



Ministry  
of Justice

Lord Timpson  
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board  
HMP Altcourse  
Brookfield Drive  
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20 February 2026

Dear Chair,

**HMP ALT COURSE: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT  
FOR 1 JULY 2024 – 30 JUNE 2025**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP Altcourse. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your continued hard work, particularly as you operated with approximately half of the recommended complement of members for the duration of the reporting period. Annual Reports provide invaluable insight into our establishments, and your efforts are sincerely appreciated.

I was extremely saddened to hear that five of the seven deaths in custody during the reporting year were apparently self-inflicted. Every death in our care is tragic and deeply upsetting for all those impacted. I am grateful for your update on responses to subsequent Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) recommendations and whilst disappointing that the PPO has had to make a repeat recommendation, I am offered some assurance that action has now been taken and that a further recommendation has been acted upon. I trust that any subsequent PPO recommendations will be treated with the upmost importance.

I am pleased to update you that the Mental Health Bill received Royal Assent on 18 December 2025. The Ministry of Justice is working closely with NHS England to support the national Mental Health and Justice Strategic Advisory Group which is focused on meeting the requirements of the new legislation and will report directly to Parliament. The group will have oversight of the transfer process and brings together key partners to identify and deliver solutions to address common causes of delays. We envisage the operational improvements necessary to fulfil the new legislation will be implemented within 18-24 months.

I appreciate the Boards is again raising concerns around the impact of prisoners being located outside their home area. I recognise the pressure our prisons are being put under as a result of the capacity crisis this Government inherited. Both the Independent Review of Criminal Courts and the Sentencing Bill will have an impact on the prison population and offender flows. The HM Prisons and Probation Service (HMPPS) Estate Configuration Review will consider the implications of the Bill post-Royal Assent and the review when available. This will inform future requirements for the entire prison estate at a strategic level, including offender flows and the functions of prisons.

The early part of 2025 saw a strategic reconfiguration of several North West prisons, including HMP Altcourse, resulting in a stabilisation of reception processes, improved overall flow management, and no prisoners arriving at HMP Altcourse after the contractual cut-off time.

Whilst successful, the revised catchment area presented challenges with gang affiliations and local tensions. Sodexo is actively addressing this by enhancing the early days in custody phase, with a focus on proactive risk identification and intervention. Measures include: peer support programmes to help integrate new arrivals; targeted keywork sessions to identify and manage potential conflicts early; and improved intelligence sharing between reception and residential units. Nationally, reducing violence in prisons is a key priority and we are working hard to make prisons as safe as possible. Whilst it is not possible to eliminate all risks of harm, we continue our efforts on a range of measures to address the levels of violence in prison. Prisoners in overcrowded cells are 19% more likely to be involved in an assault and, alongside sentence reform, we are tackling this with a commitment to build 14,000 new prison places by 2031.

As courts are scheduled to run until 1630 or 1700, it is inevitable that numerous prisoners will arrive at reception prisons between 18:00 and 19:00. Despite this, a key performance measure of prisoners arriving within 30 minutes prior to the latest reception time is showing that this is being consistently achieved around 95% of the time. I do recognise that occasionally prisoners may be delivered to reception prisons outside the agreed latest time for a variety of reasons. The transport contractor will continue to work closely with HMPPS to drive further improvements.

In respect of the handling of prisoners' property, following consultation a revised version of the Prisoners' Property Policy Framework was published on 17 November 2025 and includes additional guidance on the forwarding of excess property together with other issues identified as common areas of difficulty. HMPPS has also reminded Governors and other senior leaders of key points around property handling, including the importance of prisoners complying with volumetric limits. I can assure the Board that HMPPS remains committed to improving the management of prisoners' property and considers possible areas for improvement on an ongoing basis.

I have noted that some of Sodexo's planned initiatives did not come to fruition. Whilst disappointing, it was encouraging to note the numerous positives cited in your report. Particularly of note is the introduction of 'bite-size' courses in English and Maths so that short-term prisoners can complete more courses, and also the PICS (prisoner in-cell solution) initiative that is providing numerous benefits to prisoners. I was also encouraged to receive your comments about the good work of the resettlement hub which is helping to reduce recalls and the introduction of the User Voice charity.

Issues raised for the attention of the Director will be addressed locally and the Director will continue to keep you aware of progress as work continues. HMPPS comments in response to other issues raised in your report are set out in the attached annex.

The Deputy Prime Minister and I are deeply appreciative of Independent Monitoring Boards' important contribution throughout the estate, and we thank you for your ongoing commitment on behalf of HMP Altcourse.

Yours sincerely,



**Lord Timpson**

**Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending**

## HMP ALT COURSE: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 JULY 2024 – 30 JUNE 2025

### HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

#### **Food Budgets**

Public Sector Prisons food budgets are reviewed annually as part of the budget-setting process. Prisoner food budgets have increased incrementally over the last few years, rising from £2.18 per prisoner per day in 2022–23 to £3.01 in 2024–25. Budgets for 2025–26 have been increased in line with inflation funding received by HMPPS. Governors retain the flexibility to manage their overall budget and may supplement food provision if needed.

Directors of private prisons have the flexibility to set their own Daily Food Allowance if they wish. The current daily allowance at HMP Altcourse is £3.65 per prisoner per day, an increase from £2.98 on the 1 September 2025 and representing an approximate 44% increase since contract commencement. Whilst this is an increase, the Board's continued concerns regarding the adequacy of the daily food allowance is acknowledged. Sodexo recognises cost pressures and consequently increased its internal spend on prisoner food and is committed to maintaining food quality and portion standards despite economic challenges. It is important to reaffirm that the food budget allocation at HMP Altcourse remains the responsibility of Sodexo as the contracted provider: the contract provides flexibility for the provider to manage food costs within its operational model. HMPPS will continue to monitor delivery standards through routine contract management processes, including quality checks and prisoner feedback mechanisms.

#### **Enlarging Kitchen Facilities**

The Board's concerns regarding kitchen capacity have been noted. The operational capacity for HMP Altcourse has on average remained the same for the last 10 years and there has not been a large population increase. HMPPS continues to accept the catering services' subject matter expert's professional opinion that the existing kitchen infrastructure has adequate capacity to manage the current population and operational requirements. While the kitchen was originally designed for a smaller population, Sodexo has implemented operational adjustments to meet increased demand. Consequently, there are no plans to enlarge or significantly remodel the kitchen. HMPPS' position remains consistent with that outlined in last year's response.

Whilst there are no plans to enlarge or remodel the facilities, the local contract management team has identified some maintenance concerns, such as flooring and equipment issues, which are being addressed through Sodexo's planned maintenance regime. These matters are typical for a large operational kitchen and do not compromise its ability to deliver services effectively.