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HMYOI COOKHAM WOOD – SOME PROGRESS, BUT REMAINS FRAGILE

Cookham Wood has seen some improvements, but they were fragile and progress on resettlement had stalled, said Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an unannounced inspection of the young offender institution near Rochester.

HMYOI Cookham Wood, a former women's prison, re-roled and admitted its first young male prisoner in May 2008. At our last inspection in 2009, it was a frightening and unsafe place. Young people were hiding in their cells. Broken windows and damaged fittings caused by vandalism added to the poor environment. Despite this, a reasonable start had been made in providing education, training and resettlement activities to young people. We recommended that the numbers of young people allocated to Cookham Wood were reduced until a safe and ordered environment had been achieved. This reduction gave the governor some space to bring better order, but now capacity has increased to the full figure of 143.

Inspectors noted that:

- a much better strategic approach to bullying, tighter controls on movement and a heavy reliance on formal discipline had improved some aspects of safety;
- the use of force had reduced significantly and de-escalation techniques were successfully applied;

- the physical environment had improved;
- health care was good and there had been real improvements in the care of young people with mental health problems;
- there was very good work on race; and
- the vocational training workshops were a success, and the murals workshop was outstanding, not just for the quality of work and learning, but for its successful work with some of the most challenging young people.

However, inspectors had serious concerns. What Cookham Wood needed was support in developing a stable, experienced and confident staff group with the skills and desire to work with some very challenging young people. Achieving this was made much more difficult by the recruitment controls in place at the time of the inspection. Specific concerns included:

- the Phoenix unit, set up to manage the most difficult young people, was not operating as intended;
- despite some safety improvements, there had been three serious assaults on staff prior to the inspection and two further serious incidents after the inspection;
- there was an over-reliance on formal disciplinary procedures, including a high number of governor's adjudications;
- bullying remained a significant problem;
- the quality of interactions between staff and young people were mixed although it is not surprising that, in view of recent history, some staff were anxious about engaging individually with young people and relied on formal processes;
- the limitations of the buildings themselves placed real constraints on what could be achieved;

- more work was needed to address diversity issues for young people with disabilities, travellers, foreign nationals and on sexuality; and
- although resettlement remained a strength, progress had stalled and it relied too much on the efforts of individual staff, while maintaining family relationships requiring urgent attention. A significant number of young people never received any visits.

Nick Hardwick said:

“The YJB, NOMS and Ministers should be in no doubt that although Cookham Wood may be off the critical list, it should remain in intensive care and needs intelligent support if that progress is to be sustained. The establishment is safer than it was when we carried out our last inspection, but staff and management need support and stability to build on that to deliver consistently effective relationships with young people. The safety of the prison will depend on these relationships, and they are the key ingredient in helping the young people move to law-abiding and useful adult lives.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 22 March 2011 at www.justice.gov.uk/inspectors/hmi-prisons
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 unannounced full follow-up inspection was carried out from 4-8 October 2010.
4. HMYOI Cookham Wood is a young offender institution for male juveniles (aged 15 to 18).
5. Please contact Jane Parsons in HMI Prisons Press Office on 0207 035 2123 or 07880 787452 from 0915 to 1415 Monday to Friday if you would like more information or to request an interview with Nick Hardwick.