

*Press release of the Youth Justice Board – Crisis in Custody.*

News

**Crisis point reached as the number of young people in custody reaches record high**

A crisis is facing children and young people in custody, as the numbers of under 18s held in secure accommodation in England and Wales reaches a record high.

**24 October 2006**

The stark warning, from Youth Justice Board Chairman, Rod Morgan, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, and Children's Commissioner, Professor Sir Albert Aynsley-Green, came today during a visit to Feltham Young Offender Institution in west London.

“Over 3,350 children and young people are being held today in custody. The youth justice system has just a handful of bed spaces left,” said Professor Morgan. “We can't simply put up a sign saying ‘No Vacancies’. Action is urgently needed to stop custody for young people going into meltdown.”

While praising the excellent work undertaken at Feltham in difficult circumstances, Morgan, Owers and Aynsley-Green called for an honest debate into alternative ways to deal with young offenders who commit low level and less serious crimes.

“Of course the public must be protected from serious, persistent and prolific offenders. But we believe custody should be used only as a last resort. As a start, we are calling on the Government and sentencers to make better use of intensive supervision community sentences, which can play a major role in reducing reoffending.”

The rise in custodial population is causing a range of serious problems including:

- \* an increased risk of self harm and suicide by vulnerable young people in custody, including those who have mental health problems
- \* difficulties in running education, vocational and crime reduction courses that can help young people stay out of trouble on their release

- \* the 'bussing' of young people around the country, making it difficult for family contact to be maintained
- \* an increased risk of major disturbances and indiscipline by young people as hard-pressed staff struggle to maintain order
- \* increased sharing of cells.

Feltham YOI, west London, continues to ensure the safety of all young people within its establishment and provides sound educational and vocational services for its young people – designed to equip them with the necessary skills to help them gain entry into further education and jobs.

Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers. said: "Every time I go into a custodial establishment, I see staff achieving amazing things in difficult circumstances with highly troubled young people. But I fear the system is approaching breaking point. And I am particularly concerned about the number of young people with mental illness who end up in our prisons because of the lack of adequate provision outside"

The Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Sir Albert Aynsley-Green, said: "Custody is not effective in preventing crime. It is costly and does enormous damage to children who are, for the most part, already extremely vulnerable. It fails to offer children the support they need to rehabilitate and change their behaviour. In line with the recommendations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, custody for children and young people should be used only as a last resort, and then only for the small numbers who are a risk to themselves or others. Shutting children away in prison sends a message that we are giving up on them. If progress is to be made, we need to tackle the root causes of crime."

Ends

Note to editors

1. Feltham YOI houses England & Wales' biggest juvenile remand population. Staff within the centre should be commended for their ability to care appropriately for and manage the safety of all young people.
2. Feltham juvenile operational capacity is 240 beds. There are currently 170 remand and 60 sentenced young men.

3. The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) oversees the youth justice system in England and Wales. We work to prevent offending and reoffending by children and young people under the age of 18, and to ensure that custody for them is safe, secure, and addresses the causes of their offending behaviour.

4. Specifically, we advise the Home Secretary on the operation of, and standards for, the youth justice system; monitor the performance of the youth justice system; purchase places for, and place, children and young people remanded or sentenced to custody; identify and promote effective practice; make grants to local authorities or other bodies to support the development of effective practice; commission research and publish information.