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Chair of the Independent Monitoring Board
HMP Belmarsh
Western Way
Thamesmead
London
SE28 OEB

MoJ Ref: SUB 082674

22 October 2020

Dear ██████████,

**HMP BELMARSH: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 JULY 2019 – 30 JUNE 2020**

Thank you for your Board's report for the year ending 30 June 2020. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your hard work in capturing these helpful observations, especially as you continued this work during the pandemic and the challenges that brought. I also noted the reduced complement of Board members during the reporting year and I am grateful for the Board's continued work.

It is regrettable that the condition of the shower areas at HMP Belmarsh has remained an ongoing issue for several years now. My officials have investigated the matter and I am pleased to confirm HM Prison and Probation Service's (HMPPS) Prison Maintenance Group has secured £350,000 funding for the refurbishment of some of the showers to the 'HMP Wandsworth' specification within House Block 4, and on both spurs of landings one, two and three. The contract has been awarded to a company called PMA and the prison is currently awaiting a start date for this work to commence.

The wider and more major project to fully refurbish all showers at HMP Belmarsh to the new 'HMP Wandsworth' specification is being led by the Ministry of Justice Estates Team. This is a lengthy process and, due to competing priorities, HMPPS was unable to include this project as a priority for the current financial year. I hope, however, that the completion of the work mentioned above proves satisfactory until a full refurbishment can take place.

Regarding the End of Custody Temporary Release (ECTR) scheme, the policy was announced on Saturday 4 April and information on the scheme was issued to prisons that morning. This information included eligibility criteria, a 'Q&A' pack, a Notice to Prisoners and a template letter for local stakeholder engagement. Detailed operational guidance was issued to all prisons on Tuesday 7 April. This timeline was driven by a need to take decisive action and to move as quickly as possible in response to a rapidly evolving situation. We always seek to ensure that prisons have all the information and guidance that they need to follow national policy and deliver their regimes safely and effectively. We appreciate the complexity in operating an establishment such as HMP Belmarsh and the requirements to plan ahead, however, this was a unique and extremely fast-moving situation.

HMPPS' Insights Team, who are responsible for business improvement and learning, have already begun analysing the work undertaken by the organisation during the pandemic including communication between HMPPS HQ and prisons, within prisons and between prisons, and with prisoners/families and other stakeholders. They have not specifically looked at the ECTR scheme as this was not in the scope of the priority questions agreed with senior stakeholders within HMPPS. I can assure the Board that HMPPS is learning from how the agency is operating through the pandemic and has mechanisms in place for continuous improvement.

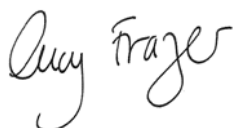
It was encouraging to receive your comments that prior to 23 March lockdown assaults were occurring at significantly lower levels than in the previous year and that staff have strived to maintain a safe environment throughout the prison. I was also pleased to note that the body scanner installed last year has been effective in identifying attempts to smuggle illicit items into the prison.

I was reassured to hear that equality issues were handled well and black and minority ethnic prisoners were treated fairly during your reporting period. It was also pleasing to note that relationships between staff and prisoners were generally good, the key worker scheme was well received and the introduction of a prisoner information channel has been successful. I was particularly pleased to read that the work being done at HMP Belmarsh through the Challenge, Support and Intervention Plan (CSIP) system for violent individuals has been recognised by HM Inspectorate of Prisons as best practice in the high security estate.

