



Ministry
of Justice

Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP Cookham Wood
Sir Evelyn Road
Rochester
ME1 3LU

MoJ ref: SUB138393

25 September 2026

Dear Chair,

**HMP COOKHAM WOOD INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 SEPTEMBER 2024 – 31 MARCH 2026**

Thank you for sharing your Board's annual report on HMP Cookham Wood. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to you for the dedication shown throughout the reporting period. I am particularly grateful for your oversight following the significant transition from a young offender institution to an adult Category C prison. I note the challenges the Board has faced with membership levels due to the transitional changes and recruitment, but the commitment shown in continued monitoring is greatly appreciated. I also hope that the addition of a new member and the closer partnership with HMP/YOI Rochester in the future will assist you.

I was saddened to learn that two prisoners died whilst in custody during the reporting period and a further death occurred shortly after release. I offer my sincere condolences to all their friends and family. I was reassured to read that prison staff were compassionate and supportive in handling these tragic circumstances. I would also like to provide assurance that any recommendations made by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman will be taken very seriously.

I welcome the Board's interest in the future direction of HMP Cookham Wood. The ambition is to become a high-performing adult Category C training and rehabilitation prison. The focus will be on providing a safe and decent environment with meaningful purpose activity to allow prisoners to develop the skills, behaviours and qualifications needed to help them prepare for a successful resettlement into the community. However, your frustrations that building and infrastructure work continued following the prison re-opening and the impact this has had on rehabilitation and resettlement are recognised. These works were necessary to support the safe and sustainable re-role of HMP Cookham Wood as an adult Category C prison and ensure it will be capable of operating at its planned capacity. The delays in construction activity were managed in conjunction with the prison who sought to mitigate the impact wherever possible with alternative delivery of education, healthcare, physical education and rehabilitative interventions.

I also acknowledge your concerns about the funding of education and purposeful activity as providing high-quality education, training and purposeful activity is important regardless the size of the site. Although there has been no reduction to the overall national budget for prison education in 2025-26, the rising cost of education services have impacted the proportion of the overall budget that could be spent on Core Education contracts. As a result, some prisons have

seen changes in the volume of provision delivered under the previous and current contracts and HMPPS has [published](#) transparency data that sets out HMP Cookham Wood and HMP/YOI Rochester have seen a reduction of 18%. However, despite the initial capacity and infrastructure challenges, performance in purposeful activity at HMP Cookham Wood has been strong, with participation levels consistently exceeding the national target. The prison has been providing sufficient activity places for the population it has held, remaining above the agreed 85% activity ratio. Forecasting also indicates this position will be maintained following the prison's capacity increasing to 180 places. As improvement works continue to be completed and accommodation is brought back into use, additional opportunities will be created to expand purposeful activity, vocational training and rehabilitative provision for prisoners. For example, the gym has now reopened and the football pitch, which was temporarily relocated to facilitate construction, is now back in use. HMP Cookham Wood will continue to work closely with the education providers and employment partners to make the best use of the available resources. This will focus on maximising opportunities aligned to labour market need and strengthening employment links to allow prisoners to progress through clear and meaningful pathways that support rehabilitation and reduce reoffending. The Board can be assured that the reopening and full utilisation of the accommodation and activity spaces will support the ambition for the prison.

Regarding your concerns about the merger and sharing of services with the much larger HMP/YOI Rochester, whilst this work remains ongoing, it has provided the opportunity to strengthen governance, leadership resilience and oversight across the two sites. This has already supported greater consistency, improved contract management and more effective use of specialist resources. Currently the two prisons remain distinct sites with different populations and operational requirements. However, shared arrangements are already in place for healthcare and education. Robust governance processes are in place to ensure that the needs of prisoners at HMP Cookham Wood remain fully represented and performance is being monitored at site level and through established contract management arrangements. Specifically in terms of education, the Board can be assured that the new Prisoner Education Service contract was planned and commissioned on the basis of a formal merger between HMP Cookham Wood and HMP/YOI Rochester and this will ensure that delivery remains aligned to the needs of learners. Once the merger is complete, having one Governor, one Senior Leadership Team and one staffing group will allow greater flexibility in the resources being allocated across the two sites based on operational need and will provide long-term sustainability for key services. This will ensure prisoners continue to receive appropriate access to healthcare, education, training and rehabilitative opportunities but there will be an ongoing review of prisoner needs to ensure these services are sufficient for both sites.

It was reassuring to receive your comments that the prison remains a calm, clean and safe environment which prisoners have recognised on their arrival. Despite the challenges of fire safety and infrastructure works, I was pleased to read about the positive impact of family days, the opportunity for time out of cell being good and that the Board recognises the potential the prison has for positive work with prisoners. It was also encouraging that overall staff interact positively with prisoners, have built a good rapport to build trust and that incidents are addressed with care and compassion. The Board's constructive feedback during a period of significant change for HMP Cookham Wood is welcomed and the Governor will continue to keep you informed locally as progress is made.

The Lord Chancellor and I appreciate the scrutiny provided by members of Independent Monitoring Boards to improve the estate and we are grateful for your dedication on behalf of HMP Cookham Wood.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Catherine'.

Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending