



## HMP/YOI ISIS

# REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT MONITORING BOARD

2011

### **1. Introduction**

1.1 This is a brief report by the Independent Monitoring Board at HMP/YOI Isis for the year 2011. It is brief because the Board is still exceptionally small; only four of its current members have previous IMB experience. However, it is hoped the report will give a flavour of the progress made by the prison in its first year of operation and the work being undertaken by the Board.

### **2. Background**

2.1 The prison opened in July 2010. It is a Category C training prison, the first of its kind in London combining young men to the age of 21 with adults to the age of 25. It is a public sector prison situated within the original perimeter of HMP Belmarsh in South-East London. The certified normal accommodation (CNA) is 478. The operational capacity (OP CAP) is 622.

### **3. Summary**

3.1 Against a backcloth of best-laid plans, the first eighteen months of HMP/YOI Isis has been a journey of mixed fortunes. Good progress has been made in many areas, particularly the resettlement of offenders back into the community, but along the way there have been setbacks, including serious staff recruitment difficulties and a rapidly shifting offender population. The prison has been well led throughout this challenging period by a committed and dedicated senior team.

## **4. Recommendations**

### Issue for the Minister

4.1 To intervene urgently to bring about policy changes and improvements in the staff recruitment process for the benefit of HMP/YOI Isis and other London prisons (4.8).

### Issues for the Prison

4.2 To adapt double cells within the prison to bring about an acceptable level of toilet decency for the offenders (4.5).

4.3 To implement fully a Personal Officer scheme across the establishment (4.13).

## **The first year of the prison**

### The early months

4.4 The aims and objectives for the prison were set out in a 3-year strategy document by the Governor prior to opening. The primary purpose was to provide a safe and secure environment for young local men serving their sentences but also to provide them with opportunities to improve their learning and to acquire skills to equip them for life on the outside without reoffending. The provision of such an establishment in London for the first time allowed offenders to be relocated from other prisons around the country to a more local prison so that family and community connections could be re-established. It also allowed offenders who reached the age of 21, but not the end of their sentence, to stay in the establishment rather than being moved on to an adult prison, thus providing continuity of sentence planning and resettlement.

4.5 The prison is modern and well built to high standards but with an emphasis on cost saving systems and green credentials. The two residential blocks are of a traditional design with single and double cells; the learning and skills areas are deliberately designed to have a more educational and industrial feel to them. However, from the outset the Board has had severe reservations about the lack of toilet privacy in the double cells, where only a curtain, no more than a few inches away, divides the bunks from the toilet. It is said that this is a standard NOMS design, but that is not good enough and at very least a solid partition should be provided.

4.6 When the prison opened, it was clear that there were many skill gaps as many of the staff were new to the prison service, including those employed by outside contractors. However, with a slow build-up of offenders - initially small numbers of YOs into two spurs of one houseblock – confidence increased and all the early signs were good. Relationships between staff and offenders were effective, a personal officer scheme was introduced and the Governor's inclusive and informal approach seemed to be paying dividends. There was a good take-up of learning and employment opportunities although these were limited

initially because of recruitment difficulties experienced by the outside provider. The Board was extremely impressed with the progress made in those early months; the offenders were generally calm and content, staff were generally well-motivated and the Governor and her senior team provided an open form of management which was well appreciated by offenders and staff alike.

## Emerging issues

4.7 Difficulties began to emerge, however, as the number of offenders built up, particularly with the arrival of Cat C offenders and the opening of the second house block in January 2011. It was clear that officer recruitment was not keeping pace which in turn meant that existing staff were put under more pressure and the offender regimes had to be adapted which brought the initial signs of discontent on the part of offenders. The Governor's original plan to merge YOs with Cat Cs in the residences had to be temporarily abandoned as it became clear that neither group found the mix helpful and bullying and violent incidents began to occur more frequently. Dedicated Cat C spurs were opened as a result which helped to resolve some of the anxieties of the older offenders.

## Recruitment

4.8 Recruitment remains a serious problem and the Board has been appalled by the apparent lack of control able to be exerted over the whole process by local management. Recruitment strategy is determined and overseen by the national HR Director and it is clear that present policies and the current recruitment cycle simply cannot meet local needs. Departing staff are only required to give 4 weeks notice whereas recruitment of new staff, managed by the Shared Service Centre in Newport, takes 6-8 months. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that present policy does not allow for vacancies to be anticipated or for there to be any London-wide recruitment. However, it is simply too restrictive for each prison to be dealt with in isolation and the result is that London prisons are constantly understaffed. The consequent dependence on detached duty staff and the regular cross deployment of staff into priority areas has had a major impact on the regime and staff morale. It is shameful that the prison continues to have so many prison officer and OSG vacancies. The recruitment process needs urgent attention nationally.

