

Oakhill secure training centre

Chalgrove Field
Oakhill
Milton Keynes
MK5 6AJ

Monitoring visit

Inspected under the secure training centres inspection framework

Information about this secure training centre

Oakhill secure training centre is operated by G4S Care and Justice Services. The centre provides accommodation for up to 80 male children aged 12 to 17 years who are serving a custodial sentence or who are remanded to custody by the courts. There were 46 children resident at the time of the monitoring visit.

Education is provided on site in dedicated facilities by G4S. Healthcare services are provided by G4S Health Services UK.

Visit dates: 24 to 25 May 2021

This monitoring visit

The visit was carried out following information received from the Youth Custody Service (YCS) concerning two recent serious, violent incidents in the centre: several staff suffered significant injuries following assaults by children. In addition, the YCS informed Ofsted that the centre had not been meeting contractual minimum staffing levels because of high staff sickness levels. Consequently, the YCS had paused admissions of children to the centre.

The focus of this monitoring visit was to assess children's current experiences of living at the centre, particularly in relation to:

- the circumstances concerning the two recent serious incidents and an increase in assaults and fights over the previous five months
- high levels of staff sickness absence and a significant increase in frontline staff leaving
- children's experiences of the daily routine at the centre, particularly of changed mixing practices on residential units and whether this had resulted in any deterioration in the standard of care.

1. This monitoring visit was unannounced. Measures are in place to prevent COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreaks in the centre, entailing isolating children who are newly admitted and any children who become symptomatic. Two newly arrived children were isolated in a separate residential unit at the point of the visit. These children are entitled to a minimum of three hours out of their locked rooms each day. However, both children were out of their rooms for considerably longer periods of time than this.
2. Senior managers reported that a number of factors jointly contributed to increased instability in the early months of 2021: a significant outbreak of COVID-19 in January, causing increased staff sickness absence; admissions of a small number of children who were originally allocated to another secure training centre; added tensions and conflicts between children due to the smaller 'bubble' groups; and gang-related disputes increasing as a consequence of boys from different parts of England being admitted. However, numbers of children residing in the centre were considerably below capacity throughout this challenging period. Fewer children meant that 'safe' staffing levels were consistently maintained, despite not meeting contractual minimum' requirements on several occasions.
3. The factors noted above are all plausible additional pressures. However, they do not adequately explain why staff and managers were unable to quickly and effectively contain and manage two very serious outbreaks of violence. Secure custody officers (SCOs) were reported to have been acting reasonably and professionally with the children involved, but the severity and intensity of children's assaults on SCOs were extreme. This lack of assured management control was compounded by a second serious incident occurring several weeks after the initial one.
4. Violent incidents and the use of force had consistently increased over recent months, peaking at a very high level in March 2021. These high levels of violence against staff increased staffing difficulties. This was particularly marked following two very serious incidents involving several staff who suffered significant injuries that required treatment in hospital. The number of violent incidents reduced during April 2021, as senior managers restored control, but they remain high. For a short period in early spring 2021, senior managers were in danger of losing control across the centre.
5. Rigorous and timely oversight of the use of force had been adversely affected by earlier staffing difficulties, but by the time of the visit, Minimising and Managing Physical Restraint coordinators had completed reviewing a backlog and had quality assured all relevant incidents. Safeguarding concerns were appropriately referred to the designated officer, providing some external scrutiny of children's safety in the centre. The number of child protection enquiries had increased over the last six months, reflecting an increase in the use of force against children across the centre.
6. The YCS had offered additional support to help the centre recover from serious difficulties experienced earlier in spring 2021. This involved instigating a 'pause' period, which included suspending new admissions and moving some children to other secure establishments. The centre was using staff from another setting to cover staff vacancies. At the time of the visit, a more orderly, predictable programme was

provided to children. A 'bubbling' arrangement of four children in residential units had been recently discontinued, reverting to the former arrangement of groups of eight children. Staff and children told inspectors that the smaller groups, introduced at the end of 2020, had exacerbated conflict and tensions in residential units. Recently, these had diminished and mixing across the centre was consequently more manageable.

