

The Prison Service needs to ensure that good work with sex offenders at HMP Whatton is not undermined by a doubling of the population at the prison, Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons said today.

Publishing the report of an unannounced inspection on the East Midlands prison, Anne Owers said there was much to applaud in the safe and respectful way the prison deals with its prisoners who are almost all sex offenders.

But she said:

"The prison now faced the imminent challenge of its population more than doubling. The Prison Service intends that Whatton should continue to specialise in managing sex offenders, but it is understandable, given current pressures on the prison system, that staff feared the extra space would be occupied by other types of offender.

"Not only would this require careful segregation of the different populations, but it might also dilute the prison's expertise in managing sex offenders. The positive findings in this report suggest that Whatton's impressive work to reduce sexual reoffending should be protected."

The inspection found the prison to be safe for both staff and prisoners and there were good standards of cleanliness, food and healthcare. Staff-prisoner relationships were excellent and the inspector's noted this was due to the professionalism of the staff.

But there were concerns too. Insufficient attention was given to maintaining safety, such as suicide, self-harm and anti-bullying procedures; it was unacceptable that some toilets lacked privacy screens; poor recording practices among personal officers were found and there was a dearth of provision for foreign national prisoners.

Anne Owers said purposeful activity was effective and outward looking and improvements had been made since the last inspection in 2002.

In conclusion, Anne Owers said:

"This is a positive report on a prison that has achieved a great deal in the demanding field of managing sex offenders.

"Considerable change is imminent and it is incumbent upon the prison and the wider Prison Service, at area and national level, to ensure that these achievements in a vital area of public protections are sustained and developed."

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

"I am very pleased that the Chief Inspector recognised the good work being carried out at HMP Whatton with a very challenging population. The governor and staff have demonstrated real commitment in this very specialised area, and deserve credit for their efforts.

"I acknowledge the concerns of the team about the continued ability of the establishment to operate as it expands. We are determined to capitalise on Whatton's expertise in the management and resettlement of sex offenders and to maintain its specialist function."

Notes to editors:

1. This unannounced inspection took place between 17 and 18 February 2004. The last inspection was in March 2002.
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 email simon.steel@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk or call 020 7273 3736.