablets, there are significant delays in responding to complaints, with some taking over two months. Where complaints relate to previous establishments, there is often no follow-up, leaving prisoners in prolonged uncertainty.

Vocational training and family contact

Initially there were significant problems with the supply of essential items for workshops, resulting in very limited vocational places. Whilst these issues are largely resolved, ongoing regime instability and staffing shortages mean that prisoners are frequently unable to benefit fully from vocational work. Prisoners report, for example, arriving at workshops up to 70 minutes late and being collected early, substantially reducing productive activity. This does not support rehabilitation or reflect the expectations of a normal working day and also risks undermining contractual arrangements with external providers. Prisoners further report that wages are routinely paid late.

The Board has also received numerous complaints regarding family contact. Visits are frequently shortened due to delays in escorting prisoners from the wings, and in some cases cancelled altogether. In one instance, a prisoner's family had travelled from London for a visit that did not take place. Prisoners have also raised concerns about main location and PCOSO prisoners attending visits at the same time.

Conclusion and request for additional oversight

Taken together, these issues paint a deeply concerning picture of the early operation of HMP Millsike and the human cost of current new prison opening models. The Board does not consider it acceptable that prisoners should endure prolonged

periods of instability, restricted regimes and compromised safety as an implicit and accepted consequence of expanding the prison estate.

We therefore request additional oversight of the operational model for new prisons, including HMP Millsike, and would welcome clarity on what additional support, scrutiny and resources will be put in place to ensure that prisoners are treated safely, fairly and humanely during the critical early years of operation.

We are not reporting these matters to you lightly and would ask that at your earliest convenience, accepting the many demands on your time, that you visit HMP Millsike to meet with us and discuss these matters in more depth.

Yours Sincerely,

[REDACTED]
IMB Millsike Chair

Copied to:

Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice,
Justice Select Committee,
Director HMP Millsike,
Controller HMP Millsike,
Head of Prison Contracts Group,
IMB National Chair,
IMB Chief Executive Officer,
IMB Policy team