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HMP FORD – FAILING IN ITS RESETTLEMENT ROLE

HMP Ford was failing in its resettlement role, and its security was undermined by poor staff-prisoner relationships, said Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an announced inspection of the West Sussex open prison.

Our inspection took place one month before a major disturbance on New Year's Day 2011 caused considerable damage and raised significant public concern. Nick Hardwick said: "This inspection report does not explain – and certainly does not excuse – the disturbance. It does, however, describe conditions in the prison one month before the disturbance took place."

Inspectors made their assessments in the context of the prison's purpose and role as a category D prison 'with an emphasis on resettlement'. Category D prisons are defined by the Prison Service as being 'for prisoners who can be reasonably trusted in open conditions'. Most prisoners were coming to the end of long sentences, although 10% were serving short sentences. All were considered to be low risk. It was clear during the inspection that the trust on which the smooth running of the prison depended was in short supply, and the prison was failing to deliver its fundamental resettlement role effectively.

The prison was not without its strengths. Inspectors were pleased to find:

- the prison was safe for most prisoners and care for vulnerable prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm was good;

- the prison's committed and adaptable security staff had made positive efforts to improve security, with better camera surveillance facilities and joint working with police;
- there were fewer absconds, though the number remained high;
- the use of force was low and health care was good; and
- work, training and education had improved and there was enough to occupy the population, with varied work, good quality training and significantly improved achievement rates in literacy and numeracy.

Inspectors, however, had serious concerns. Our last report noted that the smuggling in of alcohol had become a significant problem. While alcohol remained an issue, we were more concerned about the availability of drugs:

- over 40% of prisoners said it was easy to obtain illegal drugs and staffing shortages meant many random drug tests could not be conducted within the necessary timescales; and
- alcohol breath testing was unsophisticated, and alcohol finds were common, but not as prominent as at previous inspections.

Open prisons have fewer staff and depend much more than closed prisons on positive relationships or 'dynamic security' to run smoothly and safely.

Inspectors were concerned that:

- dynamic security was undermined by poor staff-prisoner relationships;
- prisoners had little faith in formal mechanisms for resolving their concerns and some worried that if they made a complaint, they would be returned to closed conditions; and
- diversity issues needed addressing: no black and minority ethnic prisoners, who comprised one-third of the population, were engaged in paid work outside the prison in the month prior to the inspection.

Prisoners who had served long sentences needed practical support – such as help with finding housing and a job - to help them prepare for the world outside prison and lead law-abiding lives. Inspectors were concerned that:

- prisoners' perceptions about resettlement were significantly worse than at other open prisons;
- prisoners were frustrated by poor communication about what was available and a lack of staff resources in the offender management unit which administered these processes; and
- short-term prisoners were also frustrated at the lack of resettlement support but they, unlike longer-term prisoners, had little investment in the regime.

Nick Hardwick said:

“Open prisons have a crucial role in preparing low risk, particularly long-term prisoners for life back in the community. They do this by testing prisoners in low security conditions and gradually reintroducing them into society. Most open prisons perform this role effectively. Unfortunately, this was not the case at Ford. Instead, poor relationships were undermining the development of a strong positive culture, essential to responsible living and dynamic security.

“Ford’s resettlement and offender management are critical weaknesses for a prison that should be focused squarely on preparing prisoners for a return to the community. The practical resettlement needs of individual prisoners should shape the entire approach of this establishment, something that we have now had to repeat at too many inspections. There have been some recent improvements but this time there must be sustained progress supported at every level.”

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

"I am grateful to the Chief Inspector for this report which reflects both the strengths and weaknesses at Ford. We have put additional support in place to strengthen the management of the prison and we will use the recommendations in the report to improve the performance of the establishment.

"I am pleased the good work done by the prison on safety, suicide and self harm, healthcare, and improved security with fewer absconds, has been acknowledged."

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 31 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 announced inspection was carried out from 29 November–3 December 2010.
4. HMP Ford is a category D training establishment for adult males.
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.