



## HM INSPECTORATE OF PRISONS

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### HM Chief Inspector of Prisons CHARLIE TAYLOR

Date: 15 November 2023

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

Dear Secretary of State,

#### **Urgent Notification: HMP Bedford**

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 a result of our unannounced inspection of HMP Bedford between 30<sup>th</sup> October and 9<sup>th</sup> November 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.

Bedford was also subject to an Urgent Notification in 2018 with many similar concerns highlighted by my predecessor. We reported more favourably in 2022, showing that progress is possible despite the many challenges faced by this prison.

This is the fourth time we have inspected Bedford since 2016 and, as the table below shows, it has consistently failed to provide good outcomes for prisoners.

#### **Healthy prison assessments since 2016**

	Safety	Respect	Purposeful activity	Preparation for release*
2023	Poor	Poor	Poor	Not sufficiently good
2022	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Reasonably good
2018	Poor	Poor	Poor	Not sufficiently good
2016	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good	Not sufficiently good

\*Previously Rehabilitation and Release Planning (2022 and 2018), and Resettlement (2016)

I have issued an Urgent Notification for the following reasons:

- Levels of violence were very high particularly against staff which was the highest rate in any adult male prison in the country.

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- Bedford had the third highest rate of recorded self-harm in the adult male estate. Care for prisoners at risk of self-harm was undermined by an inadequate mental health service and weak case management.
- New prisoners were placed into dirty, graffitied cells and were given a very limited induction – of particular concern in a reception prison.
- The use of force remained very high, and we saw too many examples of excessive force as well as unprofessional behaviour connected to these incidents.
- Three-quarters of the prisoners lived in overcrowded conditions. Most spent more than 22 hours a day locked in their cells. The wings were dirty and there was a widespread infestation of rats and cockroaches. Some cells had broken windows and black mould on the walls.
- The segregation unit was squalid, staff were forced to use sandbags and wear wellington boots due to overflowing sewage pipes after heavy rain.
- Prisoners expressed real frustration at their inability to get anything done for example, accessing their property, applying for a job or adding their families' numbers to their phone. Staff prisoner relationships were transactional, key work was rare and the application and complaints system were in disarray.
- The escape of a prisoner who was meant to be subject to constant supervision in July 2022 highlighted substantial weaknesses in security. The local security strategy remained incomplete after it had been deleted by a previous manager. In addition, mandatory drug testing was not taking place.
- Managers, staff, and prisoners reported witnessing incidents of racism. Oversight of fair treatment and inclusion had declined.
- Education, training and work were regularly cancelled because of a lack of operational staff and teachers. Many prisoners were unemployed and yet for those who had an education place only about half attended their classes.

The governor had taken action to address issues and poor staff performance in the 11 months since her appointment, but the scale of leadership changes at the prison including 9 new senior leaders, had created delays to improvement.

There were many staff and leaders doing their best at Bedford but some of the problems we found were symptomatic of systemic issues within the reception prison system. There will need to be a coordinated and sustained effort from national as well as local leaders to effect meaningful change at the prison.

Yours sincerely



CHARLIE TAYLOR