



12 September 2011

020 7035 2123

NOT FOR PUBLICATION BEFORE 00.01, TUESDAY, 13 SEPTEMBER 2011

HMP BELMARSH – SOME IMPROVEMENTS, BUT MORE TO DO

Belmarsh, a large and complex prison, had seen a number of areas of improvement, said Nick Hardwick, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of a full unannounced inspection of the south London jail.

HMP Belmarsh provides a local prison function for ordinary prisoners from south-east London courts, together with very secure conditions for some of the most high-risk prisoners in the system. Inspectors were pleased to find that:

- early days in custody were generally well managed and those at risk of self-harm were well cared for;
- the prison had taken important steps to tackle the significant number of violent incidents;
- there was a reasonable amount of vocational training available, and education was reasonable;
- there had been progress in resettlement work and offender management and public protection work was good; and
- the chaplaincy provided an excellent service, and work with foreign national prisoners was good.

However, inspectors were concerned to find that:

- while security was more proportionate than previously, there were still examples of it unnecessarily limiting the regime of lower-risk prisoners; however, the small number of prisoners held in the highest security conditions faced restrictions commensurate with the risks they posed, although we noted some lax supervision;
- use of force was high and inspectors were not assured it was always used as a last resort;
- staff-prisoner relations varied greatly between units and the personal officer scheme was generally ineffective; and
- prisoners spent too long locked in their cells and there were activity spaces for only around half of the population.

Following the disturbances in English cities in August 2011, the Inspectorate revisited the prison to assess the impact of any increased in admissions. HMP Belmarsh was not designated to receive prisoners from the newly convened 24-hour London courts, but had received new prisoners decanted from other London prisons. The visit focused on a small number of areas likely to be most affected by any change to the population and found these admissions had had only a minor impact. The Inspectorate will revisit other prisons it has recently inspected over the coming weeks.

Nick Hardwick said:

“Belmarsh is among the most complex prisons in England and Wales, juxtaposing the management of a transient population of ordinary, lower-risk prisoners presenting all the needs faced by any local prison, with some of the most high-risk and high-profile prisoners in the system. Achieving a balance in working with the very different risks and needs is a huge challenge, with which the prison continues to struggle. Nevertheless, while setting out a range of issues on which further work is needed, we also identify a number of commendable improvements, particularly in safety, purposeful activity and resettlement.”

Michael Spurr, Chief Executive of the National Offender Management Service, said:

"Belmarsh is a complex prison that plays a critical role in the prison estate. This report finds that overall the prison is operating effectively and this is a credit to the Governor and staff. I am particularly pleased that the Chief Inspector records that those at risk of self-harm are well cared for and that the number of violent incidents has reduced.

"Maintaining the right balance between security, which is essential in a High Security prison, and providing effective rehabilitative opportunities is challenging. The Governor and his team are committed to providing positive opportunities for prisoners while maintaining security and I am confident that the prison can continue to make progress and improve delivery to support rehabilitation and resettlement."

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

1. A copy of the report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 13 September 2011 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 full unannounced inspection was carried out from 6-15 April 2011.
4. HMP Belmarsh is a local prison with a high security unit.
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.