



██████████
Chair, Independent Monitoring Board
HMP Huntercombe
Nuffield
Henley-on-Thames
RG9 5SB

MoJ Ref: ADR 090492

1 September 2021

Dear ██████████

**HMP HUNTERCOMBE: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 1 JANUARY 2020 – 31 DECEMBER 2020**

Thank you for your Board's report for the year ending 31 December 2020. I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your hard work in capturing these helpful observations, especially as you were extremely short of Board members during the reporting year and I note the challenges faced.

I acknowledge the Board's comments concerning charges for telephone calls across the prison estate and lack of in-cell telephony at HMP Huntercombe. I thank the Governor for his efforts to improve prisoners' access to the PIN phone system and call charges. I am pleased to report that HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) are in discussions with the telephone service provider about lowering the rate of PIN telephone charges to the in-cell rate, thus removing any differences in call charges between or within establishments. Since the period covered by your report, work has commenced to install in-cell telephony to all remaining residential areas, which is estimated to be completed by end of February 2022 (Mountbatten Unit to be fitted first).

I note the Board's concerns about foreign nationals (FN) who have completed their sentence but are detained at HMP Huntercombe under immigration powers. I hope to reassure the Board that the Home Office is committed to working with HMPPS and other government agencies to address this issue and is focused on progressing FN cases as quickly as possible, by providing immigration staff to prison sites, so that work may be undertaken to progress immigration cases and keep them informed of their status through one to one meetings. Help is at hand with official documentation where deportation or removal from the United Kingdom (UK) is decided. I understand the Board's concern about bail releases being adversely affected by the lack of approved and suitable accommodation in the community, which is further impacted by the lack of available spaces within immigration removal centres (IRCs). As I am sure the Board will appreciate, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the asylum system, particularly in respect of accommodating those who require housing. In response, a decision was made that the Secretary of State for the Home Department (SSHD) would not require people to leave accommodation unless they had access to further support. This decision, when coupled with new asylum seekers and failed ones entering the system, has resulted in the growing population requiring asylum support, and an immense shortage of dispersal accommodation (i.e. long term accommodation which usually takes the form of shared flats and houses obtained through the private rental market). The SSHD recognises this significant shortage of dispersal accommodation and continues to work with providers to source additional capacity across the UK, which due to the climate, has principally been hotel

accommodation. In order to minimise the risk of Covid-19 being transmitted, opportunities to transfer time-served FNs to IRCs were limited.

Cancelled flight routes, local Covid-19 outbreaks, testing requirements and documentation have all contributed to some removals from prisons and IRCs being postponed or delayed. Covid -19 safety measures across the IRC estate, such as single occupancy and reverse cohorting (where new arrivals are kept separate from the general population) has resulted in a slower flow of time-served FNs suitable for the IRC estate being transferred. Where such moves could be arranged, and where space allowed, the Home Office transferred such individuals. Whilst it is recognised that delays can be frustrating, the Home Office and HMPPS are committed to taking the welfare of those in its care seriously and continue to work together to ensure careful risk assessments are conducted to determine the suitability of FNs for transfer to the IRC estate, imminent removal, or risk to the public should they be released. Risk assessments carried out are case specific based on several factors, which include the nature of an individual's offence, sentence length, their behaviour whilst in prison and any medical concerns. When individuals are deemed unsuitable for transfer to IRC their circumstances continue to be regularly reviewed. Changes in circumstances can affect this decision, and individuals may, on re-assessment, then be considered suitable and accepted for transfer to an IRC. The current priority into an IRC are individuals with removal directions in place and or due to fly out of the UK. In terms of monitoring the FN population, HMPPS regularly provides Home Office Immigration Enforcement with details of individuals detained in the prison estate under immigration powers. The Governor of HMP Huntercombe also regularly monitors this area.

Turning to some positive comments captured in your report, it was encouraging to hear that the Board considers HMP Huntercombe to be a safe environment. I was pleased to note the rapid roll out of video calling at the onset of the national lockdown to support family ties and the 'Living with Lockdown' self-help booklet for prisoners produced and translated into many languages. It was also encouraging to hear that nursing levels have improved and due to better staffing levels within the offender manager unit the number of outstanding offender assessment system reports have reduced. I acknowledge the applaudable work of the two healthcare assistants who have led and supported HMP Huntercombe's reception screening process.

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 Huntercombe.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alex Chalk'.

ALEX CHALK MP

Annex

HMP HUNTERCOMBE: INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1 JANUARY 2020 – 31 DECEMBER 2020

HMPPS comments on matters raised in the report

Vocational Training and Work

The period up to 31 December 2020 was impacted by the pandemic. However, under the current Exceptional Delivery Model Stage 2 curriculum offer, the Gardens workshop and Textiles workshop are both now open. In addition, a new 'Lobster Pot' workshop is to open imminently to replace the camouflage netting contract. All these areas will be delivering meaningful and purposeful work hoped to support employability on release. The focus for HMP Huntercombe is to develop transferable skills rather than international qualifications as this would prove challenging due to the wide and ever-changing nationalities of the prison population. Adopting a continuous review process of the delivery plan ensures that it meets the needs of HMP Huntercombe. Prisoners identified for release into the UK should be transferred to appropriate resettlement prison where they will be able to access relevant UK based education, skills and work qualifications.

Progression to Open Prison

There are legal and policy considerations which can make it difficult for FNs to transfer to Category D/open conditions. The law prevents those who have exhausted their rights of appeal against deportation from being transferred to open conditions or accessing ROTL in closed conditions. Those who have not reached this stage but are nonetheless still being considered for deportation, must pass an enhanced risk assessment before transferring to open or accessing ROTL; this reflects the additional risks to the integrity of the UK's immigration requirements if the individual absconds or fails to return from ROTL. This is not a local or blanket decision; the Security Categorisation Policy Framework published 20 February 2020 sets out the requirements - see sections 10.3 and 10.4. The framework can be accessed here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/security-categorisation-policy-framework>.

The primary purpose of ROTL is to help individuals who meet the necessary criteria to prepare for their resettlement in the UK. As the Board are aware, in 2019 prior to the Covid -19 pandemic, 48 individuals went out on ROTL, on a total of 1,191 days, some to paid employment locally / unpaid work on the prison estate, and some on unescorted family visits. HMP Huntercombe's function is to receive men who will be deported back to their country of origin by supporting rehabilitation overseas. Men who will resettle in the UK generally cannot be supported at Huntercombe and should be in the appropriate resettlement prison for the area of the UK in which they will be living. ROTL has started to resume at HMP Huntercombe for those who meet the criteria.