



Ministry
of Justice

Lord Timpson
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
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Dear Chair,

HMP FORD INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 NOVEMBER 2024 – 31 OCTOBER 2025

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP Ford. I want to express my sincere appreciation for the work undertaken by you and your colleagues in producing such valuable insights, particularly as you continued to operate with several vacancies.

I do recognise the Board's ongoing concerns about maintenance, repairs and expansion at HMP Ford. As set out in my reply to you last year, surveys have already been undertaken to assess the fabric, cells, and critical assets at each prison. This has provided the Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) with a greater understanding of the condition of the prison estate and the work that is needed in future years. It is acknowledged that there are maintenance needs at HMP Ford, given the whole site is currently reliant on temporary boilers and kitchen equipment which is on hire. This is the result of gas boosters being condemned and although this is a large project to address, I'm pleased to be able to advise that the work is progressing well. New boosters are expected to be installed throughout March 2026 which will allow all the hire equipment to be taken off site by April.

In terms of the expansion programme to increase capacity by up to 420 prison places, there have been delays and I understand this is frustrating, but this is a result of the constructors ISG and ESS entering administration in September 2024. However, a Pre-Construction Services Agreement (PCSA) is now being finalised with a new constructor. The PCSA phase will take approximately 35 weeks to produce a final design, expected cost and construction programme timeline. This will allow a final investment decision to be taken about HMP Ford in the Autumn later this year.

I also understand the Board's concerns about the challenges with Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) assessments. It is acknowledged that there are now higher-risk prisoners at HMP Ford, including some who arrive up to five years before their earliest release date. This has increased the workload for our qualified probation staff. While we are committed to improving timeliness, public protection will always remain a priority. Releasing someone temporarily depends on a thorough assessment of individual risk, drawing on information from relevant agencies where required. These assessments take time, especially the checks to safeguard children. To ensure probation workloads are sustainable to meet increased demand, support measures have been announced, reflecting the Government's commitment to a strong, professional service at the heart of the criminal justice system. This involves significant additional

investment in probation of up to £700 million by 2028/29 and the introduction of new digital technology to help probation practitioners to focus on public protection and rehabilitation. The Sentencing Act, which received Royal Assent on 22 January 2026, also introduces significant reforms that impact probation and enable changes that will create capacity for practitioners to focus on supervision and risk management. These will allow the imbalance between capacity and workload to be addressed through the Our Future Probation Service Programme, which will see probation workloads reduce by 25% by April 2027. The Board can be assured that the implementation of these reforms will support timelier ROTL assessments while maintaining robust public protection. In addition, across the Kent, Surrey and Sussex probation region there are ongoing recruitment campaigns and staffing within the Offender Management Unit (OMU) at HMP Ford has improved with a full-time qualified probation practitioner recruited. The prison also now has trainee probation officers working in the OMU for the first time and, alongside the local OMU processes implemented to reduce unnecessary administrative tasks, these will help to manage the workload.

Regarding your concerns about the education budget, I can provide assurance that there have been no cuts to the national prison education budget. The budget was increased but it is recognised that this has not been able to keep pace with the significant rise in the cost of delivering high-quality education in recent years. As a result, since the new Prisoner Education Service contracts started in October 2025, many prisons have seen changes in the volume of provision that can be delivered through Core Education with average reduction in delivery hours around 20-25% nationally. As part of these new contracts, the funding formula for prison education was also refreshed to ensure that allocations are a fair reflection of prison population, function and regional cost differences as many of these had not changed since the funding formula was last set in 2019. I have committed to publishing figures on prison level changes to Core Education delivery volumes in the coming weeks. However, I am not in a position to make commitments about future education budgets as these will depend on future departmental and cross-government spending decisions. I am acutely aware of the critical role that education plays in providing purposeful activity and reducing reoffending. HMPPS remains focused on how to drive the maximum value for money from the available provision to provide quality outcomes in the most efficient way to accommodate learners' needs.

Despite the challenges that remain, it was pleasing to read about the many areas in which the Board offers praise to the Governor. It is reassuring that a safe, clean and fair environment is being provided to give prisoners every chance to progress towards their release. I was encouraged by the engagement with local and regional businesses to provide prisoners with employment opportunities and I welcome the increase in those who remain in work six months after release from HMP Ford. I also appreciate the Board highlighting that for the second year running the significant efforts made by staff have ensured all prisoners had accommodation to go to on release, which is vitally important.

I note you have raised some local issues of concern in your report which the Governor will continue to keep you aware of 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 really value the contribution of Independent Monitoring Board members in improving our prisons and we are very grateful for your ongoing dedication on behalf of HMP Ford.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending

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HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Maintenance and Repair

Further to the Minister's letter, it remains the case that demands for maintenance across the prison estate are much greater than the available funding. HMPPS will therefore continue to prioritise works very carefully to make best use of the funding that is available on projects focusing on risk to life and risk to capacity and decency.

Education

It is acknowledged that inflationary pressures have impacted the proportion of the overall budget that can be spent through Core Education contracts to keep education affordable overall. However, we have also been investing in digital infrastructure, new assessment tools, and specialist staff to ensure that every pound spent delivers the greatest possible impact for learners. The redistribution of the education funding as part of the new education contracts does mean that some prisons will have seen greater delivery reductions, while some have seen increases. It is worth noting that since the funding formula was last set in 2019, the operational capacity at HMP Ford has reduced from 537 to 389 and this has been taken into account to ensure that the refreshed funding allocations are fair. However, delivery reductions apply only to Core Education contracts and do not affect the other education services such as libraries, careers advice, distance learning or industries and work opportunities which give prisoners meaningful training, qualifications and life skills to prepare them for employment. Locally, HMP Ford has mitigated the impact of these changes by undertaking a review to ensure there is sufficient purposeful activity and as a result there has been a significant increase in the number of prisoners who attend external education at local colleges and universities.

Telephony Provision

It remains the case that there are no plans to extend prisoner telephony to cells in open prisons. It is acknowledged that this does create a disparity compared to the closed estate where in-cell telephones are available, but prisoners in open prisons do typically have greater freedom of movement, allowing easier access to communal phones on wing landings and more opportunities for family contact during ROTL. However, the importance of maintaining strong family ties is recognised and HMPPS is committed to exploring all viable options to enhance the telephony provision for prisoners, including future enhancements as part of the wider prisoner telephony contract. Whilst these considerations will need to be balanced with competing requirements and costs across the prison estate for prisoner communications, HMPPS will be working with the open estate to identify and expand the existing communal phone infrastructure wherever possible. As the Board acknowledges, the trial of allowing prisoners to use their personal mobile phones under supervision was stopped, but approval has recently been given for the piloting of restricted SIM mobile PIN phones within HMP Leyhill. If this pilot is successful, these devices will be rolled out across the remainder of the open estate, including HMP Ford.