



Ministry  
of Justice

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

Charlie Taylor  
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons  
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29 September 2023

Dear Charlie,

### **URGENT NOTIFICATION – HMP WOODHILL**

Thank you for your letter of 1 September 2023, setting out your concerns following the full inspection at HMP Woodhill. I am providing you with this response within 28 calendar days of the Urgent Notification (UN) as set out in the protocol.

You have raised a number of concerning issues at HMP Woodhill around violence and safety, staffing, and decency, which I take very seriously. As an immediate action we have introduced additional oversight and we 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 the urgent action we are taking to address the concerns identified in your letter and to prioritise the safety of staff and prisoners in HMP Woodhill. I have also enclosed a copy of the action plan that I intend to publish alongside this letter.

As an immediate action for HMP Woodhill, following operational assessments the population at the establishment will be further temporarily reduced due to concerns about the risks to safety and stability. Prisoners relocated from HMP Woodhill will be placed at appropriate prisons based on their security category and needs.

#### **Staffing**

You raised concerns that a shortage of prison officers remained at the crux of the prison's difficulties. Recruitment has and continues to be significantly challenging at HMP Woodhill largely due to its competitive local labour market and proximity to other prisons.

However, HMP Woodhill remains one of the highest priority prisons for recruitment marketing, receiving the highest level of budget spending per month. Marketing channels will also be broadened further to drive increased application rates, specifically additional advertising on job sites and social media channels. In addition to this, attrition rates will continue to be tracked, including analysing exit data, and conducting exit interviews to ascertain the impact of the recently announced pay award and other factors affecting retention rates.

## **Levels of violence and safety**

To tackle violence and ensure safety for both staff and prisoners, the HMPPS National Safety Team (NST) will coordinate learning to understand the drivers of violence and self-harm. This will include undertaking focus groups with prisoners and staff. The site's Safety Team will also be strengthened through four additional staff members for a period of 24 months to help stabilise the establishment. Two additional temporary staff will be recruited for a minimum of 18 months to act as floorwalkers, who will build knowledge, confidence and capability and improve practice in the investigation of violence and safeguarding for those at risk of self-harm.

## **Substance Misuse**

I want to assure you that I am committed to reducing illicit drug use at HMP Woodhill. A Drug Strategy Lead will be urgently recruited to the establishment's Safety Team for a minimum of 12 months to coordinate the required improvements and ensure joined-up work with security and safety colleagues. In addition to this, a resilience assessment will be conducted of the local drug strategy and its delivery (restricting supply, reducing demand, and building recovery), providing specialist advice, sharing good practice, and identifying areas of further improvement.

## **Living Conditions**

Improvements to facilities are planned to address decency concerns, such as a deep clean of communal areas, a cell condition survey, and agreement of a costed programme of repair with projected work timescales. A temporary Clean and Decent Lead has been identified to oversee and assure improvements in the prison environment for a minimum period of 12 months. A Clean and Decent Quality Assurance process will also be developed to ensure that expected standards of cleanliness are being carried out.

## **Regime and time out of cell**

The newly created post of the Education, Skills, and Work (ESW) manager has commenced in post and will lead on delivering the 5-year Prison Education, Skills, and Work Quality Improvement Strategy (QIS). The strategy will contain an action plan which will identify and drive improvement. We will also lead a review of work provision and allocation/movement processes at HMP Woodhill to ensure appropriate provision and that the number of prisoners accessing available activity places is maximised.

## **Prison Performance Support Programme**

To ensure intensive co-ordinated support, HMP Woodhill will be assisted by the Prison Performance Support Programme (PPSP) for a minimum of twelve months. PPSP offers tailored support to a small number of prisons facing numerous and complex challenges to performance and includes the deployment of an Improvement Lead to work onsite, who is responsible for supporting improvement delivery for the duration of PPSP support. The support from PPSP will include a series of masterclasses for line managers at HMP Woodhill to enhance leadership and confidence. Masterclasses will be linked to the Governor's direction on leadership, the vision and underpinning mission statements for HMP Woodhill.

I can assure you that I will be monitoring the situation at HMP Woodhill very closely in the coming weeks and months to ensure that there is sustained improvement. I would also like to thank you and your team for the robust scrutiny of our prisons, and I look forward to receiving your full inspection report in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alex Chalk".

**RT HON ALEX CHALK KC MP**

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