



Ministry
of Justice

Lord Timpson
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP/YOI Deerbolt
Bowes Road
Barnard Castle
County Durham
D12 9BG

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19 July 2026

Dear Chair,

**HMP/YOI DEERBOLT INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
1 OCTOBER 2024 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2025**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP/YOI Deerbolt. I appreciate you and your colleagues' considerable efforts in producing such informative reflections on the current state of the prison, while continuing to operate with numerous vacancies. I'm sorry to hear that your membership reduced further by the end of the reporting period and I hope this improves in the coming year. It is also regrettable that there was an administrative error in my response last year and I will reiterate the need for accuracy with my officials going forward.

I was saddened to hear two prisoners died in custody during the reporting year and I offer my condolences to all their friends and family. Whilst the investigations of the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) are ongoing I would like to reassure the Board that any recommendations made by the PPO will be taken very seriously.

I recognise the Board's ongoing concerns about healthcare provision, and I want to assure you that HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), together with partners, remains firmly committed to providing people in custody with access to the equivalent standard and range of health and social care services as they would receive in the community. As responsibility for healthcare in prisons in England remains with NHS England, they continue to work closely with the commissioned health provider and HMPPS through established contract management and governance arrangements to oversee delivery and manage any emerging risks. I do welcome the Board commending the high-level of service healthcare staff provide in challenging circumstances, but where issues are identified clear escalation processes are in place and we will continue to agree appropriate remedial action. I also appreciate the Board's continued invitation for a visit to HMP/YOI Deerbolt. I wish to confirm I still intend to visit and I have tasked my team to explore opportunities to do so at the earliest feasible point, taking into account the current visits schedule.

I welcome the Board's request to improve education and rehabilitation as we know, purposeful activity is implicitly linked to the delivery of safe, decent and rehabilitative prisons. It also contributes to a range of prison outcomes including improved well-being, reduction in self-harm and suicide, reduced violence, recovery from problematic drug and alcohol use and reduced reoffending rates. Although some barriers limit prisons' ability to deliver opportunities, through the Working Week Project which is being piloted in five category C prisons, we are exploring opportunities to enhance the skills and work provision in custody. The wider Education, Skills and Work offer is designed to support prisoners' progression throughout their time in custody. This is not limited to classroom education, but includes vocational training, work in prison industries and workshops, and other purposeful activity aligned to individual

pathways and employment outcomes. This ensures that older prisoners and those with higher prior attainment can access provision that builds on their existing skills, supports employability, and prepares them for successful outcomes on release. However, the Board should be aware that prisoners of state retirement age are not required to work, but can choose to do so, in the same manner as people in custody that are unconvicted. The core education contract curriculum is commissioned at a local level via a needs analysis to ascertain the learning requirements with provision rightly focused on the learners with the greatest need, such as English and maths up to Level 2. However, Governors are able to commission bespoke activity from the Dynamic Purchasing System to add to the curriculum where specific needs have been identified. Prisoners who are ready for higher level learning can access Further and Higher Education at Level 3 and above through the Prisoners' Education Trust and the Open University. In addition, the significant reforms introduced by the Sentencing Act 2026, which received Royal Assent on 22 January 2026, will give courts greater flexibility to break the cycle of less serious offenders repeatedly entering custody. These changes will also help shape the strategic requirements of the prison estate in the future to further support resettlement into the community.

I also understand the risks that illicit items, such as drugs, weapons and mobile phones delivered via drones can present in our prisons. Whilst we cannot share all our counter measures, as making these public would undermine our security, we have specialist staff and dedicated equipment in our prisons to tackle the smuggling of contraband. In recent years, prisons have expanded the use of physical security measures such as the use of X-ray body scanners, airport-style Enhanced Gate Security, and X-ray baggage scanners. In the last financial year alone over £40 million was invested in physical security measures across 34 prisons, including £10 million on counter-drone measures, such as window replacements, external window grilles and specialist netting. In addition, UK Research and Innovation has announced an additional £6.5 million to help accelerate counter-drone research and development (R&D) as part of their R&D Mission Accelerator Programme. This investment will boost cross-government investment in next-generation technologies to help prevent drones delivering contraband. However, as the threats to prison security constantly evolves and criminals seek novel ways to destabilise prisons, we also constantly shift and adapt our security measures to ensure we keep pace with changing threats.

I was pleased to read about the professionalism of prison officers in their understanding and care for prisoners in often challenging circumstances and I welcome the Board's praise of the efforts by staff with the most complex prisoners in the Care and Separation Unit. It was reassuring to note that prisoners continue to receive fair and humane treatment with positive engagement with vulnerable prisoners and efforts made to increase the quality and quantity of key worker sessions. Despite further work being needed to increase purposeful activity, I was also encouraged that time out of cell has increased, education tuition is being provided to a high standard and that a variety of soft skills activities are on offer to improve personal development.

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/YOI Deerbolt.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James', written in a cursive style.

Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending

HMP/YOI DEERBOLT INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT 1 OCTOBER 2024 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2025

HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Developing Local Employment

The Board's initiative offer is appreciated as HMPPS is always looking to grow our partnerships and opportunities to help prison leavers into employment. The New Futures Network, the specialist employment team in HMPPS, would welcome a discussion with the IMB to explore opportunities. The Board will be able to find out further information and contact details at <https://newfuturesnetwork.gov.uk/employment-advisory-boards/>

Prison Funding

HMPPS remains committed to supporting the rehabilitation and recovery of people in prison by providing them with access to purposeful activity and education. Achieving better rehabilitation outcomes is not solely about investment in specific interventions but on a comprehensive, system-wide approach. HMPPS is committed to improving this, focusing on quality offender management alongside strengthening safety and security to create prison environments that better support rehabilitation. Within the latest HMPPS Annual Report and Accounts 2024 to 2025 published in October 2025 this confirms the total HMPPS expenditure and shows increased spending compared with 2023-24. An addendum to accounts was also published on 26 March 2026 setting out the costs per prison place and costs per prisoner data including for HMP/YOI Deerbolt.

Public Perception of Prisons

HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice is already proactively undertaking a broad programme of communications to help improve public understanding of prison life. This includes press access, documentaries, digital storytelling, partnerships with charities and creators, and other national and regional media activity to highlight rehabilitation, education, employment and public protection work across the estate. Recent examples include partnerships focused on offender employment and skills, prison education and women's justice initiatives, alongside collaborations with broadcasters, digital creators and charities to showcase how prisons can deliver punishment that works to cut crime and create fewer victims by supporting rehabilitation and reducing reoffending.