

31 October 2006

All YOT managers

Dear colleague

Response to concerns about the pressures on the secure estate

I am writing to respond to your concerns about the impact of increasing pressure on the secure estate. Many of you have raised these matters with me, as well as with my regional teams.

The YJB commissions 3,468 beds in custodial establishments. The youngest and most vulnerable young people and those subject to court ordered secure remands (COSRs) are placed in secure training centres and secure children's homes. Boys aged 15+ and girls aged 17+ (unless assessed by a YOT as having significant vulnerability risk factors) are placed into Prison Service accommodation.

We commission places with a view to operating at a capacity level of 90–93%. This allows for some 'headroom' to give us the flexibility and capacity to place young people in the most suitable type of placement, and as close to their homes as possible. However, we are currently operating at a capacity of over 96% in the Prison Service estate.

This is because since June the number of young people in the estate has been rising significantly. The most severe rise has been boys aged 15–17 held in Prison Service accommodation. The number of young people sentenced for serious offences has also increased over the past year. There are currently over 80 young people in the system subject to section 90/91 or indeterminate sentences and we anticipate this will increase over the coming year.

The Prison Service has continued to move 18-year-olds from the secure estate for children and young people into young offender facilities for 18–21-year-olds and although this is helping, it has only a limited impact on the total numbers within the under-18s system. There is also a possibility that young people on COSRs may be placed by their local authority into alternative non-secure accommodation. Again, the impact of this move will be limited.

The population rise has particularly effected the south of England. Overcrowding drafts have moved sentenced boys from establishments such as Feltham and Huntercombe to establishments in the Midlands. In turn, boys from the Midlands have been moved to the North. This has a detrimental effect on sentence planning and resettlement. It impacts on the time it takes to transport young people around the secure estate. It causes disruption to regimes and programmes. I also appreciate the increased travel burden and cost placed on families, as their son or daughter is placed in a facility many miles from home.

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We have written to NOMS, urgently seeking additional beds in the South East. We want to take more space in Feltham but with the current pressures on the adult estate, this may not be possible. However, it is crucial we get more beds in the South East to effectively manage the population in future, and we are in the process of developing a longer term strategy for the region.

In addition, when establishments run at capacity, young people from different parts of the country are mixed together. There is also a greater danger that young people involved in gangs may create disturbances. The Prison Service's Women and Young People's Group, in consultation with the YJB, is working to identify the causes of recent disturbances so that we can reduce the likelihood of them happening again. It is therefore essential that your staff provide us with all relevant information on young people before they enter custody, to ensure their safety and that of all others within the establishment. I am seeking your ongoing co-operation in this matter.

Compulsory cell-sharing is being implemented where population pressures require it, but only in instances where both boys are assessed as suitable to share. I want to make it clear that the YJB does not want to see young people share cells. However, pressures are such that we recently had to issue guidance on this issue (see www.yjb.gov.uk/en-gb/practitioners/custody/placingyoungpeopleincustody/cellsharing).

I understand holding young people outside their regions is impacting heavily on your services in terms of increased travel for staff and an associated effect on budgets. The current situation is also likely to affect your overall performance, as the increased distances make it more challenging to adhere to and achieve National Standards for DTO meetings.

Relationships between YOTs and secure facilities are of great importance to us, and I am aware that the current over-crowding is disrupting working relationships as staff have to establish knowledge of new facilities outside their usual catchments area. In an effort to reduce the impact of the current situation on relationships I have asked my regional teams to provide you with the contact details of all YJB monitors and the establishments for which each has responsibility. I am confident this will help processes/procedures and relationships to run more smoothly.

The current pressures on the secure estate are creating significant difficulties for all of us – for you in terms of ability to deliver end-to-end sentence management, and for us in terms of our ability to place young people as close to home as possible. I am grateful you have raised your concerns with me, as this confirms my existing experience of the high degree of professionalism that exists among you and your staff.

I ask for your ongoing support to help me, my colleagues at the YJB, and our secure estate providers to manage this challenging situation safely and to best effect.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ellie Roy', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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