

PENTONVILLE - UNACCEPTABLE STANDARDS OF DECENCY AND ACTIVITY

A combination of overcrowding and staff shortages were creating considerable difficulties at Pentonville, this meant that the prison was failing to provide basic standards of decency, said Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons today, publishing her unannounced follow-up inspection report.

Anne Owers said:

“We fully recognise the difficulties that the prison was facing at the time of the inspection. To a great extent, they reflect endemic problems in the prison system, particularly in the south, as a consequence of the rising number of prisoners and the difficulties in staff recruitment. However, it is not acceptable to hold prisoners in conditions that fall so far short of standards of decency and activity.

“The prison hoped and expected that the arrival of additional staff would make a significant difference to the regime. However, we suspected that there were underlying issues of staff deployment, in combination with prison overpopulation, that will make it difficult to remedy the substantial deficits we found.”

The report found that in most respects, Pentonville was unable to meet the tests of a ‘healthy prison’. It found that:

- Prisoners who were vulnerable or at risk were not properly identified.
- The prison was not carrying out cell sharing risk assessments and the reception, first night and induction procedures needed improvement, as did the monitoring of those at risk of self-harm.
- There was an inability to provide prisoners’ basic requirements: adequate access to showers, clean clothes and telephones.
- Out of cell activities were unpredictable and unacceptably low: the education and work places were under-utilised and education provision itself was inadequate, with access for only 20 per cent of prisoners.

However, the report notes that some areas of work were encouraging, notably healthcare, offending behaviour programmes and work with those withdrawing from drugs, with some improvements since the last inspection. The proportion of black and minority ethnic staff was significantly higher than in other prisons. The report also commended the links being established with community based agencies.

Concluding, Anne Owers said:

“We suggest that, with the new staff in place, the Governor and Area Manager together should review the regime and activities and

realistically assess what the prison can provide. If that analysis identifies that there cannot be a decent regime unless there are fewer prisoners, or more staff, that message needs to be sent clearly to the Prison Service, Ministers and the public.”

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

“The problems facing HMP Pentonville at the time of this inspection in September 2002 have been acknowledged by the Chief Inspector. However, Pentonville’s regime over the past six months has consistently met its targets and has exceeded its targets on purposeful activity and education. The prison has completed the highest number of offending behaviour accreditations of any prison and prisoners now have daily access to showers.

“It was unfortunate that four days before the inspection team arrived, the prison had to deal with a series of serious acts of indiscipline which had required the temporary shutdown of the normal regime, whilst the situation was stabilised.

“Ironically the month after the inspection team left Pentonville, 15 officers from the London-wide recruitment campaign started work at the prison, which has now been fully staffed since January 2003.

“In my view Pentonville today is a safe and decent prison coping professionally and compassionately with the huge numbers of prisoners passing through the gates every day.”

Note to editors:

1. The full unannounced follow-up inspection of HMP Pentonville was carried out between 2 - 4 November 2002.
2. HMP Pentonville is a local prison whose primary function is to serve the courts of North London. The prison holds prisoners for all Magistrates’ Courts and Crown Courts in that area. It also lodges prisoners during Appeal Court hearings.
3. HM Prison Inspectorate reports are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmipris/hmipris.htm>