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HMYOI ROCHESTER – NOT ENOUGH PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY

Prisoners in Rochester spent too much time in their cells and needed to engage more in work and other purposeful activity, said Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an announced inspection of the young offender institution.

HMYOI Rochester holds young men aged 18 to 21 and comprises two distinct parts – a largely Victorian facility and a modern site. The large area occupied by the prison and the challenging behaviour of some of the young men it held made it a difficult prison to run. The prison had taken initiatives to minimise violence and had used exclusions from activity, restrictions on movement, and the opportunities created by the large split site to keep prisoners a threat to (or at risk from) others apart. This inevitably disrupted the prison's more positive objectives and was a fine balance to make.

Inspectors were concerned to find that:

- too many prisoners were locked in their cells during the day, and some could have as little as one hour a day out of their cell;
- the activities on offer were often undemanding, with repetitive and mundane work, low achievement in many education courses and poor punctuality and attendance;

- the impact of security measures was in some cases too restrictive and risk averse, such as the use of release on temporary licence to take part in community placements;
- use of force by staff was high, but governance of this was weak; and
- although prisoners at risk of suicide or self-harm were generally well cared for, some had been held in segregation or in a special cell, which were completely unsuitable environments.

However, inspectors were pleased to find that:

- despite a rise in violent incidents, most prisoners said they felt safe in the prison and drug use was low;
- relationships between staff and prisoners were mostly good;
- the chaplaincy team was impressive and dynamic and work on diversity was good;
- health care was generally good; and
- resettlement was a strength, with a good accommodation service, and dedicated education, training and employment officers, though more prisoners should have been helped to prepare for release by being offered a work placement on licence in the community.

Nick Hardwick said:

“Rochester needs a greater sense of ambition for the young people it holds so that they are encouraged to benefit from work and education and greater use is made of the potential resettlement opportunities the prison provides. To do that it also needs to strike a better balance between the demands of security and the requirements of a positive regime.

“Of course the levels of actual and potential violence do need to be tackled. At the time of the inspection, consideration was being given to

holding a wider range of prisoners at Rochester and I understand this has now been agreed. This may create a less volatile population and the platform for a review of strategies to reduce violence, and so open up more positive opportunities for the prisoners Rochester holds."

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

"I am pleased that the Chief Inspector found that most of Rochester's population felt safe there and that drug use was low. His comments on healthcare and staff-prisoner relations and diversity are also welcome.

"The Governor and staff are working hard to minimise violence and use of force, and improve purposeful activity and services for vulnerable prisoners.

"All these actions, combined with already effective resettlement, will reduce the likelihood of reoffending and thereby protect the public."

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 14 June 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 14-18 February 2011.
4. HMYOI Rochester is a young offender institution for sentenced young men aged 18 to 21.
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.