



Ministry
of Justice

Lord Timpson
Minister of State for
Justice

The Rt Hon the Lord Foster of Bath
Chair, Justice and Home Affairs Committee
House of Lords
London, SW1A 0PW

MoJ ref: SUB132831

20 March 2026

Dear Don,

UPDATE ON IN-CELL AUTOMATIC FIRE DETECTION EQUIPMENT PROGRAMME

I am writing to provide an update to the JHAC on our fire safety improvement (FSI) works programme.

In 2022, HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) made a commitment to ensure all prison accommodation is fire safety compliant by the end of 2027 - which requires the installation of wired and automated fire detection (AFD), suppression and extraction (or otherwise taking non-compliant prison places out of use).

Since taking office in 2024, we have undertaken an intensive round of work in response to the prison capacity crisis we inherited from the previous government. This has comprised of delivering the 10 Year Capacity Strategy; the decision to bring forward the release point for a range of determinate sentences to 40%; and commissioning the Independent Sentencing Review (ISR) and subsequently enacting the Sentencing Act 2026.

As a result of this work, we are now in a stronger position to assess with greater accuracy future projections as regards available capacity to allocate to fire safety works over the medium to long term; and, therefore, to predict when those fire safety works are likely to be completed. Because of the urgent need for the government to respond to the prison capacity crisis which had been growing without mitigation under the previous government, and because of the underinvestment by the previous government in fire safety compliance work, we have reviewed our work plans in detail and determined that meeting the 2027 timeline set by the previous government will not be possible. To take remaining non-compliant cells out of use at the end of 2027 would inevitably – and significantly – breach critical capacity, resulting in the collapse of the proper functioning of the prison and wider criminal justice system with attendant intolerable risk to public safety.

At this stage the department does not intend to set out a new date by which we will complete the works needed for compliance. This is because the guiding principle the department has adopted is to do the works as quickly as possible taking out as much capacity as the system can safely spare. What full compliance with this guiding principle means will be kept under continual review. As such, the date for completion of the works will necessarily fluctuate.

I want to assure you that we are working to ensure that we are doing everything that can be

reasonably done to bring the estate into compliance with fire safety standards as quickly as possible. HMPPS will continually look for ways to accelerate compliance and reduce risk. We are conscious of the need to complete the AFD works as quickly as possible and also the need to take steps to minimise the ongoing fire safety risk while those works are outstanding. There has been significant progress toward the completion of the AFD works. Since 2009, over 40,000 prison spaces have been equipped with in-cell AFD. Significant resource has been expended in relation to those works: between 2020/21 and 2024/25, approximately £346 million was spent on fire safety improvements in the prison estate, the projected expenditure in the year 2025/26 is £171 million, and projects to the value of £275m are already programmed for the next financial year. In addition, we have taken steps to ensure that every cell not equipped with in-cell AFD has a standalone battery-powered smoke detector situated immediately outside the cell door and that there is sufficient airflow around the cell door to enable smoke to reach the detector in the event of a fire.

We continue to be acutely aware of the need to minimise the risk of harm from fire by any available means as we work towards full roll out of AFD. HMPPS is also accredited to the highest nationally recognised and independently assessed BS 9997 Fire Risk Management Systems standard and we continue to engage the Crown Premises Fire Safety Inspectorate as we work to ensure that we are doing all that is reasonably practicable on this issue.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James', written in a cursive style.

Lord Timpson
Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending