

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

11 January 2024

HMP YOI Cookham Wood Update

Report from/author: Cassandra Chapman, Deputy Governor, His Majesty's Young Offender Institution Cookham Wood

Summary

HMYOI Cookham Wood is a young offender facility in Medway, Kent. The current operational capacity is 90 boys between the ages of 15 and 18. At the time of writing this report there are currently 79 boys residing within Cookham Wood, both remand and sentenced.

1. Recommendation

1.1 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the report.

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1 The Council's policy and budgetary responsibilities extend to ensuring that their Local Authority Dedicated Officer (LADO) service covers the provision and management of three social workers based at Cookham Wood, for which the Council receives a grant.

2.2 This item has been circulated separately to the main agenda as it was necessary to undertake further work in finalising the report. The Chairperson of the Committee is of the opinion that it should be considered at this meeting as a matter of urgency as permitted under section 100B of the Local Government Act 1972 to enable discussion on the improvement journey at the earliest opportunity.

3 Background

3.1 In April 2023 there was an inspection (HMIP) completed that placed Cookham Wood into Urgent Notification, and it was informed that 'there will need to be urgent, concerted, long-term commitment from leaders at the YOI and from the Youth Custody Service to improve standards at Cookham Wood and make it an acceptable establishment to hold children'.

3.2 Priority concerns, and areas for improvement were noted as follows:

- 1) Despite well-resourced and national leadership teams, oversight of safety, living conditions and purposeful activity was poor. Staff did not have confidence in the leadership team and their morale was very low.
- 2) Evidence of the acceptance of low standards was widespread. Many staff were not wearing the right uniform, living units were dirty, important equipment was broken and graffiti remained a problem.
- 3) There was a complete breakdown of behaviour management. This had led to an escalation in poor behaviour to the point where there was widespread weapon making and nearly a quarter of children reporting that they felt unsafe. Staff told us they were reluctant to search thoroughly or challenge threatening or intimidating behaviour because they were not always supported by colleagues or managers.
- 4) Solitary confinement of children had become normalised at the establishment. Over a quarter of the population was completely separated from the main population. Most were locked in their cells for 23.5 hours a day with no meaningful human interaction.
- 5) Children were unable to access sufficient education. The range of education on offer was also insufficient and children had too few learning tasks to complete in their cells.
- 6) When children could attend, the quality of education was inadequate.
- 7) There were not enough teachers or prison officers to enable leaders to deliver the vocational curriculum.
- 8) Managers did not allocate children to vocational subjects based on their needs or aspirations. Instead, children were allocated on the basis of which children could mix together. As a result, too many children were disengaged and lacked motivation to participate meaningfully in learning.

3.3 Approximately 6 weeks prior to the inspection, Paul Crossey, was appointed as the Governor.

3.4 Since the inspection, the main focus of the site has been to respond to the UN action plan and take the establishment back to basics in order to make progress and move forward.

