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**Midlands Prison Visiting  
Committee.**

To:  
Mr. Alan Shatter,  
Minister for Justice & Equality,  
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**MIDLANDS PRISON VISITING COMMITTEE  
ANNUAL REPORT – 2011.**

**We the Visiting Committee are pleased to present you with the  
Annual Report for 2011.**

## **ANNUAL REPORT 2011**

The Midlands Prison Visiting Committee have a function of ensuring that all prisoners in the care of the Irish Prison Service at the Midlands Prison are treated fairly and humanely and also with dignity and respect.

The Committee meet in the Prison on the second Thursday of every month whereby we conduct our monthly meetings and meet with any prisoners requesting to see us. Also two members visit on one other visit during that month and if requested by Prison Management on other occasions which are very rare.

On our many visits during the year of 2011 we listened to prisoner complaints, concerns and requests privately and in confidence. We raised all issues with the authorities at Governor Level and seek to bring all issues to a satisfactory conclusion. We wish to say that all Staff and Services working within the Prison and those external services working with Prisoners do so in a professional manner with the interest of the Prisoners welfare a priority.

### **Prisoners Requests**

In 2011 the Committee met with thirty three prisoners during the course of the year and heard all concerns presented to them by the prisoners. We mention some of the issues raised at our meetings below.

- Visitors Searching
- Inter-Prison Transfers
- Loss of Clothing
- Temporary Release Escorts on Compassionate Grounds
- MDT Drug Testing
- Closing of Workshops due to staff shortages
- Not enough access to Education by protection prisoners

### **Visitors Searching**

Prisoners have complained that the Search Dog indicates on visitors that have no contact with drugs or prohibited articles of any kind. They feel aggrieved that they are offered

screened visits on these occasions. Having discussed the matter with Management we the committee are satisfied that the passive drug dog and O.S.G Unit have helped enormously in keeping drugs out of the prison.

### **Inter Prison Transfers**

During 2011 a lot of prisoners we met with had complained that they were being transferred to Midlands from Dublin Prisons and did not request such a transfer. They felt aggrieved as it disrupted contact with family members and put extra pressure on their families to travel to Portlaoise.

Unfortunately due to the large volume of prisoners in the system and operational constraints we understand that the management at the Midlands Prison do all that is possible to facilitate prisoner transfer requests as expediently as they can.

### **Loss of Clothing**

Due to the high number of inter-prison transfers we had some complaints from prisoners of clothing being misplaced or lost. In our investigations, we found that the Prison, having conducted an inquiry, have compensated prisoners if they find that any clothing was accidentally lost during the course of these transfers taking place.

### **Temporary Release**

During the year some prisoners have enquired about compassionate release to visit graves of loved ones, or family day release for communions or confirmations.

The Prison facilitates the visits to graves and funeral homes wherever practicable and possible.

### **MDT Drug Testing**

Prisoners not involved in Drugs/Drug taking, have on occasion , objected to partaking in the random drug testing which was introduced into the prisons in 2009. This is a mandatory test therefore prisoners are obliged to comply otherwise it is viewed as a breach of discipline and sanctions are enforced on each occasion.

### **Workshops Closure**

The Committee dealt with complaints from prisoners due to workshop closures during the year. Unfortunately due to the operational nature of the prison and the staff shortages which are ever increasing due to retirement, transfers of staff and increased prisoner numbers, we are disappointed to report that prisoners do not have full access to workshops in the Midlands Prisons

We dealt with some issues received from protection prisoners regarding access to the school and education facilities. Again it appears that at times during the year some of these facilities are not utilised fully due to operational reasons mainly staff shortages.

### **Visits Booking System**

In 2010 report we raised issues regarding the functioning of the visitors booking visits system. Unfortunately we have to report in 2011 that there is still only one dedicated line for booking visits. Prisoners families are having serious difficulties getting through on this line. We did suggest that a call answering service be set up, which we can report, was put in place. However, we have been informed that this causes more hardship to Visitors, as

they are left on hold and while doing so, their phone credit is expiring. Some visitors have reported having lost up to thirty euro in credit waiting in queue. The committee find this totally unacceptable and would like to see some measures being taken to improve the system in view of the fact that there is also a new wing due for completion in 2012 which will put greater demand on the visits booking system.

### **Sentence Management**

Prisoner applications for temporary release and transfers are considered on an on-going basis. The Midlands Prison conduct a monthly review meeting attended by A Prison Operations Official, Prison Governor and Heads of Functions i.e. Chief, Chaplain, Work & Training and Education in order to access applications and agree suitable prisoners for early release and transfers to open centres.

Again this year we are disappointed to report that the Prison is still dealing with Committals having been sentenced on the non payment of fines. We accept and understand that the Midlands Prison ensure to deal with these prisoners as expediently as they can and transfer them to open centres or release them on temporary release or part fines paid as soon as possible.

### **Committee's Visit to other Prison**

This year the Committee were delighted to visit Limerick Prison. We met with the Limerick Prison Visiting Committee and Prison Management Team. The Committee were briefed on the history of the Prison by Governor Mark Kennedy and then received a comprehensive tour of the Male Prison by A.C.O John Conway. Although the Prison is old in years the committee found it to be clean and well kept despite its age. We also were afforded the opportunity of seeing the new wing and could compare both. The Committee were treated to Lunch and we would like to thank all the Staff and Management of Limerick Prison for their courtesy and hospitality on that occasion.

### **Meeting with Director General**

This year we did not have the opportunity to meet with the then Director General Mr Brian Purcell. We would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Mr Purcell on his new role as General Secretary of the Prison Service. We also welcome the appointment of Mr. Michael Donlon to the position of Director General and look forward to meeting him during 2012.

### **Ongoing Developments**

The Committee are pleased to hear that the New Kitchen is nearing completion and also the new Prison Wing is well advanced and on target for its completion date in 2012. We look forward to receiving a tour of these areas early in the New Year. We as a Committee feel that the new Wing in particular is much needed to alleviate the overcrowding and pressure of prison spaces in the Prison System. We are cognisant of the fact that there may be staffing difficulties regarding the opening of this new unit and hope that despite the current economic constraints that the Prison Service will be provided with sufficient resources to utilise this new wing to full capacity. We as a Committee, in discussions with Management in the Midlands Prison, would be most anxious that the new unit would be managed as a drug free facility.

We also note that during 2011 the Prisons contract with external services regarding the cleaning and catering facilities for all Prisons has been withdrawn due to budgeting constraints. We the Committee in the Midlands Prison have found that as a result of this it has given the opportunity to more prisoners to gain meaningful employment in areas of the Prison which had in the past being contracted to external companies.

### **Achievements & Awards**

We wish to extend our congratulations and compliment Governor Barclay and his Staff on maintaining their accreditation with the ISO 18001 Standard in Occupational Health & Safety and also the 14001 Standard for the Environmental Management System. Great credit is due to all Staff and Prisoners in maintaining these high standards in current times with constraints on both Staff and Budgets making it more difficult to maintain on an ongoing basis.

### **Medical Services**

The Midlands Prison Medical Services is led by two full time Doctors and a staffing of 14 qualified nurses to care for the diverse needs of the prisoners. They also provide Dental Care, Chiropody, Drug Counsellors, Psychiatric Care and Optical Clinics on an ongoing basis. The level of care shown to all prisoners in their care is second to none and we commend the Medical team in doing so.

### **Lifers Group**

Work is continuing within the Lifers Group. Management are still looking at ways of improving conditions for prisoners while encouraging prisoners to engage with all the services and utilise available services on an ongoing basis.

The Committee welcome the continuation of this group and are delighted to see that the numbers of prisoners attending both the Work & Training and Educational facilities continue on the up.

### **Psychology Services**

The Midlands Prison Psychology Service aims to respond to the Mental Health and Offence related needs of those detained across the Prison. The Midlands Complex have the largest number of men across the Prison estate that are eligible to engage with the Parole Board as a result of men serving life sentences and sentences of six years and more.

The Committee found that, on their visits to the prison they were informed of access difficulties for the service, again due to prison operational staff shortages on an ongoing basis, which severely impacted on the wait list times and caused significant distress amongst the most vulnerable clients awaiting the service. The Visiting Committee feel that given the sensitivity of the work undertaken by the Psychology Service, not being able to guarantee clients appointments, could result in extra risk for violence and disturbance on the wings with fellow prisoners and staff. Therefore the Committee would suggest that least disruption to the services in this area is vital to the good order and running of the Prison for all concerned.

### **Probation Services**

The Prison Service and the Probation Service have a long history of working in partnership in managing persons convicted of offences who are committed to prison. Child and Community protection continues to be to the forefront of the Probation Services. We the Visiting Committee acknowledge that the Probation continue to engage with community based services both statutory and voluntary and more recently are carrying out assessments and organising placement work in conjunction with their community based colleagues and prison management while implementing the new pilot community returns programme which we as a committee fully support and see as a positive way forward for all involved.

