

3rd July 2026

To Sarah Coccia, Chief Operating Officer for Prisons

Dear Sarah,

Heatwave concerns

I am writing to follow up, and to place on record, the IMB's concerns about the high levels of heat in prisons, and the detrimental impact this is having on prisoners and staff alike, which I raised with you in our recent meeting.

On recent visits I have felt the oppressive heat in parts of the prison estate first-hand, including at Erlestoke, Wandsworth, Pentonville, Bullingdon and Whitemoor. Boards are reporting similar concerns. The reality is stark. In many prisons, people are living and working in conditions that are already difficult, and that become intolerable during periods of high heat.

The risk is not evenly felt. Older prisoners, those with health conditions, prisoners with disabilities, and those otherwise vulnerable are particularly exposed. Upper floors are, predictably, most affected. Poor ventilation compounds the problem, as does limited access to cold water, especially for prisoners held in cells without in-cell sanitation. The lack of shade in outside areas is also a concern, accepting of course that any such provision would need to be safe and not increase the risk of incidents at height.

We are also concerned about inconsistency across the estate. Some prisons are providing fans free of charge. Others are charging prisoners for them. In the examples brought to my attention during recent visits, the prices charged were unaffordable for many prisoners, let alone those who are retired, unable to work, or without private funds. Protection from dangerous heat should not depend on age, income, prison location, or local practice.

I would be grateful if you could let us know what HMPPS is doing now to manage and mitigate these risks, what action is being taken nationally to reduce inconsistency between establishments, and what longer-term planning is under way. Given the impact of climate change and the likelihood of us reaching heatwave conditions more often, ad hoc local responses will not be sufficient. We would expect a coherent national plan, extending beyond the immediate hot spell, to address the structural weaknesses that make parts of the estate so unsafe in these high temperatures. In this context, we have the following questions:

1. What minimum expectations are in place for prisons during periods of high heat, including access to cold water, fans, ventilation, and shade?
2. Are vulnerable prisoners being identified and prioritised consistently?
3. What guidance is being given to prisons on charging prisoners for fans or other heat mitigation measures?
4. How are conditions on upper floors and in cells without in-cell sanitation being monitored?
5. What longer-term planning is under way to ensure the estate is better prepared for increasingly frequent periods of extreme heat?

These concerns are grounded in what Boards are witnessing across the estate. Our members see, regularly and independently, the lived reality behind policy and process. They can identify poor practice, press locally for improvement, and escalate concerns before avoidable harm occurs. On this issue, their observations are clear: heat is already affecting decency, safety, and wellbeing in prisons, and the current response is uneven.

I would welcome your response on the immediate mitigations in place, and on the longer-term work being taken forward to ensure that prisoners and staff are properly safeguarded across the estate.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane Leech', with a horizontal line underneath.

Jane Leech MBE
Interim National Chair
Independent Monitoring Boards