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HMP ERLESTOKE – FRAILTIES NEED ADDRESSING URGENTLY

HMP Erlestoke provides some of the best purposeful activity for prisoners in the training estate, yet needs to address problems like the presence of drugs, inadequate violence reduction and anti-bullying arrangements, said Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an announced inspection of the adult male training prison in Wiltshire.

On their previous visit, inspectors commended the quality of the prison's purposeful activity and resettlement, and this full announced inspection found some further improvements in these areas. Unfortunately, other aspects of the prison had deteriorated, particularly the prison's Wren unit, which held an unsafe mix of new arrivals and misbehaving prisoners.

They also discovered Erlestoke was also struggling with a serious drug problem and was even failing to provide basics, such as clean sheets and clothing.

Inspectors found:

- Provision for prisoners' first days in custody was poor - reception was cramped and new arrivals were placed in the Wren unit, which held prisoners moved from elsewhere in the prison for poor behaviour. This exposed the potentially vulnerable to the predatory, and many prisoners reported feeling unsafe.
- Concerns about deteriorating levels of safety were compounded by evidence of high levels of illegal drug use across the prison, with around a quarter of prisoners testing positive or refusing to be tested.
- Violence reduction and anti-bullying arrangements were weak and paperwork needed to be improved when recording use of force. Fortunately, suicide prevention procedures were generally good and, once off Wren, most prisoners reported feeling safe.
- Managers had failed to remedy persistent problems with the provision of clean sheets and clothing. Matters were so bad that during the inspection, there were no clean sheets at all in the prison which meant that prisoners were re-issued with their own dirty bedding. This was unacceptable.

- Staff-prisoner relationships were generally good, but personal officer work needed to be strengthened. Health services were beginning to improve.
- While the management of race issues was reasonable, wider diversity provision was underdeveloped. Although a dedicated foreign national unit had opened, it contained shared cells and many prisoners had refused to move. The role of the unit needed to be reviewed.
- The quantity and quality of purposeful activity at Erlestoke had continued to improve and was now among the best in the training estate. Time out of cell was good, although inspectors found the officially reported hours were inaccurate.
- A new resettlement strategy was being implemented by an enthusiastic team, and assessment arrangements were adequate. However case management was not yet in place for all “in-scope” prisoners and provision for life-sentenced prisoners was limited. Inspectors were disappointed to find that the resettlement unit had closed.

Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons said:

“Erlestoke benefits from some of the best purposeful activity provision in the training estate and a generally sound approach to resettlement.

“However, other aspects of the prison have deteriorated. Drugs are now a significant problem and violence reduction and anti-bullying arrangements need improvement. We were particularly concerned by Wren unit, which holds an unsafe mix of new arrivals and prisoners who had misbehaved elsewhere in the prison.

“The unit was in very poor condition and should be closed. We were also disappointed by the prison’s inability to deliver some of the basics. For example, there was not a single clean sheet available during the inspection.

“There is a lot to commend at Erlestoke, but the new governor needs urgently to address the frailties we have identified if it is to become a first class training prison.”

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

“I am pleased that the Chief Inspector has recognised that good resettlement work is taking place at Erlestoke. Purposeful activity, work and training all contribute to reducing the likelihood that prisoners will re-offend on their release.

“The inspection has identified real problems which the new governor had already begun to work on and as a result there have been improvements in a number of areas. The induction and first night centre is now in a more appropriate location.

“Robust search and testing procedures have had a significant impact on drug supply and demand, and prisoners have been encouraged to take

responsibility for making the prison cleaner and more hygienic. This is a credit to the hard work of the new governor and his staff.”

Notes for Editors

1. A copy of the full report can be found on the HM Inspectorate of Prisons website from 31 October 2008 at <http://inspectors.justice.gov.uk/hmiprison>
2. The announced inspection of HMP Erlestoke was carried out from 28 April to 2 May 2008.
3. The operational capacity at HMP Erlestoke at the time of the inspection was 470
4. The last inspection of HMP Erlestoke took place from 16-18 April 2006.
5. HMP Erlestoke is the only prison in Wiltshire. Built on the former grounds of Erlestoke Manor House, the site was taken over by the then Prison Commissioners in 1960 for use as a detention centre. In 1977 it became a young prisoners' centre, and was converted to its current role of category C adult male training prison in 1988.
6. Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, is available for interview. If you would like to speak to her please contact Nilima Fox in the Press Office on 0203 334 3525.