



Annual Report of the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP Cookham Wood

**For reporting year
1 September 2024 – 31 March 2026**

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1. Statutory role of the IMB

The Prison Act 1952 requires every prison to be monitored by an independent board appointed by the Secretary of State. Under the National Monitoring Framework agreed with ministers, the Board is required to:

- satisfy itself as to the humane and just treatment of those held in custody and the range and adequacy of the programmes preparing them for release;
- inform the Secretary of State, or any official to whom authority has been delegated as it judges appropriate, any concern it has; and
- report annually to the Secretary of State on how well the prison has met the standards and requirements placed on it and the impact these have on those in its custody.

For the Board to carry out these duties effectively, its members have the right of access to every prisoner and every part of the prison, and to prison records. The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT) is an international human rights treaty designed to strengthen protection for people deprived of their liberty. The protocol recognises that such people are particularly vulnerable and aims to prevent their ill treatment through establishing a system of visits/inspections to places of detention. The Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) is part of the United Kingdom's National Preventive Mechanism (NPM).

2. Description of the establishment¹

HMP Cookham Wood is an adult male category C prison re-rolled in August 2024 following the closure of the young offender facility HMYOI Cookham Wood on 30 May 2024. The institution dates from the 1970s. Prisoners reside in a residential house block opened in 2014, in single-occupancy cells with showers and toilets. For the entirety of this reporting period, occupancy was far below the establishment's full 180 operational capacity, averaging around 85 men for the majority of this period. From February 2026, capacity began to increase to around 135 men by the end of March 2026.

Reporting period

The report covers the period from September 2024 until March 2026. This is a longer period than the usual annual reports to reflect the fact that HMP Cookham Wood was a new establishment and by the end of the period has a single Governor and senior leadership teams shared with HMP Rochester. The two sites are moving towards formal merger. The Boards at both establishments have operated separately during this period, with some dual-boarding, and so separate annual reports are required. From April 2026, the two Boards will work more collaboratively and, in the future, will look to produce a single annual report with separate sections highlighting the specifics of each institution.

The Urgent Notification issued to HMYOI Cookham Wood in April 2023 raised two issues which continue to have an impact on the running of HMP Cookham Wood. The issues raised were that the YOI was in a poor physical condition and that staff were exhausted and demoralised.

Prior to opening in September 2024, work began on the Cookham Wood estate, including Cedar block which had been the enhanced block for the young men. By March 2026 this block has still to be re-opened. In part, this is due to ongoing work with the trade unions regarding staffing. It is indicative of how long building works, handover and staff negotiations take to resolve and has a negative impact on the vision for more meaningful activity for the prisoner. Whilst the houseblocks underwent some refurbishment during the summer of 2024, the Phoenix block and the sports hall are still closed some 15 months later. Failure to open the whole estate has reduced the availability of enhanced buildings to deliver intensive resettlement and rehabilitation work and support the mental health and wellbeing of the men, and indeed the staff. The need to extend the height of the fence to comply with adult male establishment guidelines has further exacerbated the situation with no astroturf available from late 2025. It has been frustrating that lengthy building works have prevented Cookham Wood from really getting up to speed with meeting their service

¹ Figures included in this report are local management information. They reflect the prison's position at the time of reporting but may be subject to change following further validation and therefore may not always tally with Official Statistics later published by the Ministry of Justice.

standards especially around offering a variety of purposeful activities and work opportunities. This has resulted in lost opportunities to support prisoners. The proposed plans for the Cedar block to accommodate men on life and those subject to Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences is positive, with these men excited for change. However, ongoing and protracted delays detrimentally impacts the morale and deflates the expectations of these prisoners.

The last annual report commented that there was a vacuum of information for staff who held enhanced youth status, as Band 4 officers. Many officers and operational staff reported that prior to opening as HMP Cookham Wood, there was insufficient training for them to move from a YOI to a men's prison. As a consequence, some staff were lost to other institutions, and/or embarked on a new career with UK Border Force, a competing employer in the Kent area. In conjunction, the time taken to appoint a permanent Governor and establish a direction of travel impacted staff morale during this period.

In the initial months of opening, prisoners complained about officers talking to them and treating them as if they were young people. This is understandable and it took some time for officers to adapt to working with adult men, especially as there was little specific training and hands-on experience provided. Some officers did go over to HMP Rochester prior to opening, but this was mostly for cover rather than in-depth training. Whilst the Board has seen improvement, new inmates do sometimes comment that they feel they are treated as children, being told what to do rather than being given explanation as to why things happen in certain ways.

