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**PRISON OVERCROWDING: INSPECTORATES' VISIT TO COURT CELLS RAISES  
SERIOUS CONCERNS**

On 13 June, inspectors from the Inspectorate of Prisons and the Inspectorate of Courts Administration visited a court custody suite, at West London Magistrates' Court, the busiest of the courts used to house prisoners locked out from prisons at the height of prison overcrowding earlier this year. Prisoners had been held at the court both overnight and over the weekend.

While commending the staff looking after those prisoners, the report raises serious concerns about the use of such cells.

Inspectors point out that it is in the early days of custody that prisoners are most vulnerable: at one time, until prisons improved support at that crucial period, nearly a third of self-inflicted deaths occurred within the first seven days. Yet none of those support systems existed in court cells.

Inspectors' major concerns were:

- There was none of the proactive reception or healthcare screening that exists in prisons to pick up vulnerabilities, risks and medical problems
- Prisoners had been held in bare cells over a weekend, with no activity, no natural light, unable to smoke and with no exercise facilities
- Prisoners spent long periods travelling in cramped vans, having travelled all over the country, often arriving late and having to leave early the next morning
- Prisoners could not contact their families directly, or even let them know where they were
- Shower facilities were inadequate and there was no opportunity for prisoners to change clothes, so they slept in what they were wearing.

Anne Owers, Chief Inspector of Prisons, and Eddie Bloomfield, Chief Inspector of Courts Administration, said:

“In spite of the considerable efforts of staff, this inspection raised serious concerns for the safe and decent treatment of prisoners. Court cells will never be an appropriate place to hold prisoners for anything but a short period, and the underlying message of this report is that they should not be used for overnight, still less weekend, stays. However, if such an emergency recurs, it is essential that all the agencies responsible ensure that systems and procedures are in place to provide the maximum support at this vulnerable time. We will carry out further inspections, should this be necessary.”



## NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A full copy of the report is available from <http://www.inspectorates.justice.gov.uk/hmiprisons/>
2. The announced inspection took place **13 June 2007**
3. Anne Owers has limited time available for interviews. To request an interview with Anne Owers, please call 020 7210 8643.
4. Eddie Bloomfield may be contacted via 020 7217 4342.
5. This, and other inspection reports, may be viewed at HMICA's website: [www.hmica.gov.uk](http://www.hmica.gov.uk)