

VISITING COMMITTEE REPORT FOR 2014

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, in a report for the Irish Prison Service Dr. Whitaker stated that St. Patrick's Institution was not fit for purpose. The Visiting Committee for St. Patrick's agree with that observation as the facility was not suitable for young offenders because of the age of the building, the difficulty to heat it and lack of space for suitable sporting facilities which would allow these inmates to get exercise suitable for healthy development. The Committee would also like to affirm that various Governors and staff managed the inmates in a fair and sympathetic manner considering the conditions under which they worked.

Throughout 2014 the final removal of all sentenced inmates under 18 years was completed and the Institution now only caters for 17 year old remand inmates. 17 year old sentenced inmates are now transferred to Wheatfield Prison and 18-21 year old inmates are committed to St Patrick's for the purposes of processing and are subsequently transferred to another prison accordingly. The final closure of the Institution is expected to take place in late 2014 or early 2015.

As you read through this report you will note some young inmates have caused serious incidents in the Institution during 2014. The Visiting Committee hopes that the staff in any new facility will be sufficiently prepared for the problems that may occur when managing and housing such inmates.

The Visiting Committee would like to thank the Governor and prison staff for their cooperation and their efforts to treat those young vulnerable inmates with dignity and respect.

We would also like to thank Simon Walsh for the efficient way he supported our Committee throughout 2014.

On the first of December, 2013 the then Minister for Justice Mr. Alan Shatter issued SI 85/2014 notifying the transfer of D wing at St. Patrick's Institution to Mountjoy Prison and on 3rd February, 2014 C wing was transferred to Mountjoy Prison. This marked the beginning of the end of St Patrick's Institution.

JANUARY

On 1st of January, 2014 there were seventy four inmates present at St Patrick's.

The Visiting Committee visited St Patrick's on 14th January. There were sixty seven inmates in total present, consisting of eight 17 year olds on remand, 7 inmates in the unit, and 11 on protection with the remainder housed in B & C wing.

The Visiting Committee was informed that an incident had taken place over 8th and 9th January as a reaction to the confiscation of drugs and mobile phones from inmates. The incident was referred to An Garda Siochana for investigation.

During discussion with inmates one inmate in the Unit complained of a faulty window which was causing a draught. This complaint was relayed to the Governor and the problem was rectified.

There was a complaint from a second inmate regarding feeling victimised by prison staff. On follow up with staff, the Visiting Committee were informed that the inmate's annoyance may be due to the confiscation of his mobile phone.

During the visit the Visiting Committee noted that no class had taken place in kitchen due to staff shortages.

FEBUARY

The Visiting Committee visited St Patrick's on 3rd February. There were ten 17 year old inmates on remand and twenty five 18-21 year olds present. Following discussions with inmates it was noted;

There was a lot of apprehension regarding the closure of St Patricks and the future for inmates within the Institution,

There appeared to be friction between remand inmates due to previous issues arising outside of St Patrick's. Staff were monitoring this closely. It was believed that the relocation of some inmates once sentenced or released on bail may ease this tension.

The Visiting Committee were informed of a recent incident whereby an inmate gained access to the prison roof and threatened to jump. Staff persuaded the inmate to leave the roof safely. Thereafter he was referred to the prison psychologist. The inmate was visited by the Visiting Committee and he appeared physically ok.

Another incident involved an outbreak of violence in the school kitchen whereby two inmates caused damage and threatened staff. The Visiting Committee visited both inmates who were on Rule 62 lock up. Both had damaged their cells during this lock up as they felt they were unfairly treated. Neither inmate had any visible physical injuries or made any complaint regarding any ill treatment.

The Visiting Committee were informed that all 18-21 year old inmates were expected to be transferred from St Patrick's by end of February.

MARCH

The Visiting Committee visited St Patrick's on 11th March, 2014. There were 6 remand inmates aged 16-17 years old. All other inmates had been transferred to other locations. The Visiting Committee met with 4 inmates as 2 inmates were attending Court.

The primary concern raised during discussions was boredom due to such small numbers, particularly at weekends. The Committee held a brainstorming session in order to come up with ideas for activities that could be introduced to alleviate boredom. A list of potential ideas/activities was drawn up and conveyed to the Governor to include;

A dedicated social room with equipment to encourage group activity,
Group movie night at the weekend or more movies available in cell,
Badminton, racket ball, hand ball or beach ball in the gym,
Swing ball and basketball net in the yard,
Table tennis, table football, games, chess or music lessons.

