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HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
CHARLIE TAYLOR

Date: 16 July 2025

The Rt Hon Shabana Mahmood MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State
Ministry of Justice
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

Dear Secretary of State,

Urgent Notification: HMP Pentonville

In accordance with the Protocol between HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the Ministry of Justice dated October 2019, I am writing to you to invoke the Urgent Notification process following our unannounced inspection of HMP Pentonville between 30th June and 10th July 2025. The protocol sets out that this letter will be placed in the public domain, and that the Secretary of State commits to respond publicly within 28 days.

This is the fifth time we have inspected Pentonville since 2015 and, as the table below shows, it is a prison that has a record of poor performance. At this most recent inspection, the jail attracted our lowest healthy prison assessments in three of our four tests – safety, purposeful activity and preparation for release – with many of the concerns raised at our 2022 inspection still to be addressed.

Healthy prison assessments since 2015				
	Safety	Respect	Purposeful activity	Preparation for release
2025	1	2	1	1
2022	2	2	1	2
2019	1	2	2	2
2017	1	2	2	3

16/07/25-Pentonville

2015	1	1	1	2
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Healthy prison assessment scores:

1 - outcomes for prisoners are poor

2 - outcomes for prisoners are not sufficiently good

3 - outcomes for prisoners are reasonably good

4 - outcomes for prisoners are good

I have issued an Urgent Notification for the following reasons:

- Leaders had insufficient grip of critical areas of delivery in the prison and were failing to ensure even the most basic standards were maintained.
- Prison staff were failing to calculate sentences accurately. In the last six months, many prisoners had been illegally imprisoned beyond their release date.
- The care and support offered to new prisoners during their first few days in prison was wholly inadequate. First night and induction arrangements were chaotic and even frightening. Men were held in dirty, ill-equipped cells which were missing key items, including bedding, furniture, telephones and pillows.
- Population pressures meant there were not enough spaces on the induction wing which led to some new arrivals being dispersed to other wings around the jail. Staff on these wings often did not know who these men were or where they were located, increasing the risk still further for these vulnerable detainees.
- Staff on one wing were unable to account for the whereabouts of their prisoners during the day.
- There had been three suicides at Pentonville in 2025 and deficiencies identified repeatedly by internal, and Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigations, had not been addressed. We found a widespread lack of support for prisoners at imminent risk of self-harm, many of whom lived in squalid conditions.
- The oversight of prisoners under constant supervision was shockingly poor. During the inspection, we found staff who did not know the name of the prisoner they were caring for, two who were reading books, one who was asleep, and, in another case, one who was completely absent.
- In our survey of prisoners some 44% told us they felt unsafe at the time of the inspection which is the highest figure recorded in a reception prison during my time as Chief Inspector of Prisons. We observed wings that were chaotic and staff who failed to challenge poor behaviour.
- Just 54% of prisoners felt that they were treated with respect by most staff and half reported experiencing victimisation. We observed some highly committed members of frontline staff, but too many were accepting of the poor living conditions, were failing to provide even basic care to prisoners, and seemed unable or unwilling to respond effectively to legitimate everyday requests.
- The prison had fewer than 600 activity spaces for a population of 1,207. Although this was enough for most prisoners to work part-time, the governor's vision for all prisoners to be engaged in part-time work was undermined by an ineffective allocations system which left many of these places unfilled. Many of those who

had been allocated, did not attend. A large majority of prisoners spent more than 22 hours a day locked in their cells.

- 80% of the concerns raised at our last inspection in 2022 had not been addressed.

Pentonville is an overcrowded, inner-city, Victorian reception prison which is difficult to run well. However, too many of the failures outlined in this letter are firmly within the control of HMPPS leaders. In most areas of concern, it was a lack of focus on the basics, and ineffective oversight and assurance systems, that have led to these very poor outcomes.

Most staff we met at Pentonville wanted to do a good job but, after many years of poor performance, too many had become disillusioned about the possibility of improvement or their capacity to affect change.

The governor will need significant support and investment from HMPPS, including strengthening his senior team, to make measurable improvements in the future.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charlie Taylor', enclosed within a rectangular box.

Charlie Taylor