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COLNBROOK IRC – STRUGGLING TO COPE

Colnbrook immigration removal centre (IRC) had made little improvement since its last inspection, and was struggling to cope, said Dame Anne Owers, Chief inspector of Prisons, publishing a report on the inspection of the centre at Heathrow airport.

The centre, run by Serco, holds male detainees in the most secure facility in the immigration detention estate. The adjoining short-term holding facility (STHF) holds both men and women.

Safety at the centre continued to be a significant concern, with a challenging and vulnerable population and a drugs problem.

Inspectors found:

- The unit for vulnerable detainees was an oppressive and degrading environment. There was no privacy for detainees, no policy or assessment process or evidence of care planning.
- Drugs posed a serious security issue, but there was no drugs strategy, although detoxification and treatment services had improved.
- The STHF had a restricted regime and a confused role. Despite previous inspectorate recommendations, it continued to hold women in wholly inappropriate conditions, some of them extremely distressed, or co-located with male ex-prisoners. The UK Border Agency (UKBA) needs urgently to find suitable alternative accommodation for women.
- Arrangements for the support of potentially suicidal or self-harming detainees were inadequate, with poor documentation, and some inappropriate separation of vulnerable detainees. Use of force had increased and was not always well managed.
- Accommodation was of a good standard, but poor ventilation remained a problem.
- Staff generally tried hard to manage detainees with patience and good humour, though there was evidence of some inappropriate behaviour, turnover remained high and a mentoring scheme had only just been put in place.

- There was much more paid work than at the last inspection, although the range of education and work was limited.
- The welfare team provided a much appreciated service, although the staff lacked training. Access to the outside world was reasonable.

Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, said:

“Colnbrook manages the most challenging and vulnerable detainees in the immigration estate. The difficulties facing staff are compounded by the increasing length of stay of many detainees and the frustration that ensues. On top of this, the centre is required to hold women in the wholly inappropriate setting of its short-term holding facility.

“Overall, we found little improvement at Colnbrook since our last visit. Indeed, there was evidence of the centre taking inappropriate steps to manage some of the challenges it faces; in particular, there were examples of separation being misused and the vulnerable persons unit was not fit for purpose.

“Staff and managers readily admitted that Colnbrook was struggling to cope. It is to be hoped that the opening of new accommodation elsewhere in the estate will relieve some of the excessive pressure under which the centre now operates.”

Notes for Editors

1. A copy of the full report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 2 June 2009 at <http://inspectrates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprison>
2. The short unannounced follow-up unannounced inspection of Colnbrook was carried out from 17–21 November 2008. The last inspection was an unannounced full follow-up inspection in June 2007.
3. The operational capacity of Colnbrook is 308 in the IRC and 80 in the STHF.
4. The centre opened on 26 August 2004 and provides 308 spaces in the long-term facility for adult male detainees. This includes four large detainee accommodation units, a vulnerable persons unit and an enhanced unit. Within the centre there is a separate short-term holding facility, which consists of 40 twin rooms to accommodate 80 detainees.
5. 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.