The Visiting Committee attended a training session available to all Visiting Committees at Brian Stack House, Portlaoise. This was found to be very informative and we would look forward to further meetings and the opportunity to draw upon the experiences of other Visiting Committees.

At a subsequent Committee meeting of 9th April, the Governor informed us that numerous options were being considered to alleviate boredom such as pool table, play station and supply of library books

APRIL

The Monthly Visit took place on the 7th April. On that day there were only 3 inmates in St Patrick's. Unfortunately it appeared that these 3 had created some problems a few days previously. A fracas occurred over a telephone call with one of the inmates smashing the instrument. The other 2 inmates intervened which led to all 3 being restrained by the Prison staff.

We spoke to the 3 inmates and they seemed concerned about their treatment. We spoke to the Governor about the incident and satisfied ourselves that appropriate action had been taken to deal with the situation.

At our Meeting on the 9th. April the Governor informed us that he had obtained extra recreational facilities for the inmates. He said that with such a low number of inmates on any day, today there were 7, boredom was still a major factor.

The Committee suggested that the Chaplain could meet the inmates on a daily basis to try to instil a sense of mutual care and respect for each other.

The Committee enquired about the recording of inmate's phone calls. The Governor explained the circumstances around the recording of inmates' phone calls and said the Inspector of Prisons was investigating this.

The Chairman told the meeting that the Chairman of Wheatfield Prison Visiting Committee had suggested that St Patrick's Committee might like to visit Wheatfield, where the 17 year old sentenced prisoners (previously held in St Pats) were now held.

It was agreed that we would accept this invitation.

The Committee expressed concern that young vulnerable inmates would be transferred to adult prisons once St Patrick's was closed.

MAY

Our Monthly Meeting consisted of a visit to Wheatfield Prison 21st May, 2014.

Our visit focused on the new wings of Wheatfield only. This area now housed the sentenced 17 year olds who would have previously been held in St Patrick's. There were 6-8 inmates there on the day of our visit.

We met numerous prison staff and found morale to be very good. Staff informed us that they had received Communications training from the University of Ulster. They had high praise for the course, finding it beneficial in working with young inmates. They also found that the ethos of the new unit was spreading throughout the prison, with inmates and staff communicating and getting along better.

Staff meet weekly to exchange information on the progress of inmates and the number of P19s and incidents are down.

JUNE

On the date of the Monthly Meeting, 11th of June, there were only 3 inmates in St Patrick's.

Most of our discussion revolved about the upcoming closure of St Pats and the consequent rehousing of the 17 year old remand and sentenced inmates in Oberstown. All members were concerned that Oberstown may not be equipped to handle unruly 17 year olds, whose physique and attitude would be very different to the 16 year old currently there. We were also concerned about inmates being transferred to "adult prison" on becoming 18 years of age. We wondered if it would be possible to continue to house, in Oberstown, those whose sentence would expire shortly.

The Monthly Visit Report mainly concerned an incident where one inmate attacked another and then injured 2 Prison Officers, by biting, when they attempted to intervene. Both Officers required hospital treatment and HIV tests.

We went to see the perpetrator, who was on 23 hour lockup. We were told that he was still aggressive and had thrown milk and urine at the Officers. He had also damaged the viewing panel in the cell door so we could not see him inside. At our request, accompanied by 2 Officers at all times, the cell door was opened. We saw and spoke with the inmate and satisfied ourselves that he had no obvious physical injuries. He said that he needed another pillow. We left and passed his request to the Governor.

JULY

At our monthly meeting of the 9th July there were 5 inmates in custody.

Our focus of this meeting was to review the previous month's incident and to investigate how things had progressed. We were informed that the inmate involved was on Rule 62. Review was being made every seven days. Psychological services were also reviewing his progress. There had been no incidents involving the inmate since the previous month's incident.

At our visit of 24th July there were three inmates in custody. During our visit they were all in the kitchen workshop. The inmate involved in previous month's incidents was present and all inmates were working well together.

Enquiries were made about having a film shown in a communal area so inmates could benefit from further group participation.

AUGUST

At our meeting of 22nd August there were three inmates in custody, however two of these were aged 18-20 and were due for transfer to Cloverhill. The Committee met with the Assistant Governor and voiced concern with there only being one inmate in custody. We were informed that the Director General and the Inspector of Prisons was aware of the situation.

