

AN INSPECTOR CALLS

An insider's view of HM Inspectorate of Prisons

We often find that prison establishments and others do not know what Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons is about (or they have forgotten).

The Inspectorate operates as an independent body with no executive authority to follow up reports or recommendations. Ministers and the Prison Service are free to accept, reject or adapt recommendations as they see fit.

The staffing of the Inspectorate is a matter for the Home Office personnel and management division in consultation with the Chief Inspector and with the Prison Service Agency where their staff are concerned. A high degree of 'independence' is required by the Chief Inspector from staff on loan to HMIP. This is hopefully evident in the published reports.

Around 20 announced inspections and a similar number of unannounced inspections are made and reported on each year with a view to covering each Prison Service establishment at least once every five years. This includes both public and privately run operations. Reports are published, often with full media coverage. The published document includes a statement prepared on behalf of ministers and the Director General of the Prison Service. The running costs of HMIP ie salaries, travelling and subsistence, and consultants' fees are about £650,000 per annum.

Snapshot of an establishment

There are two prison inspection teams. An announced inspection would have a minimum of 7 team members whilst an unannounced inspection would normally attract a three person team. The inspection is a snapshot of a prison establishment taken during the week of the team's visit. We are invariably told we have picked the wrong week and should have come earlier or later in the year.

It is sometimes difficult to convince prison staff that you are there to assist - as all consultancy, inspection and review services should aim to do. It is surprising how many plans exist to bring to fruition, in the near future, statutory requirements or desirable elements of change. Planning and meetings can take

up a lot of time and energy in prisons.

Conversely, a visit can be seen as an opportunity to secure additional support for a local scheme or request that has not had the desired impact prior to the inspection. In a world that is embracing the 'more for less' syndrome (and there is scope for this) it is still refreshing to be able to make recommendations based on what you feel is right without having to constantly consider resource implications. It is all too easy for the prison service to reply "we can't afford it" as opposed to "we can't implement your recommendation in full but what we can do is..." or to consider reviewing existing priorities already funded.

Dates and dilemmas

The control of publication dates, following the submission (on average 13 weeks from the inspection) of a report to the Secretary of State, is in the hands of the

It is still refreshing to be able to make recommendations based on what you feel is right without having to constantly consider resource implications.

Prison Service. The inspection report is an internal document for use within the service until, and after, publication. The dilemma for staff in the inspectorate is whether to support an early publication (within 26 weeks from the inspection) on the grounds of helping the establishment to formulate early plans for addressing any shortcomings or to wait until a number of issues are addressed by the service so that when the report is published (26 to 39 weeks from the inspection) a more favourable public picture can be presented. If the Inspectorate is in the business of effecting change, it should support the option most likely to secure improvements.

However, a reply from the Prison Service as to the progress made following an announced inspection is usually received approximately 18 months from the publication of the report. The next inspection visit by HMIP, usually unannounced, often comments on a lack of progress on any major recommendations still though valid. The media appear to find these situations interesting.

A wider role

HMIP has functions which in some way resemble those already undertaken by local Boards of Visitors in prisons. The significant difference is in the scope and perspective within our different methods of operation. A Board of Visitors concerns itself with an individual establishment and its well-being on a daily basis; the inspectorate will be concerned with the system as a whole and with individual establishments only at relatively long intervals.

Although the inspection of prisons is the primary function, HMIP plays a part in the wider discussion of prison matters. Thematic reviews are produced from time to time. The Chief Inspector was also actively involved in Stage II of the Woolf inquiry, carried out the Brixton escape inquiry in July 1991 and the Wymott disturbance inquiry of September 1993.

HMIP is required by statute to produce an annual report each year. This report is passed to the Home Secretary to lay before Parliament. It attempts to summarise the inspections of the previous year and draw conclusions from the activities it has observed.

One common misconception is that the word inspector is synonymous with expert. This can be used to try and catch the inspector out when visiting an establishment or to genuinely seek advice from an experienced individual who has often seen many examples and reasons

One common misconception is that the word inspector is synonymous with expert.

for good or bad practice.

During the course of a visit, an inspector is often used by staff and prisoners in a 'father confessor' capacity; sometimes this can be helpful, at other times the information is found to be false and less than helpful.

When all is said and published it is sometimes useful to look back on an inspection and try to assess which group of consumers should derive the most benefit. Should it be ministers, the Prison Service, individual Governors, the public, or prisoners?

Steve Bass is an Inspector with HMIP.