Ministry of Justice

Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP Swaleside
Eastchurch
Isle of Sheppey
Kent
ME14 4AX

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Dear Chair ,

HMP SWALESIDE INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 MAY 2025 – 30 APRIL 2026

Thank you for submitting the Board's annual report on HMP Swaleside. I appreciate the commitment and perseverance shown by you and your fellow Board members during what has clearly been a challenging and demanding for the establishment, particularly during a year in which the Board has continued to operate below its recommended complement. Your report provides a thoughtful assessment of the significant challenges facing the prison, whilst recognising the efforts made by staff to drive improvement and maintain key services.

I was saddened to read that there were five deaths in custody during the reporting year, one of which was reportedly not from natural causes. My thoughts are with the families and friends of those who died, as well as all those affected within the prison community. I appreciate the Board's continued scrutiny of this matter and can assure you that any recommendations arising from the Prison and Probation Ombudsman's investigation will be carefully considered. Learning arising from deaths in custody continues to inform work to strengthen support for vulnerable prisoners, improve safety and enhance local oversight and governance arrangements.

The introduction of SDS40, FTR56 and the Sentencing Act 2026 has significantly increased the number of prisoners approaching release and placed additional pressure on prisons, probation services and resettlement partners across the system. I recognise the Board's concern that this pressure is being felt particularly acutely within HMP Swaleside's Offender Management Unit. Although HMP Swaleside operates as a Category B training prison rather than a resettlement prison, release planning remains a key operational priority and HMPPS continues to monitor the impact of these reforms through population management and operational planning arrangements. Work continues across prisons, probation and community services to manage this increased demand while maintaining safe and effective release processes.

Drone-enabled criminality continues to present one of the most serious security threats facing prisons and remains a significant concern at HMP Swaleside. The Board is right to highlight the increasing sophistication of organised criminal groups and the speed with which local security measures can be challenged. HMPPS continues to work closely with policing, law enforcement and international partners to detect, deter and disrupt drone-enabled criminality. This includes ongoing investment in physical security measures, intelligence-led activity and the development of new counter-drone technologies. While there were initial issues with the newly installed grilles,

a new national specification is now being fitted. These grilles are more robust and will provide stronger, more consistent protection against attempts to breach the prison's physical security. Alongside these national measures, local operational activity remains focused on identifying vulnerabilities, disrupting criminal networks and protecting the safety and security of the establishment.

A stable and experienced workforce remains fundamental to sustaining improvement and delivering a positive organisational culture. Staff experience levels have continued to improve during the reporting year and newer officers are becoming increasingly established within the workforce. The extension of visa arrangements for affected prison officers has provided important stability locally, while Foundation Training Reform and the Enable Programme continue to support recruitment, training and retention across the service. These initiatives are designed to ensure staff are equipped with the skills, confidence and support needed to work effectively within increasingly complex prison environments.

The Board rightly highlights the important role education plays in supporting rehabilitation, progression and reducing reoffending. While changes to the national prison education funding model have resulted in adjustments to some core education provision, Governors continue to have access to the Prison Education Dynamic Purchasing System to commission additional provision where local needs require it. Investment also continues through vocational training, careers advice, distance learning and library services. Despite the challenges identified in your report, I was encouraged to read that learner achievement rates remained strong and that education and library services continue to make a positive contribution to prisoners' development and progression.

Whilst your report highlights several continuing challenges, I was pleased to read that the Board had observed progress in several areas following the Urgent Notification and the subsequent focus on improvement activity. I welcome the improvements in the quality assurance of key work, strengthened scrutiny and learning around the use of force and the positive outcomes being achieved through the Drug Recovery Wing and specialist addiction services. I was also encouraged by the continued success of the education and library teams, the achievement of a five-star food hygiene rating, and the important work being undertaken within the Care, Separation and Reintegration Unit. These developments demonstrate the continued efforts being made to improve outcomes for prisoners and support the prison's longer-term recovery.

I note you have raised several 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 Lord Chancellor and I sincerely appreciate the important role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards and we extend our thanks for your ongoing commitment on behalf of HMP Swaleside.



Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister of State for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending

HMP SWALESIDE INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 MAY 2025 – 30 APRIL 2026

HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Governor Recruitment and Leadership Stability

Following two unsuccessful recruitment campaigns between 2024 and 2025, extensive work was undertaken to secure a substantive Governor appointment for HMP Swaleside. A permanent Governor took up post in July 2025 and has provided clear and sustained leadership of the prison's recovery, driving notable improvements since the Urgent Notification. Leadership stability remains an important component of the prison's continued recovery and long-term improvement.

Care, Separation and Reintegration Unit (CSRU)

The Segregation Policy Framework is currently under review to strengthen safeguards, accountability and consistency across the prison estate. Continued segregation may only be authorised where there is clear evidence that no suitable alternative exists. Individualised Intervention and Reintegration Plans are required for all segregated prisoners and are intended to support progression and facilitate a return to normal location at the earliest appropriate opportunity. Additional local oversight arrangements have also been introduced to strengthen progression planning and improve outcomes for prisoners held within the CSRU.

Catering Provision for HMP Standford Hill

Work continues to progress plans for dedicated catering facilities at HMP Standford Hill as part of the wider expansion programme. Surveys and planning activity remain underway and construction is currently expected to commence during 2026. In the interim, approval has been granted for the installation of a temporary finishing kitchen at HMP Standford Hill. This will help reduce operational pressure on HMP Swaleside's catering facilities while permanent arrangements are developed.

Secure Mental Health Provision

Prisons are not designed to provide long-term care for individuals whose needs require treatment within secure mental health facilities and timely transfers to appropriate healthcare settings remain essential. The introduction of a statutory 28-day transfer target through mental health legislation is intended to reduce delays and improve access to specialist treatment. Alongside legislative reform, partnership work continues to strengthen oversight, improve care pathways and address barriers affecting timely assessment and transfer.

Constant Watch Accommodation

Current constant-watch capacity can be stretched during periods of heightened demand. To strengthen the prison's ability to manage prisoners requiring continuous observation, two additional gated cells have been manufactured. One will be installed within the CSRU and the other within the Inpatient Department. These additional facilities will increase constant-watch capacity, improve operational resilience and enhance the prison's ability to safely manage prisoners assessed as being at immediate risk of self-harm or suicide.