

**ANNUAL REPORT 2014**

**DÓCHAS VISITING COMMITTEE  
MOUNTJOY PRISON CAMPUS**

Ms Frances Fitzgerald TD  
Minister for Justice and Equality

21/01/2015

Dear Minister,

I have pleasure in submitting the Annual Report for the Visiting Committee of the Dóchas Women's Centre located in Mountjoy Prison Campus.

There are currently four members on this Visiting Committee and it is my first duty to thank my colleagues current and past for their work during 2014. Due to a potential professional conflict of interest, one of our members stepped down from the Committee during the year.

We are very happy with the level of engagement and co-operation of management and staff throughout 2014. The maintenance of the centre has significantly improved resulting in a better working and living environment for the women and for staff respectively. Many of the improvements have been completed by the women themselves but would not have been possible but for the guidance and mentoring of dedicated officers supported by management.

The Visiting Committee is very grateful to Ms Grainne Hyland for the administrative support over the last three years. We are sorry to see her move, but wish her the best in her new position. We look forward to working with Ms Elaine McGrath who has been appointed to this role.

We would also like to thank Campus Governor Whelan and wish him well on his retirement. We welcome Governor Murphy as Campus Governor and look forward to working with him.

The Visiting Committee is very grateful to Governors O'Connor and Connolly and the staff of the Dóchas Centre for their co-operation and hard work over the past year.

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Ms Bernie Donnelly (Chairperson) 2014  
Dóchas Centre Visiting Committee

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**Dóchas Centre  
Visiting Committee Members**

Ms Bernie Donnelly (Chairperson 2014 )  
Ms Ann Delaney (Vice-Chairperson 2014)  
Ms Mary Elliott  
Ms Noel Cloak  
Ms Ruth Gallagher (until May 2014)

**Statutory Role of Visiting Committee.**  
Prisons (Visiting Committees) Act, 1925**Committee Meetings**

The Committee met each month.  
Members of the Committee made many unannounced visits during the past year.

**Accommodation****Buildings**

The overall appearance of the Dóchas Centre has improved significantly in the past year. Maintenance has improved. The Visiting Committee would like to acknowledge the extra work undertaken by staff who assisted, supervised and mentored the women which contributed to the overall enhanced appearance and condition of the buildings and grounds.

**Outside**

The flower beds are maintained and seasonally planted. Grass edges, flower planting and flower beds shrubs received ongoing attention throughout the year. Paths and buildings have been cleaned. The system for management of rubbish has improved and the area is kept tidy.

**Residential Accommodation**

Kitchens and equipment are in good working order. The communal areas can be a challenge to keep clean in the kitchen areas where there is food and where the women do their laundry. The houses have been painted and are in good condition. Women continue to maintain their own rooms in good order.

**Offices Buildings**

The administration buildings have been painted, repaired and updated where required.

**Overcrowding**

Regrettably, we encountered serious overcrowding during the first 11 months of 2014, which has a serious impact on all aspects of prison life. There has been a significant drop in numbers in the last month and this has continued into January 2015. We are unsure of the determinants of this change but it is a very welcome development. The population has dropped to 86% in the recent past and this has created an environment much more conducive to the well-being of the women and to good management, creating a less stressful environment for staff to work in.

It is the experience of the Visiting Committee that some women are not released when they should be, due to homelessness. This matter needs to be urgently addressed, with appropriate agencies taking responsibility for these women. A documentary which was aired during the year on Irish TV articulated this quite clearly. The Dóchas Centre under its Integrated Management Service often exhausts avenues open to them to get accommodation for women when they are released. This is a critical juncture in the life of each woman who should have adequate accommodation and support services available on release. It is outside the remit and responsibility of the Dóchas Centre.

The Visiting Committee has direct experience of meeting with women in the Dóchas Centre who are in need of treatment for addiction or mental health issues. These women are sent to the Dóchas Centre from the courts when non-custodial, medical or therapeutic intervention could deal with their needs more appropriately and effectively.

### **Mothers and Babies**

We continue to monitor the Mother and Baby Unit frequently, particularly where a new born baby is taken back to the Dóchas Centre with its mother. This unit is well equipped and staff continue to be very responsive to the needs of both mother and baby.

We would like to reiterate that the imprisonment of mothers with young babies is never ideal and that non-custodial and community sentences should be developed more progressively. Separation of small children from their mother through imprisonment is a very high and long lasting price to pay. It can result in far reaching and very negative consequences for a family. There was a reduction in numbers of imprisoned mothers with babies throughout the past year.

### **Health Unit**

The Health Centre is in good condition and was refurbished during 2014. The rooms in this unit are used as a committal unit for women transitioning to the main accommodation.

### **Reception Areas**

The cleanliness and condition of the Reception area where incoming women are processed has improved. Showers are being cleaned regularly. The entrance to the Reception area is maintained in good condition.

### **Communication**

Mail to and from the Dóchas Centre and between Prisons has improved.

Women continue to complain that family members have difficulty getting through by phone to book visits. Phone calls from mobile phones to book visits are very costly. As a committee we would like to see email as a mode of communication to book such visits. This could be a more efficient method allowing for instant retrieval of emails for verification purposes.

