

## **MOUNTJOY PRISON VISITING COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2006**

### **Introduction:**

The Visiting Committee (VC) met on 12 occasions during 2006. In the course of said meetings we met with prisoners, governors, chaplains, educational staff, probation services, medical and psychiatric personnel.

As has been highlighted in previous reports there continues to be no in-cell sanitation in the main prison however the Committee welcomes the improvements that have been made to sanitary conditions at the end of each wing in recent years.

During the year the Prison was severely overcrowded with at one point in August there being 515 inmates, resulting in prisoners sleeping on mattresses on the floors of the cells and the VC finds this to be unacceptable in 2006.

The VC would like to express its sympathy to the families of the prisoners who died in the prison during the year. The VC understands that official investigations are ongoing with regard to these and as such no further comment will be made herein.

The VC recognises and welcomes plans to move the Prison to a greenfield, purpose built site. However we also recognise that this process will take a number of years and that in the interim we would appeal for a number of infrastructural improvements to be made. In particular we welcome the improvements being made to the Medical Unit, the School, the Holding Cells and the refurbishment and re-opening of A wing.

During the year there was a radical change in the work practices in the Prison. These changes caused considerable disruption resulting in the curtailment of services including the school, library and opportunities for compassionate release.

### **New Work Practices:**

Within the last twelve months new work practices have been instituted in the Irish Prison Service. As a result of said changes many of the services available to prisoners have been reduced. The issue is not a simple one in an institution such as Mountjoy where rostering and staff scheduling are complex matters which are further complicated by the level of institutional absenteeism.

When staff fail to attend for work (particularly at short notice) educational and vocational services are curtailed in favour of security. The reality in Mountjoy is that this is happening on a daily basis, the reality being that these new practices do not seem to work in Mountjoy.

All our comments in this report are predicated on this fact. We would appeal to the Minister to ensure staffing levels are sufficient to meet the demand.

### **Library:**

The prison library is well equipped to provide a wide variety of choice for the prison population. Unfortunately the staffing pressure in the Prison has resulted in a further reduction in the already sparse opening hours (as previously highlighted in our reports). It is the VC's hope that this situation can be reversed and more use be made of the library particularly in the evenings.

### **Educational Facilities:**

There is a wonderful school situated in Mountjoy Prison that offers a wide curriculum. Amongst the subjects offered there are basic literacy and computer skills as well as the mosaic and ever-popular art classes. There are also many of the traditional State Examination subjects on offer to the students as well as specific courses in anger management and pre release training. The average class size is 7. There are approximately 150 prisoners on the books of the school and daily attendance levels are between 60 and 70 prisoners. Regretfully there is no longer provision for the evening classes that were quite well attended in the past. There are FETAC modules run in the school as well as the opportunity to take the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations. Currently there are 6 students enrolled at various stages in Open University Courses. Accreditation ceremonies are held during the year and this is a wonderful part of the year for the prisoners who achieve at the school. The provision of an even better choice of subjects to the prisoners could happen if there was more funding made available to the Education Unit in Mountjoy Prison. The staff are to be commended on the great work they do which is much enjoyed by the prison population.

There are 22 teachers in the school. These are employed by the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee. There is a new subject—ESOL—which is English language classes for non native speakers. There is a large uptake in these classes. Over the course of 2006 about 178 students took part in a school program. There are usually 8 teachers available every day—the others sometimes are working in other prisons as well. The school day is from 930 to 4pm and there are breaks from 12.15 to 14.15. The absenteeism of staff affects operation of the school as already mentioned.

### **Drama:**

Very unfortunately there was no dramatic production this year. The VC understands this was a result of staff shortages. The drama is an important event in the Prison year as a social outlet, a form of therapy and above all for its rehabilitative effect. The committee hopes that its production will be facilitated in future years.

### **Medical:**

The new medical unit is being built at present and will be completed by March/April 07. The VC is concerned that the visiting committee, the medical staff, doctors and other professionals in conjunction with the management of Mountjoy should have an input into the design and facilities of the new medical unit for the benefit of inmates, staff and administrators.

Having interviewed Doctors, Nurses, Staff and Inmates, the following are the major points that urgently need to be addressed.

- A proper bloods room. This must be a sterile area to eliminate chances of cross contamination.
- A proper filing system. With such a moving population it's important to have an up to date modern system as the present system is most unsatisfactory.
- Consulting rooms to be constructed in such a way that there will be complete confidentiality for patients and the safety of staff.
- We would recommend there should be a staff room with lockers and showers for both male and female staff members.

On an ongoing basis, consideration should be given to employing a specialist professional cleaning company to carry out regular cleaning of the medical unit, to ensure compliance with acute hospital standards.

### **Work Parties Projects:**

They originated approx 30 years ago for the purpose of building and renovating community centres, scout halls, football pavilions etc., in the deprived areas of Dublin. They achieved this with a 30% savings on cost. These are made up of 6 prisoners and two officers. The Rehabilitative value of these schemes cannot be overvalued, as there is an opportunity to learn how to hold down a regular job. Some of the prisoners go on to become foremen and site clerks after the programme. Absenteeism is low on the scheme. No project has run overtime except where funds have not been available.

We understand that the future viability of this scheme is threatened by staff shortages.

