

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HOURS ON FRIDAY 1 FEBRUARY 2002

CHIEF INSPECTOR CONDEMNS DARTMOOR'S 'OUTDATED CULTURE OF DISRESPECT AND OVER-CONTROL'

In the first report of an inspection carried out since her appointment Anne Owers, the new Chief Inspector of Prisons, is highly critical of one of the oldest and best-known prisons in England.

She describes Dartmoor as being "imprisoned in its own past – locked into an outdated culture of over-control and disrespect for prisoners". In spite of some pockets of good practice, and some good staff struggling against the 'old Dartmoor' culture, this lack of respect was "pervasive". However, she recognises and welcomes the recent efforts of the Prison Service to address these long-standing problems.

Prisoners were referred to by some staff, in front of Inspectors, as the 'rubbish' of the prison system; and worse comments were reported to Inspectors by prisoners and the Board of Visitors. Nearly one in four prisoners surveyed claimed to have been verbally abused by staff (the average for other similar prisons is 9%); 36% said the thing they would most like to change was the attitude of staff.

There was particular concern about the segregation unit where prisoners were exercised in 12-foot square granite 'pens', and distressed or suicidal prisoners were locked into a 'cage' of wire mesh with a perspex screen through which they could communicate their problems, and which continued in use in defiance of a Governor's order to close it.

Anne Owers said:

"The pens and the cage were degrading, and more appropriate for dangerous animals than for potentially suicidal medium to low risk prisoners. The cage was dismantled during our inspection. The use of the pens for exercise should also cease immediately."

Concern is also expressed about possible over-use of force in transferring prisoners to the unit, and the lack of proper systems to pick up warning signs.

Anne Owers warned:

“In the light of what is known to have taken place in segregation and closed units in other prisons, management and monitoring systems need urgently to be addressed.”

Prisoners’ ‘dangerousness’ was being exaggerated to justify Dartmoor’s reputation as a ‘hard’ prison with little interaction between staff and prisoners. Inspectors were warned away from areas where prisoners might be moving and advised against one to one contact.

Anne Owers said:

“The atmosphere within the prison was one of over-control, which could be perceived as intimidation: inspectors frequently reported that prisoners had spoken to them hurriedly, saying they did not wish to be observed.”

Though Dartmoor is theoretically a training prison, both the quantity and quality of training had deteriorated sharply, even since the Inspectorate criticised both in its 1997 report. Education was inadequate, as were resettlement work and sentence planning. This meant that it had little to offer prisoners, and little to be proud of except its ‘hard’ image.

Concluding, Anne Owers said:

“Dartmoor felt like the prison that time forgot. For too long, nothing had been done to deal with longstanding, outdated and inappropriate cultures. We very much welcome the fact that the new Governor, the Area Manager and the Director-General share this view and had begun to address these problems before our arrival.

“If it is to survive and develop, it is not enough to recategorise Dartmoor, close its segregation unit and upgrade its buildings, welcome though these changes are. Dartmoor needs a new culture, role and resources, so that staff can use their considerable experience to manage and motivate, rather than control, difficult prisoners.

“This also requires a change of culture in the Prison Service. Dartmoor should not be the Service’s punishment block. It should be part of a regional and national strategy for the dignified and decent treatment and resettlement of prisoners.”

Commenting on the report, Martin Narey, Director General of the Prison Service said:

“I welcome this hard-hitting but perceptive report, which gets under the skin of Dartmoor in a way previous reports never achieved. I accept Anne Owers’ criticisms which reflect my own and the Area Manager’s concerns about the prison in the past year. When I visited in May 2001

I was similarly critical of what I found. Partly as a result of that I believe Inspectors saw Dartmoor at a particularly unsettled period, following the removal of a long-standing Governor, change of rôle and revision of staffing levels.

“Dartmoor has traditionally been seen as a punishment posting for some prisoners. The change to category C security status and the leadership of the new Governor will change that once and for all. I welcome the Chief Inspector’s intention to go back to Dartmoor to examine progress. I am confident that were she to visit today she would already find a prison with a new sense of direction, decency and purpose.”

NOTE FOR EDITORS

1. The unannounced follow-up inspection of HMP Dartmoor was carried out from 17 to 21 September 2001. It is the first published report where the inspection was carried out under the new Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers.
2. Prison Inspectorate reports and press releases are available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmipris/hmipris.htm>