



020 7210 8643

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HMYOI READING: CONCERNS OVER SAFETY AND PURPOSEFUL ACTIVITY

Though there had been some progress at Reading, there were serious concerns about safety, and insufficient purposeful activity for the young men there, said Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, publishing the report of an unannounced follow-up inspection of the Young Offenders Institution in Berkshire.

Inspectors were concerned that, despite an increase in fights and assaults, anti-bullying arrangements were underdeveloped and more young prisoners reported feeling unsafe than in 2004. Adjudications were high, use of force had doubled - although some of this increase was due to improved recording - and there was more frequent use of the special cells in the segregation unit.

However, in the aftermath of three tragic deaths in 2005, much greater attention had been paid to suicide and self-harm prevention, and a small team of energetic and innovative staff had made significant progress in improving procedures.

The inspectors also found that:

- Their previous recommendation, that strip clothing should only be used in the most exceptional circumstances for young men in crisis, had not been acted on.
- The quality of accommodation varied, as did relationships between staff and young prisoners, with an ineffective personal officer scheme
- There were insufficient education, training and work places, which left too many young prisoners unemployed and locked in their cells for most of the day: unemployed young men could spend nearly 20 hours a day in their cells.
- The quality of purposeful activity was generally low: mainly low calibre, unaccredited work. However, there were pockets of excellence, for example physical education, a multi-skills kitchen fitting course and a unit where selected prisoners could work towards placements in the community
- There was no custody planning for those on short sentences, and the impressive resettlement unit was under-used.

Anne Owers said:

“Staff at Reading have the difficult task of managing a challenging and volatile population of young prisoners, many coming straight off the streets or from court, and some with serious mental and behavioural problems. The prison itself is old and has limited space, and too few resources, to provide the purposeful activity that they need. There were pockets of excellence, but this inspection also exposed some serious concerns about safety, which appeared to have deteriorated since our last inspection.”

Phil Wheatley, Director General of the Prison Service said:

“The Chief Inspector rightly recognises the progress being made at Reading in important areas such as suicide and self-harm prevention. I and the senior management team at Reading share the Inspector’s concern at the increase in violence, work to redress this is now in place with a robust strategy to reduce bullying and violent behaviour.

“Planned improvements in other areas, including association and purposeful activity provision, and a focus on developing positive staff prisoner relations through changes to the personal officer scheme, will ensure progress in these areas.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A full copy of the HMCIP report into HMYOI Reading is available from <http://www.inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons/>
2. The full un-announced inspection took place 21-25 May 2007
3. HMYOI Reading has an operational capacity of 297
4. Anne Owers has limited time available for interviews. To request an interview with Anne Owers, please call 020 7210 8643