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HMP BRIXTON – IMPROVEMENTS MADE, DESPITE OVERCROWDING

HMP Brixton had improved, despite facing the challenges of an overcrowded inner London jail, said Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an unannounced inspection of the local prison.

Brixton prison is Victorian, on a small site and receives about 90 new prisoners each week. Its certified normal capacity is just over 500 prisoners. At the time of this inspection, it was holding between 725 and 775 prisoners. Half of those held were unsentenced and most had been in the prison for less than three months. Two out of the five prisoners surveyed by inspectors said they had a drug problem when they came into the prison – many more than in comparable prisons.

Inspectors were pleased to find that:

- there had been no self-inflicted deaths for three years, compared with seven in the two years before the last inspection, which was a significant improvement;
- illicit drug use, though still too high, had reduced;
- the use of a pest controller meant the prison's vermin problem was under control;
- the education and workshops offered were often very good, although the amount of activity was not enough for the population; and

- there was good work to address offending behaviour and give prisoners the practical assistance they needed when they left prison, with energetic use of local resources.

Inspectors were concerned, however, to find that:

- overcrowding meant that prisoners shared small cells that were dirty, often with unscreened toilets, and in a poor state of repair;
- many prisoners were locked up for 21 hours a day;
- although many staff-prisoner relationships were good, many prisoners felt unsafe, and felt that staff could not always be relied on to resolve problems;
- governance and record keeping around discipline and security was poor; and
- inpatient mental health care was a disturbing sight, with some young men waiting up to six months for a place in a secure mental hospital, and some cells in a very poor state of repair.

Nick Hardwick said:

“Prison capacity is not simply a question of how many prisoners can be squeezed into the beds available. Brixton has simply too many prisoners and is not a suitable site for a busy local prison. As my predecessors have urged before, the purpose and function of Brixton prison should be reviewed and redefined, and the resources required to deliver that purpose and function must be provided.”

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

"I'm pleased that the Chief Inspector has recognised the improvements which have taken place at Brixton since the last inspection. Good quality education and work, and tackling offending behaviour, all reduce the likelihood of re-offending and help to protect the public.

"The challenges presented by Brixton's physical environment are well-documented, but staff work hard to provide as extensive a regime as possible. I acknowledge the Chief Inspector's point about the need to provide clarity about the purpose and function and will look to do this."

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 18 May 2011 at www.justice.gov.uk/inspection/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 1-10 December 2010.
4. HMP Brixton is a local prison holding adult males, whether on remand, convicted or sentenced, which serves the courts of south London.
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.