

The Mount was failing to provide a safe and positive environment for the 740 men held there, said Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an announced inspection of the prison

Anne Owers said:

"We recognise the challenges facing the prison: a more difficult and transient population, and staff shortages. But the first responsibility of those running a prison is to provide a safe and decent environment. At the time of the inspection, The Mount was neither."

Among the failings identified in the report were:

- A significant drugs problem, which the prison was only just beginning to tackle, undermined dynamic security within the prison and encouraged bullying. One in four prisoners told us that they had been victimised by other prisoners; 42% had felt unsafe; 44% said it was easy to get hold of illegal drugs;
- Staff did not properly know how to relate to the large proportion of black and minority ethnic prisoners, in spite of the fact that they had been a significant part of the prison population for some years. Staff were unlikely to pick up or deal with tensions within or between ethnic groups;
- There was insufficient meaningful work or training for the prison's population, and a large number of prisoners who were, supposedly, cleaners;
- In spite of this, there was ingrained dirt and litter in many parts of the prison. Most cells in the segregation unit were in an appalling condition, though some had been refurbished: inexplicably, staff chose to house prisoners in the dirty cells, rather than the refurbished ones;
- The segregation unit was not operating according to proper procedures. Record-keeping was the poorest inspectors had seen: prisoners' history sheets were literally rubber-stamped each day to indicate that they had been visited by a governor, chaplain or doctor - even when this had not happened. There were no proper procedures for authorising the use of the special cell, which was sometimes used inappropriately for prisoners at risk of self-harm;
- Sentence planning was in disarray and inspectors found only six completed sentence plans. There was no means of allocating prisoners to appropriate work, education or offending behaviour programmes. Many prisoners applying for

parole, or recategorisation to open conditions said that they could not meet requirements because they had not undertaken the work or programme necessary to show progression.

In spite of the overall dismal picture, there was some good work being carried out:

- The quality of education provision was commendably high, and targeted at prisoners' actual needs - it was acknowledged as the 'jewel in the crown'. But, in the absence of systems that could ensure that the right prisoners attended the right courses, inspectors described it as 'a jewel that was out of reach of many who needed it';
- A group of prisoners, and a number of voluntary organisations, provided excellent advice and support for prisoners being released. Once again, this lacked coordination or management support: key organisations had left, or were leaving, and there were no plans to fill the gaps.

Anne Owers said:

"It is thankfully rare to produce a report on a prison that is performing so poorly on our core tests. Most of the staff we came across were trying to do a good job and respond to prisoners' needs; indeed they, like the prisoners in their care, suffered from poor systems, a lack of direction and an unstable environment.

"The Mount is a failure of management. Local managers had ceased to notice deficiencies, or had become so overwhelmed by difficulties that they had lost the ability to tackle them. Those to whom they reported had not picked up the obvious failings that were all too apparent to us and the Independent Monitoring Board.

"By the time of the inspection, managers were beginning to address some of those failings; but there was a great deal more to be done. The Prison Service needs to, and undoubtedly will, take decisive action in relation to The Mount.

"However, prisons should not be allowed to deteriorate to this level. The Mount shows the importance of ensuring that managers, in our current pressurised prison system, are sufficiently scrutinised and supported in their difficult task."

Phil Wheatley, Director General of the Prison Service said:

"The last inspection report published in April 2003 identified the Mount as a good prison. Since then there has been a deterioration, as a result of significant population pressures and the level of drugs coming in to the prison, which placed the previous management team under huge pressure.

"This report helps expose the size of the problem the new management team faces. The new team will be there for some time and work is already under way to improve the prison across the board. We have been able to reduce levels of overcrowding in the prison which will enable this work to gather pace."

Notes to editors:

1. The announced inspection of HMP The Mount took place on 11-15 October 2004.
2. The Mount is a category C training 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.