

Cork Prison Visiting Committee

Annual Report

In submitting our annual report for 2005 we are happy to report a satisfactory year within the prison unit with no serious problems arising.

During the year we had a change of governors with Mr. Liam Metcalfe replacing Mr. Sean Quigley. Members of our committee paid tribute to Governor Quigley on his transfer to Dublin, for his contribution to the efficient and effective management of the prison and his willingness to listen to any proposal made to him. Members welcomed Governor Metcalfe and assured him of our cooperation and support.

Meetings.

Our committee met once each month within the prison. On the days of our meetings any prisoner, with a problem or a request who wished to meet us was facilitated, in so doing. As well, two members of our committee were available to meet prisoners, if required, in the interim period, between monthly meetings. Most problems brought to our notice from prisoners, were in relation to requests for transfers to other prisons, for family reasons, medical reasons, problems with staff or other offenders, or punishment thought to be unfair. On all occasions our members listened to their problems, advised them of procedures and brought individual queries or requests to prison staff. Generally the problems are dealt with positively and speedily, except in the cases where prisoners are seeking transfers to other prisons or where requests are made to be accommodated in single cells, where there can be a delay in meeting these requests. Members, on a rota basis, visit other areas of the prison. In particular the kitchen is visited at meal times and at meal preparation times. At all times the food and hygiene was found to be of a high standard and customer satisfaction was noted. In 2005 the kitchen received a Q mark for its hygiene and food quality. During the year four new members joined our committee replacing four long-serving members. Our chairman of three years, Mr. Jack Roche, due to his appointment, as Chairman, of the European LEADER integration unit resigned his membership and many tributes were paid to him for his conscientious work over the years.

During the year at our different meetings we had presentation from representatives of the various statutory and voluntary groups, contributing to and supporting the welfare of the prison population in the broadest sense. This interaction assisted our members in advising prisoners who may have problems or requests. Presentations were made by the Probation Welfare Service, Education Unit, Addiction Counsellors, and the Justice of the Peace Group etc.

Due to financial constraints it was not possible to visit another prison during the year. Our members feel that these visits were worthwhile and valuable in the exchange of information and ideas that these visits generated. Particularly, as Cork Prison is quite old and many modern improvements are not possible due to space constraints etc., some options available to other prisons may be possible for implementation here.

Overcrowding

Conditions of overcrowding still exist but not to the same extent as other years. During the year the capacity was set at 263. This was due to the elimination of the 6 man cells reduced to single cells. This was done in the interest of good management, safety and some privacy. The persistent controversy still remains, that of in cell sanitation. Prisoners complain, and our members feel that a decision should be made in the short term on this problem. If Cork Prison is to be retained on a long-term basis then action is needed urgently. If not the alternative must be available as soon as is possible.

Necessary Improvements.

We are supportive of the prison policy to keep the prison drug-free. In this regard the netting over the exercise yard must be kept at its maximum texture and strength and the facility to immediately repair any defects needs to be established. During the year ladders were being used to access the outside walls with a view to getting contraband into the prison. This was helped by the fact that the outside monitors were not manned by night. A request from this committee and the Governor to address this problem resulted in the Control Room for CCTV being manned now at night. The continued vigilance of prison staff has been praiseworthy in preventing drugs being available to prisoners through these methods of supply. Overall while space is at a premium it is not possible to modernise as is urgently needed. The D'block Observation Unit is to be suitably upgraded in the near future.

Education/Workshops

Activity under this heading is very positive and most beneficial. Prisoners have available to them further education, furtherance and improvement of skills and activities in art, painting, film-making and hurley making. Our members recognise these classes and activities as a vital segment of prison life.

Conduct

The conduct of prisoners over the year has been generally good. There was a 'dirty protest' carried out by three prisoners over a period of which was suitably and capably monitored by prison staff and ended after a brief period. Similarly with a brief hunger strike by these prisoners. A prisoner was viciously assaulted and injured with a blade, and the matter was reported to the Gardai, but when interviewed the victim would not make a formal complaint.

Thanks.

The committee wish to express their thanks to the governor and staff for the courtesy and help afforded to us at all times. We also wish to express our thanks and appreciation to the prison chaplain Fr. Michael Kidney, the probation and welfare service, in particular Dermot O'Connell; Colin Herlihy and his staff in the Education unit, the Simon Community, St. Vincent de Paul, Legion of Mary, AA and other support groups. Their unselfish efforts help in the smooth running of the prison.