It would also be helpful if there was a voicemail service for visitors to ring to avoid the rapid depletion of mobile phone credit when the caller can be left on hold, waiting for the service they require. Visits are of the utmost importance to maintain contact between prisoners and their families and particularly with the children of mothers who are in prison.

**Health****Physical Health**

The physical health of the women is being met and we did not encounter any issues during the year.

**Mental Health**

The response to mental health issues are dealt with by the Health Unit and cases are referred to the Central Mental Hospital where appropriate.

**Dental Health**

We did encounter issues with dental health with non-urgent cases having to wait for a considerable length of time to get an appointment with the dentist.

**Optical Health**

Optical health has been met during the year.

**Health and Safety**

We are happy after inspection that the requisite fire drills have taken place. Fire and breathing apparatus was checked on an unannounced visit and all has been serviced at expected intervals. Assembly points are adequately marked and with corridors vented in case of smoke.

**Programmes for Women 2014****Listening Service**

The Listening Service has proved to be very valuable service for women experiencing personal crisis outside of office hours. The Samaritans trained further candidates during the past year.

**Toastmasters**

Toastmasters visit the Dóchas Centre fortnightly and a number of women have enrolled in this programme. This helps build self-esteem, self-awareness through public speaking and assists significantly with personal development and confidence.

**Assistance Dogs**

The women also participated in an Assistance Dogs Programme. This contributed enormously to the well-being of the women caring for pups until they were ready to go to foster families before formal training. This is very worthwhile programme and will continue largely due to its success. Great credit is due to the women involved and to the staff in the Dóchas Centre for facilitating this programme.

**Rise**

RISE is a counselling service with a team of experienced addiction counsellors who provide individual and group counselling services to people adversely affected by alcohol addiction. A number of women participated in this programme.

Gaisce is based on achievement and is an award from the President. It sets personal goals and measures achievement for various challenges. Women have achieved various levels in this programme

**Shop**

The issue of the Tuck Shop is ongoing. Prices are prohibitive, particularly for prisoners who may not have any visitors or receive any additional spending money from families. This was highlighted in the Annual Report in 2013. The tender system leading to the roll out of the Recommended Retail Price in February 2014 for all prisons is not addressing the issues or needs in the Dóchas Centre. It is not acceptable that women have to pay such high prices for basic items.

**Transportation**

Issues in relation to the transportation of women did not arise during 2014. We will continue to monitor this.

**School**

The difficulty of school closures because of the non-availability of Prison Officers which was highlighted in the Visiting Committee Annual Report 2013 has been addressed. Officers are now present each morning, thus facilitating the timely and consistent opening of the Education Unit. Classes are now running smoothly and the staff are able to structure and maintain the school schedule. Most importantly, it is invaluable for the women themselves who attend the classes. The committee would like to thank management and staff for their extra efforts in this regard throughout the year and in doing so acknowledging the importance and value of education for the women. This was a very positive and welcome change. There is a wide timetable of courses available to the women.

The Visiting Committee feels at this stage that the internet and access to journals, eBooks and relevant websites are a vital part of education and research and would benefit and enhance learning. We would urge the Irish Prison Service to give consideration to this area of education within the Dóchas centre. This could be achieved with proper supervision in a securely controlled environment. The internet is a rich educational resource which would allow and enhance the learning experience of the students with different learning styles. It would also enhance teaching of Pottery, Art, Woodwork, Home Economics and other areas through the use of free on-line resources, which could be a very useful teaching tool for the Education Unit.

Knowledge and competence in the use of the internet is also essential for some awards contained in the National Qualification Framework for FET Awards Standards and HE Awards Standard as determined by Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI). It is therefore necessary for students to have access. It is also necessary for students registered in Open University courses.

Progress has been made in relation to allowing women outside of the Dóchas Centre for further education for courses not available in the Education Unit or at third level. Such instances require an operational management plan to be drawn up specific to each individual. This has been recognised and achieved. Such arrangements are integral to the rehabilitation and preparation for re-entry into society.

Where sanction has not been granted for a woman to attend outside courses there could be other opportunities available to them. Courses could be delivered via virtual classroom online. Students could link up, engage and interact with other virtual students and a facilitator through Moodle or Blackboard which are the educational platforms which are most commonly used. Offline courses are also an option. Materials, resources, videos and course lecture notes posted to the site would be readily available and accessible.

All of the above would greatly enrich the education experience, personal development, personal enhancement and rehabilitation of each woman.

**The Gym**

The Gym closures were less frequent during 2014. The Visiting Committee is very pleased with this positive development and few complaints were received.

**Staff**

Continuing Professional Development and statutory training is on-going for staff.

**Human Rights Programme**

The majority of staff has now participated in the Human Rights Programme which was rolled out in 2013.

**WASP (Women Awareness for Staff Programme)**

This is a programme provided by the Irish Prison Service for staff working with women prisoners in the Centre. It is a programme specifically designed based on gender specific and gender responsive needs of women in custody.

**Visiting Committee**

The Human Rights Training was extended to include Members of Visiting Committees and participants agreed that this was an excellent and valuable course.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Bernie Donnelly (Chairperson 2014 )

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Ms Anne Delaney (Vice-Chairperson 2014 )

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Ms Mary Elliott

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Mr Noel Cloak

Date \_\_\_\_\_