7. The director advised inspectors that further learning arising from the two incidents for all SCOs and frontline managers is imminent. SCOs who were invited to comment on this area during the visit were unable to pinpoint any salient lessons arising from the two incidents. This indicates that important rapid learning for all SCOs has not been disseminated with enough urgency. Measures to restore control have prevented further extreme incidents recurring in the short term, but uncertainties remain in the centre's capacity to achieve a sustainable reduction in violence.
8. Children were experiencing a calm, structured daily routine at the point of the visit. Nearly all children were attending education for 21 hours a week. A small number of children were not attending education because of disruptive behaviours. Managers recognise that the oversight of risk assessments of children who are not attending education should be more rigorous to support their earliest possible return. During the visit, children were well behaved and polite in education, benefiting from constructive relationships with staff. They particularly enjoyed practical activities and proudly shared their achievements. The head of education and her team have made substantial progress in addressing relevant recommendations from the last inspection in 2019.
9. Children were also generally well behaved in their residential units during the visit. Their exchanges with SCOs were mainly jovial and respectful. An experienced SCO skilfully defused confrontational and inflammatory comments by two children, avoiding potential conflict and escalation. Many SCOs are long-serving and experienced frontline staff. These officers are typically more confident and assured in their day-to-day work with children. Children reported that they preferred the care provided by these staff and complained that too many SCOs were new and inexperienced. Overall, most children spoken to were generally positive about the care provided by SCOs. However, recurrent themes were perceived inconsistencies in their treatment and some children reasonably expressing irritation concerning too much focus being placed on amassing points through a reward scheme.
10. A new reward scheme was being piloted in some residential units during the visit. Staff and children reported that they had been consulted and involved in shaping a refreshed scheme. A new 'platinum' level, involving a range of additional benefits in children's rooms, was viewed favourably as a meaningful and worthwhile incentive to try to achieve. Children were also aware that the new scheme entails twice-weekly reviews, enabling swifter movements up and down scheme levels, which they also considered as a potential improvement.
11. The attrition rate of SCOs has markedly increased over recent months. The recruitment of new staff has not replenished a high number of leavers. This picture is

compounded by high sickness levels, which have only very recently started to decline. Many SCOs have left without notice shortly after completing their eight-week induction programmes, and a significant number of others have been dismissed. This indicates that many SCOs are ill-prepared for working conditions with children on residential units. Improving the effectiveness of the recruitment and retention of frontline staff is a systemic, persistent difficulty that has been evident across all secure training centres for several years. This signals that major stakeholders, particularly the YCS, may wish to consider investigating possible causes and support senior managers with new approaches that may prove more effective. This continuing turnover of inexperienced staff is also likely to be a significant contributory factor to continuing high levels of violence and unstable, transitory relationships experienced by children with frontline staff who spend the most time looking after them.

12. Many SCOs are experienced and have worked in the centre for several years. They enjoy the work and value the progress children make during their time in the centre. Some told inspectors that they are well supported and managed. Other experienced staff feel that residential managers should respond more quickly to provide support when difficulties with children are emerging in order to help staff de-escalate and manage incidents. The recent introduction of residential seniors, who are responsible for smaller numbers of children, is considered by SCOs as a positive step forward. This is because the seniors are more accessible and available to provide prompt practical support and advice, underpinned by an improved understanding of individual children's profiles and behaviours.
13. Experienced SCOs appreciate the important help children receive from their regular sessions with specialist staff, such as psychologists and substance misuse and sexually harmful behaviour workers. They understand that some of the information shared in these sessions is confidential, but they are frustrated that they receive limited advice from the specialist workers on how they could improve their understanding and management of children's behaviours. SCOs also reported that they are rarely able to attend multidisciplinary case planning and review meetings about children. This indicates that SCOs are not integral members of case management and reviewing teams, resulting in continuing feelings of professional exclusion. Some SCOs also told inspectors that they are not routinely consulted about management decisions to move children to different residential units. This means that their important contributions to the suitability of mixing children are unheard. This omission may contribute to subsequent conflicts and incidents, which possibly could be avoided.
14. The centre's improvement plan illustrates uneven and delayed responses to some recommendations from the 2019 inspection. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in diverting senior management's attention elsewhere is recognised, but reduced numbers of children enabled opportunities to make stronger progress. The improvement plan is primarily an account of detailed actions that have been completed and those that remain outstanding, measured against traffic-light indicators of progress. Links between completed actions and any impact on improved experiences and outcomes for children in custody are unclear.

Recent Inspection History

| Inspection date | Inspection type | Inspection judgement |
|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 16 to 19 November 2020 | Assurance visit | Not applicable |
| 8 to 12 April 2019 | Inspection | Requires improvement to be good |
| 5 to 15 June 2018 | Inspection | Requires improvement to be good |

What needs to improve:

Recommendations

- The centre should ensure that the outstanding recommendations from the April 2019 inspection are addressed.
- The centre's improvement plan should demonstrate how the experiences and outcomes for children are progressing.
- Learning for frontline staff and managers arising from two serious incidents of violence should be disseminated as soon as possible to minimise the likelihood of recurrence.
- The small number of children not attending education should be supported to return as soon as possible.
- Senior managers, the YCS and any other relevant partners should investigate why the recruitment and retention of SCOs remains a systemic, long-standing difficulty in secure training centres and identify measures to improve it.

Information about this inspection

The purpose of this visit was to monitor the action taken and the progress made by the secure training centre since its last inspection.

The centre was inspected under the secure training centres inspection framework.

This inspection was carried out in accordance with Rule 43 of the Secure Training Centre Rules (produced in compliance with Section 47 of the Prison Act 1952, as amended by Section 6(2) of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994), Section 80 of the Children Act 1989. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's power to inspect secure training centres is provided by section 146 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

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