

Visiting Committee Annual Report 2005

Introduction

The Committee met monthly on the first Thursday of the month. The meetings were well attended. Visits were undertaken by two members of the committee who were nominated monthly. They conducted detailed and comprehensive tours of the prison. The committee's vacancies were filled with the appointment of Ms Eileen Morris, Ms Marie Cleary, Mr Michael Geraghty, Mr Patrick Greaney and Mr Luie McEntire.

Overcrowding

The issue of overcrowding is still a problem and a cause for concern in the opinion of the committee. The remand wing in Castlerea Prison has capacity for 20 offenders but is regularly populated with in excess of 30 - 35 offenders on remand. This, along with constantly exceeding the maximum recommended prisoner population for Castlerea Prison, places an enormous strain on resources and can create difficulties for Staff. The committee have voiced their support for the provision of a dedicated remand unit. This unit could be facilitated by the redevelopment of the unused building.

Unused Building

Committee members visited the unused building situated on the prison site at various times during the year. The committee has voiced its concern regarding overcrowding and would reiterate its belief in the potential for the development of the building. There is potential for the training and development of building and work skills for the offenders on site.

Prisoners with psychiatric problems

A prison term is not always the best way to deal with an offender with psychiatric problems, therefore, the committee is again highlighting the problems associated with people who have psychiatric problems and suicidal tendencies being committed to prison. Staff and offenders are exposed to an unacceptable level of risk and trauma. The Prison Staff deal with these cases with the utmost of professionalism and demonstrate the due care and attention necessary to deal with the issues that arise. The psychiatrist attends as required but there is no psychologist attached to the prison.

New courthouse

The courthouse is fully operational. The new Prison Service Escort Corps transport was inspected by members of the committee.

The Grove

The committee supports the positive environment provided by the Grove area and notes its uniqueness in the greater prison estate. It continues to be beneficial in the rehabilitation of the prisoners transferred

Visiting Committee Annual Report 2005

there. With its various workshops and educational facilities it is unique within the prison system even though the media has focused its attention on it during the year.

Education Unit

The Education Unit continues its work to provide a space with a learning and development ethos. The dedication and professionalism of the staff supports the efforts of the offenders who utilise the facilities on a regular basis.

Workshops

The committee members visited the Staff and the ongoing work in the various workshops during the year. The committee notes that the computer shop in the Main Prison is still not fully functioning.

Kitchen area

The standard of hygiene and the quality of food provided by both kitchens is of a continuing high standard and the committee would like to give credit to the staff and offenders working in the area. The high quality was recognised by the awarding of the Q Mark during the year. The kitchen continues to provide valuable training and experience for offenders.

Probation and Welfare Service

In our previous annual report it was highlighted that there was only one Probation and Welfare Officer to deal with the needs of over 200 offenders. While he provides an excellent service the committee feel that it is necessary to highlight this as an area in need of improvement.

Chaplaincy

There is no Chaplain based in the Prison since September. The committee feel that it is necessary to highlight this as an area in need of improvement the level of pastoral care in Castlereagh Prison. The committee notes that it is envisaged that a Chaplain will take up appointment early in the new year.

Accommodation

The problems associated with finding accommodation on release continues to cause concern for the committee. Problems continue to pervade the sourcing of such accommodation even though the Probation and Welfare service target it as an urgent need. The low level of staffing of the Probation and Welfare inhibits further improvement of the delivery of the service.

Prisoners before the committee

Visiting Committee Annual Report 2005

The committee have met with numerous offenders during the course of their visits to the prison. Furthermore, several offenders requested to meet with the entire committee to air their concerns or grievances. All the cases presented were discussed any actions deemed necessary was undertaken. The committee can judge the efficiency of the administration of the prison by small number of offenders requesting to see them annually.

Incidents

The committee was appraised by the Governor of any incidents of a serious nature during the year.

Medical Services

The committee notes that there is a comprehensive medical team in place on site and would like to commend them for their work during the year

Special Care Unit

During the year the Special Care Unit was refurbished to a reasonable degree removing the previous dreary and depressing environment. The committee notes that the installation of the showers and toilets served to create a more positive environment.

Conclusion

Once again one gets the impression that Castlerea Prison is very well run with a low prisoner/staff ratio and a low level of incidents reported. The support services are in need of improvement and the estate could be upgraded with the refurbishment of the unused building. The committee would like to acknowledge the courtesy and help extended to them by the Governor and Staff over the last year.