Having checked on the inmate he said he was bored but that he was getting on well overall.

The Committee again raised concerns about young violent inmates going to Oberstown and the resources that would be available to manage and care for them there.

Following our monthly meeting we visited the inmate in custody a number of times to ensure all was well. On each occasion he mentioned being bored but he was happy to be there overall.

SEPTEMBER

The number in custody during our monthly meeting of the 18th September was eight. Three were due for transfer to Wheatfield Prison as they had just been sentenced.

Concerns were again raised in relation to facilities in Oberstown and how they would manage violent or troublesome young inmates. Governor informed the meeting of the strategy employed there whereby inmates are given Time Out in order to reflect upon the situation. This method has been found to be successful. The Committee further discussed review of penal policy including the use of Community Courts, weekend imprisonment and restorative justice. The Committee were encouraged by the possibility of alternatives to imprisonment being investigated.

We were informed that it was planned to close the Institution in mid October.

OCTOBER

At our meeting of the 15th October there were 8 inmates remanded in custody.

We were informed that the closing of St Patrick's has been further put back to November as Oberstown was not ready.

A number of issues had been raised at an unannounced visit of the same month:

The heating system had not fully kicked in;

The daily regime of B school

Boredom with inmates, including the request for additional games for playstations;

We were informed that all had been resolved and in particular B school has access to art, woodwork, kitchen & gym in the afternoons.

We were further informed that the Chaplain & Probation Officer call to the B school on a daily basis.

The family visiting rooms are being used for 17 year old remand visits.

NOVEMBER

At our unannounced visit of 18th November there were 7 inmates in custody. The majority of inmates were in the kitchen advancing their cookery skills. One inmate was in Art class and one inmate was attending Court. It was noted that the woodwork workshop was also available to the inmates.

We attended the recreational area utilized by inmates wherein we found a football table and a pool table, both of which were of good quality and were reported to be enjoyed by inmates.

At our monthly meeting of the same month there were eight inmates in custody; six were on remand and two, having been sentenced, were due to be transferred to Wheatfield Prison.

We met the Governor who reported that the inmates were getting on well and that there had been no P19's issued recently.

Staff were on a work to rule which led to some delays with services, however all services were still running.

DECEMBER

At our unannounced visit of 10th December there were five inmates in custody. Inmates were all on their way to the kitchen at the time of our visit. They were in good form and had no complaints. A request was made for a new pool cue, one having been accidentally broken. This request was relayed to the Governor who sought to replace the cue immediately.

At our monthly meeting of 12th December there were six inmates in custody. It was anticipated that this number would go down nearer to Christmas. The inmates were getting on well.

There remained no details surrounding the transfer of inmates to Oberstown.

Following our visit we were invited to Christmas dinner in the B school kitchen as prepared by inmates under the supervision of Ms. Cahill. The inmates did an excellent job and were a credit to Ms. Cahill's hard work and encouragement in the kitchen workshop.

CONCLUSION

As the closure of St Patricks approaches, we feel it worthwhile setting out some of our views on the future for young offenders. Over the past few years we have had interaction with the inmates, remand and sentenced, their parents and the staff of the Irish Prison Service. We therefore feel that we have a unique perspective on this area.

We have a number of issues relating to the future:-

We are concerned as to how Oberstown will be able to handle unruly 17 year olds. This cohort is quite different from the current inmates in Oberstown. In St Patricks some of them have been responsible for serious incidents, hospitalising of Prison Officers and actions leading to large numbers of vulnerable inmates being placed on Protection. Can Oberstown cope with this?

Another concern is the transition of sentenced inmates from Oberstown to adult prisons on reaching their 18th birthday. This is also a concern of many of their parents. We feel that there should be some type of facility to house young adult inmates, say from 18 to 23. This type of facility exists in many jurisdictions. Certainly inmates in Oberstown who are close to finishing their sentences should not be transferred to adult prisons.

We believe that the Visiting Committee system provides a valuable watchdog service and also provides a vehicle for inmates to channel issues and complaints. We feel that this system or something similar should be put in place in places of detention for children.

Finally, we are disappointed that during our term of office that the Inspector of Prisons never sought to canvas our views on the running of St Patricks during his many visits and prior to producing his Reports.

Signed:

Denis Murphy _____

Sean Lyons _____

Niall Counihan _____

Emma Muldowney_____