



Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP Northumberland
Acklington
Morpeth
NE65 9EX

MoJ ref: SUB126720

22 September 2025

Dear Chair,

**HMP NORTHUMBERLAND: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 JANUARY 2024 – 31 DECEMBER 2024**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP Northumberland. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for the hard work that has been put into capturing your helpful observations, particularly while you are still short of members.

I was saddened to hear that there were seven deaths during the reporting year. I understand four of these deaths were due to natural causes or terminal illness, two were drug related, and one self-inflicted. No doubt this must have been very difficult for fellow prisoners and staff alike. I offer my condolences to the friends and family of those that died and would like to reassure the Board that recommendations made by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman are taken very seriously.

I have read your report with care and note the Board's ongoing concern about the availability and timeliness of mental health support for prisoners at HMP Northumberland. The Government recognises that some individuals who meet the threshold for detention under the Mental Health Act continue to face unacceptable delays in accessing secure hospital placements. The Mental Health Bill, which recently completed Committee Stage, in the House of Commons will introduce a statutory 28-day time limit for transfers from prison to hospital. This is supported by an operational implementation plan under development with NHS England, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Welsh Government, the Youth Custody Service and the Home Office. The newly formed Mental Health and Justice Strategic Advisory Group is providing oversight and identifying solutions to long-standing systemic issues.

Mental health services at HMP Northumberland are delivered by Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys (TEWV) NHS Foundation Trust. Although the prison does not have its own inpatient facility, a referral pathway exists into the Integrated Support Unit at HMP Durham. I understand that in 2024 there were two referrals resulting in successful transfers, although both waited over 28 days in segregation. These are the type of delays the Bill seeks to resolve.

I was encouraged to read that leadership and staffing within the mental health team have improved, following the recruitment of an experienced senior manager and that the service has taken steps to improve dual diagnosis care pathways and its management of complex cases.

I was encouraged that you were able to report on a number of positive developments at HMP Northumberland this year. The Welcome Centre now provides an important foundation for prisoner

engagement in activities, while the opening of Alnwick House demonstrates progress in managing specialist cohorts. Targeted efforts to reduce the entry of illicit items, combined with strong staffing continuity and the absence of agency use, have supported safety and service delivery. I welcome the strengthened partnership with Northumbria NHS Foundation Trust and the delivery of consultant-led healthcare within the prison, supported by virtual outpatient appointments. I also recognise the creative and purposeful work available to prisoners, including in bicycle repair, tailoring, catering and engineering which plays a vital role in rehabilitation and skill development.

I note you have raised a local issue of concern in your report which the Director will continue to keep you aware of as work continues. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) comments in response to the Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) issue is set out in the attached annex. Whilst a more complete response is contained therein, I can confirm that cells affected by RAAC are projected to become available for occupation from January 2026.

The Lord Chancellor and I continue to appreciate the important role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards throughout the estate. We appreciate your ongoing dedication on behalf of HMP Northumberland.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James', written in a cursive style.

Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation, and Reducing Reoffending

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HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

RAAC (Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete) – Remediation and Risk Management

The Board's concern regarding the widespread impact of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) across the prison are noted. The safety of staff and prisoners has remained paramount and a coordinated, multi-agency response has been sustained throughout to manage the risks and deliver structural solutions.

Initial management of the situation included the temporary closure of three houseblocks (HB1, HB3 and HB4), as well as the installation of temporary propping systems across affected areas. These measures allowed remediation works to proceed while ensuring structural stability. Permanent steel supports have now been installed in Houseblock 1 and works are underway or due to commence in the education building, Gym 1 and other key locations including healthcare, the security offices, the CASU plantroom and prisoner reception. The programme remains on track for completion by the end of 2025.

To support the ongoing works, all buildings have undergone intrusive surveys with findings recorded in a live RAAC Risk Register. Each identified risk is assessed based on structural vulnerability and operational impact. A comprehensive inspection regime is in place, aligned with Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE) guidance, including weekly checks of temporary supports and routine monitoring for degradation.

As noted in your report, the operational consequences of the building closures have been significant. There has been a marked reduction in space for resettlement services, purposeful activity, education and communal worship. These constraints have had a knock-on effect on regime stability, mental and physical wellbeing and the ability to maintain a full and punctual regime, particularly given the additional escorting burden across a large site. Loss of gym access, increased pressure on Houseblock 9 and disruption to service delivery were all noted.

However, local management has responded with commendable adaptability. Key mitigations have included:

- Repurposing spaces to accommodate the Employment Hub, resettlement services, education classrooms, prisoner property storage and other purposeful activity areas.
- Creating a hybrid education model (wing-based and face-to-face delivery) to maintain curriculum access during periods of classroom loss.
- Opening new classrooms on Houseblock 8 by vacating association and office areas.
- Expanding outdoor gym sessions during good weather through external partnerships.
- Establishing faith provision in a repurposed workshop to allow communal worship.
- Relocating the mental health team to a refurbished area in the former reception suite.
- Increasing healthcare outreach, with additional provision on residential units and in work areas, to maintain patient access.

Progress remains under close review and that all required mitigations will remain in place until full completion of the works. The cells are projected to become available for occupation from January 2026. A cell upgrade programme has also been agreed to modernise the living conditions for the houseblocks impacted by RAAC.