Ministry of Justice

Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP/YOI Rochester
1 Fort Road
Rochester
Kent
ME1 3QS

MoJ ref: SUB138779

30 October 2026

Dear Chair,

HMP/YOI ROCHESTER INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 APRIL 2025 – 31 MARCH 2026

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP/YOI Rochester. I appreciate you and your colleagues' considerable efforts and commitment in monitoring the prison and compiling this report despite the membership challenges you have faced during the reporting period. I hope the situation improves going forward.

I was very saddened to read that three prisoners died in custody during the reporting year. I offer my sincere condolences to all their friends and family and would like to reassure them that any recommendations made by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman will be taken very seriously. It was, however, reassuring that end-of-life care and family support has been recognised for its exceptional high standard and I wish to thank those involved during such difficult circumstances.

I share your concerns about the threats that drugs pose within our prisons. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is committed to tackling the conveyance of illicit items into prisons. In recent years, the use of physical security measures has been expanded to support prisons, such as X-ray body scanners, airport-style Enhanced Gate Security including X-ray baggage scanners and drug trace detection equipment. As drugs can enter prisons through multiple routes and the threat to security constantly evolves, to keep pace with this HMPPS must also shift and adapt, which is why it cannot publish all its counter measures as this would undermine security. However, in June 2026 the Government committed to a further £35 million to improve counter drone security, which is in addition to over £40 million already invested recently in physical security measures, as well as continuing to work on research of technologies. HMPPS also conducts vulnerability assessments at prisons to understand risks and to implement plans to mitigate the threat. Its Counter Corruption Unit has also been expanded, providing training, support and guidance to staff, as well as pursuing those who engage in this kind of criminality.

Reducing drug availability and demand whilst supporting recovery remains a priority at HMP/YOI Rochester and although drugs continue to be a significant challenge there are signs that the current approach is having an impact alongside wider improvements in safety. The prisons Drug Strategy and having a dedicated Lead has improved oversight, allowing the prison to strengthen its approach to tackle illicit substances through intelligence-led activity, improved security processes, mail monitoring, and drug testing. Improvements are being seen through a reduction

in positive Mandatory Drug Test (MDT) rates and successes in the collaborative work with external agencies. To ensure progress is maintained senior leaders will continue to oversee the impact that these actions are having which will be measured through MDT outcomes, intelligence, illicit finds, reports of prisoners under the influence, violence indicators and wider stability measures. In addition, the prison continues to work with the substance misuse services provider to offer support to prisoners who are keen to live substance free lives, or who may need encouragement to engage with services.

I appreciate your concerns about the needs of the ageing prison population. Local Authorities are responsible for Adult Social Care and HMP/YOI Rochester has worked with the Local Authority, supported by its healthcare partners to identify prisoners needs, secure assessments and to put appropriate support arrangements in place. It is recognised that the prison now holds more older prisoners and greater numbers with complex health and social care needs. The focus will remain on ensuring prisoners with assessed care needs are treated with dignity, are supported to maintain independence and are enabled to access rehabilitation, healthcare and regime activity safely. Partnership working will continue to be strengthened to address the needs of this changing population. In addition, the Ministry of Justice is developing an Older People's Strategy in response to the recommendations from the Independent Sentencing Review and the Chief Medical Officer for England's report. This will have a focus on the suitability of the prison estate and consideration is being given to how a prison environment can better support older people in custody, such as those with social care needs. This includes exploring immediate opportunities to improve outcomes, alongside longer-term considerations for how the prison system can adapt to meet their needs.

Despite challenges remaining, I welcome the Board's assessment that the prison continues to provide a safe environment and improvements are being made following the focus on recovery, stabilisation and delivery of the Urgent Notification action plan. It was reassuring to note throw-overs and drone sightings reduced during the year, as well as weapons finds, assaults on staff and the need to use force. I was pleased to read that staff are professional in their interactions and have positive relationships with prisoners who are being treated fairly and humanely. I am also encouraged that the resettlement provision continues to perform well and that the library is highly valued with a reading culture emerging following the introduction of a reading strategy.

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 Lord Chancellor and I recognise the important contribution that members of Independent Monitoring Boards provide in improving our prisons and we are very grateful for your commitment on behalf of HMP/YOI Rochester.



