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020 3334 3527

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HMP GARTH: BUDGET CUTS COULD HIT WELL-RUN PRISON

HMP Garth was one of the most effective and well-run adult prisons of its type but budget cuts had put some key areas of excellence under severe threat, said Dame Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an unannounced full inspection into the Category B training prison in Lancashire.

Garth holds a challenging population of men who have committed serious and violent offences and, since the last inspection, has also had a six-fold increase in the number of younger and potentially more volatile prisoners serving indeterminate sentences for public protection (IPP). Inspectors therefore commended what staff and managers had achieved, particularly the impressive levels of safety, decency and purposeful activity, together with a strong emphasis on resettlement. However, they also expressed concern that these achievements were being put at risk by the cumulative effect of budget cuts

Inspectors found:

- A safe environment – although incidents of violence and self-harm had increased, along with the change in population and the greater apparent availability of drugs.
- Effective violence reduction and suicide prevention strategies, backed up by good dynamic security, but with scope for further improvements.
- An excellent range of purposeful activity, which contributed to the maintenance of a safe environment.
- Good relationships between staff and prisoners, which also contributed to safety and decency at Garth.
- Good management of race and foreign national issues, although disability work remained underdeveloped.
- Effective collaboration between different departments to meet the needs of individual prisoners.

- Effective offender management, with up-to-date assessments and extremely good public protection work, but requiring better support from external offender managers.
- Problems in moving prisoners on to appropriate prisons, in particular problems in moving on IPPs who became frustrated as a result.
- Good reintegration services and an excellent drug therapeutic community.

Anne Owers said:

“This is, self-evidently, a good report on a high-performing prison. But there is a sting in its tail. Some of the areas of excellence that we report on were under severe threat, due to the budget cuts the prison was required to make, and the associated exercise in benchmarking standard costs for prison functions.

“The governor had been told that she was unlikely to be able to afford to maintain current levels of activity, while the benchmarking exercise proposed stripping out the factors that made for excellent, as opposed to merely acceptable, offender management and public protection work. Added to that, some of the contracted work was being affected by the current economic downturn, and the log-jam of IPP prisoners, stuck in a place from which they could not achieve parole, had not been broken, but simply transferred from local prisons to Garth.

“These are serious and potentially risky developments, not only for Garth but for the prison system as a whole. The pressures and expectations within the prison system remain high. But at the same time, there is evidence of a regression to the mean: where excellence may be penalised, not rewarded or aimed for. That is the first time that message has been sent out in my eight years as Chief Inspector, and it has an ominous ring for prisoners, good prison managers and staff, and the prison system as a whole.”

Phil Wheatley, Director General of the National Offender Management Service, said:

"This is an excellent report of which the Governor and staff should be proud. I am pleased that the Chief Inspector has commended Garth as an effective and well run prison, especially in light of the challenging population it holds.

“Given the need to make best use of our resources it is right to look critically at service delivery in all prison establishments. This will enable us to determine the right balance of resources and regime delivery to maximise the contribution that NOMS can make to reducing re-offending and protecting the public.”

Notes for Editors

1. The full report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 26 August 2009 at <http://inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons>.
2. The announced inspection of the HMP Garth was carried out 30 March – 3 April 2009.

3. The operational capacity at HMP Garth at the time of the inspection was 847.
4. The last full inspection of HMP Garth took place in February 2004.
5. Anne Owers, Chief Inspector, is available for interview. If you would like to speak to her please contact Tom Hodson in the Press Office on 0203 334 3527.