



Chair
Independent Monitoring Board
HMP Durham
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Durham
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MoJ ref: SUB135067

19 June 2026

Dear Chair,

**HMP DURHAM INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
1 NOVEMBER 2024 – 31 OCTOBER 2025**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP Durham. I noted your comment about the Board's role being valued and would like to echo this and express my gratitude to you and all your colleagues for your continued efforts and commitment in capturing your helpful observations. I hope the position with the complement of members continues to improve.

I was deeply upset to hear twelve prisoners died during the reporting year, either in custody or shortly after release. I understand that the two deaths in custody were suspected to have been self-inflicted with the remaining ten deaths within 28 days of release. These deaths are extremely tragic and I offer my sincere condolences to the friends and family of all the deceased. Whilst there were recommendations for healthcare in some of the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) reports, I would like to reassure the Board that any recommendations made by the PPO are always taken very seriously and trust the local management to inform the Board of all deaths using the agreed protocols.

As set out in last years' response, delivery of the 10-Year Prison Capacity Strategy is in full flow and the Government is committed to delivering an additional 14,000 prison places with an aim to do so by 2031. We have already delivered approximately 3,100 of these places since taking office. Our build programme consists of the construction of four new prisons, including HMP Millsike which opened in Spring 2025, as well as the expansion and refurbishment of the existing estate. We have committed a further investment of £4.7bn over the spending review period (2026/27 to 2028/29) to deliver these places, including breaking ground at the site of the new HMP Welland Oaks in Leicestershire in November 2025. We are also committed to undertaking critical maintenance work and the ambition to acquire more land for future prisons, should they be required. Whilst there are no additional places being delivered at HMP Durham as part of these expansion plans, the delivery of additional capacity will help to ease pressure across the estate.

Additionally, it is anticipated that the significant reforms contained in the Sentencing Act, which received Royal Assent on 22 January 2026, will provide the Courts with options to end the cycle of less serious offenders going in and out of prison though there may be challenges during implementation. Whilst not part of the Act, this coincides with our decision to sanction the biggest ever expansion in tagging together with an increase in the probation budget by up to £700 million over the next three years to bolster community justice. The Government is also investing in new technology to reduce admin so staff can focus on work that reduces reoffending.

I appreciate the Board's frustrations around deploying staff at HMP Durham. It is acknowledged that the time taken to hire is elongated at present, but I can assure you that all efforts are being deployed to reduce this time to enable directly and non-directly employed staff to commence employment in a timely fashion. All individuals working within HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) undergo a comprehensive onboarding process, which includes security vetting. Each case is different and therefore Time to Hire can vary.

Average time to hire varies depending upon the type of role being recruited, the security vetting requirements of individual prisons, and candidate behaviour. The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) are continually looking for efficiencies in our recruitment processes and are seeing positive upward trends across our frontline operational recruitment. The MoJ has set a dedicated task group to reducing bottlenecks and the current Time to Hire is 40 weeks from application to start date. This is partially due to increase in demand across HMPPS. Each recruitment campaign is unique and will have a different measure of what is an acceptable time to hire based on controllable and uncontrollable factors. Whilst we continue to keep timeframes as low as possible, it remains imperative that all necessary checks are thoroughly undertaken to ensure the right people are working for the organisation.

I note you have raised some local issues of concern in your report which the Governor will continue to keep you appraised on progress as work continues. HMPPS comments in response to other issues raised in your report are set out in the attached annex.

It was encouraging to receive your comments about the significant improvement in diversity and inclusion together with the good work of the early days in custody group, the drug and alcohol recovery team (DART) team, the family support worker. I was pleased to note the better provision of hot water and heating since April 2025 which was raised as a concern in the last years' report. The ingress of illicit items is an ongoing challenge and I was therefore reassured to note the efforts to improve security provision and curb the entry of drugs.

Whilst not referenced in the annual report, I was pleased to learn that sustained improvement across the majority of performance metrics has resulted in HMP Durham moving from a level one to a level three prison on the performance hub this year. This progress is thanks to a whole-prison approach, which has driven the sustained performance improvement. Additionally, whilst not formally raised as a concern, I wanted to update you on the position regarding releases in error, given there were four during the reporting period. These were regrettable incidents and the Deputy Prime Minister took immediate and decisive action by announcing a national five-point action plan in November 2025. The Independent Review led by Dame Lynne Owens was published on 15 April 2026 and can be found online together with our response. Progress has already been made and through a combination of reform, improved technology and better practice, we will reduce the number of releases in error to pre-prison capacity crisis levels and drive them down year-on-year.

The Deputy Prime Minister and I deeply appreciate the value and scrutiny brought by members of Independent Monitoring Boards to improve the estate and we extend our thanks for your continued hard work and dedication on behalf of HMP Durham.

Yours sincerely,



Lord Timpson

Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending

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HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Education Budgets

There have been no cuts to the national prison education budget, however, the cost of delivering high-quality education has risen significantly in recent years, and while the budget has increased, it has not kept pace with rising costs. As a result, some reductions in the volume of Core Education delivered have been necessary from October 2025. HMPPS have published transparency data on the level of Core Education commissioning under the previous and current Core Education contracts within prisons. The national reduction in delivery volume in October 2025 was 21%. HMP Durham saw a reduction of 16%.

A revised funding formula has also been applied to ensure fair allocation based on prison population and regional cost differences. This redistribution means that some prisons will see greater delivery reductions, while others will see increases. This delivery reduction applies only to Core Education contracts and does not affect other education services such as libraries, careers advice, distance learning or vocational training delivered through industries and workshops. HMPPS is also investing in digital infrastructure, new assessment tools, and specialist staff to ensure that every pound spent delivers the greatest possible impact for learners. The Prison Education Dynamic Purchasing System also remains available to Governors to commission provision to meet the needs of their local prisoner cohort, and HMP Durham is utilising this option together with enrichment projects with third parties such as Durham University. It is also important that prisons continue to plan their curriculum based on careful analysis of their population's needs, and that ongoing efforts are made to improve attendance and allocations to ensure learners can gain the maximum benefit from the provision available.

Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT)

Following feedback from the operational line, some changes have been made to the format of the ACCT ongoing record. Although the format has changed, the content remains the same. Additionally, some minor formatting and wording adjustments have been made to the ACCT document to ensure alignment with the Safety Policy Framework. Local and national training has taken place for staff on the use of the most recent version of the ACCT document.

In accordance with the new Safety Policy Framework which came into effect in January 2025, the electronic ACCT Quality Assurance tool was revised to strengthen local assurance of ACCT outcomes. Additional guidance on completing the tool was also issued. A new ACCT Analysis Tool will be available later this year and is intended to support establishments that do not currently have their own method for analysing ACCT specific data, helping to improve local understanding of strengths and areas for development in ACCT delivery. HMPPS will continue to review opportunities for improvement in the delivery of ACCT while continuing to prioritise the individual needs and safety of those supported through the ACCT process.

Temporary Projects Funding

The Early Days in Custody family services worker was not commissioned by HMPPS for their work within HMP Durham. The part-time temporary family worker supporting early days was an initiative independently commissioned by the Nepacs charity, which holds other HMPPS-commissioned family services including a visitor's centre team leader, visits teams, and a Family Engagement Worker (part-time) to work within HMP Durham.

HMP Durham funds a full time Family Development Worker at the prison in addition to the Family Services provision, which is there to support all prisoners at HMP Durham, and the prison resources the First Night and Induction Unit with Prison Officers to support the early days of prisoners arriving at the establishment.