



## **PRESS RELEASE**

# **Inspectors say: ‘New women’s prison still needed for Northern Ireland’**

**Embargoed until 11:00 on Thursday 12 June**

A new inspection of Ash House, Northern Ireland’s women’s prison by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons (HMCIP) and Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI), has stated that until a separate, dedicated women’s facility is established, the needs of female prisoners are unlikely to ever be properly met.

“Staff at Ash House have made commendable efforts to mitigate the inappropriate location of a women’s prison within the male young offenders centre at Hydebank Wood,” said Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in England and Wales and Kit Chivers, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland.

“This report has identified a number of improvements since our last unannounced inspection was carried out in 2004. However, the inadequacies of the current arrangement remain all too apparent,” said the Chief Inspectors.

“For example, the diet provided is geared towards the needs of young male prisoners, and despite the best efforts of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), it is simply not practical to properly deliver aspects of the system such as healthcare, transport, visits and work on a single site that accommodates both male and female prisoners,” they said.

“We therefore again urge the NIPS to establish a separate facility to meet the specific needs of women prisoners as quickly as possible,” stated the Chief Inspectors.

Inspectors who scrutinised the facility last autumn found that Ash House provided too few learning and skills opportunities for female prisoners and that education provision was not geared to the needs of the women held in the self-contained unit.

“Inspectors found there was no strategic approach to the delivery of education and training for women, and activities were not co-ordinated. They also found that women with the greatest educational deficits did not have their needs met.

“Most jobs undertaken by female prisoners were found to be domestic tasks that did not fill much time or provide valuable skills training,” said the Chief Inspectors.

Inspectors were pleased to find that relationships between staff and female prisoners in Ash House had improved since their previous visit, though this progress should be further enhanced by a personal officer scheme to provide support and underpin resettlement work.

Resettlement work had a relatively low priority within the facility. Inspectors found there was no resettlement team and cuts in resources had left committed staff demoralised with most resettlement work being undertaken by partner agencies rather than by prison officers.

HMCIP and CJI have recommended that a resettlement team should be established at Ash House along similar lines to teams that exist at Maghaberry and Magilligan Prisons in order to address this issue.

The inspection report recognised that improvements had been made in the way care was provided to vulnerable prisoners who were at risk of self harm.

“The rate of self harm among women at Ash House has decreased from our last inspection. While there have been no deaths since women prisoners were moved from the previous women’s prison facility Mourne House,” the Chief Inspectors said “a specific self harm and suicide policy for women still needs to be developed.”

Inspectors have recommended that the healthcare arrangements should be reviewed as current provision was found not to meet the needs of the female prisoners. It is expected this situation will improve with the recent transfer of responsibility for prisoners’ healthcare to the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

In conclusion Ms Owers and Mr Chivers said: “Inspectors welcome the commitment given by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to incorporate the recommendations of this inspection report into the current programme of work taking forward the gender specific issues of Ash House.”

## **ENDS**

### **Notes for editors**

- This inspection was carried out by HMCIP and CJI assisted by Inspectors from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) between 29 October – 2 November 2007.
- The report contains 154 recommendations for improvement.
- Ash House is a self-contained unit housing female prisoners within Hydebank Wood Young Offender Centre.
- The facility opened in June 2004 following a major refurbishment programme. Further refurbishment was completed in April 2007.
- At the time of the inspection 46 female prisoners were accommodated in Ash House. The unit has an operational capacity of 71 prisoners.

### **Notes End**

***For further information or to arrange an interview with Kit Chivers, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland, please contact Meloney McVeigh on 028 90 258013 or 079666 81324.***