

Dochas Visiting Committee

Dochas Centre,

North Circular Rd

January 6 2017

An Tanaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality Ms Frances Fitzgerald TD,

Dept of Justice and Equality,

94 St Stephens Green,

Dublin 2.

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Dochas Visiting Committee, I have pleasure in submitting our report for 2016. It has been our privilege to work and engage with the women in carrying out our remit.

Throughout the year we have regularly met with Governor Mary O'Connor, Chief Martin Galgey, the Chiefs, ACOs and Officers and we wish to acknowledge their cooperation without which we could not adequately perform our duties. We would also like to acknowledge the support of the campus Governor, Brian Murphy.

Due to the efforts of management and staff within Dochas and to some progressive measures that have been put in place as a result of the many reports and reviews of the prison system, the conditions for women in detention have improved.

However many of the difficulties we have highlighted in previous reports remain. We believe that without the full implementation of the agreed recommendations contained in Joint IPS and Probation Services reviews, and others, the many serious shortcomings in the detention of women prisoners will remain. These concerns have already been set out in full in our annual report of 2015.

These issues include:

1. The unequal treatment of women prisoners due to the lack of Open facilities and specifically, the failure to provide gender specific community based open or step down facilities for suitable women.
2. The current unacceptable condition of the Dochas campus and buildings.
3. Homelessness and difficulty accessing supported safe accommodation on release.
4. Overcrowding.

Yours Faithfully,

Anne M Delaney.

Chairperson. Dochas Visiting Committee

## REPORT OF THE DOCHAS VISITING COMMITTEE 2016

### INTRODUCTION.

In accordance with our obligations under the Prison ( Visiting Committees ) Act 1925 we set out our report for 2016.

The Dochas Visiting Committee consists of three members and in fulfilling our remit under the said Act we ensured that visits were undertaken on a weekly basis. Some visits were pre-arranged, others were unannounced.

Each visit involved walking throughout the prison, speaking with the women, inspecting as many areas as possible, speaking with support personnel and staff and finally, discussing with management issues brought to our attention by the women or noted by ourselves. These issues or queries were followed up by us to ensure they were fully answered and resolved.

Our regular visits provide us with up to date information on deficits within the prison, evidence of improvements where made, an insight into support structures both on-site and otherwise, the facility of speaking with personnel and crucially, the opportunity for constant interaction with the women themselves.

Our report is based on this close, consistent, on-site monitoring throughout the year.

### BUILDINGS AND YARDS.

We reported in our 2015 Report that the Dochas campus required considerable works to upgrade and re-furbish the facility. Very little work has been undertaken and some areas have deteriorated further.

The standard and condition of rooms throughout the campus is uneven.

In the house known as The Willows, which houses women on enhanced regime, rooms, common areas, working spaces and so forth are of a good standard.

The condition of the houses and rooms in the large yard is generally adequate but many rooms require attention. Furniture in the rooms is sparse with little or no storage, especially wardrobe space. Some rooms have tables and small presses, others do not. Bins are in short supply as are cleaning items.

In the small yard, which generally houses those women on basic, the condition of rooms and common areas, including kitchens and recreational areas, is without doubt, inadequate. We thoroughly inspected a random selection of rooms in this yard. All were inadequately furnished with old and broken furniture. Old presses were propped up using books or boxes and there were no tables in most. The bedding was old and worn, sinks blocked, ant infestations in some shower and wash-handbasin areas, paint flaking off walls and all were

generally in an overall grim and gloomy state. In several rooms the shower drain was blocked as prisoners were unable to remove the drain cap to clean them. In one house the clothes dryer was broken and women were trying to dry clothes in their small rooms. In the same house the pipe under the main sink in the kitchen had snapped thus rendering the sink virtually useless as water poured out on to the floor.

We fully understand that the women are and should be responsible for the cleaning and upkeep of their rooms. Some of the women try to keep their rooms in an exemplary way. Others will always have a problem in this regard. However, when the basic fabric of the room and furnishings are frankly so bad and when cleaning supplies are not always readily available, this is impossible.

