

**VISITING COMMITTEE**

**MIDLANDS PRISON**

**ANNUAL REPORT 2017**

## CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. PRISONERS' ISSUES	3
2.1 Access to Enhancement Regime/School	4
2.2 Inter-Prison Transfers	4
2.3 Water Quality	4
2.4 Prison Visits	4
2.5 Response to Complaints	4
2.6 Tuck Shop	4
2.7 Assaults	4
3. SERVICE & PROGRAMME UPDATES	5
3.1 Resettlement Service	5
3.2 Building Better Lives (BBL) Programme	5
3.2 Work & Training Area	6
3.4 Social & Community Involvement	6
3.5 Independent Living Landing	6
4. MEDICAL SERVICES	6
4.1 Safe Talk Programme	7
5. EDUCATION	7
5.1 Curriculum	7
5.2 Participation	8
5.3 Accreditation	8
5.4 Red Cross & First Aid Programme	8
5.5 GAISCE Award	8
5.6 Other Areas	8
5.7 New initiatives	9
6. PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE	9
6.1 Chaplaincy Service	9
7. MIDLANDS VISITOR CENTRE	9
8. DEATH IN CUSTODY	10
9. INDUSTRIAL AREA/WORKSHOPS	10
9.1 Certification	10
10. VISITING COMMITTEE INITIATIVES	10
10.1 Unannounced Visits	10
11. V.C. VISITS BETWEEN PRISONS	10
12. CONCLUSION	11

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Midlands Prison is a closed, medium security prison for adult males. It is the committal prison for counties Wicklow, Wexford, Carlow, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois, Offaly, Meath and Westmeath. The prison population in the Midlands prison is in excess of 800 (at the time of writing – March 2018, there were 837 prisoners in custody). Of these, approximately 46% (389) have been convicted of sex offences. The Midlands Prison is the primary prison in the country for convicted sex offenders, holding 73% of all prisoners in the State convicted of such offences.

The purpose of The Midlands Prison Visiting Committee is to ensure that all prisoners in the care of the Irish Prison Service at the Midlands Prison are treated fairly and humanely and also with dignity and respect.

The Visiting Committee of the Midlands Prison in 2017 consisted of the following members: Joe Leahy, Ted Laffey, John Kelly, Derek Mulcahy, Anna Tuohy-Halligan and Liam Ahearn (appointed in December 2017).

The committee convenes in the prison to conduct meetings, meet with any prisoner who requests a meeting with us, and to relay feedback to those same prisoners. The committee may also conduct an unannounced visit and will, if requested by prison management, visit the prison on other occasions.

On our many visits during 2017, we met prisoners at their request, and listened to their concerns, complaints and requests privately and in confidence. We raised all issues with the authorities at governor level, and sought to bring all issues to a satisfactory conclusion.

Based on what we have seen on our many visits to the prison, it is our belief that the staff and all those working within the Midlands prison provide a service that has the prisoner's welfare at heart.

## **2. PRISONERS' ISSUES**

In 2017, the committee carried out inspections in most areas of the prison as well as meeting with 39 prisoners during the course of the year to hear their concerns. Some of the issues raised included:

- Access to Enhanced Regime and School
- Inter-Prison Transfer Requests
- Water Quality
- Prison Visits/Treatment of Visitors
- Response to Complaints
- Tuck Shop
- Assaults

### *2.1 Access to Enhancement Regime and School*

Some prisoners complained that the lack of school and job opportunities led to their inability to achieve enhancement status. The Visiting Committee raised this issue with the Governor and the Committee was satisfied that fair procedures were followed.

The school is available but not every prisoner wishes to avail of same.

One of the constraining circumstances being that there are only a limited number of jobs available at any one time within the prison. Segregation of prisoners can also lead to issues in this regard.

### *2.2 Inter-Prison Transfers*

The Irish Prison Service is responsible for the handling of inter-prison transfers which are dealt with on a case by case basis. This information was given by the Visiting Committee to those prisoners who raised this as an issue.

