

14 October 2021

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
Justice Secretary

Amanda Spielman
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Sent by email: secofstate@justice.gov.uk

Dear Secretary of State

Urgent Notification: Oakhill Secure Training Centre

In accordance with the [Joint inspection framework: secure training centres](#) (STCs) that refers to the protocol between Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), I am writing to invoke the Urgent Notification (UN) process in respect of Oakhill Secure Training Centre (Oakhill).

A monitoring visit to Oakhill on 13 September 2021 was commissioned by your predecessor due to emerging concerns about the care and well-being of children, and the [report](#) was published on 11 October 2021. This visit was limited in scope and focussed on the day-to-day care and experiences of children, in order to understand how much time children spent out of their rooms and what activities they were able to undertake. Inspectors found widespread failings that were having a significant impact on the care and well-being of children.

The joint inspectorates have since undertaken a full inspection of Oakhill, on 4-8 October 2021. This letter sets out the visit history and inspection findings, which have led to the Chief Inspectors' decision to invoke the Urgent Notification process.

What the UN process requires

The decision to invoke the UN process in relation to STCs is determined by the judgement of the chief inspectors of Ofsted, HMI Prisons and the Care Quality Commission. It is informed by the findings of the monitoring visit and the evidence from the full inspection, and as referenced in the joint inspection framework for STCs and as set out in the Protocol between HM Chief Inspector and the MoJ, may take account of:

- Poor healthy prison test assessments

- The pattern of the healthy prison test judgements
- Repeated poor assessments
- The type of prison and the risks presented
- The vulnerability of those detained
- The failure to achieve recommendations
- The inspectorates' confidence in capacity for change and improvement.

The last five bullet points are particularly relevant to Oakhill.

The joint inspection framework for STCs sets out that this letter will be published, and that the Secretary of State will respond publicly within 28 calendar days of publication. The response will explain how the care, safety and wellbeing of children at Oakhill will be improved in both the immediate and longer term.

Recent inspections of Oakhill¹

We have inspected Oakhill six times since February 2017.

	Overall effectiveness (before 2019) Overall experiences and progress of children and young people (after 2020)
January 2017	Requires improvement to be good
October 2017	Inadequate
June 2018	Requires improvement to be good
April 2019	Requires improvement to be good
November 2020 (assurance visit*)	No serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children
May 2021	Monitoring Visit
September 2021	Monitoring Visit
October 2021**	Inadequate

*In our visits conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic we developed and implemented an assurance visits framework to assess that children are safe, and that leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

** This is a provisional judgement until completion of quality assurance processes and publication

Since 2017, Oakhill has not been judged higher than 'requires improvement to be good' for the 'overall experiences and progress of children'.

Oakhill looks after children who are vulnerable and assessed as needing more support than can be provided by a Young Offenders Institution.

¹ [Secure training centres inspection framework](#)

The findings of our most recent visits should be seen in the context of the consistent lack of progress made to improve provision over the previous six inspections.

As required by the Protocol, we set out the key evidence for the decision to invoke the UN process.

Key findings of the full inspection in October 2021

- Children live in a dilapidated environment, experience frequent incidents of violence and use of force and are often cared for by inexperienced staff.
- Staff are reluctant to challenge low level poor behaviour. This failure frequently leads to more serious incidents, including violence. This is exacerbated by the lack of an effective behaviour management strategy to support staff in how to deal with challenging behaviour.
- Levels of use of force are very high. There are incidents where the use of force on children is not justified and contrary to legislation. Staff are not sufficiently skilled in the use of physical restraint techniques to ensure that children are always safeguarded. Governance and quality assurance of the use of force and the physical restraint of children is ineffective. Poor practice is not identified and addressed quickly enough, leading to delays in taking action.
- Systems for safeguarding children are in disarray. Senior leaders failed to ensure that safeguarding concerns and allegations are referred to statutory agencies as required. There is a considerable backlog of safeguarding concerns awaiting action. Children therefore remain at risk of serious harm.
- Safeguarding concerns have been investigated internally contrary to statutory guidance. This could compromise any future investigations.
- Children have access to inappropriate adult content channels via their in-room televisions. Senior managers have been aware of this since March 2021, but no action has been taken.
- Most children reported a lack of confidence in the complaints system, discouraging them from raising concerns. This has serious implications for safeguarding as it could allow harmful behaviour to go undetected.

- Residential staff are not able to access key information to inform their day-to-day care of children. In addition, some staff stated to inspectors that they had been given the choice of whether to read relevant information. Some had chosen not to. Children are therefore being cared for by staff who are not equipped with all the information they need to keep the children safe and to meet their individual needs.
- Staffing of the centre remains fragile. The centre's records dated September 2021 show an annual staff attrition rate of 27%, resulting in unstable, transient relationships with children. This has been a primary factor in children's experiences of poor care and control.
- Frontline staff are poorly managed and supported. Many have not received any purposeful training and development beyond their mandatory programmes. No training needs analysis has been completed.
- The decision by senior leaders to lock children into their rooms for an average of approximately 19 hours per day in July and August was wholly inappropriate and risk averse. Children's experiences during this period were bleak, and barely met minimum standards of human decency. This practice ended shortly after the monitoring visit.
- The centre director has begun to exert some grip, but as she is a temporary appointee, we do not have confidence in the sustainability of progress. The provider advised that a recruitment campaign is under way to appoint a new director. We do not know whether the provider will be able to provide high quality and consistent leadership through the appointment of a director with suitable skill and experience, including specific experience in children's care and services, to make the necessary improvements rapidly.

Ofsted and partner inspectorates have shared our findings with the Ministry of Justice and the Youth Custody Service, so that they can ensure that the necessary actions are taken promptly. We will publish the inspection report in due course and will review progress at our next inspection.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amanda Spielman".

Amanda Spielman

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector