

The enormous pressure of a rising prison population is affecting all prisons; and underlines the need for an independent and robust inspectorate, said Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing her annual report today.

The report records a year in which the Inspectorate published 80 inspection reports. They cover a time when the prison population rose by nine per cent. It highlights some important developments over the last year particularly in healthcare, education and drug work and follow-up inspections showed that many of the inspectorate's recommendations for improvement had been wholly or partially achieved. However, this good work was overshadowed by the ever-increasing population pressure.

Anne Owers said:

"All prisons are feeling the strain of the continued pressure on population, with an increasing risk not only of acute problems, such as deaths and disturbances, but of an insidious and chronic decline in expectations and achievements.

"Almost two people a week kill themselves in our prisons: and they are the most vulnerable people often new to prison, with mental health and substance use problems. One in four women in local prisons self-harm, some repeatedly.

"Although the best local prisons are working hard to sustain standards of humanity and respect, they are failing to deliver the opportunities that prisoners need to prevent re-offending. And training prisons, too, are feeling the strain only five of the 19 trainers inspected were able to provide adequate employment and training.

"Against this backdrop, it is vital to retain independent and robust inspection to monitor the effects of that pressure and to promote improvements."

Implications of overcrowding for safer custody

The report links the rise in prison population and prisoner movements to the continuing rise in suicides and self-harm, despite the commendable efforts of the Safer Custody Group:

- It commends developments to improve investigations into deaths in

custody;

- It calls for internal inquiries into serious incidents of self-harm, which almost result in death, to prevent recurrence and for the use of social workers, psychologists and others to assist prison staff in caring for the vulnerable;
- It criticises escort arrangements that result in long journeys with few breaks for some of the most vulnerable, like women and young people such as a 19-year-old new to prison who did not arrive in prison until seven and a half hours after his case finished; and
- The provision of effective drug detoxification, treatment and throughcare is critical. This work in some prisons is improving but there were serious deficits in others, such as Styal, where six women drug users died soon after admission.

Developments

- Follow-up inspections of 22 prisons showed they had been able to achieve, wholly or in part, 1,500 inspectorate recommendations for change;
- Healthcare in prison has shown a noticeable and much needed improvement as its commissioning and funding transfers from the Prison Service to the Department of Health. Increasingly, prisons are part of the local health economy, and this creates new responsibilities both for Primary Care Trusts and prison managers;
- The Department for Education and Skills is looking for similar equivalence in prison education and training;
- The combination of treatment and throughcare for drug users is rarely achieved, largely because of the absence of support and treatment after prison; and
- Following the Howard League judgement on children in custody and the joint inspectorates' work on children's safeguards, the report welcomes the fact that both local authorities and the Prison Service have begun to focus on the need to exercise properly their responsibility to protect children.

Overall, the report welcomes the increasing involvement of outside bodies – health, education and social services – in improving

conditions for prisoners. Anne Owers said:

“Prisoners should no longer be out of the sight and minds of those charged with providing healthcare, education, child protection or social inclusion. The governance of prisons will need to change to reflect the different accountability, funding and standards of the outside bodies providing services inside.”

Minority populations

The report also looks at three groups of prisoners – women, black and minority ethnic prisoners and foreign nationals - who have special needs within the Prison System. It identifies:

- The needs of women are acute and in danger of being neglected or disregarded – particularly as the Prison Service reintegrates the management of women’s prisons into area management. The report calls for a strong women’s policy group with real impact on operational practice. The Inspectorate will be continuing to promote the special needs of women and will expect the Prison Service to do the same;
- Some progress has been made on race, but this progress is patchy, with few prisons promoting good race relations. The report gives examples. It welcomes the Action Plan agreed with the Commission for Racial Equality but calls for much closer management attention to race issues at area and local level; and
- Foreign nationals, who constitute 12 per cent of prisoners, are not well served overall, with no Prison Service standard on their treatment. Thirty-two prisons inspected had no foreign nationals policy at all.

Immigration detainees

The Inspectorate published its first set of reports on immigration removal centres last year. Often, they showed the ‘inspection gap’ between what was supposed to happen and what did:

- The reports revealed a general sense of insecurity among detainees, heightened by the lack of information about their cases and the future; and
- They recommended that the detention of children should be exceptional, only for a matter of days, and that their welfare and

developmental needs should be independently assessed and monitored.

Concluding Anne Owers said:

“Inspectorates, like the prison system, are facing considerable change. Over the last year, our work has been scrutinised and reviewed closely as part of the review of criminal justice inspectorates. My concern is that the specific focus of this Inspectorate – the treatment and conditions of those the state holds in custody – should not be lost or blurred; and I am glad to have obtained assurances that key aspects of our work will be retained.

“It is clear that the Prisons and Probation Inspectorates must work together, and with others, to monitor and push forward the resettlement agenda. I welcome the holistic approach being taken by the Carter Review of Correctional Services, with the need to build confidence in and increase the use of effective and appropriate sanctions for those who do not need to be in prison, and for whom prison can do little.

“However, it is important to examine any proposed changes to ensure that they protect our existing work and the independence of the Inspectorate and provide a more effective, rather than simply a more expedient, structure.

“This annual report, and the inspection reports that underpin it, are evidence of the value and necessity of detailed, objective and robust inspection of places of detention. That is something this Inspectorate has always provided, and, with a prison population of 74,000, the need for it has never been greater.”

Notes for editors:

1. The HM Prison Inspectorate annual reports is available from 20 January 2004 at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>