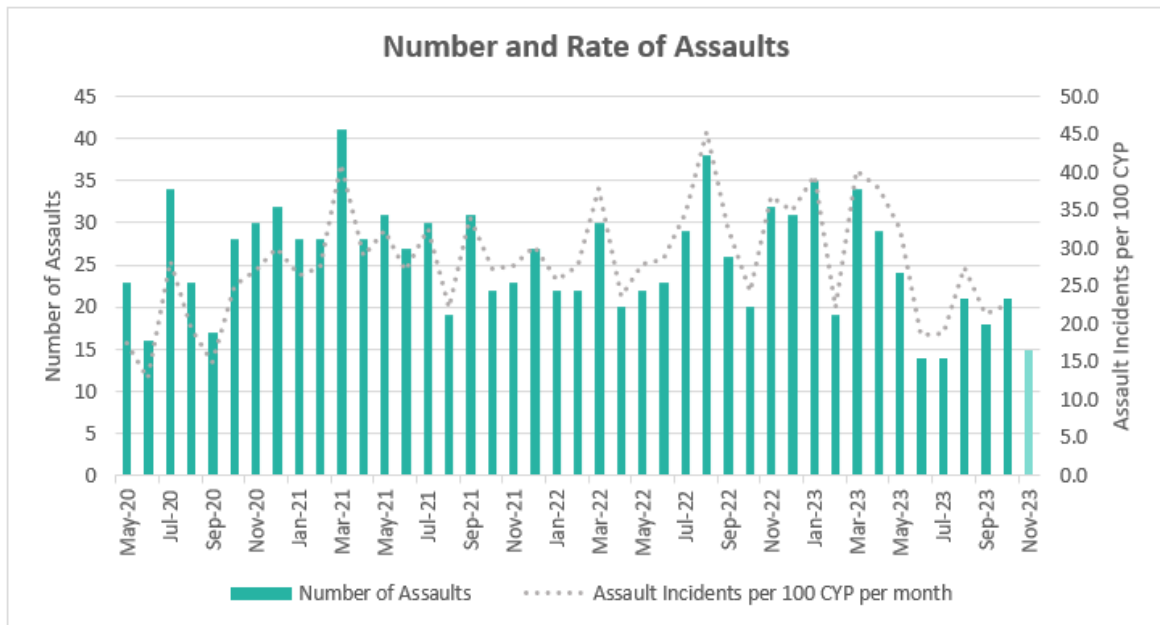
3.5 The Senior Leadership has been strengthened, with some previous members moving on to new roles, and new Leaders being brought in from HMP Belmarsh, HMP Rochester, and HMP Swaleside. This has brought fresh thinking and new ways of working to Cookham Wood, and positive progress is beginning to be made.

3.6 Focus has been placed onto addressing staff about wearing correct uniform, including epaulettes, and work is ongoing about the possibility of the introduction of a new YCS (Youth Custody Service) uniform that will appear less formal than a traditional prison officer uniform.

- 3.7 Cleanliness is an ongoing focus across the site. Major refurbishment is taking place on A3 landing currently, with a plan for this to move to other landings once complete. There is also fire safety works, and refurbishment due in some of the older areas of the establishment.
- 3.8 Searching has been a big focus for the staffing, ensuring that they feel able to search boys thoroughly, and feel supported and confident to challenge as appropriate. There is still ongoing work regarding this, with Managers being available during key times to assist staff at times when conflict is more likely.
- 3.9 A dedicated Manager was introduced to have oversight of separated boys (rule 49), and significant work has been completed regarding time out of room. There is now a focus in morning briefings looking at the amount of time outside their bedroom each boy gets each day. A new spreadsheet has been developed to allow us to have a better understanding of exactly how much time each boy accesses time out. In addition, there has been a full reprofile of the staffing team. This means that currently we are not offering boys time out on landings in the evenings. Instead, we have focussed on increasing our staff provision during the core day, to ensure that boys could go to education each day, thus increasing their time out of room.
- 3.10 There has been the appointment of a new Head of Education, who is working very closely with the site to ensure that boys who are currently separated for various reasons maintain access to the curriculum and have meaningful interaction with staff.
- 3.11 Access to education remains a priority for all staff across site. The timetable has been updated on a number of occasions to ensure the best possible provision for all. Novus (Education provider) has completed considerable work to ensure that there are now enough qualified teachers on site to allow each boy access to full time education. There has also been work to establish better quality education delivery, with more challenging work for boys to complete.
- 3.12 A new governance model has been developed. Previously there was limited oversight, and the meeting structure needed improving. A new 'Strategic Thursday' model has been set up. Every Thursday is now allocated for different functional meeting – week one: Health and residential, week two: reducing reoffending, week three: safety, week four: SLT performance and strategic.

