

Good relationships between staff and prisoners at Cookham Wood must be supported by effective systems and procedures if the prison is to meet the needs of its increasingly demanding population, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers said today.

Publishing the report of a full announced inspection of the closed women's training prison in Kent, Anne Owers, said:

"Like the rest of the women's estate, Cookham Wood has been under considerable pressure over the last year, with a changing and increasingly needy population.

"Staff displayed a high level of concern for, and knowledge about, the women in their care. However, neither staff nor prisoners were helped by the lack of effective systems and procedures to ensure that this was translated into actual outcomes."

The most serious problem identified was that the published regime bore little relationship to reality. Association out of cell was regularly and unpredictably cancelled and there had been only one weekday of full association in the last three months. As a result prisoners were unable to contact their families and children regularly. This was partly the result of chronic staffing shortages, but in the view of the Inspectorate it also contributed to them. Staff who cared about their prisoners found themselves unable to deliver what was promised. This, together with a more demanding population, increased stress and sickness levels. Instituting a deliverable and consistent regime would assist in breaking this vicious circle.

The report acknowledges that, to its credit, Cookham Wood had never had a suicide; indeed, the good interpersonal relationships witnessed undoubtedly meant that staff had saved prisoners' lives. However, the prison was now receiving much more vulnerable women, and the Inspectorate was not convinced that the systems in place were robust enough to protect their safety.

Observation panels were sometimes blocked, and there was concern about staffing levels and support in the segregation unit, which held some of the most damaged women.

The report also highlights concerns about the safeguards for young adult women held on the same wing as adults at Cookham Wood and recommends much closer supervision.

Anne Owers concluded:

"The quality of relationships at Cookham Wood is a model for much of the rest of the prison estate. It is a tribute to the outgoing Governor, and should not be lost. However, the changing nature of the population means that this must be supplemented by systems and procedures that can support staff and provide real outcomes for prisoners. That is a difficult task, given the pressures on the women's estate, but one that we hope will be assisted by the recommendations in this report."

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

"The Chief Inspector has rightly praised the strong personal relationships that exist between staff and prisoners at Cookham Wood.

"Whilst the increasingly vulnerable population combined with staff shortages inevitably have affected the regime offered at Cookham Wood, the prison is actively recruiting staff and an established shift pattern for staff has increased prisoner's access to the activities on offer.

"As the Chief Inspector identifies, there is more work to do at Cookham Wood but I believe it offers a safe and decent environment for the women in its care."

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. The full announced inspection of HM Prison Cookham Wood was carried out between 6 - 10 October 2003.

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