

HMP Wealstun in West Yorkshire is a split site - half a category C closed training prison and half a category D open prison - but conditions and supervision on the open side were unacceptable and the changing nature of the prison's population presented a challenge to staff and managers, said HM Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers, publishing her inspection report today.

Wealstun is a working prison, set to expand. The category C training part is commended for providing employment or education to nearly all prisoners. However, on the open side, half the prisoners were in dormitories, due for demolition, that lacked fire and smoke alarms, were open to vermin infestation, and were in a state of disrepair.

Added to this, Inspectors found that staff on the open side were sometimes not present at all - for example during evening association or at night - and when present had little active engagement with prisoners, except for lifers.

Anne Owers said:

"These dormitories were due to be demolished when new units were built, but they should not have been in use at all. They were unfit for habitation. In order to create an effective open prison at Wealstun, it will not be enough to replace the unsafe and insanitary dormitories. Staff, from governors downward, will need to engage actively with prisoners."

The report also criticises the fact that although all prisoners had theoretically signed up to be drug-free, 95% of them told the Inspectorate that drugs were freely available and indeed some dormitory doors had notices saying 'no salesmen' in order to discourage dealers.

The report commends the category C training part of HMP Wealstun which offered employment or education to nearly all its prisoners. However, much of the work did not lead to qualifications and some was not suitable to the prison's changed population, as it absorbed the effects of the population pressure in the prison system.

The report notes that the training side of Wealstun was still feeling the aftershock of a serious disturbance in June 2003 which had resulted in the loss of one unit, still under repair. As a consequence, the previously relaxed regime had been considerably tightened: with

greater security during movements, and a great deal less association and time out of cell for prisoners.

Anne Owers said:

"It is to the credit of staff and managers that staff-prisoner relationships remained reasonably good in the training part of the prison, and indeed in some places excellent. The task now is to support staff to gradually relax controls, engage fully with prisoners and regain the dynamic security that is necessary to run a training prison, particularly as the training side is about to double in size."

Concluding, Anne Owers said:

"Wealstun shows the effects of population pressure on a previously stable and settled prison. That is a message that needs to be heard and understood at every level, as more and more prisoners, earlier in sentence, are decanted into low security and open prisons. And there can be no excuse, whatever the pressure, for holding prisoners in conditions which breach basic health and safety requirements.

"But there is also a task for local managers. Wealstun will inevitably be a more difficult and less settled prison than it was: with an increased population of more short-term and volatile prisoners. This will require active management and staff engagement, on both sides of the prison, if it is to provide a stable and secure environment where prisoners have the opportunities they need to reduce re-offending."

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

"Management and staff at Wealstun are to be commended on maintaining good relationships with prisoners during a difficult period, and the provision of employment or education to almost all prisoners is a positive step in furthering our aims of effective resettlement and reducing re-offending.

"The report draws attention to the poor living conditions within two of the units on the open side of the prison and it is acknowledged that much work has to be done in this area. However, work is scheduled to rectify the deficiencies identified by the Inspectorate and four new accommodation units are to be provided, allowing demolition of the units that caused the inspection team the greatest concern."

NOTE TO EDITORS:

1. The full announced inspection of HMP Wealstun was carried out from 27-31 October 2003.

2. HMP Wealstun is a prison with a site split between a category C training prison and category D training/resettlement. It receives prisoners predominantly from West Yorkshire and County Durham. At the time of the inspection, it held around 600 prisoners, but this was set to increase to 950, when all wings were operative and new units completed.

3. Prison Inspectorate reports and press releases are available on

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/justice/prisons/inspprisons>