



**Antonia Romeo**  
Permanent Secretary  
Ministry of Justice

102 Petty France  
London SW1A 9AJ  
E: permanent.secretary@justice.gov.uk

[www.gov.uk/MoJ](http://www.gov.uk/MoJ)

Dame Meg Hillier MP  
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

*[By email]*

25 November 2022

Dear Chair,

## **MINISTRY OF JUSTICE ACCOUNTING OFFICER ASSESSMENTS**

Thank you for your letter of 15 November in which you asked for clarification of specific points on the assessment summaries relating to the prison expansion portfolio. At the time, the prison expansion portfolio fell within the remit of Jo Farrar, as AO/HMPPS, hence Jo completed the assessments. However, as you requested, I am now responding to each of your further questions, below.

### **Plans for the portfolio as a whole**

The Prison Strategy White Paper 2021 sets out plans for the delivery of 20,000 additional prison places. This is the biggest prison build programme in a century, aimed

at ensuring the right conditions are in place to rehabilitate prisoners, helping to cut crime and protect the public.

We have already delivered over 3,100 additional prison places across the country. In February this year, HMP Five Wells opened as a c.1,700 capacity prison in Wellingborough and our first-ever ‘smart’ prison. We are also set to open HMP Fosse Way next spring, a new prison in Leicestershire, which will hold c.1,700 prisoners, and construction has begun on Britain’s first all-electric prison at Full Sutton in East Yorkshire, which will hold nearly 1,500 prisoners when it opens in 2025.

We are also undertaking major refurbishments at HMP Birmingham and HMP Liverpool, and a houseblock at HMP Stocken is under construction. These will bring nearly 1,000 additional places to the existing estate. In June, we awarded a contract to Kier and Wates to oversee the construction and delivery of approximately 2,400 new places across six prison sites. These will include houseblocks, as well as supporting buildings such as kitchens, workshops and sports facilities. In addition, over 400 temporary accommodation places have been transitioned into operational capacity.

### **Overall affordability of the portfolio**

As with other construction programmes, prison expansion plans have been affected by unexpectedly high levels of inflation over the last year, which have had a material impact on actual and estimated costs. We have taken steps to mitigate risks and continue actively to manage our affordability position.

The Chancellor’s Autumn Statement on 17 November made a commitment to existing spending plans up to 2024/25, alongside an HMT-led Efficiency and Savings Review. The department will consider the outcomes of this review and its overall impact on the affordability of the programme.

### **Staffing risks**

The MoJ is committed to providing the high-quality prison places that are needed over coming years, which includes ensuring they are adequately resourced and supported by

sufficient prison officer staffing levels. We also work closely with relevant partners to ensure that there is capacity across other workforce groups in the prison, including for educational, health and administrative posts.

We have a process in place to analyse the number of additional staff required to deliver new prison places at all publicly operated sites with estate expansion projects, and a dedicated mobilisation team to support with recruitment. Lead-in times for recruiting operational staff is an important consideration in the context of either back-filling positions where staff transfer, or direct recruitment. Recruitment of prison officers begins 18 months before the prison opens under usual timelines, to maximise success in both recruiting and onboarding staff into expanded prisons.

We recognise that the labour market is challenging, and the most recently published prison workforce statistics show that the staffing position in prisons is very difficult at some sites at the moment. Improving that is one of our top priorities, and we have a lot of activity in place to improve both recruitment and retention. We are regularly reviewing and updating our approach to marketing and communications and are focusing on outreach and our benefits package to support the increased staffing need. At sites with particular recruitment and retention challenges, we have a tailored approach to recruitment advertising and at 18 sites we pay additional market supplements to increase pay for staff at some grades. The 2022/23 pay award for prison staff delivered an increase in base pay of at least 4% for all HMPPS staff in prisons, alongside further targeted pay rises for our lowest paid staff of up to £3,000. We have written out to candidates who are part way through applications to become prison officers to make them aware of the pay increases, which we hope will help to boost application numbers. We anticipate that the increases to prison pay will also help with staff retention. To support retention further we have, since April 2022, worked to improve the joining experience of new employees by improving marketing materials and increasing support for new joiners via 'New Colleague Mentors'.

Where new places are privately operated we ensure through the operator competition that we test that they have an approach and staffing model that provides a safe, secure,

and rehabilitative environment. Operators are expected to deliver high quality and value for money bids that manage the risks and meet the needs of the prisoners. We evaluate all aspects of bidders' proposals, which includes scrutinising the staffing approach and resilience. A mobilisation assurance team is also in place to support all private operators and provide assurance that recruitment is progressing.

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**ANTONIA ROMEO**