



Ministry
of Justice

Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister of State for Justice

Chair
Independent Monitoring Board
HMP/YOI Thorn Cross
Arley Road
Warrington
Cheshire
WA4 4RL

MoJ ref: SUB138392

25 September 2026

Dear Chair,

**HMP/YOI THORN CROSS: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 MAY 2025 – 30 APRIL 2026**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP/YOI Thorn Cross. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your continued dedication and valuable observations captured throughout the year, despite operating below the recommended complement of Board members.

I was saddened to learn there was a death in custody at HMP/YOI Thorn Cross in August 2025. I offer my sincere condolences to the individual's family and friends. While the death is currently believed to have been due to natural causes and a full Coroner's inquest is awaited, I would like to reassure the Board that any recommendations arising from investigations are taken very seriously.

I was pleased to read the Board's positive assessment that HMP/YOI Thorn Cross remains a safe establishment, with low levels of violence and self-harm and a strong rehabilitative culture. The Board's observations of constructive, respectful and supportive relationships between staff and prisoners are particularly encouraging. It is also reassuring to note the significant improvement in arrangements for prisoners arriving without their medication. The kitchen team's nomination for a national catering award further reflects the dedication and professionalism of staff across the prison.

I also welcome the positive outcomes achieved in preparing men for release, including high rates of accommodation and employment on release, as well as the continued success of initiatives such as incentivised substance-free living and dedicated resettlement pathways. It is particularly encouraging that employment outcomes for released prisoners continue to exceed Prison Service targets, reflecting the prison's strong commitment to rehabilitation and reducing reoffending.

Although no specific issues have been raised for my attention, I note the local issues of concern highlighted in your report which the Governor will continue to keep the Board apprised on as work continues. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) comments in response to other issues raised in your report are set out in the attached annex.

The Lord Chancellor and I sincerely value the role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards throughout the estate, and we are very grateful for your continued hard work on behalf of HMP/YOI Thorn Cross.

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

Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending

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HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

CCTV

The project to upgrade and replace the full CCTV system is being designed in 2026/27 and, subject to funding and governance approval, is planned to be delivered in the 2027/28 capital maintenance programme. Whilst we appreciate delays will be frustrating, unfortunately, demands for maintenance across the estate are much greater than the available funding. HMPPS must therefore prioritise works very carefully to make best use of that funding, focusing on risk to life, capacity and decency.

Smoking Ban

In line with the closed estate, the use of tobacco will be prohibited in the open estate in due course. Prisoners will no longer be able to purchase tobacco from the canteen and will not be permitted to use or possess tobacco within the prison. The purchase and use of tobacco will continue to be permitted while on Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL). There will be no changes to the access or use of vapes.

Offender Flows

There are currently no plans to introduce a minimum period that a prisoner must spend in closed conditions before being considered for transfer to the open estate. Offender flow decisions are based on the principle of Time Left to Serve, alongside individual risk assessments, sentence planning requirements and suitability for open conditions.

During periods of population pressure, it is imperative that prisons can safely receive new arrivals from court. As a result, transfers from reception prisons are often prioritised over longer-term progression moves elsewhere in the estate. While pressures on capacity are expected to ease following the implementation of the Sentencing Act, challenges are likely to remain in some parts of the prison estate.

Work continues to reconfigure the estate to better reflect the changing prisoner cohort, although there will not always be precise alignment between available accommodation and population needs. In this context, it remains important that prisoners who are suitable for open conditions can progress at the earliest appropriate opportunity. Introducing a mandatory minimum period in closed conditions would reduce operational flexibility and could place additional pressure on the closed estate at a time when capacity continues to be carefully managed.

In-Cell Telephony

Following the successful pilot of mobile PIN phones at HMP Leyhill, HMPPS is reviewing the outcomes to determine the next steps for the service. Supporting prisoners to maintain contact with their families and the wider community remains an important priority, and lessons learned from the pilot will help inform future decisions regarding the provision of PIN phone services at the establishment.