

Cork Prison Visiting Committee

Annual Report 2014

The Cork Prison Visiting Committee met on a monthly basis during 2014, and visited the prison on interim visits between meetings. The committee members met prisoners at their request and processed their requests through the Governor. They conveyed back all responses, where appropriate. The committee noted a significant drop in the number of prisoners requesting a meeting with the V.C in 2014.

The main issues raised by prisoners were transfer to other prisons, medical problems, mental health issues, and problems with other prisoners and/or staff. Overcrowding remains a serious concern in Cork Prison, but management have succeeded in keeping numbers down to an average of 220, which is a challenge as the prison has to take committals on demand.

The Prison V.C are very pleased to report that the new prison is visibly progressing, and we hope it will be ready to take prisoners from December 2015. This should alleviate the pressure of overcrowding, which has been the hallmark of Cork Prison for many years.

Education and Training

2014 was another successful year at the Education unit of Cork Prison. The unit continues to offer a broad based curriculum, including general subjects, art, pottery, music, choir, computers, languages, cookery, crafts, woodwork, and physical and health education. 3 prisoners sat the Leaving Certificate in June 2014. 178 certificates were awarded in FETAC, and 20 prisoners obtained a Safe Pass Certificate. The Education unit also had graduates in the community based Health and First Aid Course (Red Cross).

New initiatives in the Education unit include the production of a DVD on bullying in prison, as well as a pilot project with the Cork Traveller Visibility Group. The DVD on bullying used a script devised and written by the prisoners, but professional actors were used in filming. The DVD was launched by the Director General, Michael Donnellan, in November.

John O Sullivan, a tutor from the Traveller Visibility group worked with the prisons Basic Education Tutor to offer classes once a week to members of the

Travelling Community.

The Education Unit continues to participate in multi-disciplinary activities with Education staff represented on the Library Committee, Physical Education Committee, UCAS, The Listening Project, CBHFA, and Health and Safety committee.

Post Release Project

This project under Frances Russell continues to work with homeless prisoners, to ensure that nobody leaves the prison without accommodation. Ms. Russell also offers support with social welfare applications, Education and Training Needs. The main challenges facing the Post Release Project on a daily basis are Homelessness, Mental health issues, Addictions, Education, and Social welfare. The Post Release Project continues to work very closely with Focus Ireland in-reach service, as well as the Homeless unit, Homeless Hostels, Housing Dept in Cork City Council and the Dept of Community and Family Affairs. The crisis in housing shows no sign of abating and will continue to affect the prison population with regard to numbers if the weather deteriorates during the winter period.

Access to mental health services is a huge issue for prisoners on release. Often prisoners with mental health issues, who are in chronic need of hospitalisation or long term residential care, are more often placed in a homeless hostel, which is totally unsuited to their needs. Prisoners also have difficulties accessing services when they are deemed to fall between mental health, addiction and behavioural issues. The Post Release Project dealt with 210 prisoners between January and November 2014. They supported the resettlement of 72 homeless prisoners, they provided access to treatment and rehabilitation to 27 prisoners, 22 prisoners were able to access community education programmes and community employment schemes. The project also helped 150 prisoners to access social welfare entitlements and 60 prisoners to access medical and mental health services. Family support was provided to 5 prisoners on release, and housing issues were resolved for 30 prisoners on release. The main aim of the Post Release Service for 2015 is to continue to provide a comprehensive Post Release programme to support rehabilitation, reintegration, and resettlement of ex-prisoners by liaising with voluntary and statutory agencies on their behalf.

The Computer Print Workshop opened in Cork Prison in May 2007. It provides certification in the ECDL License, and in the last 8 years has presented over

140 certificates to prisoners in Cork Prison from the Irish Computer Society. The certificates consist of Equal skills, ECDL Start, ECDL, Advanced ECDL, and Expert Certificate. The course run is a fully Certified Course from ICS. The workshop itself is a non profit making enterprise and its sole function is to provide education to prisoners. The Computer Workshop has 10 computers, all equipped with Microsoft Office. There are limited spaces available, but the majority of prisoners entering the workshops are enthusiastic, though many have little or no expertise or knowledge of computers. The workshop itself is located in the Educational Area of the prison.

Other Agencies

The Dillons Cross Project for female relatives of prisoners moved to a new premises this year. This has allowed the programme to expand and now includes counselling for the women and access to outside groups such as Citizens Information, MABS, etc. This move has led to increased costs and the Dillons Cross Project continues to seek support for this unique initiative.

The Grattan Project Addiction Counselling Service was set up in October 1998 using funds obtained from the Cork Local Drugs Task Force. This project was a Probation Service Initiative and is currently fully funded by the probation service. The primary function of the project is to provide addiction counselling/addiction service to clients of the probation service. The project has been providing a counselling service to inmates of Cork Prison for more than 15 years. The Grattan Project also plays a key role in the U.C.A.S scheme. In 2015, they hope to continue to provide a service to inmates of Cork Prison who wish to engage with the project.