Catherine McKinnell MP
Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending

HMP/YOI ROCHESTER INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 APRIL 2025 – 31 MARCH 2026

HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Prison Conditions

Whilst there is still work to do, the Board's recognition of the improvements to living conditions already achieved at HMP/YOI Rochester is welcomed. Refurbishment works have improved accommodation standards and communal areas are much cleaner with significantly reduced vermin activity. HMPPS remains committed to delivering sustained improvement in living conditions to promote a safe and secure environment that facilitates genuine rehabilitation. The concerns about the Care and Separation Unit (CSU) are acknowledged and HMP/YOI Rochester is continuing to work with Estates and Property colleagues to prioritise improvements to maintain the progress that has already been made and to address areas where standards are not yet where they need to be. The Clean, Rehabilitative Enabling and Decent (CRED) team initiative will be looking to move into the CSU within the next six months to begin making some improvements. Investment in the prison estate will also continue to be underpinned by the condition survey data, which assessed the fabric, cells, and critical assets at each prison to inform future maintenance. Boiler replacement works in A and D Wings are projected to commence at HMP/YOI Rochester this year and a range of projects are also in development. Although these projects are at an early stage to advise on delivery timescales these include fire safety improvement works, shower refurbishments, window replacements, improved CCTV, site-wide hot water and heating improvements, the demolition of C Wing and new dispensaries in E and H Wings.

Prisoners' Property

The frustrations caused when property is delayed, damaged or lost during transfer are recognised and HMPPS remains committed to strengthening the management of prisoners' property to ensure that belongings are handled with care and respect. A digital property tracking solution has been explored, but this is not currently a priority for delivery. Existing digital capacity is focused on higher-risk and safety-critical programmes, such as the exit from NOMIS and transformation to Digital Prison Services as the single platform for prisoner management. Further to the previous response, the renewed attention nationally and the consultation with prison staff has resulted in a revised version of the Prisoners' Property Policy Framework which was published on 17 November 2025. This update provides additional guidance on common areas of difficulty that were identified, such as sending on of excess property, the handling of prisoners' laundry and on the correct completion of the cell clearance certificate. However, compliance with volumetric control remains applicable across all prisons and is of key importance, since property within those limits will be moved with prisoners when they transfer to another prison. The HMPPS Prison Performance Committee has previously discussed assurance regarding prisoner property and agreed that compliance would have the greatest impact through the operational reporting line and Prison Group Directors and Area Executive Directors continue to make progress within their teams to drive improvements. HMP/YOI Rochester also continues to strengthen its local oversight and quality assurance with a clearer focus on resolving backlogs, which are discussed at the daily operational meeting. The prison is also working with escort providers, as well as sending and receiving prisons to improve communication, accountability and timely transfer of property to help alleviate property issues.

Offender Behaviour Programmes

It is recognised that the prisoners convicted of sexual offences (PCoSO) population have specific rehabilitative needs, however, it must be noted that accredited offending behaviour programmes (OBP) are only one form of rehabilitative activity. Delivery of accredited programmes for eligible PCoSOs nationally has been expanded and HMP/YOI Rochester transitioned to the Building Choices programme during the 2025-26 financial year. It is also recognised that staffing issues impacted programme delivery, but the new delivery model will utilise the accredited programme resources across both HMP Elmley and HMP/YOI Rochester in the interim, whilst a second programme delivery team is embedded. The model will provide greater flexibility to meet demand, as the prison will be able to deliver both high and moderate intensity variants of Building Choices and can provide separate groups to the prisoners convicted of sexual offending. The prison also intends to introduce a Building Choices group to people with learning difficulties this financial year, which will provide a comprehensive offer to different risks and needs. Demand will remain under review as the digital approach to referrals and assessment for accredited programmes nationally is improved, but there are plans to increase OBP places further as a result of prison expansion. In due course, this will enable both HMP Elmley and HMP/YOI Rochester to operate two Building Choices teams per site, including continuing the flexible approach to delivery based on site need which will increase provision for the PCoSO population. However, as prisoners may require different or additional support to OBPs, HMP/YOI Rochester is also continuing to adapt its rehabilitative offer and progression pathways to reflect its differing populations. A needs analysis has been completed to ensure that the wider regime reflects these needs and meaningful purposeful activity has been improved, with better engagement in education and training. Work is also continuing with key partners to improve access to interventions, progression opportunities and support that is linked to risk and need.