

*Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform,  
94 St Stephens Green,  
Dublin 2*

*Report of the Visiting Committee, Dochas Centre to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform*

***Membership***

Dochas Visiting Committee comprised eight members. Visits took place monthly with visits by two members each month outside meeting times and occasional unannounced visits. Over 100 women were interviewed and the general prison population was engaged with on a monthly basis. Regular contact was maintained between the Governor, Dochas Centre and Chairperson, VC. The Committee would like to acknowledge the open manner in which Dochas Governors Mc Mahon and O Connor dealt with them and the courtesy shown to them by all members of staff.

***Staffing***

Staff working in Dochas Centre showed a strong commitment to the good running of the prison and a humane attitude to prisoners. They maintain good discipline as evidenced by the low level of serious incidents while providing support to women.

It must be noted, however, that the departure of Governor Mc Mahon halfway through the year marked a low point in the prison and the transition period impacted considerably on the smooth running of the prison. This was further impacted by the low levels and on occasion absence of ranking officers in the prison. The specific demands on Dochas prison for escort, hospital visits etc to facilitate women prisoners has significant impact on staff availability within the prison and should be noted.

***Ethos***

It is with regret that this committee notes a distinct shift from the ethos on which the success of Dochas was built and the committee express concerns over future direction of the prison. In this context it should be noted that as women prisoners do not have the option of open prison, training unit or other alternatives available to male prisoners this committee urges that the unique, widely diverse remit of Dochas be given consideration. Censorship of incoming items resulted in women not having access to fresh underwear on occasion in 2010, a lack of toothbrushes on another. This is wholly unacceptable.

## *Welfare*

Sadly Dochas experienced its first death by suicide in 2010 and this committee extends its deepest condolences to family and staff who were deeply traumatised by this sad event. The committee would like to commend Governor O Connor and staff members for their humane response to this tragic loss.

The Visiting Committee wishes to note two serious incidents which occurred in 2010 and which have been drawn to the Minister's attention.

In May 2010 a prisoner was forcibly removed from the prison in circumstances which represent a serious violation of her human rights while a prisoner. Letters from the Visiting Committee regarding this incident have been unanswered and while assured that investigations are ongoing there has been no result to date.

Of deep concern are details of a search carried out in the prison by a dedicated search team. This search involved both a physical inspection of the prison and an examination of women using the BOSS chair.

Dochas Visiting Committee unreservedly acknowledges the right of the Irish Prison Service to maintain order and discipline in the prison and indeed commends them for doing so. Searches are an intrinsic part of that order. It is the manner of this search which the Visiting Committee calls into question.

In particular the Visiting Committee condemns the manner of use of the BOSS chair. Having locked down the prison, and having searched prisoners, the search required women to be brought to the gym where they were required to remove clothing including underwear **in the presence of male officers**. A small number of towels were passed among the women, a number of whom were not adequately covered.

It is the understanding of this committee from a brief study of international literature on the BOSS chair that it is unnecessary to subject women to the humiliation of stripping naked. It is certainly not in keeping with international norms of good practice. The degrading requirement of involuntary body exposure on this occasion was an unnecessary humiliation.

During the same search of the prison items were confiscated by the Search Team. There does not appear to have been clear direction given. Items taken from some prisoners were the same items left with others. Some prisoners had mattresses removed, others were left with exactly the same item. Property bought through the Prison Service was confiscated. If searches of this nature are to become the norm in Dochas this Committee recommends strict guidelines which adhere to all standards of best practice.

### ***Accommodation***

Overcrowding continues to be a problem in the prison. Dochas Visiting Committee wish to draw attention to the numbers of prisoners being held at the prison which peaked at 150 with three babies in a prison designed for 85 women. Representations made by this committee regarding provision of breakfast supplies were addressed by prison authorities. Bunk beds were installed during 2010. The Visiting Committee, while acknowledging the challenges faced by prison authorities, shares concerns about their installation on a number of health and safety grounds.

The accommodation of large numbers (upwards of 20 on occasion) in the Health Centre have prevented the correct use of this facility. Given the important role of the Health Centre it recommended by the Visiting Committee that this facility be ringfenced solely for the purposes for which it was designed.

### ***Education***

Education offers an opportunity for rehabilitation. Learning in Dochas continues to be offered by a committed group of professionals who offer literacy courses, artwork, hairdressing courses, sewing classes as well as a variety of FETAC courses in subjects such as food safety and catering. A new regime of locked yards has seriously disrupted attendance at school. The insufficient number of officers available to supervise has resulted in significant cancellation of classes. The library is seldom open.

### ***Health & Safety***

The Visiting Committee continues to call for the provision of a net to prevent drugs entering the prison. Many prisoners are on methadone programmes (approx 25% of the prison population) and are being assisted in efforts towards being clean. The continued capacity to “land” drugs into the prison poses a threat to the safety and wellbeing of both staff and prisoners.

Health was generally well provided for in Dochas Centre in 2010. A doctor and nurse are available to meet the requirements of the prisoners. Additional support is provided by an addiction counsellor and psychologist. A visiting psychiatrist attends on occasion. Outside medical personnel including an optician are accessed where required. Regular meetings are held between prison authorities and medical staff which have also been attended by the Chairperson of the Visiting Committee. Incidents of attempted suicide and self harm appear to be carefully monitored.

While general health is catered for, the Visiting Committee question whether prisoners suffering serious mental health concerns can be adequately cared for in Dochas Centre.

Pastoral care continues to be provided albeit on a more restricted basis.

### ***Conclusion***

The Visiting Committee of Dochas Centre commend this report to the Minister. The Committee have sought to present facts in a clear and impartial manner and regrets that on this occasion it must draw to the Minister's attention a greatly deteriorated prison environment.

Finally, the Visiting Committee wishes Governor O Connor well in her role and commends both her and her staff for a strong level of commitment to the women detained.

Eibhlin Byrne (Chairperson)

Marian Quinlan (Deputy Chairperson)

Bosco O Farrell

Paul Connell

Michael Landy

Margaret Richardson

Marie Murphy

Jacqui Mc Conville