



Ministry
of Justice

Lord Timpson
Minister of State for Justice

Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP/YOI Low Newton
Finchale Avenue
Brasside
Durham
DH1 5YA

August 2025

Dear Chair,

**HMP/YOI LOW NEWTON: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 MARCH 2024 – 28 FEBRURY 2025**

Thank you for providing your Board's annual report on HMP/YOI Low Newton. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your hard work that has once again been put into capturing your helpful observations. I know the Board continues to be short of members, but I welcome your new colleagues that joined during this report year.

I was saddened to hear that one woman died in custody during the reporting year as well as a further two women shortly after release from custody. I was heartened to read about the support provided by prison staff following the death in custody and I am grateful to the Board for the support it offered to prisoners and staff impacted by the death. I offer my condolences to all their friends and family and would like to provide reassurance that any recommendations made by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman will be taken very seriously.

I understand the Board's ongoing concern about women in custody who present with severe mental ill health and challenging behaviour. We do recognise that vulnerable people in prison who meet the threshold for detention under the Mental Health Act and require a transfer to hospital continue to experience delays in accessing the specialist care and treatment they need. A Mental Health and Justice Strategic Advisory Group is being developed to improve the oversight of the transfer process and deliver solutions to address common causes of delays. NHS England are also working closely with the Provider Collaboratives, who have responsibility for commissioning secure mental health beds, and prison healthcare teams to support timely transfers. In addition, there was a joint NHS England and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Women's Health and Social Care Review which was published in November 2023. This review identified eight strategic findings with supporting recommendations which were accepted, with one focusing upon mental health support and access to treatment. The collaborative work currently taking place with NHS England to implement these is critical to improving the health and wellbeing of women in custody.

The Ministry of Justice is also committed to addressing the specific needs of women in the criminal justice system. The Women's Justice Board (WJB) has been created with the clear goal of reducing the number of women going to prison, with more managed in the community. I also welcome the recent Independent Sentencing Review's consideration of the needs of women, and the recommendations that will help address these. A reduction in the use of short sentences is one which is expected to particularly benefit women.

In the North East, Liaison & Diversion (L&D) services are embedded within police custody suites and courts, with dedicated pathways for women. While L&D services are underpinned by a standard service specification to ensure consistency and quality, together with NHS England, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Home Office, we are currently improving our understanding of how L&D services across the country meet vulnerable offenders' needs and are exploring options to strengthen these pathways. In addition, The Mental Health Bill, which includes several reforms to improve access to mental health care and treatment, is progressing. The Bill was introduced to the House of Lords in November 2024 and has recently completed Committee Stage in the House of Commons. This will prevent courts from temporarily detaining people with severe mental illness in prison as a 'place of safety' whilst awaiting a hospital bed for treatment or assessment under the Mental Health Act. These measures are designed to reduce delays and ensure swifter access to the treatment which individuals need.

We also know that the arrival of women into custody who present with significantly complex mental health needs can place a considerable strain on both staff and the running of a prison. However, HMP/YOI Low Newton continue to provide compassionate and comprehensive care to these women. It is acknowledged that in many cases, these women are located in the Care and Separation Unit or in Healthcare. While this is not ideal, enhanced support is available with increased operational staff levels and nursing staff that can better manage these individuals and their risks to ensure the safety of prisoners and staff whilst awaiting transfers. To continue to provide support to women in custody with more complex needs there is a range of evidence-based interventions and services that are provided for women in prison. These include the Women's Offender Personality Disorder Pathway, as well as the Women's Estate Psychology Services team. There is national multidisciplinary support available to women's prisons to help manage a small number of the most complex individuals, provided by the Women's Estate Case Advice and Support Panel (WECASP). HMPPS is also building upon the success of Compass, a programme that uses Compassion Focussed Therapy to support women with complex trauma needs to enable them to develop coping skills. Compass is delivered at HMP/YOI Low Newton and is showing promising signs of reducing the frequency and seriousness of acts of self-harm for the women who complete it. Separately, the Primrose Service, part of the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway at HMP/YOI Low Newton also offers 12 places for women presenting with personality difficulties linked to their risk.

In terms of the positive aspects, it was reassuring to receive your comments that the prison provides a clean and safe environment. I was encouraged to read about the work to improve decency of cells, the refurbishment to the canteen where activities can now take place, as well as there being more evening activities to occupy women. I was also pleased that the Board commends the support staff provide to prisoners and to read about the positive relationships observed between staff and prisoners.

I note you have raised a local issue of concern in your report which the Governor will continue to keep you aware of as work continues. HMPPS's comments in response to the other issue raised in your report are set out in the attached annex.

The Lord Chancellor and I appreciate the valuable role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards to help improve our prisons and we are very grateful for your ongoing dedication on behalf of HMP/YOI Low Newton.

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

HMP/YOI LOW NEWTON: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 MARCH 2024 – 28 FEBRUARY 2025

HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Transfer Arrival

The marked improvement that the Board has seen is welcomed. Over the past year, HMPPS Prisoner Escort and Custody Service (PECS) have placed significant emphasis on the performance of the transport provider to meet the contractual obligation for more than 90% of women given a custodial outcome at court are transferred to prison within two hours. This target has been consistently met, with the exception of August 2024, but performance continues to be closely monitored.

Locally, the prison reception staff also continue to engage with all women arriving to gather feedback on their journey, whether they are new receptions or those returning from court. The Head of Operations addresses any issues related to the arrival times and behavioural concerns, with an immediate escalation route established for exceptional cases. However, all concerns are logged and reviewed monthly, with the findings shared with PECS and the transport provider to learn lessons. This remains a key focus at HMP/YOI Low Newton and will be tracked through functional performance meetings and the local assurance framework to ensure robust accountability to address any delays and unacceptable behaviours encountered during journeys to the prison.