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PRISON SYSTEM UNDER PRESSURE - LESSONS MUST BE LEARNT, WARNS CHIEF INSPECTOR

After a year in which prisons held a record number of prisoners, the prison system remains under pressure, and important lessons must be learnt if prisons are to be safe and effective, said the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Dame Anne Owers, in her annual report published today (Thursday 29 January).

Despite 'sustained and chronic' pressure, the report recognises progress over the past year. Overall, the Inspectorate's assessments of prisons inspected last year were more positive than those of prisons inspected the previous year, particularly in resettlement work. The number of self-inflicted deaths also decreased last year.

Anne Owers said:

'It is a credit to those running and working in prisons that, in spite of the pressure, many were able to sustain or even improve performance, and respond to Inspectorate recommendations and best practice criteria.

'There is, however, little room for complacency. Only a quarter of adult male prisons were performing positively against all four of our tests and these were inspections carried out before the cuts to the core day. This is not a prison system able to perform at optimum level. At most, this year's outcomes give a breathing space, and an opportunity to learn lessons that can prevent prisons reaching a tipping point and sliding backwards.'

She identifies a number of warning signs, and new concerns

- Growing concerns about safety, particularly in dispersal prisons and young offender institutions, and rates of self-harm among women
- Unsuitable, cramped or unhygienic accommodation in some prisons
- Difficulties in complying with duties under the Disability Discrimination Act, and other equality duties
- Low activity levels in too many training prisons
- The growing problem of alcohol misuse and the limited investment in this in prisons or the community
- The potential effect of the recession on prisoners' employment and resettlement prospects

She identifies key lessons for government:

- To avoid ill-considered and unresourced legislation of the kind that produced the indeterminate sentence for public protections
- To invest in alternatives to prison for those who do not need to be, and should not be, there – more work is needed to provide for those with mental health problems, and to implement the Corston review on women
- To develop a well-grounded, clearly articulated, and properly resourced strategy for the medium and long term health of both prisons and probation that builds on progress made since the 1980s and 1990s in making prisons safer, more secure, and more likely to rehabilitate those within them.
- To take note of evidence that shows that small prisons perform better than large ones and that resettlement is best carried out in prisons close to home – shown both in the annual report and in an in-depth research study published today on the Inspectorate's website.

Anne Owers said:

“Inspections last year showed that large prisons were more likely to be unsafe and to rely on force. In addition, in-depth research found that size was the most influential factor in how prisons performed against the tests of safety and respect, and overall. Prisons holding 400 or fewer prisoners were significantly more likely to perform well in these tests than larger prisons holding more than 800 prisoners. Smaller prisons were four times more likely to perform well overall than large prisons holding more than 800 prisoners, when the age of the prison was controlled for. Distance from home was the key variable in performance against resettlement.

“These findings should underpin planning for the future of the prison estate. They reinforce concerns about Titan prisons, and support the approach taken in the Corston report, for smaller custodial settings where needed.”

The report also refers to the inspection of immigration detention and the new inspection programme on police custody

- Immigration removal centres were, on the whole, less safe and respectful than those inspected last year, though activity and welfare support had improved. The detention of children remains a major concern and is ripe for review
- Inspections of police custody, jointly with the Inspectorate of Constabulary, have confirmed much good practice, but also revealed some deficiencies.

Anne Owers said:

“That is the reason why inspection is crucial. There is no substitute for being there or for the need to keep under regular and unpredictable review the institutions that have such a profound and direct effect on people's lives.”

“In recent years, there has too readily been an assumption that inspection and regulation are always burdensome and sometimes unnecessary; that self-regulation and light-touch inspection are preferable to rolling programmes and specialist, detailed, on site investigation. Events this year, in fields as far apart as finance and social services, have seriously called into question these assumptions.”

Notes for Editors

1. This annual report describes the findings of inspectorate reports published between September 2007 and August 2008. It includes sections on
 - immigration detention
 - women prisoners
 - indeterminate-sentenced prisoners
 - juveniles
 - foreign nationals
 - race and diversity
 - healthcare, including mental health

Reports can be found at: www.inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons

2. Alongside the annual report, HMIP have also published a review: *The prison characteristics that predict prisons being assessed as performing 'well'*. To view the review in full visit: www.inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons
3. Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, is available for interview. If you would like to speak to her please contact Rachael Collins in the Press Office on 020 3334 3540.