The Dochas campus is in need of a major upgrade. Furniture, including bedding, chairs, storage and soft furnishings, should be replaced. It is essential this is done taking into account the needs of the women. Comfortable furniture and bedding, and adequate and appropriate storage space for clothes/personal items should be provided. All washing machines, dryers and all white goods should be replaced, repaired or upgraded. Likewise a major upgrading of shower/toilet areas is urgently required.

We have made repeated representations about this. We were informed that money had been ear-marked to carry out major works on one house, Cedar, during the year. Disappointingly, no works have been carried out anywhere.

The importance of surroundings to the well being of prisoners and to their rehabilitation has been emphasised in several reports and indeed strongly supported at the opening of the excellent facility in Cork.

The Visiting Committee urges that the planned works to upgrade the facility are progressed and completed without further delay.

#### YARDS AND GREEN AREAS.

There are two grassed areas in this small tight campus, one in each yard. A small number of women plant and maintain the flower beds. This work has improved the overall look of the campus as well as providing valuable work/limited training to the three or four women involved.

Despite the efforts of those involved, the grass is rarely cut and the yards generally present an untidy and badly kept appearance. A few benches ( some broken ) and tables are placed around these yards.

A planned and properly funded strategy could be easily devised to provide more usable and attractive open spaces for the women.

In the 2015 Report we regretted the discontinuance of a horticulture course then being conducted on the grass area in the large yard despite the willingness of course providers to continue with this project. The course instructed the women in basic horticulture and

participants were enthusiastic about the course and felt it would help them improve the surroundings for all. Arising from this, the Visiting Committee visited Thornton Hall to see if classes could be organised for a small group of women who would be taken out on a daily basis and trained in horticulture, vegetable growing and market gardening. The facilities there are impressive and currently male prisoners only are taken out daily to Thornton Hall for training.

We made representations to management and to the IPS to devise a system whereby women deemed suitable could also avail of the practical training this superb facility offers. We were informed that there were many obstacles to the implementation of this and we have no doubt that serious strategic planning, personnel availability, appropriate course planning, transport, monitoring and of course security considerations all feed in to these obstacles.

Equally, we have no doubt that similar obstacles and challenges faced the original planners of the scheme for men, and these were clearly overcome.

It is troubling that this or similar opportunities for open air and valuable training cannot be devised for suitable women prisoners.

Women prisoners, unlike their male counterparts, do not have the opportunity to advance to open facilities such as Thornton Hall. This facility, as with the other open facilities, Shelton Abbey, Loughan House and the Training Unit are not available to women prisoners.

The Visiting Committee is strongly of the view that this represents a serious equality deficit in the treatment of women prisoners.

#### MOTHER AND BABY UNIT.

This unit dedicated to the use of mothers and their babies is bright, warm, well ventilated and nicely decorated. It is well stocked. Generally, the requirements of the mothers and their babies have been met.

#### RECEPTION AREA.

This is the unit where the prisoner first comes into contact with the prison system. They shower, receive fresh clothing, have their medical history taken and are then put into a holding cell. They are given information regarding the Dochas, mainly through leaflets compiled by the Visiting Committee, Probation Service, on site supports, schools programmes etc.

The Reception area is bright and clean with a full range of information leaflets and personnel on hand to help women gain some knowledge of the system. We have been informed that some foreign nationals or non-English speakers have had difficulties accessing information

but we are satisfied that every effort is made to help women with literacy problems and non English speakers.

New washing machines and dryers have been installed thus ensuring a steady supply of fresh clean clothing. The staff working in this unit face challenging situations and make every effort to keep the situation calm for the women, particularly those entering the system for the first time.

#### TUCK SHOP.

The high prices in the Tuck Shop have been a constant cause of complaint for many years and this seemed to have developed into an intractable problem.

We are very happy to acknowledge that through the hard work and imaginative endeavours of the staff responsible for the shop, this difficulty has been successfully addressed. This is a heartening development, as heretofore the meagre resources of the prisoners were unnecessarily wasted on over-priced but necessary items which could only be sourced in the shop.

The staff are to be commended for their commitment to successfully resolving this long-standing problem.

#### KITCHENS AND CANTEENS.

The kitchens and canteens are kept to a high standard. They are also continuing to provide work/training facilities to women in the catering trade.

We are happy to confirm that the quality and variety of food available to the women has greatly improved and is of a high standard. It is also in plentiful supply.