3. Main areas for development

TO THE MINISTER

- What type of prison does Cookham Wood want to become in 2026-27 as it nears full capacity?
- How can the prison service adequately fund appropriate education and purposeful activity in smaller establishments to prepare prisoners for a meaningful life on release?
- How will a formal merger with the much larger HMP Rochester and sharing of services (namely healthcare and education) affect the running of HMP Cookham Wood and allow it sufficient provision to be highly effective?

4. Evidence

Headlines

From its inception as an adult male category C prison, life has been relatively calm for the men and officers at Cookham Wood. Prisoners have reported feeling safe. Time out of cell has always been good averaging 5.5 hours daily. There is very little violence and when this has occurred, a handful of times, from our observations, officers have dealt with the situation speedily and with care and compassion. Use of Force reviews are reflective and identify areas for improvement for individuals and the wider prison workforce. The use of drugs is negligible, increasing occasionally, but always brought back under control quickly. Prisoners were concerned as the roll began to increase that illicit drug use would become more prolific. To date this has not materialised, in part due to good vigilance and systems imposed by officers and by the self determination of established prisoners who set strong expectations.

The prison overall is clean and tidy with little, or no graffiti and men are encouraged and generally comply with keeping their own cells clean. Legionella outbreaks are fewer than when a YOI. Food overall is reported as good and men can cook for themselves. There are some complaints about a lack of choice for those on restricted diets.

Family days are a highlight. The staff work hard to give families a positive environment. Improvements have been made to the outdoor and indoor spaces, and such days have a positive impact on the wellbeing and morale of the men.

Reception is well managed. Officers are observed as welcoming to new arrivals and show kindness by answering questions and try to ease anxieties. The same is true for transfers out and releases where IMB has witnessed some excellent work with men who are leaving the establishment.

The greatest challenges over this period have been with healthcare, education and purposeful activities. From the Board's observations, healthcare can best be described as erratic. Some of the issues, such as access to a pain nurse, due to the location of services at HMP Rochester, meant that prisoners waited long periods to be seen by the right healthcare professional. This caused distress and affected the physical and mental health of some individuals.

From the outset there have been insufficient numbers of men engaging in purposeful activity, and this has been exacerbated by an increasing roll. Some progress has been made throughout this period, but it has been inconsistent. As with healthcare, sharing contracts with HMP Rochester means Cookham Wood's services can be disrupted. Such disruptions frustrate prisoners, and officers, especially when courses are not completed and qualifications are not achieved.

Work allocation for prisoners on arrival can take too long. There is a defined process but little contingency if education and related staff are away. Due to the lack of

available work and education, some men waited for over two weeks without doing anything purposeful. This has the potential for idle hands which can lead to boredom. The availability of diversionary activities on the houseblock including, for example, board and card games, the ability to cook one's own food, has helped to keep men calm.

Cookham Wood has the potential for positive work to happen with prisoners. The estate is small and well kept. On the whole staff interact positively with prisoners and accommodation and food is good. However, during this reporting period there have been extended periods where prisoner engagement with appropriate education and activities has been low. As a result, prisoner morale has been adversely impacted, they have little to be proud of and are not adequately prepared for life on release.

5. Main findings

Safety

- The reception and induction of new prisoners is managed smoothly. Men transferring in have generally commented on a calm atmosphere and feeling safe. Most new arrivals have been placed on a dedicated induction wing interspersed with established prisoners. This arrangement has worked well with established prisoners setting the example and new men quickly adapting to the regime whilst building relationships with officers and fellow prisoners in the process.
- ACCT reviews have been conducted empathetically and professionally throughout the reporting period. An officer was particularly proactive responding to one serious incident, and their vigilance prevented the prisoner from causing further harm to himself. On other occasions where prisoners have been isolated for their own safety, staff have been engaging and gone to extra lengths to provide resources such as reading materials and distraction packs from the library.
- Positive tests for illicit substances have been low throughout the reporting period. There has been sharing of prescribed medication from time to time and a spike in February 2026, coinciding with the increase in the roll. This was quickly negated with the Board not observing a lasting impact.
- There were three deaths within the scope of this reporting period. One followed a release from the establishment and two involved prisoners who had been held at Cookham Wood. Officers handled the deaths of these men with compassion and courtesy and supported other prisoners who knew them well. The Board witnessed caring work with another prisoner over the death of one prisoner who died in hospital. By 31 March 2026, the PPO investigations relating to two of these deaths had not concluded and the Board is awaiting the outcome of those investigations.