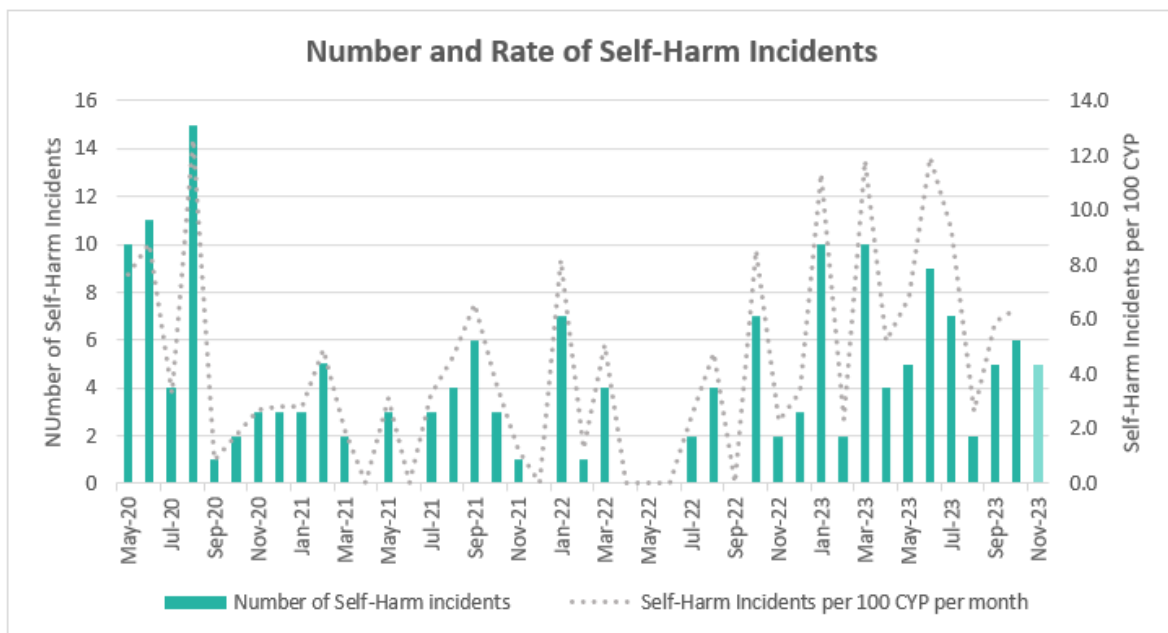
4. Data

4.1 Assaults:



4.1.1 Overall, there is a downward trajectory in assaults from the time of the inspection. We are currently looking to trial a new way of investigating violence, this is a method used in the adult estate, and will enable us to look at what has led to certain incidents, and formulate plans to resolve.

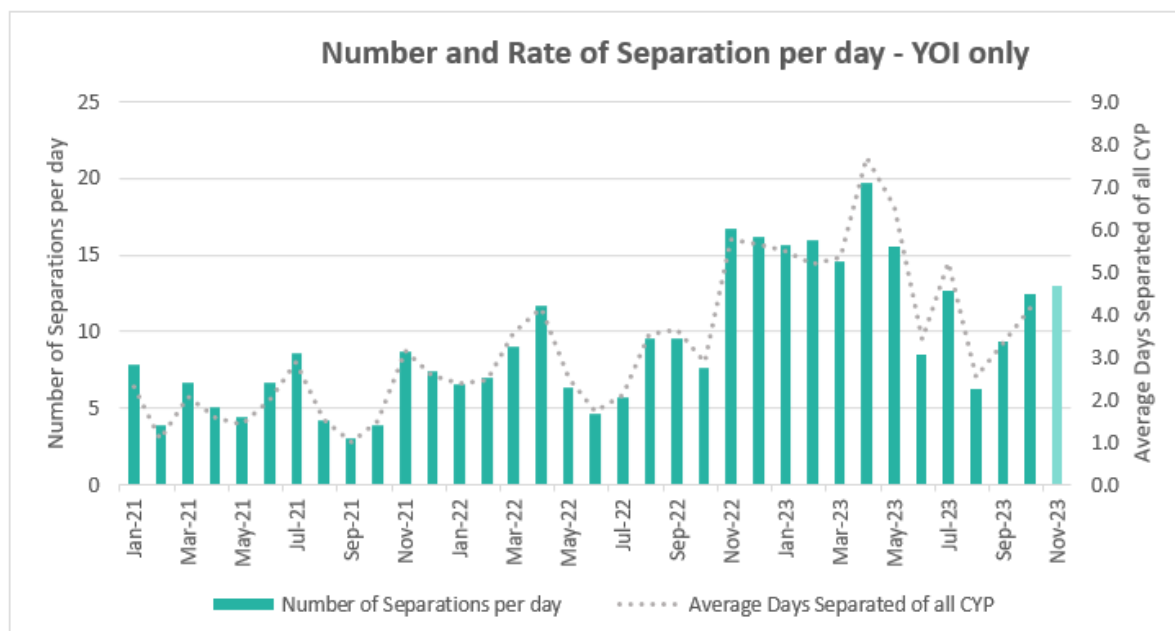
4.2 Self-harm:



4.2.1 Self-harm remains at a reasonably low rate, with few incidents each month, and generally 1 or 2 young people being responsible for these incidents. The main method of self-harm is cutting. Work continues across site to ensure that

the ACCT (Assessment, Carre in Custody and Teamwork) process is to a good standard, and that actions are supportive to young people. The main driver to self-harm currently is being new to custody. There has been a recent review of our early days in custody process, and work is ongoing to improve this.

4.3 Separation:

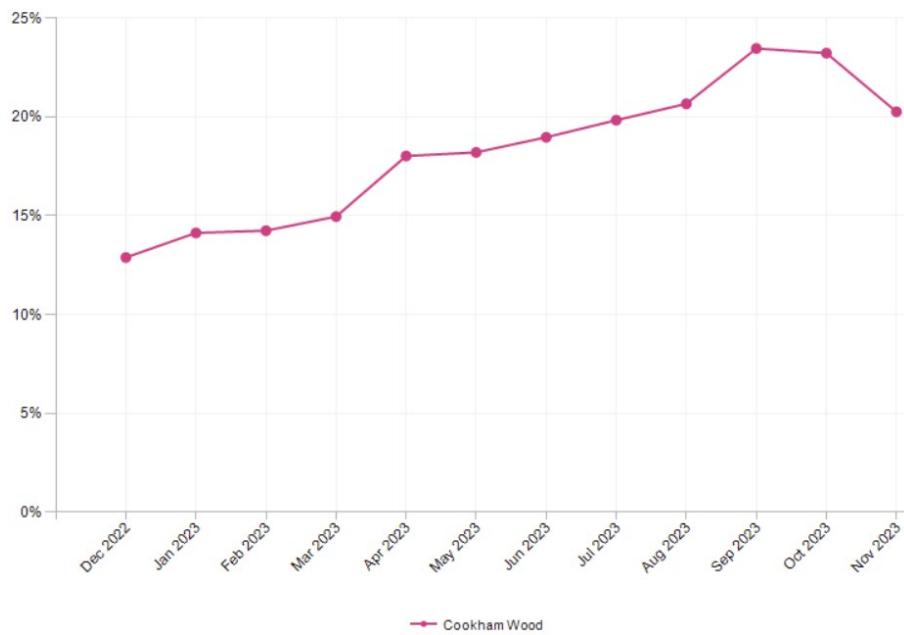


4.3.1 Separation rates are lower than they were in May 2023, when the inspection highlighted an area of concern. Individual case managers are now allocated to each individual and there is better oversight over risk posed. The new governance structure has meant the reintroduction of the Separation Management and Review Group (SMARG) meeting, which enables a better understanding of what leads to separation, how we manage it etc.

4.4 Release on Temporary licence (ROTL):

4.4.1 Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL) continues to be a good story for Cookham Wood, with high numbers of eligible boys accessing time in the community for reasons such as education, employment or maintaining family ties. The number of episodes, and boys accessing ROTL exceed all of the other YOI sites.

4.5 Staffing/Resource:



4.5.1 Staff resignation rates have risen slightly over the year, however, we have a better understanding of the reasons behind this, and we are actively working on it.



4.5.2 Sickness rates have decreased over recent months, with a better understanding of the drivers to sickness across the site.

4.6 Conclusion:

4.6.1 The establishment are now expecting another HMIP inspection, which we are continuing to work towards. There remains significant work to do, however, we are content that we are moving in the correct direction.

5. Risk management

5.1 The Council is working in partnership with Cookham Wood in relation to their improvement journey and the Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive monitors this and any risks associated with the improvement and its action plan to ensure it remains well managed.

6 Financial implications

6.1 There are no direct financial implications to the Council arising from this report.

7 Legal implications

7.1 There are no direct legal implications to the Council arising from this report.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None