### **Work Shops:**

There are various workshops available in the main prison but once again staff shortages means that there is not an opportunity for as many prisoners as would like to undertake work in them. The dignity and right of offenders who want to work should be respected by serious consideration of allocating additional resources to this particular part of the prison. Once again the staff who are working in the workshops are to be commended on the dedication and commitment they show in the face of difficult circumstances.

### **Drugs:**

We welcome the commitment of the Minister to tackle the drug problem in Irish Prisons.

Unfortunately there is still a problem existing whereby drugs are getting into the Prison and there is relatively easy access to drugs for the prison population.

Mountjoy is the largest methadone maintenance clinic in the country. The other prisons in the country cap the number of methadone maintenance prisoners resulting in a concentration in Mountjoy.

The trustees and non drug users are now under huge pressure to bring in drugs. They are intimidated/ threatened personally or by phone. Their families are also threatened. Prisoners who are allowed out on temporary release also come under huge pressure to smuggle drugs back into the Prison.

It is the view of this committee that the only way to protect the innocent is to introduce screened visits as part of an overall drug policy. Limiting this to known users or mules will only serve to increase the pressure on the innocent inmates.

Sniffer Dogs – the committee welcomes the news of the introduction of a sniffer dog into the Irish Prison Service but it is our strongly held view that there should be a full time presence in Mountjoy to counteract the smuggling of illicit substances into the Prison.

A large number of drugs are getting in over the walls from the North Circular Road. The provision of more CCTV cameras as well as an increased Garda presence in such areas may help this problem somewhat. The committee welcomes the erection of nets around the Prison perimeter to counteract the airborne insertion of Drugs into the Prison.

As part of an overall policy to combat drugs in the Prison the committee strongly recommends the provision of increased resources to the Detox program which relative to the current drug population is inadequate. The committee understands that further space in the medical unit is to be provided for this purpose and welcome this development.

### **Mobile Phones:**

It appears to the VC that the possession of phones and in particular SIM cards is widespread within the prison. It is the view of the committee that these are being used to assist in the smuggling of drugs into the prison. More seriously it has come to the committee's attention that the phones may be also used for more serious organised crime. This is having an obviously negative impact on prisoner welfare.

Technology is available to provide a solution to this issue by way of blocking the signal to the phones and it continues to be our recommendation that the prison authorities be provided with sufficient resources to facilitate the introduction of mobile phone interceptors in the prison without delay. We understand that there are developments afoot in this area and we appeal for these to be installed without delay.

### **Kitchen:**

The committee recognises the importance of a healthy and balanced diet for the inmates. The kitchen area in Mountjoy Prison is operated to the highest standards in hygiene and service. Management and Staff have been recognised for their professional

approach at all times and indeed they have been successful in gaining many prestigious awards over the years.

### **Improvement / Changes since 2005**

- New water boilers for the tea to serve the different wings have been purchased.
- There is a menu for coeliac and halals and one muslim prisoner is now working in the kitchen and helps with cooking their special foods.
- The overall menu was updated in June.
- Cooking oil from the kitchen is recycled
- Cardboard packaging is also recycled.
- There is a great interest in recycling tins but they would need a machine to compact them.
- Waste Packaging could also be cut down upon, if similar polygall (25 Litre milk) containers were installed in the prison. (Same as that which operates in the Medical Unit).

A number of small infrastructural requirements were highlighted to us by the staff in the kitchen/bakery and we recommend these be provided for in the coming year.

### **Dóchas Centre:**

The Dóchas Centre has capacity for up to 90 female inmates. Whilst not the same level of overcrowding exists as in the male prison the risk is real that services may suffer if numbers are not controlled.

Of particular concern is the housing of non nationals awaiting deportation in the Dochas Centre. This results in short term overcrowding and the reduction of services which can be provided. We urge that other facilities be used for this purpose.

In general the facilities in the Dochas centre are of a very high standard. Indeed the VC hope that the women will make better use of all the available services in the future. It is the view of the committee that many of the women suffer through lack of routine.

### **Miscellaneous:**

The committee regrets the decision of the Prison Service to discontinue the Christmas Loan Scheme for Prisoners.

The committee continue to be disappointed by the lack of communication from the Prison authorities in regard to important events which occur in the Prison. Too often we read about such happenings in the media.

### **Conclusion:**

We recommend that a way be found to deactivate mobile phone signals coming into the prison. The introduction of screened visits, sniffer dogs and extra Gardaí is also recommended to assist in the fight against drugs entering the prison.

Although Mountjoy Prison is entering its twilight years, it is the strongly held opinion of this committee that targeted spending in several important areas could make a real and significant difference to the welfare of the prisoners.

The staffing issues highlighted repeatedly in this report must be acted upon in the coming year.

We acknowledge the competence and co-operation of the Governor and management and wish to record a special thanks to the secretaries who served the committee during the year . We are resolved to serve our function in full and look forward to working in close harmony with the Minister and the Irish Prison Service.

Go mbeirimid beo ar am seo arís.

Members of Mountjoy Visiting Committee:

Stephen Langton (Chairperson)

Paddie Connellan (Vice Chairperson)

Bernie Nolan

Betty Minihane

Carmel Bolger

Eoin Hardiman

Liam Hogan

Niall Tempany

Nicola Byrne

Noel Cloak