## Violence

4.9 The YO age group is a volatile one and violent incidents do occur frequently; however, during the early months they were mainly of low order and concluded swiftly. Worryingly, this changed during the latter half of 2011 as the mix of offenders changed and as staff recruitment became a chronic problem. More serious incidents began to occur, some of which were severe with staff and offenders being injured, some seriously, and in a few cases, hospitalised. The Board expressed its deep concerns about this trend. There is little doubt that much of the violence is gang-related which to some extent has been facilitated by the very policy of bringing local men back to their original locality. Some of it was also caused by the arrival in the Autumn of older men up to the age of 30 who had been supplanted from their original prisons by juveniles and other YOs as a result of the August

riots. Many of these were entirely unsuitable for Isis and were the cause of some of the escalated violence.

4.10 To accommodate these arrivals, the prison had increasingly to rely on the services of detached duty staff brought in from other establishments to cope with the increased numbers. Many of these had had no experience of YO's and none had the benefit of being Isis-trained. Their inevitable short tenure hardly contributed to a settled environment. The prison soon became full, morale dropped and offenders and staff felt less safe. Inevitably, the establishment became destabilised as the number of violent incidents increased.

4.11 The new recently-appointed Governor was determined to deal with the epidemic of violence which peaked towards the end of 2011. Recent initiatives have included adopting a clear zero tolerance approach with more punitive outcomes and the increased use of IEP. Many referrals are now being made to local police who are committed to investigating cases more speedily than in the past and more offenders are being re-categorised and transferred out whenever possible. Local changes such as cell doors being closed during association and fewer offenders being on association at any one time seem to have been successful in reducing the levels of violence. There has been a marked decrease during the first two months of 2012. The Board supports these initiatives and is monitoring the situation closely.

## Communications

4.12 Among the effects of the staffing concerns mentioned above is the problem of adequate communication with offenders. The Board has found that communications between offenders and prison officers is generally poor. The attitude of some officers to offender concerns is dismissive. Many of the applications directed to the IMB by offenders cover matters which could and should have been resolved by the prison. This breakdown manifests itself in a number of ways. First, applications made to the prison are often investigated and 'completed' by administrative staff within agreed timescales but the results are not fed back to the offender. Second, 'progress' on matters of real importance to offenders such as HDC or Cat D reviews is not routinely communicated back to them. In the majority of these cases, significant work is on-going by the Offender Management Unit (OMU) but the offenders are unaware of the status of that work because communication channels are not working effectively. The Board has been informed of cases where offenders have asked staff to follow up on such cases but staffing levels and pressure of work have precluded that from happening.

4.13 Not only does this frustration cause extra work for complaints staff, Governors and bodies such as the IMB, but it may well be a contributory factor to some of the violent episodes mentioned above. Some officers, particularly those on detached duty, seem to be uncertain of the regime and appear to be poorly managed. The Board feels that there is a need for greater management consistency on the part of senior officers and that they should be more visible on the landings. If staffing levels allowed, full implementation of the Personal Officer scheme would alleviate many of these concerns.

## Property

4.14 Throughout the year, the Board has been concerned about the high number of complaints both to the prison and to the Board about property matters. Property is always a sensitive issue for offenders and it should be possible to have a secure system operating both within the prison and between prisons to ensure that offenders obtain or are reunited with their property in a timely and proper fashion. Complaints have concerned property accompanying offenders on arrival, property received later from other establishments, property brought in during social visits, and property losses generally.

4.15 The Board has been critical of the prison in not being able to have a consistent approach to the management of property, although it understands the shortage of staffing and inexperience factors that have contributed to this failing. This shortage and subsequent levels of sickness have regularly necessitated officers from Reception being temporarily relocated to other more critical areas. The situation has often been exacerbated by a sudden large influx of new arrivals although that is less likely now that the prison is full.

4.16 Concerted efforts at weekends and over Bank Holiday periods when offender education and employment activities have been curtailed have helped to clear property backlogs.

4.17 Property being brought in via Visits has been a constant source of aggravation with long delays occurring before offenders receive it, so the present monthly system is to be replaced with a less frequent exchange period of every three months. This is in line with other prisons and, although it may not be popular with offenders at first, it should ensure a faster service.

## Kitchens and Catering

4.18 The kitchen at Isis has been built and equipped to a very high standard. It is therefore disappointing that the overall standard of catering in the establishment falls well below this standard. The service is provided by Aramark, the contract caterer. In the early months, a good service was delivered to the limited number of offenders; however, with many staff changes including a succession of catering managers and the introduction of offender workers into the kitchen, standards dropped when the number of offenders in the prison increased. While ingredients and the quality of prepared food remain fair, it is not always served at the appropriate temperature; hot food is often lukewarm and cold food is sometimes half-frozen. Working practices within the kitchen, as observed by Board members, including the supervision of offenders and the general cleanliness of the area and the equipment within it, including the serving trolleys, leave a lot to be desired.