#### SCHOOL/WORKSHOPS

In January 2016 the School Principal retired and a new Principal has been appointed.

We would like to record our appreciation to the retired principal who was popular with the women and very pro active in organising relevant activities and classes for them. We wish her successor well and look forward to working with her.

Take up of places in classes appears to be increasing and it is most important that the schedule of this vital resource is not disrupted by staff re-deployment or shortages.

#### PSYCHOLOGY SERVICES.

We wish to acknowledge the appointment of a fulltime, on-site Psychologist to the Dochas Centre in 2016. This is a most welcome development .

A number of progressive programmes have commenced and from speaking with many of the women, they are already reaping considerable benefits.

One such programme is Dialectical Behaviour Therapy. This is an evidenced based intervention and comprises skills coaching in mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation and interpersonal skills developed over twenty four weekly skills coaching sessions. Evidence of skills practise is required between sessions.

The absence from the campus of this vital service was a cause of deep concern to the Visiting Committee. The present appointment is a temporary one but we understand that a permanent appointment will be made in early 2017, following the appropriate procedures.

#### HEALTHCARE.

In our 2016 report we noted the deficit in staffing numbers in Healthcare. The deficit remains. Healthcare is a very busy unit providing not only a full range of primary health care but many other demanding services from examining each new admission, medication management, counselling/referrals, liaising with other services including ISM, constant input into inter-disciplinary teams and many other vital services.

With retirements/transfers we understand the net position currently to be 5 nurses and 1 agency nurse. The full complement should be 6 nurses, ( 3 either side of the roster) and 1 nurse from 8am to 5pm.

We emphasise that this is an extremely busy healthcare provider and would ask that the staffing numbers are regularised.

#### OPTICIAN.

The provision of the services of an Optician continues to be a serious problem. All prisoners are entitled to the same healthcare as those on the GMS scheme in the greater population and this includes access to a dentist and optician.

At present a number of women have been waiting for an appointment to see an Optician for almost six months. It is unfair and wrong that, for example, one woman who lost her glasses while moving room within Dochas, remains without a replacement pair. She is suffering headaches and urgently requires attention. Another prisoner who does intricate therapeutic art work which she is learning at the school has had to discontinue this work because of her deteriorating eyesight.

We urge that this vital service, which these women are entitled to receive, is put in place immediately and continued on a regular basis to ensure there is no further disruption of this essential medical facility.

#### HEALTH AND SAFETY.

An inspection was carried out on fire safety measures etc.

All fire extinguishers were in place and all were in working order. It was confirmed that weekly inspections of fire extinguishers and hoses are carried out and that twenty five fire drills are conducted annually. Full records of all inspections are maintained.

#### CHAPLAINCY.

Two new appointments have been made to the chaplaincy service and we welcome the new chaplains. A long standing chaplain, now retired, remains on in a voluntary capacity. This service is much valued by the women and continues to provide spiritual and pastoral care to those women who wish to avail of it. Throughout the year, both from what we witness ourselves and from speaking with the women, we are aware of the considerable support and comfort they bring to the women at all times but particularly in times of crises or great personal challenge.

The value of this support service cannot be overestimated.

#### DRUGS.

The presence of drugs continues to be a significant problem. This is a matter of deep concern as it fuels aggressive and bullying behaviour endangering prisoners and staff. The Visiting Committee is concerned that this problem seems to be getting worse.

It threatens the well-being of prisoners, disrupts the prison and its operation, engenders fear in many women and poses serious risks for all.

#### BULLYING/VIOLENCE.

Although bullying and violent behaviour is often triggered by substance abuse, this is by no means always the case. Prisoner on prisoner aggression and bullying is prevalent. The relative ease with which women can move from one house to another despite measures to limit this, makes it difficult to protect vulnerable women from the aggressive bullies.

We want to acknowledge the sensitive and largely effective handling by management of these situations. They present undoubtedly serious management challenges, not least of which is finding alternative accommodation in an already overcrowded campus to which to remove the victim.

However, the Visiting Committee would like to see more timely interventions undertaken. Delayed interventions have caused great distress to the victim(s) and have given the perpetrators a sense that they are immune from repercussions, thus allowing this behaviour to continue.