### *2.3 Water Quality*

A very small number of prisoners complained about water quality, which on investigation by the Visiting Committee was determined to be “hard” water. The Visiting Committee was satisfied that the water quality was sufficient and on par with water delivered in many other areas of the country who experience hard water.

### *2.4 Prison Visits*

Prison visits in the main are going well. On investigation by the Visiting Committee, it was determined that some prisoners were denied visits following attempts to bring contraband into the prison. As a result, some visits were denied or suspended.

### *2.5 Response to Complaints*

Concern was raised by some prisoners that there was a lack of information in responses to complaints made to the authorities. While understanding the prisoner concerns, the committee was assured by the prison authorities that proper procedures were being followed in the prison regarding the processing of complaints.

### *2.6 Tuck Shop*

Some prisoners complained about the price of goods in the prison tuck shop. The Visiting Committee investigated this and everything was found to be in order.

### *2.7 Assaults*

Assaults unfortunately, are part and parcel of prison life. The Visiting Committee has informed any prisoner complaining of being assaulted that they should report the matter to the Gardaí as soon as possible – as is their right. The Committee commends the prison staff in their professional dealings in this regard.

### **3. SERVICE AND PROGRAMME UPDATES**

#### *3.1 Resettlement Service*

The Resettlement Service is for prisoners both pre and post release. The Service aims to help identify resettlement needs and facilitate any supports the prisoner may require. The Resettlement Service helps develop pre-release and post-release plans that offer the best chance of success to the prisoner on release from prison.

The Service operates through on-to-one meetings between the prisoner and the Resettlement Coordinator. It is voluntary and person-centered. The service works with other services in the prison: probation, counsellors, psychology, teachers, etc. in order to provide the best service to the prisoner.

The Resettlement Support Worker offers support & guidance in;

- Planning for release
- Providing information and support in areas such as available benefits and housing
- Support with accessing relevant services on release

#### *3.2 Building Better Lives (BBL) Programme*

The BBL program works with individuals convicted of sexual violence and is currently provided in both Arbour Hill and the Midlands Prison. With the programme based on international best practice, the Visiting Committee is encouraged to hear that both prisons are currently working together to provide a National Programme of Excellence, aimed at reducing the risk of re-offending and improving public protection.

The BBL programme is delivered over three stages, with the first stage “Exploring Better Lives” (EBL) facilitated in the Midlands Prison by the IPS Psychology Service and the Probation Service. Stages Two and Three are delivered in Arbour Hill prison – with prisoners transferring to Arbour Hill to complete the programme.

In 2016/2017, 17 prisoners engaged in the BBL programme in the Midlands Prison with a further 12 prisoners completing the programme.

The Visiting Committee accepts that while these numbers appear low, the capacity available in the Midlands Prison for participants is just 35 per year. Additionally, the criteria for participation in the programme prevents many Prisoners from engaging in the programme. Some Prisoners refuse to engage; others are assessed and considered more suitable for other (available) interventions; more are serving shorter sentences and therefore would not be able to complete the programme.

The Visiting Committee commends those involved in the assessment and delivery of the BBL programme and is interested to see how the programme engagement develops in the coming years.

### *3.3 Work & Training Area*

The Visiting Committee noted the introduction of a stonemasonry course in the Work and Training Area in 2017. This course took place one day a week in the Building Skills workshop and was very well received by all participants on the initial course. We understand that this course will continue into 2018.

The Furniture Restoration training which was introduced last year (2016) continues with the support and co-operation of Kevin Mullally - a furniture restoration expert. The Visiting Committee has been informed that plans are in place to offer a new course to members of the travelling community in early 2018. We understand that this will take place in one of the workshops over the new kitchen and that it is being offered as a joint venture between the Midlands Work and Training Area and the Gate Service (IASIO).

