



Ministry  
of Justice

The Right Honourable  
**Alex Chalk MP**  
Lord Chancellor & Secretary of  
State for Justice

**HM Inspectorate of Prisons**

Charlie Taylor  
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**MoJ ref:** 105880

25 May 2023

Dear Charlie,

**URGENT NOTIFICATION – HMYOI Cookham Wood**

Thank you for your letter of 28 April 2023, setting out your concerns following the full inspection at His Majesty's Young Offender Institution (HMYOI) Cookham Wood. I am providing you with this response within 28 calendar days of the Urgent Notification as set out in the protocol.

The serious issues identified at HMYOI Cookham Wood around leadership, behaviour management, staffing resource and regime are extremely disappointing. As an immediate action there is ongoing support and oversight from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Youth Custody Service (YCS) and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), who will continue to monitor progress well beyond this initial 28-day period until we are satisfied that there is sustained improvement.

I have set out below in more detail how the department is taking urgent action to address the concerns set out in your report and to prioritise the safety of staff and young people in HMYOI Cookham Wood. I have also enclosed a copy of the action plan that I intend to publish alongside this letter for your consideration.

**Leadership and standards**

I take your findings on failings in leadership and the failure to drive up standards extremely seriously. To improve the care provided of young people at HMYOI Cookham Wood, a new Governor had already been appointed and his Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is being reviewed and strengthened to ensure they have the depth of experience to bring effective and efficient change. Expert teams are being deployed from other areas including experienced colleagues from the Standards Coaching Team (SCT), including seven Youth Justice Workers and one Custodial Manager who will provide intensive support to operational staff at HMYOI Cookham Wood. In addition to the support from expert teams, refurbishment works will be immediately accelerated to improve the physical conditions and cleanliness of the site.

**Behaviour management and violence**

I am committed to ensuring that HMYOI Cookham Wood is a safe place for both staff and young people.

The widespread weapon making at HMYOI Cookham Wood was particularly worrying. Additional expert teams from the Risk and Capability Unit, responsible for assessing vulnerabilities of key security processes, will work with intelligence teams at the site to identify the causes of weapon carrying and take action to reduce not only the ability to manufacture weapons but also address the underlying causes of this behaviour. A Dedicated Search Team will conduct searches to find and remove weapons and repeat this process as is necessary.

It was concerning to see the volume of separations being used to manage behaviour on site. The number of young people being kept apart has already reduced following a member of the existing management team being redeployed to tackle this issue. Though some children remain separated, the newly appointed manager is identifying ways to maximise their engagement in purposeful activities and ensure that there is effective case management in place.

The newly deployed teams from HMPPS with experience in coaching operational staff and security processes, will provide further support to increase staff confidence and capability in the skills required to manage behaviour effectively. This will include practical security training, relationship building and appropriate challenge coaching. Young people and staff at all levels will be involved in the actions taken to respond to levels of violence at a safety summit.

### **Staffing Resource**

To improve staff morale and retention, we are in the process of appointing a staff well-being lead and creating a People Plan that will support the staff group, improve well-being, improve retention and reduce sickness absence. Work will be undertaken to ensure effective staffing resource management and regime planning.

HMYOI Cookham Wood is a priority one site for national retention oversight and will see additional HR professionals deployed to improve retention and the recruitment of staff.

### **Regime**

We are committed to working closely with the external education provider to drive up standards of teaching and improve academic outcomes for young people. A contractual notice has been issued to the provider in relation to these issues, and the provider has submitted an improvement plan which is currently under review.

To ensure young people at Cookham Wood access to the educational opportunities required to ensure better outcomes after custody, a new activities lead will bring together YCS staff, the education provider, the conflict resolution team, and all other organisations working with young people on site to develop an innovative and flexible regime. This will ensure young people are able to access a range of learning and enrichment opportunities in and outside of the education department tailored to their needs. Operational staff resourcing is also being reviewed to ensure the site is equipped to deliver a full regime for all young people.

I would like to thank you for the continued robust inspections and care for the improvement of the experiences of children and young people in custody. I am committed to ensuring sustained improvement so young people at HMYOI Cookham Wood live in an environment that is safe and decent and conducive to turning their backs on crime for good.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Alex Chalk'.

**RT HON ALEX CHALK KC MP**

**LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE**