



Ministry
of Justice

The Right Honourable
Alex Chalk KC MP
Lord Chancellor & Secretary
of State for Justice

Charlie Taylor
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
HM Inspectorate of Prisons
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MoJ ref: 111167

15 December 2023

Dear Charlie,

URGENT NOTIFICATION – HMP BEDFORD

Thank you for your letter of 17 November 2023, setting out your concerns following the full inspection at HMP Bedford. I am providing you with this response within 28 calendar days of the Urgent Notification (UN) as set out in the protocol.

You have raised a number of concerning issues at HMP Bedford around the levels of violence and self-harm, living conditions, and fair treatment and inclusion which I take very seriously. As an immediate action we have introduced additional oversight and we will continue to monitor progress well beyond this initial 28-day period until we are satisfied that there is sustained improvement.

This is the second time a UN has been invoked at HMP Bedford, and I agree that the circumstances leading to this are not acceptable. I have set out below, in more detail, the urgent action we are taking to address the concerns identified in your letter and to prioritise the safety of staff and prisoners in HMP Bedford. I have also enclosed a copy of the action plan that I intend to publish alongside this letter.

You have raised concerns about systemic issues within reception prisons. There is no one single factor that determines differences in performance, and HMP Bedford has its own particular challenges, but as you know reception prisons usually have a higher number of prisoners on remand, and the prisoners often stay in the establishments for a relatively short amount of time. However, despite these challenges we are determined to drive up performance in reception prisons and across the system.

Leadership

In your letter you acknowledge many staff and leaders are doing their best at Bedford. In order to further support HMP Bedford and the Governor's plans for the prison, additional management posts are being funded to strengthen the management team. Frontline staffing is being boosted by four officers on loan from other prisons and additional overtime funding has been provided for the equivalent of eight full-time officers to help cover vacancies.

Levels of violence and self-harm

We are dedicated to improving safety for staff and prisoners and are taking action to better understand and identify the drivers of violence and build on existing work to address them. A new Violence Reduction senior leader has been appointed to ensure increased focus and pace of improvements in this area. To understand and tackle the drivers of violence, leaders will also work to identify the reasons for prisoner frustrations.

We will also deploy the national Prison Officer Standards Coaching Team (SCT) to improve delivery standards. The SCT is formed of experienced officers from across the estate, who have been trained in coaching skills. The SCT will mentor frontline staff, with a particular focus on themes such as reducing violence and support to prisoners who are at risk of self-harm.

Temporary funding will be provided for 12 months for one staff member to act as a floorwalker, who will build knowledge and improve practice in the investigation of violence and safeguarding for those at risk of self-harm. A new dedicated Suicide and Self-harm senior leaders is also in post to oversee improvements in this area.

Use of Force

You raised in your letter that use of force has remained too high. A weekly Use of Force Panel has been put together to review all incidents, any instances of unprofessionalism will be identified and appropriate action will be taken. All prisoners involved in an incident of violence or force being used will be debriefed by senior officers, with co-ordination by the Use of Force Coordinator and oversight by the new Head of Violence Reduction.

Living Conditions and Segregation Unit

You raised concerns about the decency and living conditions at HMP Bedford. To improve the cleanliness, new cleaning schedules for wing cleaners will be set and adherence to them will be closely monitored and this will take place alongside pest control measures. The Senior Leadership Team will commence weekly accommodation decency checks, to help inform an audit to identify and address priority areas.

There is also an ongoing project to redevelop a new Segregation Unit on B wing which is due for completion end of April 2024, at which point the old segregation unit will be closed.

Fair Treatment and Inclusion

We firmly stand against racism and any forms of discriminatory and unfair treatment, considering them entirely unacceptable. We are committed to fostering an inclusive and fair environment at HMP Bedford.

To ensure this, the Governor and regional Diversity & Inclusion Lead will hold focus groups with staff and prisoners to discuss racism concerns and plan appropriate actions. We are also recruiting two new Diversity and Inclusion Leads to provide further support.

Time out of cell and Purposeful Activity

We are working to improve time out of cell by improving the availability of purposeful activity. Leaders will review the prison core day and implement recommendations to maximise opportunities for prisoners to

attend activities. Training will also be provided to upskill staff in purposeful activity attendance and reinforce the importance of education, training and work, and the impact this has on reducing reoffending.

I can assure you that I will be monitoring the situation at HMP Bedford very closely in the coming weeks and months to ensure that there is sustained improvement. I would also like to thank you, and your team, for the robust scrutiny of our prisons, and I look forward to receiving your full inspection report in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Alex Chalk". The signature is written in a cursive style with a period at the end.

RT HON ALEX CHALK KC MP
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE