

DRAKE HALL – A PRISON IN NEED OF A ROLE

Drake Hall is described as a prison with a relaxed and positive environment, doing some excellent work, and with a high level of staff care and concern for the women there, in a report released today by Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons. However, the change in its status and population has led to confusion about its role and purpose, and created a potentially unsafe environment.

Since the last inspection, Drake Hall, which houses female adults and young offenders, had changed from an 'open' to a 'semi-open' prison. There was little physical security, or permanent staff supervision. However, there were many more vulnerable, difficult and short-sentenced women, including a sudden and large number of foreign nationals. This had consequences for safety and positive work.

Anne Owers said:

“It is to the credit of managers and staff that overall stability and safety had been preserved, in the face of much change (sometimes with little warning) and considerable uncertainty about the prison’s role and future.

“However, the fact that staff were not routinely physically present on the units, where there was open association, clearly had implications for safety. The living accommodation, and current staff deployment, were intrinsically unsafe for any but the most compliant and trustworthy women. Only half the women in our survey said they felt safe, compared to an average of two-thirds in similar prisons. Many aspects of the prison’s life suffered from the absence of opportunities for staff to interact informally, regularly and positively with prisoners. And the needs of foreign national prisoners, currently a third of the population, were not adequately met.”

The report commends:

- the development of healthcare;
- the many opportunities for association between the women;
- a comprehensive suicide and self-harm policy;
- an excellent and enthusiastic race relations officer;
- the opportunities for all women to access work or education; and
- the high quality resettlement and drug rehabilitation units.

However, it points to the need for:

- much greater focus on the needs of foreign nationals;
- more proactive reception and induction procedures;
- better mechanisms for dealing with requests and problems;
- more varied resettlement and work opportunities;
- improved personal officer work.

Concluding, Anne Owers said:

“Drake Hall needs to be provided with a clear and secure sense of its role and future, building on the relaxed and positive attitude that has been created. It needs to be supported by the whole of the Prison Service, in relation to the kinds of women who are sent there, and the resources that are available to provide skills training and resettlement for them.”

Commenting on the report, Phil Wheatley, Director General of the Prison Service said:

“The Chief Inspector has rightly highlighted the relaxed and positive atmosphere at HMP Drake Hall. Her praise for the high level of care demonstrated by staff is also well deserved.

“Because of the population pressures in the female estate we have had to maximise our use of places in all the women’s prisons. But all prisoners sent to Drake Hall will have been subject to standard allocation procedures and only those found suitable for semi-open conditions will have been sent there.

“Arrangements are now in place to meet the specific needs of foreign national prisoners and all staff will be trained in diversity issues.”

NOTE TO EDITORS:

1. The full announced inspection of HMP Drake Hall was carried out between 18 - 22 November 2002.
2. HMP Drake Hall is semi-open establishment in Staffordshire for female sentenced adults and young offenders.
3. HM Prison Inspectorate reports are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>