

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HOURS ON WEDNESDAY 18 JUNE 2003

THE VERNE - A GOOD PRISON THAT NEEDS CLEARER STRATEGY FOR WORK, RESETTLEMENT AND FOREIGN NATIONALS

HMP The Verne is doing good work, within a safe environment, based on positive staff-prisoner relationships, but needs to develop strategies for work, resettlement and foreign nationals, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, said today as she published the report of an announced inspection.

Anne Owers said;

“This inspection report identified much good work at The Verne. It is an establishment founded on dynamic security, characterised by good relationships at all levels: between staff, between staff and prisoners, and between prisoners. With this in place, it has been able to provide a safe environment, even with low levels of physical security and an increasingly heterogeneous prisoner mix.

“Nearly half of the prison's population were foreign nationals. It was to the credit of the prison that it had managed this rapidly growing and increasingly varied population safely and with respect. However, in spite of some good initiatives, there was no coherent management strategy for identifying or meeting their needs.

“As in many Category C prisons we have recently inspected, there were signs that prison overcrowding meant that the prison was receiving a more difficult and challenging population. Safety issues will need to be kept under continuous review.”

The report praises senior managers and staff for some excellent pockets of work, notably in suicide prevention and race relations. Purposeful activity and resettlement were also areas where there was evidence of good initiatives, but these needed to be actively managed and be part of an overall strategy, based on prisoners' needs.

The prison was unsure how many foreign nationals it held, had very limited interpretation and translation facilities, no formalised links with the Immigration and Nationality Department, and no mechanisms for meeting the specific work, training and resettlement needs of this disparate group.

Anne Owers said

Overall, this inspection shows a prison that had achieved a great deal in unpromising physical surroundings and in the face of a rapidly-changing population.

“To sustain this momentum, staff and prisoners need a clear strategic steer on the role of the establishment, particularly in relation to its de facto role as a main centre for foreign nationals. The sooner this role is confirmed, locally, regionally and nationally, the sooner the prison will be able to achieve its full potential.”

The Director General of the Prison Service, Phil Wheatley, said:

“Approximately half of the prisoners at The Verne are foreign nationals and they are totally integrated into the prison’s population and regime with their needs being individually addressed, but I recognise that there are issues that need a more coherent approach and we are addressing these.

“The Verne is a good prison and I am pleased that the Chief Inspector recognises this. This report is a great credit to the governor, Mike Cook, and his staff and I know this praise is well deserved.”

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The full-unannounced inspection of HM Prison The Verne was carried out between 3 and 7 February 2003.
2. Inspectorate reports and releases are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>.
3. For an electronic copy of the report, please email kate.williams@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk. or call 020 7 273 4513