### **Education Facilities**

The Visiting Committee acknowledge the continued services and work by Ms Linda Tynan Principal and her staff in providing an excellent and varied range of classes and courses to cater for all the needs of the prison population. 2011 saw an increased number of classes provided for segregated prisoners on C1. There is also an Education presence in the Gyms, Sports Hall and Horticulture areas. We commend the Education Staff on the high attendance daily to the school with an average weekly attendance of 279 students. In October five An Gaisce Medals (Presidents Award) were presented to students in the Education Centre. This programme is running in the Prison for the past three years. We congratulate the Midlands Prison Student on receiving the first ever Gold Medal Award presented in a Prison. We also congratulate 14 students who were successful in Leaving Certificate Exams and 3 students successfully completed Junior Certificate exams. We understand that students are now increasingly choosing FETAC courses over the traditional Junior & Leaving Certificate. In the current economic situation, in the general community, students appear to prefer the option of undertaking accreditation that qualifies them for a specific employment rather than partaking in a Leaving Certificate. In 2011 12 students received a full FETAC level 3 award, 2 students received a full FETAC level 4 Award and 5 Students completed a full level 5 FETAC award.

The Visiting Committee welcome a new Positive Anger Control programme which has been introduced at the latter end of 2011. It is envisaged to run this 8 week programme three times a year. We also note that the Literacy needs of students are being met with a Touch Type Read and Spell Literacy Programme and it is available to A Division prisoners also.

Overall the Midlands Prison Education Unit is committed to working with Prison Management to extend the length of time which students can access classes on a daily basis. Therefore we feel it is vital that Prison Management provide operational support to enable Ms. Tynan and her team to continue with the excellent facilities being afforded to the prisoners at this time.

### **Chaplaincy**

The Committee recognise the vital and important role of the Chaplain in the Midlands Prison. They play a major role in looking after the spiritual needs of the prisoner and provide pastoral care for all the prison community. They also provide an important link with prisoners families while in custody and afterwards. We would like to thank Fr Tom Sinnott and his Chaplaincy team for their on-going hard work and commitment in working with all Services in the Midlands Prison.

### **Incidents**

It is regrettable that we are reporting on the death of a Prisoner (R.I.P) in October. He was committed to Midlands Prison serving a sentence of three months for fine related offences. The Committee understand that an internal investigation into this unfortunate incident is ongoing but again would like to stress the importance that People should not be placed in Prison for Non Payment of Fines. There has to be alternative measures put in place for collection of Fines.

### **Kitchen/Catering Facilities**

The Committee commend the Kitchen Staff on the quality of food and hygiene standards maintained on an ongoing basis in the Midlands Prison. We welcome the building of the new kitchen and understand that it will be a great source of employment for more of the prison population. We must congratulate the team on their exceptionally high scores on their annual food safety audits as more demands are made on the delivery of high quality service due to the increasing prisoner population. Prisoners working in this area receive training and Accreditation/Certificates in City and Guilds.

### **Industrial Area/Workshops**

The Industrial Manager strives to keep the various workshops open on a daily basis. The committee would like to emphasise the importance of operational support in managing these areas as it plays a key role towards the enhancement of prisoner sentence management in a very positive and constructive way.

### **Horticulture**

We the Committee would like to commend the horticulture staff and prisoners for all their good work during the year. On our many visits to the prison the beautifully maintained gardens, flower beds and hanging baskets both inside and outside the prison, during summer and winter are a credit to all involved in this ongoing project.

**Conclusion**

Firstly, we the Midlands Visiting Committee would like to thank our fellow committee members who were not re-appointed during the year. We thank them for their hard work and commitment in the time that we served together.

We also wish to extend our good wishes to all Staff that retired during 2011.

We thank Governor Barclay, Governor Malone who addressed us at our monthly meetings and kept us informed during the year, Eileen Fennelly for her work as Secretary to the Committee and all the Management and Staff who made themselves available to facilitate us during our visits and duties in 2011.

Finally, the Committee commend all the Staff and Services working in the Midlands Prison for their continued commitment and dedication, and their professional approach despite having to operate with reduced resources in this current economic climate.



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Colm Wylie (Chairperson)

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Nuala Halpin (Vice-Chairperson)

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John Cronin

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Paddy Boland

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Brigid Teehey