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**HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
CHARLIE TAYLOR**

Date: 26 April 2023

The Rt Hon Alex Chalk KC MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State
Ministry of Justice
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

Dear Secretary of State,

Urgent Notification: HMYOI Cookham Wood

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 as result of our unannounced inspection of HMYOI Cookham Wood between 4-20 April 2023. 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 inspection is the sixth time we have inspected Cookham Wood since 2016. Reports from these inspections chronicle a steady decline in outcomes across all four of our healthy prison tests.

Inspection year	Safety	Care	Purposeful activity	Resettlement
2016	Not sufficiently good	Good	Reasonably good	Reasonably good
2017	Not sufficiently good	Reasonably good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good
2018	Not sufficiently good	Reasonably good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good
2019	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good
2021	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Poor	Not sufficiently good
2023	Poor	Not sufficiently good	Poor	Not sufficiently good

In 2021 I reported on an institution with significant problems and the need for support to be provided to enable improvements:

We found low morale among staff, low standards, low expectations and a lack of energy and creativity that could engage and motivate children to use their time at Cookham Wood usefully, despite holding only half the young people it was resourced to hold. The response to difficulties found between children was invariably limited to keeping them apart, placing further restrictions on the regime. Leaders needed to find ways to move beyond this reactive and limiting approach, starting with

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energetic and motivational engagement with children, as well as the clear demarcation and enforcement of standards.

On returning I have found a failure to address the sustained decline in standards at this high-risk establishment and have no other option but to issue an urgent notification for the following reasons:

1. There was a complete breakdown of behaviour management, this had led to the escalation of poor behaviour to the point where there was widespread weapon making and nearly a quarter of children reported feeling unsafe. Staff told us they were reluctant to search thoroughly or challenge threatening or intimidating behaviour because they were not always supported by colleagues or managers.
2. In the complete absence of other measures, the prison relied on keeping boys apart or completely segregating them to maintain safety. At the time of our inspection 90% of children were subjected to 'keep apart' and staff were managing 583 individual conflicts in a population of 77.
3. Solitary confinement of children had become normalised at the establishment. Over a quarter of the population was completely segregated from the main population. Most were locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day with no meaningful human interaction. Records showed that it was not unusual for this group of children to not come out of their cells for days on end. Education and other interventions were almost never delivered. Two boys who needed protecting from their peers had been subjected to these conditions for more than 100 days.
4. The leadership team lacked cohesion and had failed to drive up standards. Many staff did not have confidence in leaders and managers.
5. Evidence of the acceptance of low standards was widespread. Many staff were not wearing the right uniform, living units were dirty, important equipment was broken and graffiti remained a problem. Inspectors witnessed examples of intimidating and threatening behaviour including insulting or pushing past staff going unaddressed.
6. Education, skills and work provision had declined and was inadequate in all areas. Children were allocated to classes based on whom they could safely mix with rather than their abilities or needs, as a result they were demotivated. Attendance, teaching and behaviour management were poor and as such only a small proportion of boys who started a course achieved the qualification.
7. There were significant staffing shortfalls in some areas at the establishment, but we were told that 450 staff were currently employed at Cookham Wood. This included 44 directly employed managers, of whom 24 were senior leaders. Several more worked for partners in healthcare, education and other areas. The fact that such rich resources were delivering this unacceptable service for 77 children indicated that much of it was currently wasted, underused or in need of reorganisation to improve outcomes at the site.

We met many staff who cared about the children at Cookham Wood and wanted to deliver a good service to them, however they had lost hope that improvements were possible.

There will need to be a concerted and urgent response by the Youth Custody Service and the leadership of the prison in order to make this institution a safe and decent place to hold children.

Yours Sincerely



Charlie Taylor