



MoJ ref: SUB 126808

11 August 2025

**HMYOI COOKHAM WOOD: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 SEPTEMBER 2023 TO 30 MAY 2024**

Thank you for providing the Board's annual report on HMYOI Cookham Wood, which I have read with care and attention. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your hard work in capturing helpful observations around the running of Cookham Wood prior to its closure as a YOI, and around how that closure was managed. I welcome your desire to ensure that lessons are learned so that the needs of children and young people in youth custody can be met going forward.

This reporting year has been evidently challenging. After the April 2023 inspection and the subsequent Urgent Notification from HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, it was concluded that HMYOI Cookham Wood fell short of achieving the required improvements in a reasonable timeframe. Therefore, the difficult decision was taken to close the site to children and repurpose it for adults. I recognise that this decision had a direct impact on staff, children in the Youth Custody Service's (YCS) care and indeed volunteers, such as yourself and your members.

The YCS carried out an internal review following the closure of Cookham Wood as a youth establishment and its transition to an adult prison. Whilst the small sample of people interviewed to inform this was a key limitation of the review, it found that the movement of children was completed swiftly and with care, drawing on previous experiences, such as the closure of Rainsbrook Secure Training Centre and the Ashfield YOI judicial review. Positive practice included person-centred multi-disciplinary meetings to ensure that placement decisions were based on individual needs. It was also led by staff with extensive knowledge and prior experience of similar transitions. Some important lessons were learnt for the event of a similar exercise in the future, which resonate with some of your observations. They include keeping staff informed of progress throughout to make sure they feel valued and supported and the need for longer preparation time to work through the complexities of redeploying Youth Justice Worker Specialist qualified staff to the adult estate.

In relation to the financial impact of the re-role, including the early termination of contracts, I want to assure you that these costs were carefully considered during both the planning and implementation stages. The education contract with Novus could no longer be delivered once the site's population changed and a negotiated settlement was made that enabled us to meet our legal obligations appropriately. I am aware that youth custody is far more resource-intensive than adult provision, particularly when it comes to staffing ratios and full-time education requirements. The YCS acknowledges that this experience has demonstrated the challenges as to how planning decisions are made for the Children and Young People's Secure Estate. Youth custody facilities are by their nature bespoke and specialist environments, often existing in highly regulated sectors, and as such, take time to establish. This can often drive up costs in commissioning but consideration will be given going forward to procurement strategies for youth custodial services and how greater flexibility can be secured.

The re-role of Cookham Wood has given me cause to reflect on how we deliver custody for children in our care. I recognise that the redeployment of Youth Justice Worker Specialists brought particular challenges as there were no direct equivalents to their roles in the adult estate. This inevitably led to delays, but I am pleased to say that there is now a clear and agreed process in place for managing such redeployments, staying in line with policy frameworks and legal grounds. I will continue to work with the Youth Custody Service, NHS England and education providers to deliver on the national roadmap for effective practice, improving performance in public sector YOIs. Each site now operates under a local plan focused on achieving clear outcomes in areas such as safety, behaviour and education. I acknowledge your comments around improvements observed when there was a smaller number of boys at Cookham Wood.

I recognise that this was a challenging and significant year of change, and I was pleased to hear of the dedication and care shown by the staff at Cookham Wood throughout the transition and that this was recognised by the Board. The efforts made to support young people during this period and the positive environment that staff worked hard to create, even in the face of considerable operational challenges, should not go unnoticed.

The Lord Chancellor and I appreciate the valuable role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards throughout the estate and we would like to reiterate our thanks for your continued hard work on behalf of HMP Cookham Wood.

I note you have raised some issues of concern in your report to the (YCS and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and comments in response to these are set out in the attached annex.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nic', with a stylized flourish above it.

SIR NIC DAKIN MP

Annex

INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 SEPTEMBER 2023 TO 30 MAY 2024

YCS/HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Outcomes for Boys Following the Closure and the Impact of Reducing the Youth Estate

While we cannot say for certain that outcomes improved for every boy moved from HMYOI Cookham Wood, as outlined in the Ministerial response, each placement was made with careful consideration of the child's best interests taking a person-centred approach in all cases. Each move was guided by a multi-disciplinary process and supported by highly qualified professionals who worked to preserve resettlement plans and maintain continuity of education. However, we recognise that there would have been some negative impacts of the moves with some boys being placed further from home and the need for some to adjust to different education provision or additional keep-apart restrictions depending on the new site.

The decision to close Cookham Wood reduced capacity across the youth estate, particularly in the South East, which has evidently placed additional pressure on other sites. Please be assured that the YCS continues to monitor these impacts closely and is working to ensure that all children continue to receive safe and stable placements with meaningful access to education and regime.

Regime and support for men now held at HMP Cookham Wood

Since Cookham Wood became an adult establishment, significant efforts have been made to provide a full and purposeful regime for the men now held there. The current provision includes a range of educational access such as English, Maths, Art, IT and Catering, a well-used library service and a range of work placements, including roles in the kitchens, cleaning, decorating and gardening. Gym sessions are regularly available, and proposals are in place to offer accredited fitness qualifications.

The focus on resettlement support, including fortnightly keyworker sessions, access to Prison Offender Managers and practical assistance with identification and banking is also available. The continued support for family contact, facilitated by PACT with frequent visits and family days are particularly encouraging. In-cell telephony and Launchpad laptops are helping to maintain vital links and support learning and preparation for release.