Fair and humane treatment

- The main houseblock has remained clean and tidy throughout the reporting period. Prisoners take ownership of the cleanliness of their own landings and cells with most appreciating the single occupancy setup. Seasonal adjustments such as additional blankets in winter and fans in summer are made. Cookham Wood has a limited number of cells for men with a disability and/or mobility issues. Whilst some adjustments were made to accommodate these men (e.g. moving to a ground floor landing), adjustments for individuals has taken too long to happen. The Board did observe one instance in which reasonable adjustments were not made for a disabled man who required the installation of grab rails in his cell. No action was taken for several months despite frequent requests, and he left the establishment without things being fixed. Such issues can make a big

difference to the lives of prisoners. Minor works like this have taken far too long to be sorted and impact the morale of prisoners and indeed officers who are constantly trying to resolve such issues.

- Adjudications have been infrequent throughout the reporting period, but when they have occurred The Board has observed them being conducted fairly and professionally. There is no dedicated segregation unit with men transferring to HMP Rochester for this purpose. As capacity continues to rise towards the maximum 180, an alternate system will need to be implemented.
- Faith and pastoral support for men at Cookham Wood has remained good overall. There was a period without a regular Iman and although cover was promised, that didn't always materialise, frustrating prisoners, which could have been mitigated if communication had been more timely. Religious services are held weekly with additional provision made for those who observe Ramadan, Christmas, Easter and other religious holidays. Support for family bereavement is thoughtful and supportive.
- The Board has observed consistently good interactions and dynamics between officers and prisoners. The majority of officers have a good rapport with prisoners and look to build trust with the men from the outset. There is ample opportunity for officers to do this on landings, exercise yards and movements throughout the estate. However, a minority of officers do not engage in this way. For some officers there is a reluctance to engage in key work; a crucial part of an officer/prisoner relationship. Prisoners notice and comment when officers sit reading their own books or doing jigsaws alone. These are lost opportunities for better engagement with prisoners. Staffing levels have occasionally resulted in longer lockup and less time out of cell, but this has not been a regular occurrence.
- Property has been one of the biggest issues raised with Board throughout the reporting period. Men have repeatedly highlighted property being lost when they are transferred into the prison, and the Board has seen instances where some property cards arrive with no entries. Officers in reception work hard to work through these issues but often there is no way to resolve the situation, especially if they relate to property coming from another establishment. When compensation for lost property is finally agreed it can take too long for men to be reimbursed, causing frustration. Once again, small things can take too long to be resolved.
- Delays in complaint responses is a major source of reference to the Board. Men know their rights and are understandably angry when no record of their complaint is logged on the system or replies are not received within timescales. Some of this relates to how and when things get recorded and communicated - again a small adjustment and clear communication goes a long way to manage prisoner expectations. The Board has witnessed officers being helpful in trying to resolve these issues.

Health and wellbeing

- Due to being under capacity for much of the reporting period, waiting times to access healthcare provision and other clinical services such as the dentist has been significant for prisoners at Cookham Wood. In the Board's opinion, there is a disjointed approach between how some shared services operate across HMP Cookham Wood and HMP Rochester. As a smaller site, men at Cookham Wood have borne the greatest brunt with one individual repeatedly let down by cancellations and/or the rearrangement of appointments, whilst remaining in pain. Specialist healthcare staffing pressures have been evident, with a number of complaints voiced around poor treatment and communication by healthcare staff. There have been a high number of concerns made to Board about medication not being provided quickly enough or being refused. Sometimes this has been a communication issue but, some men have waited too long to get medical intervention. It is also currently unclear the frequency in which certain more specialist healthcare services are available to men at Cookham Wood, e.g. booking an appointment with a psychiatrist.
- The Board has observed neurodiversity being a prominent and growing support need amongst men at Cookham Wood. Some men with diagnosed autism have commented that reasonable adjustments have not always been made for their needs. However, a dedicated neurodiversity manager is set to be appointed covering HMP Cookham Wood.
- Medical escorts to hospital are conducted in a timely fashion and arrangements are made to make the men feel as comfortable as possible on their return. Extensive building works across the site have detrimentally impacted the physical exercise provision for men at Cookham Wood. The sports hall has been out of commission for the entirety of the reporting period and the astroturf for some proportion too. With works now complete, the Board looks forward to seeing these facilities being well used. The gym has been an important constant and the standout activity for prisoners to improve their physical health and mental wellbeing. There was a period when prisoners had their number of gym sessions cut which caused frustration, especially as prisoners were then left on the landings for longer periods. This has now been worked through, and prisoners have access to several sessions per week and are complementary about the staff and facilities. Provision has been made for those aged over 50, which is particularly important given the ageing population. Attendance was slow to start but numbers have slowly increased.
- Men have access to exercise yard(s) though these have not always been open and/or utilised as well as they could be.