The Committee has been informed that the picture framing, engraving and multimedia workshops remained ongoing during 2017, although available resources restrict the attendants to 6 prisoners at a time.

### *3.4 Social and Community Involvement*

The Workshops engaged in community/social projects again this year. Of particular note was their involvement in the Durrow Scarecrow Festival, where prisoners from the Midlands Prisons created an enactment of a "prison escape" complete with props made within the prison workshops. This proved to be an enormous success and the Committee would hope to see something similar take place in 2018.

### *3.5 Independent Living Landing*

The Visiting Committee was pleased to visit the Independent Living Landing in "B" Division of the prison, where there is a capacity for 38 prisoners to enjoy a more relaxed regime following recognition of their good behaviour and co-operation with the prison authorities.

At the time of writing, 35 prisoners are using the "semi-open" social environment which gives access to a library, recreational area and canteen. The prisoners on this landing also eat meals together under an enhanced regime.

## **4. MEDICAL SERVICES**

The committee has been advised that there was no change to the number of staff working within the healthcare area of the Midlands Prison during 2017.

The committee is pleased to note that their previous concerns re staffing in this area have been addressed, and commend the Prison Medical Services team.

The Committee noted that there was one critical incident during the year where a prisoner was seriously assaulted and sustained life-threatening injuries. The quick

response of Chief Gerard Manley and his team, in getting the injured prisoner into a prison van immediately and taking him to the nearby hospital, rather than wait on an ambulance, undoubtedly saved the prisoner's life. The committee commends the prison management for their rapid action and note that the location of the hospital – being so close to the prison, was an important element in avoiding a fatality in this instance.

#### *4.1 SafeTalk Program*

SafeTalk is a short training program that provides the tools to identify persons with thoughts of suicide and trains people how to respond in such situations. Having seen the increasing awareness of mental health issues within the overall prison population, the Midlands Visiting Committee recommended in 2016 that this program be introduced in the Midlands Prison. The Visiting Committee is gratified to note that the Midlands Prison authorities continued to deliver the SafeTalk program in 2017 with training delivered to prisoners on 3 separate dates.

## **5. EDUCATION**

### *5.1 Curriculum*

The Midlands Prison Education Unit provides a wide curriculum of subjects to prisoners. The levels on offer in 2017 ranged from basic (QQI level 1) through to and including University level.

In 2017, the subjects offered to prisoners included:

- English
- Mathematics
- Communications
- Computer Studies
- Woodwork
- Metalwork
- Motor Vehicle Technology
- Home Economics
- Physical Education
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- Languages (French/German/Spanish)
- Arts & Crafts (incl. Pottery and Stained Glass)
- Music
- Drama
- Education Guidance
- Sociology
- Accounting
- Horticulture
- Personal development

## *5.2 Participation*

There were 1,045 unique students through the Midlands Education Service during 2017, with 446 currently enrolled for classes.

## *5.3 Accreditation*

252 students presented for external QQI assessment in 2017 as follows:

- Level 1: 18 students (an increase of 16 over 2016)
- Level 2: 33 (increase of 24)
- Level 3: 130 (decrease of 25)
- Level 4: 46 (increase of 14)
- Level 5: 35 (increase of 9)

In addition, 7 (increase of 1) prisoners sat the Leaving Certificate in 2017.

Students sitting their Junior Cert examination numbered 23. There were no Junior Cert students in 2016.

2 students studied with the Open University and one with the University of Cardiff.

The Visiting Committee is very pleased to acknowledge the increase in the number of prisoners engaging in the Education Unit in 2017 and commend the programme providers and all staff working in this area on the work accomplished this year.

## *5.4 Red Cross Programme*

17 prisoners participated in the Red Cross Programme during 2017.

## *5.5 GAISCE Award*

GAISCE - the President's Award, is Ireland's National Challenge Award for young people. It is awarded by the President of Ireland to those outside the Defence Forces or An Garda Síochána.

