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**HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
CHARLIE TAYLOR**

Date: 30th August 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: HMP Woodhill

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 Woodhill between 14th and 25th August. 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 Woodhill since 2014 and, as the table below shows, there has been a worrying decline in outcomes across all four of our healthy prison tests. Most concerning, in our three most recent inspections the jail attracted our lowest healthy prison test scores for both safety and purposeful activity. It was especially troubling to find at this most recent visit that none of the recommendations from our 2021 inspection had been achieved. Indeed, many poor outcomes we had previously identified had worsened in some important areas, particularly with regard to safety.

Healthy prison assessments since 2014 ¹				
	Safety	Respect	Purposeful activity	RRP
2023	1	2	1	2
2021	1	2	1	2
2018	1	3	1	3
2015	2	3	3	3
2014	2	3	1	2

¹ 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:

- Woodhill was unsafe. In our survey, for example, 71% of prisoners said they had felt unsafe at some point during their stay at the prison and almost half said they currently felt unsafe. We found at least 26 prisoners who were self-isolating in their cells in fear for their safety, and the prison had the highest rate of serious assaults against staff in England and Wales. Reported incidents of violence at the prison had risen sharply, with 298 incidents recorded in the 12 months leading up to this inspection, compared with 182 prior to the previous inspection. Consistent with these findings, the use of force against prisoners was amongst the highest in the adult male estate. Leaders had yet to take effective action to make the prison safer.
- The rate of reported self-harm was the highest in the adult male estate. In the last 12 months, there had been 829 incidents of self-harm involving 124 individuals – a significant increase since our previous inspection. Despite very great complexity and vulnerability amongst the population, the prison's response to these alarming outcomes was inadequate.
- Illicit drug use was a serious problem. The rate of positive random mandatory tests (38%) was the sixth highest of all prisons.
- Leaders were not tackling the sources of much of the prisoners' frustration that included a lack of access to basic amenities and delays in getting anything done. Emergency cell call bells often went unanswered for long periods of time, key work was non-existent and induction for new arrivals was very poor. The many relatively inexperienced staff lacked the confidence and were not sufficiently supported to challenge poor behaviour, and we found bullying and intimidation by prisoners to be rife. Many prison officers told us they feared for their safety, and morale was low.
- A chronic shortage of prison officers remained at the crux of the prison's difficulties; only half of the prison's quota of Band 3 officers were available for operational duties, and there was still a 36% shortfall even when staffing resources were supplemented by officers on detached duty from other jails. More officers were leaving than joining, and a continuing deterioration in staffing was forecast.
- The physical infrastructure was run down and neglected. Communal areas of the prison were dirty, and in some parts, filthy. Most wing showers lacked privacy, but refurbishment had stalled. The facilities management service struggled to repair often damaged cells.
- Although time out of cell had improved since our last inspection, prisoners still spent far too long locked up. Staff shortages meant work and education were routinely cancelled, and our checks found fewer than 25% of the population were actually attending activities. The library had been shut since 2020. Ofsted inspectors graded the provision as inadequate in each of their assessments.
- The prison was not fulfilling its function as a category B trainer. Prisoners were underemployed and very frustrated by the lack of opportunities for progression. In our survey, only a third of prisoners said their experience in this prison would make them less likely to reoffend in the future, which was much worse than in similar prisons.

Despite these findings, we acknowledge the many dedicated staff working in challenging circumstances doing their very best to care for some highly complex and vulnerable men. Leadership of this complex and high-risk prison, operating both specialist units² and holding category A prisoners in addition to its role as a category B trainer, is a huge challenge in and of itself, made even harder by a severe and enduring shortage of staff.

Local leaders urgently need more support from HMPPS, and the prison urgently needs a complete reset that addresses the chronic staff shortage, and then begins to make the prison a safe, decent and purposeful place.

Yours sincerely,



Charlie Taylor

² The prison's Close Supervision Centre (CSC) was not part of this inspection.