

Andy Slaughter MP
Chair of the Justice Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

MoJ ref: 122325

14 March 2025

Dear Andy,

LAY OBSERVERS' NATIONAL ANNUAL REPORT 2023 - 2024

I am writing to let you know that the Lay Observers' National Council have published their 2023 – 24 national annual report. A copy of the report can be found on the Lay Observer's website at: <https://layobservers.org/reports/>.

The Lay Observers report praised the dedication by many of the court staff to ensure people are well cared for. However, there were several concerns regarding insufficient staffing levels; the need for children to be accompanied by trained staff and transported separately from adults and housed in non-cellular accommodation where possible; the need to improve the quality and comfort of custody suites; and the requirement to ensure that interpreting services are available for those in need.

I recognise these findings, and I assure you that I take all the concerns raised by the Lay Observers very seriously and I, working with my colleague the Minister of State for Courts, am determined to do whatever it takes to respond to these concerns and make improvements in the identified areas to get it right, with consideration to the report's recommendations. I have outlined the actions we are taking to address the report's recommendation in the annex to this letter.



Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending

Annex

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation	Response
1. Recommendation: Contractors should continue their efforts to increase staffing levels until there is suitable staffing for both custody suites and transportation services.	The PECS contract management team have robust assurance processes in place to ensure the appropriate staffing levels to deliver transportation services. In addition, suppliers maintain proactive recruitment campaigns and have a pipeline of new starters to replace leavers through natural attrition. Our management information indicates that we currently have more staff in post than during the period covered by the report. Presently, if including new starters in training both suppliers staffing levels are above the contracted target, ensuring safety, security, and decency at all times.
2. Recommendation: All children should be accompanied by appropriately trained staff, both in the custody suite and while being transported, and should be transported separately from adults.	PECS will continue to work with suppliers to minimise the number of occasions children are transported with adults, however it is right that where resources are stretched, we prioritise the youngest and most vulnerable children.
3. Recommendation: All children should be housed in non-cellular accommodation unless there are exceptional circumstances.	Tribunals Service (HMCTS) are currently working towards increasing the number of non-cellular rooms which can be adapted to improve the care of children attending court. In addition, funding has been secured to purchase specialist furniture and other items to brighten up rooms and present a more welcoming, interactive, and supportive environment.
4. Recommendation: The quality and comfort of the seating in custody suites should be improved.	Fixed seating in cells poses challenges, such as managing allocation for those in need, maintaining hygiene and upholding safety requirement. We are currently examining these issues to find effective solutions and considering a feasibility study to assess potential improvements. Our goal is to identify realistic and practical measures to address concerns without compromising operational needs.
5. Recommendation: The telephone interpreting service should be used for all detained people who lack the ability to communicate well in English.	PECS suppliers have committed to a review of telephone interpreting services, which will be closely monitored to ensure the diverse needs of all detainees are met.

6. Recommendation: Additional clothing or blankets, or an alternative method of keeping people warm, should be provided to all detained people who feel cold while they are in cells.	A process agreed between PECS and HMCTS monitors cells temperature. Where temperatures fall below or are above the agreed range immediate action is taken. If this is not effective the decision is taken either not to open, or if detained people are present, close the custody suite and move them out immediately. This eliminates the need to introduce blankets, as to do so would only create additional fire and safety risks.
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