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FIRST JOINT INSPECTION REPORT ON POLICE CUSTODY SUITES

Today, the Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers and the Chief Inspector of Constabulary, Sir Ronnie Flanagan, publish their first joint inspection report on conditions and treatment in police custody, undertaken into the three custody suites in the London borough of Southwark run by the Metropolitan Police Service: at Peckham, Walworth Road and Southwark.

This is the first of a series of inspections to examine the treatment and conditions in police detention, in line with the UK's international obligations to ensure regular and independent inspection of all places of detention.

The report finds that the safeguards in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act were complied with, and there was good support for substance misusers. Procedures existed to mitigate the risk of self-harm. There were no complaints about improper treatment. All detainees were held in single cells, and were observed to be treated professionally and with courtesy.

However, the inspection identified some shortcomings in the facilities for holding detainees. Concerns are raised about the disbanding of specialist custody teams and the consequent lack of ownership of facilities and practice. All the suites had dirty cells and inadequately cleaned showers; there was limited access to showers and toilet paper; all staff did not carry ligature knives and none routinely carried keys; rooms for forensic medical examiners were unhygienic to the point of being inappropriate for the collection of forensic samples. The problem was acute in the Southwark suite, which could hold immigration detainees for up to seven days. It was run entirely on overtime and, in spite of an earlier extremely critical internal report, was still unfit for use, being both unhygienic and unsafe.

The report raises other issues that require management attention. They include the need to develop specific procedures for juveniles, to provide space for confidential interviews, and to undertake more proactive work and training on self-harm. Inspectors also called for the UK Border Agency, which contracts for short-term holding facilities for immigration detainees, to exercise more oversight over the length and conditions of their detention.

Anne Owers and Sir Ronnie Flanagan said:

“Our two inspectorates have found this to be a very productive joint venture, which has raised some important issues as well as confirming the generally sound approach of custody staff in very busy and pressurised environments.

“We believe that it will be of assistance to the Borough Commander and the Metropolitan Police’s Custody Directorate in driving forward best practice.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A full copy of the joint report into Southwark BCU is available from <http://inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons/>
2. The Metropolitan Police Service has 76 custody suites designated under PACE for the reception of detainees.
3. The joint inspection took place between 21 and 22 April 2008.
4. Anne Owers is available for media interviews. Please call 0207 210 8722 to arrange an interview.