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**HM Chief Inspector of Prisons**  
**CHARLIE TAYLOR**

Date: 8 May 2024

The Rt Hon Alex Chalk KC MP  
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State  
Ministry of Justice  
102 Petty France  
London  
SW1H 9AJ

Dear Secretary of State,

Urgent Notification: HMP Wandsworth

In accordance with the Protocol between HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Ministry of Justice dated October 2019, I am writing to you to invoke the Urgent Notification process following our unannounced inspection of HMP Wandsworth between 22<sup>nd</sup> April and 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2024. The protocol sets out that this letter will be placed in the public domain, and that the Secretary of State commits to respond publicly within 28 days.

Wandsworth is a prison that is still reeling from the very high-profile escape in 2023. Our findings suggest that security remains a significant concern, although failings were evident in almost all aspects of the prison's operation. This was reflected in our healthy prison test scores of poor for "safety", "respect" and "purposeful activity" and not sufficiently good in "preparation for release".

When we last inspected Wandsworth in September 2021, we reported serious concerns about outcomes for prisoners and at that time I cautioned against plans to increase the prison roll:

*"Leaders in this crumbling, overcrowded, vermin-infested prison will need considerable ongoing support from the prison service...It is hard to see how HMP Wandsworth's limited progress can be sustained if prisoner numbers in this jail are allowed to increase as they are scheduled to do next April."*

The population at the time of that inspection was 1,364. When we returned this month, it had risen to 1,513.

I have issued an Urgent Notification for the following reasons:

08/05/24-

- Despite a high-profile escape from Wandsworth in September 2023, inspectors found significant weaknesses in many aspects of security. Wings were chaotic and staff across most units were unable to confirm where all prisoners were during the working day. There was no reliable roll that could assure leaders that all prisoners were accounted for. Given the recent escape, it was unfathomable that leaders had not focussed their attention on this area.
- There had been 10 self-inflicted deaths since the last inspection, seven of which had occurred in the last 12 months. The rate of self-harm was high and rising, and yet around 40% of emergency cell bells were not answered within five minutes.
- Overall rates of violence, including serious assaults, had increased since the last inspection and were higher than most similar prisons. In our survey, 69% of prisoners said they had felt unsafe at Wandsworth.
- Over half (51%) of prisoners surveyed said it was easy to get illicit drugs and the smell of cannabis was ubiquitous. Although leaders had identified this issue as presenting the highest level of security risk, they had suspended drug testing between August 2023 and January 2024. In the most recent confirmed random drug test results (February 2024), 44% of prisoners tested positive.
- Wandsworth was badly overcrowded and has a transient population, with more than half on remand. Living conditions were very poor, cells were cramped and ill-equipped, and the prison was still too dirty. The fabric of the buildings and facilities including showers and heating still needed significant investment to bring them up to a decent standard.
- In our survey only 41% of prisoners said that staff treated them with respect, significantly lower than in comparable prisons. Very limited time out of cell, absent staff, and a failure to deliver any key work reduced the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships on wings.
- A substantial lack of work and education spaces and poor use of those that were available meant there was very little purposeful activity. Most prisoners were unemployed and spent over 22 hours a day locked up.
- Prisoners had no idea when or if they would be unlocked each day or whether they would get access to fresh air. Life on residential units was unpredictable and confusing for staff and prisoners alike.
- Consistent failures to enable access to healthcare services due to prison staff absences resulted in important assessment and treatment interventions being curtailed. Clinic non-attendance rates were high at around 24%. The costly new health centre that was supposed to open in the summer of 2022 was still unused.
- Despite a full complement of officers, sickness, restricted duties, and training commitments meant that over a third could not be deployed to operational duties each day; this led to curtailed regimes, cross-deployment, and burnt-out staff.
- Inexperience across every grade of operational staff was preventing them from bringing about much needed change. Staff were not wilfully neglectful,

they simply did not understand their role and they lacked direction, training, and consistent support from leaders.

The poor outcomes we found at Wandsworth stemmed from poor leadership at every level of the prison, from HMPPS and the Ministry of Justice, leading to systemic and cultural failures that have led to this shocking decline. There was a degree of despondency amongst prisoners that I have not come across in my time as Chief Inspector.

Many well-meaning and hard-working leaders and staff persevered at Wandsworth, but they were often fighting against a tide of cross-cutting, intractable problems that require comprehensive, long-term solutions.

For this troubled prison to begin to recover, Wandsworth needs permanent experienced leaders at all levels who are invested in the long-term future of the prison to improve security, safety and guide their less experienced colleagues.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charlie Taylor', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Charlie Taylor