

Limerick Prison Visiting Committee Annual Report 2008

We the members of Limerick Prison Visiting Committee are pleased to present our **annual report**. The committee held monthly meetings in conjunction with interim meetings and other visits to the prison. We met with individual prisoners, both male and female at various locations throughout the Prison, with an average of three/four offenders presenting themselves to the committee per month. The following is a list of the issues which were of concern to offenders and which were discussed at the meetings:

1. Transfers to other places of detention,
2. Loss of privileges/restoration of lost remission,
3. Temporary Release applications,
4. Concern of offenders re: visitors being denied access under the new search procedures,
5. Family visits,
6. Medical treatment,
7. General complaints .

Female Prison

The committee has again noted that the bed capacity in the female prison has been exceeded throughout the year. We again recommend that the capacity of the female wing be maintained at 12 in order to ensure less pressure on staff and offenders in this confined area or alternatively extra accommodation should be made available.

New Medical and Educational Facilities

The committee welcomes the provision and opening of the new educational and medical wing. This is an excellent facility offering state of the art equipment. The provision of 10 classrooms/craft rooms, music recording room, kitchen, woodwork room, gym and hall, and library have all been responsible for the marked increase in offender numbers availing of the facilities. The Principal teacher has informed the committee that there has been an estimated three-fold increase in numbers attending classes and this has been a result of the new structures, facilities, equipment and the support of teaching and prison staff.

The provision of enhanced, and again, state of the art medical facilities and equipment is also welcomed by the committee. There are now a range of excellent facilities to support all medical, psychiatric and dental services. The Probation and Welfare Service and outside support agencies are also well facilitated in this new wing.

Infrastructural Projects

Yet again, following on from previous recommendations, the committee calls on the Irish Prison Service to continue with their plans to upgrade and provide new infrastructure and facilities at the prison. The committee recommends that in-cell sanitation currently in C, D and E wings be extended to the two remaining wings, which are without same at present i.e. A Wing and B Wing. The committee again recommends this as a matter of priority and urgency.

Catering

Members of the committee visited the catering department during the year and found the food to be of high quality and the catering facilities to be of the highest standard for cleanliness and hygiene.

Probation Service

The committee are aware that following the departure of one of the probation officers, a vacancy now exists in the Probation Service at Limerick Prison. There is presently 1 full-time probation officer with a senior probation officer visiting at various times during each week. This is a vital service and the committee is hopeful that an early appointment will be made to fill the vacancy. The committee met with members of the Probation Service during their monthly meeting in April and were informed of the important role that the service provides. The Probation Officers had found at that time, that the short time-frame for seeing offenders was causing difficulties, however the provision of enhanced interviewing facilities has now negated this difficulty.

New Screening/Search Procedures

The committee welcomes and supports the implementation and operation of the new screening and searching procedures, recently introduced at Limerick Prison. We commend the Irish Prison Service, the Governor and his staff on the continued work of stemming the supply of contraband items and drugs into the prison. We also note the introduction of sniffer dogs at the prison and we are hopeful of their continued success.

Psychiatric Service

The committee is of the view that a number of offenders committed to prison, have psychiatric problems and should be treated at a central mental unit/facility, where the necessary treatment/counselling should be made available, rather than within the mainstream prison environment.

We would reiterate our hope that imprisonment is not being used as a containment area for such ill persons who could be better treated in the community setting.

We also recommend that continued treatment should be made available to offenders with mental health issues, post release from prison.

Meeting with members of the Limerick Homeless Persons Centre

Ms. Una Hogan and Ms. Mary Murphy of The Limerick Homeless Persons Centre met with the committee and gave a detailed and informative account of the services which they provide. They informed the members that The Homeless Persons Centre is a joint initiative between Limerick City Council and the Mid-Western Health Board and it co-ordinates the provision of homeless services for the Limerick City area. They outlined the level of accommodation which was available at present for homeless persons and spoke of their close liaison with the Probation Service in connection with homeless persons on their release from prison.

The committee found this meeting to be very informative and it gave an interesting insight into the very valuable work and services provided by The Homeless Persons Centre.

The committee intends to continue to meet with outside support agencies, in the future, in order to gain a greater appreciation of the valuable services they provide to offenders both within the prison and on their release.

Visit to Mountjoy Prison

The committee visited Mountjoy Prison and held their monthly meeting there on 3rd July. Following the meeting the members of the committee were given a tour of the prison, which was both interesting and informative and offered the members the opportunity to gain an insight into the running and management of other prisons and view the practices which are occurring there. The members were pleasantly surprised with the excellent conditions for offenders at the Dochas Center. The committee would like to extend their gratitude to Governor Lonergan, Governor McMahon and the staff of Mountjoy.

Employment

The committee is pleased to report the enhanced availability of employment for offenders at Limerick Prison. We note that a number of workshops are operating within the prison such as; Industrial Skills, Industrial Cleaning, Building Skills, and Computer Workshop. While the Laundry and Kitchen also provide employment for offenders. There has been an average of 100 offenders attending employment daily and most workshops offer certification in various skills. As per our report last year, we as a committee feel that employment for offenders would go a long way to the Irish Prison Services commitment " to managing custodial sentences in a way which encourages and supports prisoners".

Persons committed to Limerick Prison on Fines/Debts

The committee are of the opinion that the committal to prison of persons on fines/debts are putting a huge strain on the resources and facilities at Limerick Prison. The committee calls for some other alternative measures to deal with such offences, rather than imprisonment.

Condolences

The members also would like to express our sincere sympathy to the families of staff, members and offenders who passed away during the last year.

In conclusion, the committee would like to express their thanks and gratitude to those members of the visiting committee whose tenure has expired and wish them well for the future. We would also like to welcome the new and re-appointed members to the committee. We thank the Governor and staff at Limerick Prison for their help and assistance throughout the year.

