



PRESS RELEASE

Positive momentum to change Maghaberry Prison maintained but concerns still remain say Inspectors

A new inspection report on Maghaberry Prison has found work to provide a safer, more stable environment for prisoners and staff at the high security facility is continuing, but issues remain around support for vulnerable prisoners and the availability and use of drugs.

Speaking today following the publication of the report, Brendan McGuigan, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland said Inspectors were "encouraged" by the continuing efforts to address the serious concerns identified by a multi-disciplinary inspection team in 2015 around safety, stability and leadership.

"A small team of experienced Inspectors from Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons in England and Wales, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate, carried out a three-day review of Maghaberry in early September 2016.

"This review was not intended to replicate a full inspection but to check the momentum and progress against the nine inspection recommendations made in 2015, had been maintained.

"During this visit we found the Northern Ireland Prison Service and senior leaders within Maghaberry remained committed to turning the prison around and improving outcomes for prisoners."

Mr McGuigan indicated managers were now located within the houses they held responsibility for which had resulted in a more hands-on management style. A more dynamic approach to security was also in place with prison staff now routinely supervising association areas within Maghaberry.

"This showed a willingness among staff to challenge previously held views and thinking, and is a positive step towards achieving cultural change," said Mr McGuigan.

"At the time of the visit in September the prison was more settled and calm. Prisoners were experiencing a more predictable routine, focused around a core day where prisoners attended work, education or other activities and where fewer lockdowns and regime restrictions occurred."

However, the Chief Inspector said significant concerns remained around the level of support provided to vulnerable prisoners and the abuse of both illegal and prescription drugs.

"Inspectors found that while mental health support and assistance provided to new prisoners has improved since January 2016, there was still no overall safer joint custody strategy in place to comprehensively address safety issues, for those who were vulnerable.

"This is a serious omission which was impeding work in tackling vulnerability"

Mr McGuigan said Inspectors found that prison management were not monitoring the prison's death in custody action plan in a sufficient manner, to ensure responses to Prisoner Ombudsman recommendations were embedded within operational practice at Maghaberry, to support prisoners deemed to be vulnerable to suicide or self-harm.

He also indicated that Inspectors had found no significant progress had been made in addressing the concerns raised in May 2015 and repeated in January 2016, around the abuse of drugs at Maghaberry.

He continued: "The high level of prescription drug availability and use by prisoners remains a significant concern, especially given the volume of divertible medication held by prisoners themselves, which can result in vulnerable prisoners being bullied by others to hand over their medication.

"There were also problems in accessing addiction services and no coordinated, recovery-based approach to addressing the significant substance misuse issues which exist within the prison population."

"While the Inspection Team welcome the progress that has been made and the momentum to deliver change at Maghaberry which has built up since May 2015, I reiterate our view that significant risks remain, particularly around prisoner safety, which have the potential to drag the prison back to where it was 18 months ago, " said the Chief Inspector.

"Strong leadership, focused on delivering improvement must therefore be maintained and prison management and leadership within the NIPS cannot become complacent.

"Maghaberry continues to be a complex prison operating in a difficult environment, so we must be realistic in terms how quickly the change required and work undertaken to modernise Maghaberry, can be achieved.

"In light of this, Inspectors are committed to continuing to work with the prison management, Governors at Maghaberry, and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to oversee the implementation of the nine inspection recommendations. We will also continue to carry out further low impact reviews within the prison, to support continued progress and ensure any loss of momentum or slippage is identified and halted at the earliest opportunity," concluded Mr McGuigan.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The Low Impact Review was conducted from 5 - 7 September 2016. It does not re-inspect all areas of the prison or deal with the issues in the same level of detail as full unannounced or announced inspections. It presents a snapshot of the experience of prisoners held there and a sense of how the prison was progressing the nine inspection recommendations made in 2015.