



Debriefing paper for the inspection of

## **HMP Woodhill**

by HM Inspectorate of Prisons

2–12 March 2026

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This paper represents the material presented at the full inspection debrief by HM Inspectorate of Prisons. The material and assessments are indicative only and may be changed at the discretion of the Chief Inspector after due reflection during the report production process or on the discovery of additional evidence. Inspected bodies will be offered the opportunity to correct factual inaccuracies as part of the publication process.

# Contents

Healthy prison assessments.....	3
1. Leadership.....	4
2. Safety .....	6
3. Respect.....	9
4. Purposeful activity.....	12
5. Preparation for release .....	14

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## Healthy prison assessments

### **Outcomes for prisoners are good against this healthy prison test.**

There is no evidence that outcomes for prisoners are being adversely affected in any significant areas.

### **Outcomes for prisoners are reasonably good against this healthy prison test.**

There is evidence of adverse outcomes for prisoners in only a small number of areas. For the majority there are no significant concerns. Procedures to safeguard outcomes are in place.

### **Outcomes for prisoners are not sufficiently good against this healthy prison test.**

There is evidence that outcomes for prisoners are being adversely affected in many areas or particularly in those areas of greatest importance to the well-being of prisoners. Problems/concerns, if left unattended, are likely to become areas of serious concern.

### **Outcomes for prisoners are poor against this healthy prison test.**

There is evidence that the outcomes for prisoners are seriously affected by current practice. There is a failure to ensure even adequate treatment of and/or conditions for prisoners. Immediate remedial action is required.

# 1. Leadership

**Our judgements about leadership take a narrative form and do not result in a score.**

- We have found poor outcomes in safety and purposeful activity at each inspection of Woodhill since 2018. This had not improved and leaders had allowed outcomes in our preparation for release test to deteriorate. The Urgent Notification issued by the Chief Inspector in 2023 prompted remedial action by HMPPS and some of that help continued, but leaders had not addressed the very high rates of violence, drugs and self-harm.
- The new governor was an experienced leader but had only been in post for six months and a new deputy had joined him just two months ago. We had confidence that they had analysed the needs and priorities of the prison accurately. Most staff we spoke to felt encouraged by his drive and new leadership style.
- The governor was trying to improve stability by delivering time out of cell more reliably. While there were fewer examples of protesting behaviour such as setting cell fires or malicious fire alarm activation, leaders' efforts had yet to have an impact on the high and increasing rates of violence.
- Leaders were still not delivering the outcomes expected of a training prison. Ofsted rated the provision of education and skills as inadequate. Some of the activities that improved employability had ceased as a consequence of HMPPS cuts to education delivery, attendance was poor and sessions were very often cancelled.
- Probation leaders were not providing enough staff to deliver meaningful offender management contact time and there were very few opportunities for prisoners to address their offending behaviour.
- Leaders were addressing the shortfall of officers, and more new recruits were due to start, with some transferring from other prisons. The governor was taking more robust action to reduce the proportion of officers not available for operational duties, including those under disciplinary procedures or regularly absent.
- A consultant was working with senior leaders to promote team working and the governor met with middle managers each week to improve communication and consultation. Leaders were making sure new supervising officers had time to shadow experienced colleagues, but this was not leading to them setting or maintaining adequate standards on the wings.
- Poor staff-prisoner relationships were at the heart of many of the frustrations for prisoners. Some staff lacked the competence and confidence to enforce

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rules or engage with prisoners constructively. There was an urgent need for clear leadership to support frontline staff.

- Leaders had allocated a member of the safety team to each house unit to promote improvements, but this was not yet having an impact on the quality of ACCT case management.
- Experienced and visible health care leaders were working effectively together and clinical staff felt valued and supported by them.
- The prison service had not provided adequate funding for refurbishments in the prison, which was dilapidated. For example, funding for shower refurbishments had been delayed for a long time. Prison leaders had secured some replacement laundry equipment and had begun to improve basic processes such as reinstating weekly kit exchange.

## 2. Safety

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

### Early days in custody

- Prisoners spoke positively about their early days experience; our survey results were more positive than in similar prisons and at our last inspection across many of the indicators.
- The quality of safety interviews was reasonable, and it was positive that prisoners met one of the safer custody officers soon after arrival to explore these issues in more depth.
- Prisoners spoke positively about staff on the induction unit and cells were generally clean and well equipped.
- Support provided on the induction unit was good, with effective oversight from managers.
- While prisoners received a helpful induction, they waited too long to be assessed for education, which meant they could not go to the gym.