The Visiting Committee congratulates the 4 prisoners who received the prestigious Gaisce Award on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017 - 3 of whom were recipients of the Bronze Gaisce Award while 1 received the Silver Award.

## *5.6 Other Areas*

Reflecting the general increase in the number of prisoners engaging in courses offered within the Midlands Prison, both the Pre-Release Programme and the Anger Management Programmes were well-attended in 2017, with 72 students completing the Pre-Release Programme and 76 completing the Anger Management Programme.

There was also a number of entries into the Listowel Writers Section in 2017.



### *5.7 New Initiatives*

The Visiting Committee was pleased to see many new initiatives introduced by the Education Unit during the year. These included the following programmes:

- Start Your Own Business Programme (Laois Enterprise Office)
- Workshops with Mental Health Ireland
- Focus Groups – Suicide Awareness
- Parenting programme
- Cardiac First responder Course
- Soft Skills programme
- A number of visiting Speakers such as Mr Kenny Egan, who spoke about Addiction Awareness

## **6. PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE**

The Visiting Committee notes that the prison-based Counselling Service is provided by two full time counsellors in Midlands prison and a part-time counsellor in Portlaoise.

Several new initiatives, described above (section 7.7) focussed on mental health

Addiction Counselling is available in the prison. Initial referral to the counselling service can come from any source (self-referrals, other services/ individuals both inside and outside the prison). All referrals are initially assessed by an Addiction Nurse who will identify those suitable for addiction counselling and refer them to the provided MQI counselling service.

### *6.1 Chaplaincy*

The Committee are very appreciative of the care and support offered to prisoners by the very dedicated Prison Chaplains, who play a very important role in prison life.

## **7. MIDLANDS VISITOR CENTRE**

The Midlands Prison Visitor Centre provides a range of information and reception services for prisoners' families and friends.

The prison facilitated a total of 25,998 visits to prisoners during 2017 – a decrease of 4.4% (over 1,200 visits) on the previous year (27,279). Visitor numbers comprised 43,733 adults and 9,805 children.

## **8. DEATH IN CUSTODY**

3 prisoners died in custody in the Midlands Prison during 2017. The Midlands Visiting Committee would like to express our deepest sympathy to those bereaved.

## **9. INDUSTRIAL AREA/WORKSHOPS**

The Midlands Prison provides a number of workshops offering employment and training for a number of prisoners during their time in prison.

### *9.1 Certification*

Certification courses were offered in the following areas in 2017:

- Building Skills (Construction to Diploma level) City and Guilds
- Welding (Manual Metal Arc) City and Guilds
- Laundry (Guild of Launderers)
- Horticulture (QQI Level 3)

## **10. VISITING COMMITTEE INITIATIVES**

### *10.1 Un-announced Visits to Midlands Prison*

The Visiting Committee made a number of un-announced visits to the Prison during the year. On each occasion, they inspected different areas of the prison and had nothing untoward to report as a result of these visits.

## **11. VISITING COMMITTEE VISITS BETWEEN PRISONS**

Members of the Midlands Visiting Committee visited Limerick Prison on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2017. The Visiting Committee would like to express our sincere thanks to the Governors and staff of Limerick Prison. Our gratitude is also extended to Caroline Allen of the Midlands Prison for her help in organising the visit.

This proved to be beneficial to our Committee.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Visiting Committee was satisfied with the standards witnessed in the provision of care and welfare offered to the prison population during the year.

We would like to thank Caroline Allen, Governor's Secretary and all the other Prison staff for their support and assistance throughout 2017.

We would also like to thank the Governors and Prison Management team for all their dedication and assistance to us during the year.

We were very pleased to see the return of Ted Laffey to the Visiting Committee in February and also welcome Liam Ahearn who joined the Visiting Committee in December.

We look forward to working alongside all once again in 2018.

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Joe Leahy  
Chairperson, Midlands Visiting Committee