The Cork Alliance Centre works with individuals released from prison, with the support of both the Probation Service and the I.P.S. The Centre provides support to make a fresh start, both in terms of reducing offending, and increasing positive participation in individual, family and community life. The services of the Cork Alliance Centre focus on people who choose to voluntarily access supports as they seek to desist from crime. On average 70 service users at any time access the supports of Cork Alliance. In 2014, they worked with 214 people, 87% men and 13% women. Together, with their offending behaviors, their primary presenting needs were identified as 77% Mental health and Addiction issues, and 23% reintegration. As an extension of the programme in late 2014, Cork Alliance began a process of inter-prison and programme area

referrals between Cork and Limerick. This two-way process better serves Limerick regional prisoners who serve their sentence in Cork Prison and vice versa. To date, there have been 214 referrals to the U.C.A.S Supported Release Programme, with 159 in 2014 alone.

The IASIO works with clients of the Criminal Justice System in the community and prisons across Ireland. Three separate programmes work to assist clients to progress their lives by providing a professional support system. The work of this service is mainly built on desistance, a belief that people can and do stop committing crime. The services include the Linkage service and the Resettlement service, both of which work in Cork Prison. The Gate service is a third service, and this service is available in other prisons in Ireland with a post in Cork Prison to commence early in 2015. The Linkage service is a Guidance and Placement service that offers a weekly clinic to prisoners through the Probation service. It is fully funded by the Probation service, and the other programmes are funded through the Irish Prison service. In 2014, several Changing Course programmes ran in Cork Prison, and the feedback from the participants was very positive. The uptake of the programme is good and the retention and completion rates for participants are high, with a waiting list for the next programme.

New Initiatives

Cork Prison Information Booklet was made available this year. All services, outside organisations, Volunteer groups and individuals as well as activities within the prison were detailed in this booklet. It is hoped it will facilitate improved access to services for prisoners. Another recent initiative is the production of a new DVD which outlines the rehabilitative, educational and training services available to prisoners. The V.C would like to acknowledge the commitment and support of Stephen Sheerin, Liam Duncliffe and John Nelligan of the I.P.S and Ray Murray of Care and Rehab in the production and financing of the DVD. The committee members would also like to thank Mr. Dermot O Connell whose commitment to this initiative ensured its success.

The VC would also like to acknowledge the foresight of the Irish Prison Service in providing two excellent playgrounds for the children of St Brendans and St Marks Primary schools, through funds from the “Community Dividend.” These playgrounds were urgently needed, and are deeply appreciated by the teachers, parents and staff.

Cork Prison Library

We received a copy of the Library Development Plan 2014 – 2016 which

clearly outlined the aims and philosophy of the prison library service and put forward a coherent plan for the stocking, staffing and resourcing of the library in the new prison.

Hurley Repair Workshop

The Hurley Repair Workshop in Cork Prison began in September 1998. It is run by one member of staff, Industrial Supervisor, Andrew McCarthy. On a daily basis, 20-25 prisoners are employed, repairing hurleys from 50 or more GAA club, mostly from the greater Cork region, but also from Waterford, Tipperary, Limerick, Kerry, Kildare and Dublin. Prisoners receive Certification in Hurley Repair from the Munster Council of the GAA who are very supportive of the venture. The workshop is a welcome relief for many prisoners from the more mundane aspects of prison life. During the summer months, between 100-150 hurleys are being repaired in the workshop. In 2014, 22 basic certs and 8 advanced certs were awarded to prisoners.

Joinery Workshop

The Joinery Workshop provided certification to prisoners in City & Guilds Basic construction skills. In 2014, they have awarded 57 Modular certs, 3 Awards, 6 Certificates, and 2 Diplomas. The Workshop has also awarded 30 FETAC manual handling Certs and 4 Gaisce Bronze medal awards after prisoners completed various tasks, including a 13 week Community Involvement scheme. The Workshop is closely linked to St. Pauls special needs school in Cope Foundation, and supplies specialised furniture to cater for Childrens various needs. They are also involved with Marymount Hospice, supplying various items on request. All prisoners are given an induction course on entry into the workshop in Health and Safety, and Machine safety and operation.

Conditions in Cork Prison

As outlined in VC reports for the past number of years, the committee continue to express its concern at conditions in some parts of Cork Prison. However, we are hopeful that this issue will be resolved in the coming year, as the building of the new prison continues on schedule.

The committee are confident from our visits and observations that management, staff, and ancillary staff are dealing with prisoners in a very humane and professional manner.

We would also like to express concern at an article that appeared in the Irish Examiner in relation to the D unit of Cork Prison. It referenced the Inspector of Prisons Judge Michael Reilly's comments that the cells in the D wing were "filthy and cold."

On every occasion that committee members visited the D wing this year, they found it to be clean and not in any way cold, in spite of the archaic conditions of the prison.

A wider issue of concern to the V.C members is the ongoing issue of poor mental health among prisoners. The committee strongly feels that some prisoners are being sent to prison because there is nowhere else for them to go. The committee welcomes the recent announcement of the appointment of a new chaplain for Cork Prison. The chaplaincy at Cork Prison provides a very important service, in terms of support and counselling to prisoners and was sorely missed after the retirement of Sr. Mary Jo. We also welcome the announcement of a new psychiatrist for Cork Prison.

The Visiting Committee wish to express their sincere thanks and appreciation to Governor Jim Collins and Governors O Sullivan and Foster. We would like to thank the Chief Officer, and all staff in the prison for their cooperation and courtesy. We would like to pay tribute to the many voluntary organisations who assist prisoners and their families. Finally, a very special word of thanks to our hardworking secretary, Ms. Caroline O'Connor.