

## **BLAKENHURST - A SAFER PRISON, BUT NEED TO EMPOWER STAFF AND IMPROVE PRISONERS' LIVING CONDITIONS**

Staff and managers were working hard to make Blakenhurst prison safer, but staff needed to exert more positive control, and some prisoners' living conditions were entirely unacceptable, said Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing an inspection report today.

Anne Owers, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons said:

"At the time of our inspection in January 2001, HMP Blakenhurst was in a state of transition; in August 2001, the Prison Service had taken back direct management of the prison from the private contractor, UKDS.

"In general, we were impressed with the number of recommendations that had been completed in the 16 months since our last visit. We found that staff and managers at Blakenhurst were working hard to make the prison a safer place and were committed to the Prison Service's decency agenda.

"Our primary concern was that many staff did not appear to exert a controlling presence on the wings. When prisoners were unlocked, they moved about freely on their landings but, at times, staff were not as observant or challenging of behaviour as we would expect. Staff needed to be empowered and made more confident in their dealings with prisoners to be more ready to challenge inappropriate prisoner behaviour."

The report found that cells were dirty and squalid on some of the wings, with some of the living conditions for prisoners in their cells entirely unacceptable. The prison had still not provided toilet screens in shared cells, resulting in prisoners creating makeshift screens out of towels sellotaped to the end of bunk beds or sheets of newspaper or old black plastic bags. There were also still no shower screens in the communal showering areas or any privacy screens around the baths. Despite a recently introduced anti-bullying strategy, the Inspectorate was also concerned about the lack of plans for a programme to challenge the behaviour of bullies and offer support for victims. The report also recommended a more effective personal officer scheme and better assessment of the needs of foreign nationals.

The Inspectorate did, however, highlight examples of good practice:

- \* Education provision for prisoners was good, with about 200 prisoners able to attend education each day. There was a varied timetable and prisoners appeared keen and interested in their work.

- \* Blakenhurst had a broad-based and comprehensive resettlement strategy, providing a good basis for developing its resettlement agenda. Many of the aspects of the strategy were in need of further development, cohesion and co-ordination, but good contacts had been made with a range of external agencies, who were making an impact on the lives of prisoners.

- \* Positive work on race relations, led by the Governor.

\* There were high quality interventions on substance use, with a large voluntary testing unit on one of the house blocks. Acupuncture was also being used.

Concluding, Anne Owers said:

"Blakenhurst was a dynamic prison which was working towards becoming a healthy prison. The key to achieving this aim was to empower staff to work with prisoners in a positive and challenging way. This would impact upon respect (by improving cleanliness), safety (through reducing bullying and enhancing control), and resettlement (by improving the role of personal officers in meeting the prison's resettlement objectives).

"Management and staff were committed to the Prison Service's decency agenda and to positive outcomes for prisoners. There remains some way to go for Blakenhurst to meet the definition of a healthy prison but, following this short unannounced inspection, we left confident that achieving that end was entirely feasible by the time of our next full inspection."

Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, said:

"I welcome the Inspector's report on HMP Blakenhurst, and am pleased that the commitment of staff to making the prison a safe and decent environment is recognised, along with the excellent resettlement work being undertaken there.

"I am confident that, since the prison's transition from private contractor to Prison Service management, staff confidence in challenging unacceptable prisoner behaviour has greatly increased, and with the continuing programme of development to improve facilities, including privacy screens in cells, Blakenhurst is working successfully towards fulfilling the definition of a healthy establishment."

#### NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The unannounced follow-up inspection of HMP Blakenhurst was carried out between 13 and 15 May 2002.
2. HMP Blakenhurst is a local prison serving a number of crown and magistrates courts in the Midlands.
3. HM Prison Inspectorate reports and releases are available at [www.homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk/hmipris/hmipris](http://www.homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk/hmipris/hmipris)