### Promoting positive behaviour

- Data showed that the prison remained unsafe, with rates of violence remaining very high. At the time of the inspection, only Swaleside had a higher rate in all category B training prisons. Around a third of all violent incidents involved the use of weapons.
- The rate of assaults against staff had increased by 45% and the rate of prisoner-on-prisoner violence had increased by 23% since the last inspection.
- The rate of serious assaults against staff was the highest in the LTHSE. Some resulted in significant injuries.
- In our survey, 61% of prisoners said that they had felt unsafe at some point, and 39% said they currently felt unsafe, which was similar to the last inspection and other category B training prisons.
- However, over the last six months, leaders had improved some aspects of stability in the population. For example, the number of incidents at height, malicious fire alarm activations and cell fires by prisoners had all reduced.
- Violence continued to be driven by many factors, including drug use, debts, gang problems, boredom and the continued limitations in staff-prisoner relationships.
- Most investigations into violent incidents were of a good quality but did not often lead to meaningful actions to support victims or challenge perpetrators.
- The regime for self-isolating men was very poor.
- The introduction of the enhanced wing was a good way of incentivising behaviour, but leaders knew there was far more to do to develop the range of rewards.
- The adjudication system had collapsed in 2025, and there were no consequences for many serious charges.

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- The new governor had taken effective and prompt action. For example, the independent adjudicator was now hearing appropriate cases and oversight of police referrals had improved.

## **Segregation**

- The segregation unit remained busy, and some stays were lengthy, particularly as many men had very challenging and complex needs.
- Staff were knowledgeable about prisoners, and we observed some examples of good engagement, but day-to-day pressures meant that interactions were often brief.
- Most of the time the regime was poor, with prisoners only able to shower or exercise every other day, which was not acceptable.
- Reintegration planning had been introduced but targets were often not specific to the individuals' circumstances and risks.
- There was little activity available, though the unit held a supply of books and it was good that some prisoners retained access to a laptop.
- The physical environment remained austere and communal areas were worn and tired.
- Some cells were out of action, but others were in reasonable condition.
- Oversight of segregation on the wings had improved.

## **Use of force**

- The rate of use of force was very high and the highest in category B training prisons.
- PAVA use was very high.
- The use of body-worn cameras had improved. In the footage we viewed, most staff responded quickly to incidents.
- However, some uses of force could have been avoided through more effective use of de-escalation. We also observed some antagonistic behaviour and inflammatory language from staff.
- Oversight had improved and robust action was taken to address poor and inappropriate use of force.
- Special accommodation was used rarely but prisoners were not always removed at the earliest opportunity.

## **Security**

- Drugs were far too easily available, and their use continued to have a significant impact on the safety of staff and prisoners. There had been three drug-related deaths in the last two years.
- The random MDT positive rate over the last year was 41%, which was among the highest of all adult male prisons. Leaders reported that the number of prisoners using illicit drugs may well have been closer to 55%, as a high number refused to take a test.
- Only one in four suspicion tests had been completed since January 2026. Those carried out produced a positive rate of over 90%.
- Prison staff were not routinely searched at the gate.

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- Some improvements to physical security were being made to prevent drone access, including wire over exercise yards and new grilles covering cell windows.
- Leaders had reduced the high backlog of intelligence reports.
- There was no ISFL unit or other incentives to motivate prisoners not to use drugs.

## **Safeguarding**

- Rates of self-harm remained among the highest in the adult male estate, despite an 18% reduction since the last inspection.
- Since our last inspection, the PPO had classified one death as self-inflicted.
- PPO recommendations were reviewed regularly but ongoing assurance of the implementation of some actions was limited. For example, lots of observation panels were covered by prisoners and this was not challenged by staff.
- Prisoners told us that a lack of opportunities for progression, limited purposeful activity and frustration caused by poor staff-prisoner relationships contributed to them getting into crisis.
- There were few formal interventions to support men, but the Compass unit provided a quieter environment for a small number of more vulnerable prisoners.
- We saw evidence of some effective, targeted work to support individuals with complex needs.
- ACCT care plans did not reflect the issues raised by prisoners and too many did not set out the support required.