#### STAFF.

We come into constant contact with the staff of Dochas who carry out highly responsible duties in a challenging environment. Theirs is an extremely difficult job and we want to acknowledge the sensitivity, care, and professionalism of the dedicated officers involved. We also wish to emphasise that the majority of the women speak highly of the officers and personnel and acknowledge their positive and crucial input into their progress.

During the year we did however receive a small number of complaints against staff all of which were immediately brought to management's attention. The behaviour complained of was, in the main, perceived by the women as bullying, insensitive or aggressive. Some stated that their complaints were ignored or not dealt with or that they had been 'fobbed off'. One woman felt threatened that privileges would be withdrawn if complaints were made. Others complained of name-calling.

It is wholly unacceptable that any staff member should use his or her position to degrade, threaten or bully any woman within the prison. We have alluded to this before and we believe that on-going and mandatory training for all staff is crucial.

We want to emphasise that the majority of officers undertake their difficult task with sensitivity and care.

#### NUMBERS.

The numbers in Dochas continue to cause problems. Throughout the year they regularly reached 120 and occasionally above that figure. The full capacity of Dochas is 105. This over-crowding is unacceptable and leads to prisoners 'doubling-up', often in very small rooms. It also fuels aggressive behaviour, bullying and serious discontent. It is an ongoing



problem to which we have constantly referred both in discussions with management and in our Reports. It remains frustratingly unresolved.

#### HOMELESSNESS AND ACCESS TO SUPPORTED SAFE ACCOMMODATION.

Throughout 2016 we made representations regarding the ongoing lack of supported and safe accommodation for homeless women released from prison. We fully appreciate that efforts are made to try to find accommodation for the women in need and we realise the extremely difficult task facing the support staff who work valiantly and tirelessly on behalf of these women. We speak from first-hand knowledge of the efforts of these support staff including ISM, Re-Settlement officers and many others, and know the frustrations faced by them on a daily basis. They are often successful in their endeavours but for various reasons their hard work does not always yield the desired results.

We are also at this stage frustrated at the official responses we receive to our representations which includes being constantly told that the support structures are in place to ensure that no woman leaves Dochas homeless. This is frankly not the case.

As recently as two weeks before Christmas 2016 a woman was released from Dochas. She had nowhere to go. She was given money for Bed and Breakfast accommodation for one night and her only option thereafter was 'the nightly hostel'.

We will once again unapologetically repeat our deep concern, viz:

A number of vulnerable women are leaving Dochas, which is State care, homeless. They do not have safe or supported accommodation and only have sufficient funds for Bed&Breakfast accommodation for one night. Thereafter, their only option is to try to get into a nightly hostel. Thus they are immediately thrown back onto the streets, into the milieu of drugs, alcohol, criminality and danger that has often fuelled their problem in the first instance and the hard work of the dedicated staff and supports in Dochas, and of the women themselves, is undone.

We cannot but acknowledge the programmes that have been put in place to help prisoners find supports and services when they leave prison. We acknowledge the positive intent and commitment of the IPS. But the fact remains that these programmes are not all encompassing and not always successful. There are clearly glaring deficits which need to be urgently addressed.

#### CONCLUSION.

The Dochas Visiting Committee acknowledges that improvements and positive programmes have been put in place within the Dochas prison. We believe however, that a great deal of work remains to be done.

Our concerns which were fully and explicitly set out in our 2015 Report, remain:

1. The lack of a gender specific community based open or step down facilities for women deemed suitable for it.
2. The current unacceptable condition of the Dochas campus and buildings.
3. Homelessness and difficulty accessing supported safe accommodation on release.
4. Over-crowding.

We cannot emphasise strongly enough our deep frustration at what we perceive as a failure to adequately address, or at all, these concerns despite their being already embedded in various Reports and Strategies, including those of the Irish Prison Service and the Department of Justice and Equality.

Accordingly we urge that the measures and recommendations set out in The Strategic Review Group Policy Report 2014 and accepted by The Department of Justice and Equality are researched, framed, resourced and implemented without any further delay.

We also ask that The Minister for Justice and Equality establishes a mechanism to ensure the implementation of actions arising from the Strategic Group's report which would report to the Minister.

Anne M Delaney.

Chairperson.

Noel Cloak.

Christine Ryan.

January 2017