

Preston prison has made some headway, but is struggling with severe overcrowding and poor quality accommodation, says the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, in the report of an announced inspection published today.

The report recorded good staff-prisoner relationships, improving race relations practices, and impressive resettlement work. Prisoners' needs were effectively assessed and realistic plans drawn up to address them, using a wide range of agencies.

But the report also pointed out that there was not enough purposeful activity; over a third of prisoners were unemployed and there were few training opportunities. Some procedural safeguards were weak; particularly in relation to anti-bullying, the management of suicidal prisoners, and drug use. Chronic staffing shortages were impacting badly on healthcare, particularly for the severely disturbed patients for whom the prison could do little.

Anne Owers said:

"Preston's problems are common to many local prisons: historic, somewhat decrepit buildings, under-investment, a history of poor industrial relations, and an ever rising number of prisoners, many of them challenging and needy. It is commendable that Preston has nevertheless made some headway, and has a clear vision of what needs to be done to provide positive outcomes for its prisoners. It deserves some breathing space to achieve this; but that is what it is unlikely to get, given the current population crisis".

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

"The Chief Inspector rightly recognises that the physical environment of Preston is not ideal and suffers from all the problems associated with prisons built in the Victorian era.

"As the Chief Inspector makes clear many of the problems identified are already being addressed. Healthcare will be fully staffed by the middle of January, there is now an integrated mental health in-reach team and a large number of prison staff have been trained in mental health awareness for prisoners. A short duration drug programme has just been introduced and the

new anti-bullying system is now bedding in.

"I am pleased that she acknowledges that staff / prisoner relationships are healthy, and that the prison's resettlement work is of a consistently high standard. It is to the credit of the Governor and his staff that Preston is moving forward."

Notes to editors:

1. The announced inspection of HMP Preston took place on 26 -30 July 2004.
2. HMP Preston is a Category B local prison.
3. Inspectorate reports and releases are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>.
4. For an electronic copy of the report, please call 020 7273 4545.