### **3. Respect**

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were not sufficiently good.**

#### **Staff-prisoner relationships**

- In our survey, 59% of respondents said that most staff treated them with respect, which was similar to other category B training prisons.
- However, as we found at our last inspection, many prisoners complained that staff were dismissive and disengaged, and they expressed frustration that they could not get simple things done.
- Some described staff as antagonistic and we saw many examples of officers not showing the capability or confidence to maintain expected standards and challenge poor behaviour.
- Too little key work was being delivered and in our survey, only 34% of prisoners said that, in the last week, a member of staff had talked to them about how they were getting on.
- Peer support work was limited.

#### **Daily life (living conditions)**

- All prisoners had a single cell, but many lacked adequate storage for their clothes and possessions.
- External areas were pleasant and clean.
- Our survey showed more positive views from prisoners about the cleanliness of communal areas than in similar prisons.
- However, we found many areas that were scruffy and dirty and despite having many prisoners as cleaners, staff failed to maintain good standards.
- Access to cleaning materials was difficult.
- Many showers were out of action or damaged and were often dirty and damp. Much-needed refurbishments identified at our last inspection had still not been completed.
- Prisoners complained about long waits for cell bells to be answered. The monitoring of this had only recently been reinstated by leaders.
- Access to stored property was poor and there were over 130 applications waiting to be dealt with at the time of this inspection.
- Some repairs continued to take too long.

#### **Residential services (catering and shop)**

- Only 21% of prisoners surveyed said they got enough to eat. Many prisoners complained about food running out and the serving of meals was not well supervised.
- Prisoners who were fasting during Ramadan were not offered a choice of meal.

- Canteen issues were routinely discussed at council meetings, and the list was reviewed regularly.

## **Prisoner consultation, applications and redress**

- The introduction of laptops was good and helped prisoners to make applications and manage daily life.
- However, it took too long for some departments to respond to prisoners.
- It was good that wing forums were held to seek prisoners' views about the causes of violence.
- The rate of complaints had decreased by around 20% since 2023 but remained the highest of category B training prisons.
- Too many responses in the sample of complaints we reviewed were dismissive and did not involve a thorough investigation or a conversation with the prisoner.

## **Fair treatment and inclusion**

- Leaders regularly reviewed evidence of disproportionate outcomes but little action was taken to address any issues.
- Claims of discrimination were robustly investigated and there was a good level of independent scrutiny.
- There was too little consultation with groups of prisoners; for example, there had only been one forum with black and minority ethnic men in the last year.
- Over half of our survey respondents considered themselves to be neurodivergent and, of these, only 18% felt that they were getting the support they needed. A small number had support plans in place but officers we spoke to were not aware of these.
- Professional interpretation services were not always being used to communicate with prisoners with limited or no English.
- There was no disability access to the education centre and wing staff did not always know about emergency evacuation plans.
- Although a buddy scheme was in place it was not a paid role and it lacked formal oversight.

## **Faith and religion**

- The chaplaincy team was well staffed. In our survey, 88% of prisoners said that they could attend religious services and 67% felt that their beliefs were respected, both of which were higher than at similar prisons.
- A good range of support was provided.

## **Health, well-being and social care**

- Health services had strong clinical leadership and teams worked collaboratively to ensure patients' needs were met.
- Clinical governance structures were robust, and services were using data well to drive improvement.

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- Primary care services were well led with excellent access to nurses and GPs. Long-term conditions were managed robustly, and the clinical assessment unit was delivering effective care and treatment.
- The prison regularly delayed treatment for patients who needed to be taken to A&E which created significant risk and undermined clinicians' judgement.
- Overall, the mental health team was delivering a good standard of care. Although the waiting time for some psychological therapies was too long, patients were prioritised appropriately and were supported while waiting for these interventions.
- The number of patients transferred to hospital under the MHA had increased but delays were dreadful, with an average wait of 191 days.
- Integrated addictions services were very good. Renewed efforts from prison leaders had led to enhanced joint service delivery.
- Oversight and governance of social care was good but recording of the care provided was inconsistent.
- Pharmacy services and medicines management were well led with particularly good oversight of the safe delivery of medicines. The service had made many improvements since the last inspection.
- Dental services were good.

## 4. Purposeful activity

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

### **Time out of cell**

- In our roll checks, 34% of prisoners were locked in their cells during the core working day and only 15% were engaged in purposeful activity off the wing.
- Another 15% were employed as wing workers but they did very little.
- The governor had introduced a regime which allowed half of the house unit out of their cell at any one time to promote safety and stability. This restricted the amount of time out of cell but made delivery reliable.
- Those in full time activity had about 6.5 hours out of their cell during the week, but others received much less. Time unlocked at the weekend remained poor for most prisoners at around two hours.
- Planned activities, such as education, were often cancelled.
- Access to the gym was good and, in our survey, 51% said they could attend three times a week or more. Prisoners could take part in a wide range of activities.
- Access to the library was very limited and it was not an integral part of the prison.
- There was no evidence of the delivery of the prison's reading strategy.