Progression and resettlement

- English, Maths and Information Computer Technology courses are available to men at Cookham Wood with all men required to be working towards a minimum of Level 1 qualifications in English and Maths. Attendance and engagement at the beginning of the reporting period was intermittent but the Board has seen an improvement following clearer communication around expectations and more considered implementation. While this is important, given this is a cat C establishment many men have undertaken courses elsewhere and are seeking course which will provide them with practical skills for work when they leave prison. Such courses are few and far between.
- The library has a good selection of books, audiobooks, DVDs and other resources and is a highlight for the men who enjoy attending. From our observations, the librarian interacts well with the men and is always helpful and proactive in responding to their requests. Activities and speakers are a feature. However, despite this being a valued and important service, the library is only open Tuesday to Thursday, leaving long periods without this important facility and no contracted cover when the librarian is away. Once again sharing a contract with HMP Rochester means the librarian is sometimes called away to cover at the busier site. It is hoped a new contract can be negotiated giving Cookham Wood better access to the library.
- Cookham Wood has good vocational training and purposeful activity facilities including a catering kitchen, barbering shop, art studio, prison radio, DIY workshop and music studio. Unfortunately, during the reporting period these facilities have been chronically under-utilised. This is due in large part to the joint contract arrangements with HMP Rochester and this larger site taking precedence when staffing has been pressurised. The education contract is shared with Rochester on an 80/20 split based on populations. Cuts to education provision has impacted the men at Cookham Wood, but given the very low base from which the prison was operating, the Governor and education staff have tried to be creative in what can be offered. The Board has observed efforts made to provide alternatives for the men during these periods, e.g. incepting a new clothes donation partnership with a voluntary organisation following the dissolution of Gillingham Street Angels. However, overall there are far too few men accessing regular education and activities during this reporting period. This has resulted in men leaving prison without having opportunities to build skills that will support them in their communities and indeed prepare them for a life outside prison in which they have not participated for many years. This situation fails prisoners and wider society. It is hoped the re-opening of Cedar block will provide an improved offer and a release on temporary licence (ROTL) pathway. When staffing pressures emerge, courses planned for Cookham have been delayed and if education staff are absent there is little contingency meaning the course invariably doesn't run. Catering and art classes, which are enjoyed by prisoners

have been affected by 80/20 split and suspended for long periods when staffing levels are under pressure.

- The strain on community offender managers, prison offender managers, resettlement services and community probation has been evident over the course of the reporting period at Cookham Wood, resulting in some men not always been adequately prepared for release, e.g. not being issued with a photo ID to access banking and other support services and/or having a form of accommodation for their first nights out.
- Some prisoners have been anxious about release and uncertain about what support they can expect to receive in the community. A few men have left Cookham Wood and unfortunately returned very quickly to custody, some within a day of release. This is wasteful of public money at best and a human tragedy for those men, their families, and wider society who expect more from the system.
- The adjournment of several parole hearings due to factors including the unavailability of staff and queries regarding risk management plans has been especially distressing and hard hitting for men serving long sentences. Some men transferring into Cookham Wood have raised concerns that they are unable to complete certain elements of their sentence plans owing to the course(s) not being available. As a key determinate when going before a parole board or submitting a transfer request to another establishment, this will need to be addressed quickly.

The work of the IMB

In the Board's final annual report, 2023-24, covering the closure of HMYOI Cookham Wood, the issue of IMB members feeling exposed was raised centrally due to how decisions and information was communicated by HMPPS. This had a significant impact on the membership, and by February 2025, four experienced IMB members had resigned, leaving just one member who had been around for over a year and one new member. This greatly increased the workload undertaken by IMB members on a weekly basis to ensure that statutory responsibilities were met. The IMB members were conscious about managing visits carefully so as to not overexpose the prison with the same members to ensure that independence is maintained. Closer collaboration with Rochester IMB helped but they too had membership challenges and were monitoring a much larger estate. The timing of national recruitment campaigns has not served the Cookham Wood Board well and has left them under complement for all this reporting period. One new member has been recruited in this period.



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