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

The Justice Secretary and I appreciate the valuable role played by members of Independent Monitoring Boards throughout the estate and we are very grateful for your continued hard work on behalf of HMP Belmarsh.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucy Frazer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

LUCY FRAZER QC MP

Annex

HMP BELMARSH: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 JULY 2019 – 30 JUNE 2020

HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Prisoner Transfers

HMPPS appreciates the Board's concerns about the time taken to return prisoners to HMP Belmarsh following attendance at Court. Data captured identifies that over the twelve-month period of August 2019 to July 2020 there were 4,295 prisoners returned to HMP Belmarsh from Court, of which 97.93% were returned on time. Where performance relating to prisoners being returned before the latest reception time falls short of contractual requirements the escort contractor is challenged and, if required, formal contractual measures are taken against the contractor. Returning prisoners effectively is also dependant on other stakeholders within the Criminal Justice System. There will be occasions when late court sittings, combined with traffic or weather conditions, have a detrimental impact on prisoner arrival times. Where a late arrival is unavoidable, the escort contractors are required to ensure that receiving prisons are informed of the delays and agreement is sought in advance for the safe receipt of any late arrivals. Prison Escort and Custody Service has not received any complaints nor recorded any incidents involving HMP Belmarsh over the last 12 months.

Additionally, conflict management remains a concern when transporting a cohort of defendants that are alleged to involve themselves in gang related violence. The safe and secure process of conveying individuals who fall within this cohort can sometimes involve the need to transport these prisoners separately to ensure any conflicts are effectively managed and safety is maintained.

Facilities Management

HMPPS can confirm that Government Facility Services Ltd (GFSL) has taken steps to address the shortfalls in service. This has involved a structural change within the GFSL Management team at the establishment. GFSL have also completed a number of recruitment campaigns to fill the vacant on-site positions, which HMPPS understands has provided an improved and more satisfactory service.

Despite performance issues, the team has managed to achieve a 100% statutory compliance record for the prison. The non-planned and planned maintenance tasks are monitored by Prison Maintenance Group on a monthly basis through the Key Performance Indicator process. This is reported to the Governor at the monthly tri-partite meetings where any concerns are addressed.

Triple Occupancy Cells

HMPPS recognises the Board's ongoing and repeated concerns regarding the use of triple-occupancy cells at HMP Belmarsh. While these places meet HMPPS standards for crowded accommodation, holding three men in a cell designed for two prisoners, in order to accommodate national population pressures is not desirable.

As population levels are currently low following the Covid-19 pandemic, HMPPS has agreed to reduce the occupancy of these three-person cells to two prisoners at HMP Belmarsh. This is being delivered on a gradual basis and it is expected all cells will have reduced to double occupancy by early 2021. This timetable may need to be extended, for example in response to increasing population pressures, or to accommodate any essential maintenance work or refurbishment that needs to take place at HMP Belmarsh.

We will aim to keep this reduction in place indefinitely, however, we cannot agree to make this reduction permanent and have agreed with the prison that these triple-occupancy cells could be considered for return to use in response to sustained long-term growth in the prison population.

Prisoners' Property

It is unfortunate and regrettable that prisoners' property continues to be an issue. Further to last year's response, work on the development of the new Prisoners' Property Policy Framework is still ongoing. Following the conclusion of the summer 2019 project, HMPPS has worked closely with stakeholders to consult on proposed changes to the policy. Discussions ahead of consultation with IMB members began with the IMB Secretariat in late February 2020, who proposed meetings take place with Board members in April. In light of the pressures placed on Boards by Covid-19, HMPPS agreed with the IMB Secretariat to pause this consultation. This work is now moving forward again and a meeting with IMB members took place in August. Consultation with operational colleagues is also expected to resume soon. The feedback received at the meeting with IMB members will be considered alongside the comments received from other stakeholders, with the intention that the revised draft policy framework will be circulated for wider consultation at the end of 2020.

Prison Visits Booking System

The difficulties around visits slot availability are linked to the local prison booking processes rather than the national online booking service. It appears issues arise when local staff operating the kiosk prison booking service change the slot details on the national database (NOMIS) without informing the team at headquarters. Prisons are aware that they must alert headquarters when making changes to ensure the smooth operation of the system. Going forward, HMPPS has now developed a new functionality that will automatically update the online service whenever slot changes are made on NOMIS. This will be released when the service is reopened for public use.