

The physical environment, the absence of purposeful activity, and remnants of the old negative culture are all inhibiting progress at Portland Young Offenders' Institution, said Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, in a report published today.

The report records some pockets of good work taking place, with vulnerable young people and in resettlement, which was 'a model of good practice'. But in other areas, the prison was performing poorly, or not sufficiently well.

Anne Owers said:

"On some wings, focused and innovative work was being developed. However, on the wings where the majority of young prisoners lived, there was little evidence of such positive and proactive relationships. Staff were distant, the personal officer scheme virtually inoperative, and young prisoners, particularly the unemployed, spent far too much time in their cells - up to 23 hours a day. 42% of young prisoners said they felt unsafe - a significantly higher percentage than in other young offender institutions.

"The physical environment on four main wings was unacceptable. Drake and Raleigh were old wings, with small cells, rusting shower areas, poor standards of cleanliness, and an ineffective call bell system. Hardy and Rodney were more modern buildings, but with poor lines of sight, and no in-cell sanitation. The inadequacies of the night sanitation system meant that young people were effectively slopping out, and that those at risk could not be effectively monitored. Bottles of urine and parcels of excreta outside prisons are largely things of the past: they were all too evidently present outside Hardy wing."

The report also found evidence of racial tension: black and minority ethnic prisoners perceived that they were less well treated than their white counterparts. Inspectors did not find evidence to support this, but the prison's own ethnic monitoring systems were not robust enough to rebut these beliefs. There was an evident gulf, and considerable distrust, between the growing Muslim population and staff and managers.

Lack of purposeful activity was a major problem for prisoners on the main wings. On one day of the inspection, 107 young people were in

their cells and others were inactive on the wings. Those who were unemployed could spend 23 hours a day in their cells with no outdoor exercise provided. The 120 education spaces available in the main prison were not filled and the 127

workshop spaces were insufficient to meet demand.

Resettlement work was however well developed. Only 4% of young prisoners were released to no fixed abode, as compared to 50% at the time of the

last full inspection. It was evident that the resettlement team understood, and were trying to meet, the needs of those about to be released. This was more difficult because many young men were being held some distance from home.

In conclusion, Anne Owers said:

"Portland is a prison with a great deal of historical baggage. This is evident, not only in its listed buildings, but also in some residual staff attitudes: harking back to a more authoritarian model of dealing with young people and a perception of Portland as the prison where 'difficult' young people are sent.

"However, its culture and self-perception is visibly changing. This report records many examples of good, forward-looking work, some of it inherited from the positive regime established for juveniles. For Portland's future, the task for managers will be to ensure that those pockets of good work are spread to, and embedded in, all the residential units. The task for the Prison Service will be to ensure that those units are fit for purpose, and that resources are available to develop young people's skills."

The Director General of the Prison Service, Phil Wheatley, said: "The Prison Service recognises there have been significant problems at Portland for some time. As the Chief inspector acknowledges, many of the problems are due to the age and condition of the building.

"But progress is being made in a number of key areas, including bullying strategy, safer custody and time out of cell, currently averaging around eight hours per day. The level of use of force is kept under continual review and special cells are only used when

absolutely necessary.

"The Chief Inspector's praise for the prison's resettlement work is well deserved and indicates a will to establish and maintain good practice."

Notes to editors:

1. The full announced inspection of HMYOI Portland was carried out between 12-16 July 2004.
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 call 020 7273 4545.