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HMP ASKHAM GRANGE – AN OUTSTANDING PRISON, BUT CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE

Askham Grange has always had positive inspection reports, but on this occasion its performance can best be described as outstanding, said Dame Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an announced inspection of the women's open prison near York.

It is the only adult prison which inspectors have assessed as performing well across all their four tests of safety, respect, purposeful activity and resettlement. However, next month it is to lose its own separate Governor, and will become part of a cluster, managed from New Hall women's prison near Wakefield.

Inspectors found:

- Staff and managers were committed to working positively and innovatively with each individual woman prisoner. Inspectors spoke to women who said that their stay at Askham had given them confidence and self-esteem that they had previously lacked.
- There was little evidence of bullying, in spite of the fact that women lived in cramped dormitories, and incidents of self-harm were rare, even among women who had self-harmed previously in other prisons.
- Relationships between women, and between women prisoners and staff, were supportive: 97% of prisoners surveyed said that they had a staff member they could turn to for support. Diversity issues needed more attention.
- While healthcare provision was good, it needed to be better integrated into the prison as a whole; it was disappointing that women found that some nurses lacked the positive approach of the rest of the establishment.
- There were sufficient activities for all women, and the education provision was assessed as of outstanding quality. Most women were enthusiastic about the value of their participation in education and training, and many were keen to continue it outside.
- It was commendable that a number of programmes designed to improve personal and social skills and raise self-esteem were provided. Most work within the prison led to vocational qualifications, and over 40 women were able to work out in the community, in paid or voluntary work.

- All areas of resettlement were well covered, though the strategy did not identify the needs of specific groups of prisoners, such as young adults and women reaching the end of life sentences. Sentence planning was effective, as was reintegration planning.

Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, said:

“Open prisons, despite their relatively compliant population, are not always positive and supportive environments: too often they are merely waiting rooms on the way to release. Askham Grange was far from that: it provided a holistic and individualised approach to managing the transition from custody back to the community.

“This is a credit to its staff and managers. It is also a message to the prison system about the kind of establishment and the kind of approach that most benefit prisoners, particularly women prisoners.

”It is therefore of considerable concern that, due to the need to make efficiency cuts, Askham Grange is now about to lose its own separate Governor, and will be ‘clustered’ with New Hall women’s local prison, 30 miles away, which is itself dealing with a mixed and very challenging population. That risks losing the specialised focus and direction that has made Askham the best adult prison I have inspected.”

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

"This is an excellent report and the Governor and staff should be proud of their work. The Chief Inspector rightly recognises the positive and supportive environment created at Askham Grange: this has given women the confidence and self-esteem they had previously lacked to help with their resettlement back into the community after release.

“The clustering of Askham Grange and New Hall provides a good opportunity to improve the link between closed and open prisons and at the same time to reduce the cost of the management overheads so resources can be focussed on providing the best possible care to prisoners.”

Notes for Editors

1. A copy of the full report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 27 March 2009 at <http://inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons>
2. The announced full inspection of HMP Askham Grange was carried out from 29 September – 3 October 2008. The last full inspection of HMP Askham Grange took place in March 2004.
3. The operational capacity at HMP Askham Grange is 128.

4. Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, is available for interview. If you would like to speak to her please contact Tom Hodson in the Press Office on 0203 334 3527.