### **Education, skills and work activity**

- Leaders and managers understood the importance of providing prisoners with relevant education and training to keep them purposefully occupied and develop the skills they needed to improve their life chances on release.
- Leaders had developed an ambitious curriculum that reflected the needs of the long-term population.
- Prisoners had access to a range of longer and higher-level courses, such as the level 1 and 2 multi-skills and the level 3 Award in Education and Training for peer mentors.
- Leaders provided sufficient education, skills and work activity places but did not allocate fully to these spaces. As a result, prisoners were on waiting lists for courses.
- Leaders had been hampered in implementing their curriculum due to cancellations caused by the lack of officers to supervise activity areas.
- There were too few opportunities for prisoners in work to gain accredited qualifications. For example, most servery workers did not have their food safety qualification.
- Most tutors and instructors planned and taught lessons that helped prisoners to develop their skills. They provided prisoners with constructive feedback to help them improve.
- Prisoners in workshops developed new knowledge and skills, which they demonstrated confidently. However, staff did not identify well enough the skills that prisoners needed to develop and track their progress against

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these. Consequently, prisoners did not have a sufficiently detailed record of their achievements that they could take with them when they left.

- Staff provided prisoners with information, advice and guidance to support them to develop the skills they needed to progress with their sentence.
- Staff had helped prisoners develop a good understanding of British Values. Prisoners were respectful, polite, courteous, and well-behaved towards their peers, officers, and tutors/instructors.
- Too many prisoners did not attend activities. Attendance in industries was higher and more sustained, compared to education.
- Leaders and managers had not provided prisoners with a broad enough range of personal development activities that allowed them to develop themselves.

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## 5. Preparation for release

**Outcomes for prisoners against this healthy prison test were poor.**

### **Children and families and contact with the outside world**

- The range of support to help men build or maintain family ties was limited, with little casework, no parenting courses and few uses of Storybook Dads.
- Social visits routinely started late and there were too few opportunities for video visits.
- There were good initiatives to support prisoners who were not getting visits. 'Quiet visits' for neurodiverse children were offered.
- In-cell technology made it much easier for men to keep in touch with their family using the 'email a prisoner' scheme.

### **Reducing reoffending**

- Woodhill was still not fulfilling its function as a category B training prison, with too few opportunities for progression despite holding long-term prisoners.
- In our survey, only 41% of men said their experience would make them less likely to reoffend, but this was in line with similar prisons.
- The number of POMs, especially probation officers, had reduced in recent months and this was negatively impacting many of the outcomes under this test.
- More prisoners were being released, but leaders had not adapted resettlement provision to meet this increase.

### **Supporting prisoners and managing risks**

- POM caseloads were very high. About 20% of the population had not been allocated a POM and some prisoners went for months without seeing them.
- The OMU was maintaining its focus on completing essential tasks such as parole assessments, categorisation reviews and reports to MAPPA. There had been recent successes in transferring men to category C jails.
- Most sentence plans were created remotely, which did not support prisoner engagement.
- There was not enough to engage indeterminate sentenced prisoners and the increased number of recalled men.
- Public protection arrangements were weak. Not all prisoners who presented an ongoing risk to children had their contact restricted. Very little offence-related monitoring took place.

### **Opportunities to progress**

- There were still few opportunities for prisoners to progress or reduce their risk. During our inspection, many men told us that they were frustrated about this.

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- POMs did not have the capacity to do meaningful one-to-one work and there were very few structured interventions to help men think about their behaviour.
- The new accredited programme had been slow to start and only seven men had completed it in six months. Specific versions of this programme for the most risky men and those with learning difficulties were not available.

## **Returning to the community**

- The number of releases had increased significantly. Virtually all of these were high-risk, but very little extra resettlement support had been provided.
- There was insufficient recorded evidence of POMs supporting release and risk management planning.
- The IRMM was not sufficiently frequent or well attended to ensure adequate oversight of high-risk releases.
- Most prisoners had housing on the day of release, but only a third of it was sustainable and just under 10% of men had been released homeless.
- Very few prisoners left with employment. Men could not routinely open a bank account or see the DWP ahead of release.
- There was some developing through-the-gate support from Reconnect.