

Fifteen months on from an extremely critical inspection report, Ashfield has undergone swift and fundamental change and bore comparison with some of the best performing young offender institutions, Anne Owers HM Chief Inspector of Prisons said today. However, she warns that these improvements were recent and still developing: they need to be sustained and supported and numbers capped.

HMYOI Ashfield is a private prison, run by Premier Custodial Group, holding juvenile and young adult men. It was taken back into Prison Service management for a short time in 2002, chiefly because of concerns about the safety of young people held there.

Anne Owers said:

“Ashfield had turned itself around in the previous fifteen months and was a safe environment where staff were in control and were confident enough to set and maintain boundaries. Many of our recommendations had formed the basis for this significant improvement, which reflects great credit on all those responsible for running and staffing Ashfield.

“This fundamental change had been achieved through greatly improved staff training, mentoring and monitoring, backed up with correct systems and procedures. There was much more activity, particularly for juveniles. But the task is not complete and these improvements need to be sustained and built on through continued support.”

The report praises many aspects of the regime, particularly for juveniles:

- Reception, first night and induction processes were amongst the best seen, and included examples of good practice that should be emulated across the juvenile estate;
- The great majority of children and young people had never, or rarely, felt unsafe; and
- Most young people, especially juveniles, were purposefully occupied for most of the day and the quality of education provision had improved significantly.

The report also notes areas which need to be addressed by those overseeing, resourcing and monitoring Ashfield, as well as those running the establishment:

- Staff will continue to need support, as most are young and relatively

inexperienced and, although staff turnover has improved, it is still high;

- Premier Custodial Services need to continue to provide the levels of resource and staffing needed for children and young people;
- Education provision, while improved, now needs to be extended to wider and higher levels and more young adults need to be engaged in education or skills training, rather than wing duties;
- The arbitrary movement of children and young people between establishments, often at short notice, causes anger and distress for a young person and undermines the work of staff; and
- The lack of access to specialist care and therapy, outside prison, for severely mentally ill young people needs to be addressed.

Anne Owers concluded:

“At the time of the inspection, Ashfield was holding only 200 juveniles (and 83 young adults). Any significant expansion of that number will, in our view, be fraught with risk. The dramatic improvements we describe need to be bedded in, not overwhelmed. Children in prison are a volatile and demanding population: Ashfield’s recent history shows how far such an establishment can deteriorate under undue pressure, as well as how quickly it can improve.

“Provided this report is not seen as a green light to fill Ashfield to capacity with under-18s, and so long as fully trained managers continue to support their relatively inexperienced staff, then the swift improvements we have seen can be sustained and built on.”

Commenting on the report, Trevor Williams from the Office of Contracted Prisons said:

“I am delighted that the considerable progress at Ashfield has been recognised in this report. The improvements made since the previous highly critical report have been significant and wide ranging. The challenge that now faces Ashfield is to sustain those achievements whilst increasing the capacity.”

Notes to Editors:

1. The full announced inspection of HMYOI Ashfield was carried out between 22 and 26 September 2003.
2. Ashfield is a young offender institution for male juveniles (aged between 15 and 17) and young adults (aged between 18 and 21),

serving courts stretching from Aberystwyth in West Wales, Cornwall in the South West of England over to Swindon and the surrounding areas. It holds sentenced juveniles, including those from Wales, Bristol and surrounding areas, as well as a busy remand juvenile population. The young adult wings accommodate a mix of remand, convicted, unsentenced and sentenced young men.

3. Prison inspectorate reports and press releases are available from <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>