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BORDER AND IMMIGRATION AGENCY'S FAILINGS JEOPARDISE SAFETY

Dover Immigration Removal Centre was well-run, and its staff had coped well with a changed population, but the Border and Immigration Agency's failings threatened to undermine the safety and security of the centre, said Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of a full unannounced inspection of the centre.

Inspectors found that the proportion of ex-prisoners at Dover had risen from 5% to 66% and the average length of stay had more than doubled. Centre staff and managers were commended for nevertheless ensuring that the centre was operating reasonable safely and decently, and for making progress in activity and welfare support for detainees.

By contrast, the failings of the Border and Immigration Agency (BIA)'s Criminal Casework Directorate were causing frustration and anxiety to on-site staff and detainees and threatened to undermine safety and security. Their casework was described as 'characterised by delay, error and inefficiency'. Inspectors found

- A British citizen had been held for eight months, even after on-site staff had recognised his status and produced corroborative documents;
- Other detainees, desperate to return home, found their cases parked without action: on-site staff passed on the plea from one: 'Please help me. I cannot take much more';
- Some bail summaries, prepared for the courts by BIA caseworkers to contest detainees' applications for bail, were seriously inaccurate and misleading.

In relation to the rest of the centre, the report says that:

- There was good support for newly-arrived and vulnerable detainees, and most felt safe;
- Staff-detainee relationships were good, with 86% of detainees saying staff treated them well;
- Activities for detainees had improved. About 60% of detainees were engaged in activity each day, and this was set to increase;
- A welfare officer scheme for practical problems had begun, and there were excellent relationships with the volunteer visitors' group, which supported over 500 detainees during March;

- Security measures had been improved in line with the increased risk posed by the changed population. However, these were not overly oppressive;
- Healthcare required improvement, particularly in mental health, but was about to be transferred to the local Primary Care Trust.

Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, said:

“Our last inspection congratulated managers at Dover on the successful transition from a prison to an IRC, and the culture change that had involved. This inspection found that those positive changes had been retained, even with a more challenging and frustrated population.

Dover remained a well-run centre. But its continued security, and the safety of the detainees it held, were being considerably jeopardised by the continued failings of external immigration caseworkers, who were proving unable to progress cases effectively. At the same time, experienced on-site immigration officers were being replaced by less experienced port staff. These are matters that urgently need addressing, throughout the immigration detention estate, which now holds a substantial number of ex-prisoners.”

Notes to Editors

Operational Capacity of Dover IRC; 316.

Anne Owers is available for interview from ?