

Staff at HMP Bedford were doing much commendable work in difficult circumstances said Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons today.

Publishing her [report on the announced inspection](#) of the small local prison, she said it compared well with others of its type.

Nevertheless, there was scope for improvement - particularly in getting prisoners out of their cells and into purposeful activity.

Anne Owers said:

"Bedford was a fundamentally safe and well controlled prison. It coped well with the incessant movement of prisoners, some of them very challenging. There were effective systems in place to minimise bullying and reduce the risk of suicide and self-harm, although the latter could be better co-ordinated. However, a number of new policies needed to be introduced or developed: on first night, induction, personal officers and foreign nationals.

"The real stumbling block to progress was the lack of purposeful activity: prisoners simply spent too long in their cells. Senior managers were aware of this deficit and we hope that the arrival of a new governor will give further impetus to expanding provision."

The report notes that Bedford provided a largely respectful environment with good, mutually respectful staff-prisoner relationships. Healthcare, which had been an area of concern in the past, had improved considerably.

Resettlement was also an area of some strength. Needs assessments took place on reception and these informed much of the prisoner's subsequent stay and considerable efforts were made to assist with reintegration. Public protection work, jointly with police and probation services, was particularly impressive.

A number of the weaknesses identified in the report were those found in almost all aging local prisons: having to double up prisoners in small cells designed for one and the need to refurbish deteriorating accommodation, particularly showers. Other weaknesses simply required better management: improvements in race relations work, requests and complaints, and an urgent need to improve the quality of the food.

Anne Owers concluded:

"Overall, Bedford compares well with many other local prisons and this is no small achievement. Local prisons take the brunt of the problems that have come with the massive increase in the prison population in recent years. They suffer the worst overcrowding, in some of the most dilapidated accommodation, and must try to deliver a diverse range of services to a rapidly changing body of prisoners, many significantly damaged or at risk. Accordingly, this inspection report must be viewed as a relatively positive one. Of course Bedford can improve - and it should - but it must also be applauded for the distance it has begun to travel towards becoming a healthy local prison."

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

"I visited HMP Bedford late last year and was impressed by the commitment and dedication of staff who have contributed to making the establishment one of the best local prisons in the country."

"Like other local prisons Bedford suffers from overcrowding, however it is in spite of these population pressures that the prison is offering prisoners a safe and decent environment in which to help resettle them into the community and reduce the risk of reoffending."

"Guy Baulf has recently taken over as governor and I am very pleased that he has already taken steps to increase work and education provision for prisoners. I know that under his leadership the prison will continue improving."

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The announced inspection of the HMP Bedford was carried out between 5 and 9 January 2004.
2. Bedford prison is a local prison holding adult male prisoners. The establishment serves the courts of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and North Hertfordshire.1. The full announced inspection of HM Prison Cookham Wood was carried out between 6 - 10 October 2003.

3 . Inspectorate reports and releases are available at
<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>