



Ministry  
of Justice

**Lord Timpson**  
Minister of State for Justice

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Chair of Lay Observers' National Council  
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6 March 2026

Dear David,

### **LAY OBSERVERS' NATIONAL ANNUAL REPORT 2024 - 2025**

Thank you for your national annual report. I value the independent scrutiny provided by the Lay Observers (LO) and their vital role in monitoring the treatment and conditions of detained persons in custody and during transport. I am grateful to you and your members for your continued dedication, professionalism and the invaluable independent insight you bring.

I share your recognition of progress made, including the provision of dedicated accommodation for children, and note that serious concerns are now far less common, with LOs frequently reporting staff who prioritise welfare and go above and beyond. However, I also acknowledge that serious issues persist. Detained people still spend too long in custody suites and vehicles, with delays and rigid processes affecting welfare.

I take your findings, and the concerns you raise regarding safety and welfare, seriously. I have outlined the actions we are taking to address the recommendations made in your latest report and expand further on progress made on recommendations from your 2023/24 annual report in the annex to this letter.

I recognise the vital role of Liaison and Diversion (L&D) teams and on call paramedics in identifying needs and ensuring timely- access to key health and risk information. I also acknowledge the importance of having L&D teams in every court, with permanent staff in high-volume- courts, so that -mental health assessments are proactively offered to all detained people, enabling early intervention and avoiding missed risks.

To support continued improvement, HMPPS and NHS England (NHSE) have jointly commissioned enhanced medical services in court custody suites. On call paramedics now have access to Digital Person Escort Records (DPERs), and we are exploring further ways to strengthen access to relevant medical information. The Prisoner Escort and Custody Services (PECS) contract team and NHSE continue to review and drive improvements.

I appreciate the need for greater use of video calls for short procedural or information only appearances where in person attendance is unnecessary. However, the decision on whether a hearing proceeds via video link is determined by the judiciary and guided by Practice Directions issued by the Lady Chief Justice. Nevertheless, HMCTS has increased its use of video calling over recent years and will continue to work collaboratively to ensure that the technology and support provided enables the judiciary to exercise these decisions effectively.

I also note your recommendation regarding the need to provide essential comfort items, such as blankets, warm clothing and padded benches, particularly given the extended time some people now spend in detention. However, I am afraid that we cannot accept this recommendation. The introduction of blankets or other clothing would create fire and safety risks, as well as laundry, hygiene, and disposal challenges that current court custody infrastructure is not designed to support.

I agree that it is vital detainees are kept warm while in court custody and so we will continue to actively monitor cell temperatures to ensure they remain within published Health and Safety (H&S) guidance. Where temperatures fall outside these parameters, cells are removed from use. We remain open to ideas that improve detainee comfort where they can be delivered safely and hygienically in court custody. Throughout 2026, we will continue exploring whether fixed, wipe clean bench designs meet infection control and operational requirements. For any viable solution, the LOs' input will be requested at the appropriate stage.

I also acknowledge the need for interpreting services for those who lack the ability to communicate well in English. I am pleased to note recent analysis shows that national usage of telephone interpretation services increased during 2025, with some regions recording rises of up to 400%. Nevertheless, it remains a key focus with the PECS contract management team who are formalising plans to further improve utilisation.

Thank you again for your continued scrutiny of our court custody suites and transportation services.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Lord Timpson**  
**Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending**

**Annex: Progress against 2023-2024 Lay Observer annual report recommendations:**

Recommendation	LO findings on progress	Response
<p>1. <b>Recommendation:</b> Contractors should continue their efforts to increase staffing levels until there is suitable staffing for both custody suites and transportation services.</p>	<p><b>Partial progress.</b> Staffing levels within custody suites have improved nationally. However, this improvement is uneven, with significant regional variation. The target staffing model remains inadequate, not accounting for the complexity of needs routinely encountered in custody suites. In contrast transportation staffing levels has shown no improvement.</p>	<p>In 2025, supplier vacancies aligned with the target operating model following a full review of recruitment and attrition processes.</p> <p>Recruitment activity remains effective, but national vetting delays continue to slow progress.</p> <p>Resource levels are monitored through monthly governance boards.</p>
<p>2. <b>Recommendation:</b> All children should be accompanied by appropriately trained staff, both in the custody suite and while being transported, and should be transported separately from adults.</p>	<p><b>No progress.</b> Children continue to frequently be transported alongside adults, particularly from police custody.</p>	<p>Staff are trained to care for detainees, and children and young people (CYP) from secure accommodation are supported by specially trained staff during transport and at court.</p> <p>The contract allows CYP to be transported from police stations using vehicle separation screens to keep them apart from adults.</p> <p>The PECS CYP team monitors how often CYP trained staff collect children from police stations, though this can be challenging due to unpredictable demand and late-night remands. Suppliers prioritise resources for younger and vulnerable children, using dedicated teams and vehicles where practicable.</p>
<p>3. <b>Recommendation:</b> All children should be housed in non-cellular accommodation unless there are exceptional circumstances.</p>	<p><b>Partial progress.</b> Dedicated non-cellular rooms for children have been introduced in 20 courts, representing a significant improvement, where they have been implemented well. However, many courts that regularly hold children still lack suitable non-cellular spaces.</p>	<p>PECS and HMCTS are working to increase the number of non-cellular rooms for children in courts. Funding from HMPPS provided specialist furniture, distraction materials and TVs, enabling 20 dedicated children's rooms. The programme is now complete but will remain under review should future opportunities arise.</p>

<p>4. <b>Recommendation:</b> The quality and comfort of the seating in custody suites should be improved.</p>	<p><b>No progress.</b> Despite ministerial commitments in response to the 2022-2023 and the 2023-2024 Lay Observer annual reports to consider a feasibility study on seating improvements, there is no evidence that this work has begun, and conditions remain almost universally poor.</p>	<p>Building on the commitment to scope a feasibility study specifically on seating comfort HMCTS are continuing to explore whether fixed, wipe clean bench designs meet infection control and operational requirements.</p> <p>Subject to the usual approvals, our aim is to bring forward a costed proposal and operating model by June 2026.</p>
<p>5. <b>Recommendation:</b> The telephone interpreting service should be used for all detained people who lack the ability to communicate well in English.</p>	<p><b>No progress.</b> Although PECS suppliers committed to reviewing the use of telephone interpretation services, there is no evidence of increased uptake during this reporting period.</p>	<p>Progress has been made, and improving the use of telephone interpretation remains a priority for PECS. Monthly data is reviewed with agreed actions, and recent analysis shows usage has increased by up to 400% in some regions, with good practice being shared.</p>
<p>6. <b>Recommendation:</b> Additional clothing or blankets, or an alternative method of keeping people warm, should be provided to all detained people who feel cold while they are in cells.</p>	<p><b>No progress.</b> Detained people continue to report discomfort due to cold conditions. Some courts do make ad hoc efforts to provide blankets or increase temperatures; however, these measures remain inconsistent and rely on staff initiative which often conflicts with existing policy.</p>	<p>Cell temperatures are monitored to stay within set limits, and any cell outside the range is taken out of use. Providing blankets would create fire, safety, hygiene and laundry issues, and is therefore not practical given current court infrastructure. Alternative options that improve comfort while maintaining safety continue to be explored.</p>