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HMP/YOI ISIS – FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES

HMP/YOI Isis had made progress but there was still a long way to go, said Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an announced inspection of the south east London training jail.

HMP/YOI Isis opened in July 2010, the first new public prison to be opened for 20 years. It is the only category C training prison for young men aged 18 to 25. This was its first inspection. Isis had faced problems in recruiting staff and had had to deal with an influx of prisoners who had been displaced as a result of the disturbances in August 2011. At the heart of the challenges it faced were poor staff-prisoner relationships. A combination of relatively inexperienced new recruits who lacked confidence, and staff drafted in from other prisons (many of whom had low expectations of, and a dismissive attitude towards, prisoners) meant that managers struggled to embed a positive culture. In a training prison, maximising prisoners' involvement in education, training and work should have been a key objective for every member of staff but this was not so.

Inspectors were concerned to find that:

- the weak relationships meant officers fell back on formal disciplinary action or resorted to force too quickly;
- too many staff appeared to lack the confidence or motivation to deliver their responsibilities effectively;

- many prisoners did not feel confident that the prison would keep them safe;
- the cell call bell system was dysfunctional, meaning emergencies may not always be promptly attended to;
- the personal officer scheme was poor, work on diversity was very limited and complaints of racism were not always effectively investigated;
- prisoners had to wait up to six months to get their possessions from the store;
- despite some good quality education, training and work provision, there was no strategy to ensure the prison delivered its training role, and prisoners appeared to be able to opt out of activities without being challenged;
- half of all the prisoners were locked in their cells during the working part of the day; and
- the biometric roll check system frequently failed, meaning all prisoner movement halted, sometimes for hours, until a manual check could be done, so work, education and training were severely disrupted.

However, inspectors were pleased to find that:

- drugs use was low for a category C prison in London, the drug treatment service was well established and there was good provision to address alcohol abuse;
- day-to-day support for prisoners at risk of suicide or self-harm was good;
- the prison had good processes in place for tackling bullies;
- resettlement was a strength, with robust public protection procedures, and good offender management processes; and

- there were very effective services to ensure prisoners had stable accommodation when they left and a high proportion also found a job, training or education place.

Nick Hardwick said:

“Despite the progress it has made, it would be wrong to underestimate the formidable challenges Isis still has to overcome. Achieving a stable, permanent staff group with a common culture and objectives is the essential step in doing so and it will need – and is entitled to expect – every support from the Prison Service nationally. The progress the prison has already made in delivering resettlement services, supporting prisoners at risk of self-harm and restricting the supply of drugs are commendable achievements. The prison now needs to ensure it makes equal progress in delivering its central training function and providing a safe and decent environment for all the young men it holds.”

Michael Spurr, Chief Executive Officer of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), said:

“The Chief Inspector rightly highlights the challenges Isis has faced in opening and running a new prison. Recruitment at Isis has posed a challenge but new staff are being absorbed well and are working hard to manage the volatile population.

“I am pleased that the Inspector praised the resettlement work being undertaken and acknowledged the low drug use. The Governor and staff are working hard to establish a positive culture and are committed to creating a safe and secure environment. I am confident that they will continue to build on the progress made.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 19 January 2012 at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/inspectorate-reports/hmi-prisons/prison-and-yoi-inspections/index.htm>
2. HM Inspectorate of Prisons is an independent inspectorate, inspecting places of detention to report on conditions and treatment, and promote positive outcomes for those detained and the public.
3. This announced inspection was carried out from 12-16 September 2011.
4. HMP/YOI Isis is a category C training prison for young men aged 18 to 25.
5. Please contact Jane Parsons in HMI Prisons Press Office on 0207 035 2123 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information or to request an interview with Nick Hardwick.