4.19 There are also significant problems on the spurs where servery supervision is poor. There is no consistency in the way in which servery workers hand out food packs at lunchtime and hot meals in the evening with the result that offenders complain about being treated unfairly. Portion control is inadequate because of the lack of supervision, food temperature is not properly monitored and logs are not completed. The Board has received

numerous complaints about the serving of food and the problems continue despite attempts by senior staff to resolve them. The recent introduction of an additional prison officer to work within the residential group at meal times is welcomed as a stronger level of supervision is required.

## Activities

4.20 There is a wide range of learning and skills activities available in the prison, also education and vocational training, and physical education. The facilities are of exceptional quality. However, for many offenders the opportunities have been limited. The Learning and Skills provider, Kensington and Chelsea College were slow to recruit and there have been subsequent staffing shortages necessitating the cancellation of sessions. Problems with the prison regime, the late unlocking of offenders and a complicated roll reconciliation process – recently abandoned - have all contributed to a situation whereby offenders have less time out of cell than originally planned. Work opportunities are also limited but the prison is committed to increasing these in conjunction with outside employers.

## Success stories

4.21 The general health of the population is good and health related matters are managed well by the prison's health care provider, Harmoni for Health. The service is commissioned for the NHS by Greenwich PCT. The unit is basically a primary care facility with outpatient and diagnostic facilities. Attendance at clinics has been a problem resulting in complaints to the Board but has improved in recent times. Drug misuse is very low, borne out by low mandatory drug testing rates. There is a good CARATs service providing drug and alcohol support. Incidences of self-harm are low; ACCT documents are routinely reviewed by the Board.

4.22 The Segregation unit is well run and every effort is made to relocate offenders back to the houseblocks or to other establishments rather than being held for indefinite periods in the Unit. The Board has been impressed with the detailed and caring way adjudications and GOOD reviews have been undertaken, particularly with offenders who have been transferred there for their own protection.

4.23 OMU is effective in managing offenders through to release and beyond and there is a commendable broad range of both vocational and academic provision. Links with the local community are strong and with the support of DePaul UK, offenders are offered good accommodation alternatives on release. Also, to the credit of OMU, most offenders have some form of employment or training to go to at the end of their sentence. The recent HMIP report made favourable comments on progress made with the resettlement of offenders and the Board likewise commends prison staff on their work in this area.

## **5. The First Year of the Board**

### The early months

5.1 When the prison opened in July 2010 there was no IMB. For several years colleagues in neighbouring Boards had been making representations to Ministers and to the IMB Secretariat about the need for national recruitment to take place in advance of the opening of Isis so that newly recruited members could be trained on other Boards such as at HMP Belmarsh and then transferred to Isis in time for its opening. Nothing along those lines took place. It is a disgrace that it was then left to last minute appeals to experienced members from other Boards to come and help out. In the event, only four experienced members responded who remain on the Board today. The Board was finally established in December 2010 five months after the prison opened.

5.2. Despite subsequent appeals for help and one recruitment drive managed locally by Board members, the Board currently has only 8 active members out of a complement of 20, four of which are still undergoing training.

5.3 Inevitably the Board's work has been constrained by its limited membership; it has therefore concentrated on managing offender Applications. Weekly Rota reports have been completed but their content has been less than comprehensive. No areas of special interest have yet been allocated, hence the brevity of this report. The Board has only been able to provide one member each week to cover the rota visit, hear Applications, attend GOOD reviews and be available on-call for emergencies. This puts a heavy responsibility, not to mention time commitment, on the duty member and it is to be hoped that that does not cause any loss of members from an already understaffed Board.

### Analysis of Applications

5.4 As can be expected, the level of Applications to the Board has risen steadily in line with the prison roll. The highest number of Applications has been in connection with property as referred to above. Other subjects featuring heavily include HDC and Cat D progress, IEP, complaints about staff, regime issues, food, discipline, adjudications and visits.

### Attendance and Training

5.5 Although its membership is still small, attendance at Board meetings has been excellent. The Governor attends each meeting and presents a comprehensive and detailed monthly report. A 30-minute training session takes place before each meeting presented by a senior member of staff.

### Dealings with the prison

5.6 Despite the difficulties mentioned above, the Board has been delighted with the level of cooperation and helpfulness that has been offered to the Board and its members by the

Governors and staff of the prison. They have all been extremely welcoming and have valued the Board's contributions, criticisms and challenges. They have all behaved with an openness and candour that was refreshing and unexpected. The Board is also extremely pleased with and grateful for the services of the IMB clerk.

## **Glossary of Abbreviations**

ACCT	Assessment, Care in Custody Teamwork
CARAT	Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare
CNA	Certified Normal Accommodation
GOOD	Good Order or Discipline
HDC	Home Detention Curfew
HMIP	HM Chief Inspector of Prisons
HR	Human Resources
IEP	Incentive and Earned Privileges
MDT	Mandatory Drug Testing
NHS	National Health Service
OMU	Offender Management Unit
OSG	Operational Support Grade
PCT	Primary Care Trust
YO	Young Offender