

Dochas Visiting Committee
Dochas Centre
North Circular Rd,
Dublin 7

7 February 2016

Ms Frances Fitzgerald, TD,
Minister for Justice and Equality,
Dept of Justice and Equality,
94 St Stephen's Green,
Dublin 2

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Visiting Committee of the Dochas Women's Centre, I have pleasure in submitting our Annual Report for 2015.

In carrying out our duties it has been our privilege to work with the women in the Dochas Centre.

We would like to record our thanks to Governor Mary O'Conner, the Chief Officer, the ACOs and all the staff at the centre for their assistance and cooperation with us and their practical input throughout the year. We are grateful also to Campus Governor Brian Murphy for his support.

During the year The Dochas Centre was honoured with a visit from An t-Uachtarán Mr Michael D Higgins and Mrs Higgins. The President and Mrs Higgins met with many of the women and their visit was very much appreciated.

We would also like to acknowledge and record our thanks to the many other well known personalities who visited the Centre throughout the year and gave generously of their time and expertise to the women. Among these was the Dublin GAA Team who were very welcome surprise guests at the women's Christmas lunch.

This Report is divided into two sections:

Section One: Deals with the day to day running of the Centre and with both the on-going concerns and the progress made during the year.

Section Two: The Visiting Committee's position on the present system of detaining Women Offenders.

Yours Faithfully,

Anne Delaney

Chairperson, Dochas Visiting Committee.

REPORT OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE 2015

DOCHAS CENTRE

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

In order to carry out our duties under the Prisons (Visiting Committees) Act 1925, the Dochas Visiting Committee (VC) undertook both arranged and unannounced visits on a regular basis throughout the year. Visits involved walking around the centre, visiting all areas and ensuring that we were available at all times to speak with the women. It has been a privilege to work with the women in the Dochas Centre throughout the year.

At the end of each visit our concerns of that day were discussed with management. They were quickly addressed. The cooperation of and engagement with Governor Mary O'Conner, the Chief Officer, the ACOs and staff at the centre was crucial to the fulfilment of our duties. They were always available to us and for this we are very grateful.

There have been welcome improvements in the Centre. Innovative and progressive programmes have been rolled out during the past few years, many stemming from The Incentivised Regime Policy and earned Temporary Release.

A number of problems, flagged in several previous reports, remain. They include over-crowding, the presence of drugs in the prison, the imprisonment of mothers (including women with small infants), the housing of remand and convicted prisoners together, the lack of protected/sheltered accommodation for some women on release from the Centre, homelessness, the lack of a 'one-stop' shop providing information on supports and services and the absence of a streamlined delivery of these supports when they leave the Centre, and the difficulty in accessing addiction or counselling services on release. This is not an exhaustive list. We believe that many of the ongoing difficulties we refer to in this report could be more fully addressed in the wider context of alternatives to the present system of the detention of women offenders.

THE BUILDINGS AND YARDS

Rooms are generally well heated and clean and for the most part in good condition. Beds and mattresses in some cases are old and worn and should be replaced. Likewise bed clothing and soft furnishings need to be upgraded. Some areas have been painted but the overall campus needs freshening.

One enclosed yard has a small grassed area. This is kept by a group of women who plant and tend flowers and keep it generally tidy.

During the year a short horticultural course was provided in this grassed area. Participants engaged fully and found it useful and enjoyable. Despite the willingness of the course provider to expand on this course and offer more courses to interested women, this offer was not taken up to the disappointment of course participants. We appreciate there may have been operational difficulties involved but it is to be regretted that a popular outdoor course in an otherwise small tight campus for women was not continued.

THE SCHOOL/EDUCATIONAL CENTRE

The School or Education Centre is a valued and very popular resource among the women who speak highly of the work of its Principal and her staff. Every effort is made by them to provide a wide variety of practical courses tailored to the women's needs. Many of the courses are certified and the school organises presentation ceremonies at the successful completion of courses.

Because the Dochas population is a complex mix, not least because of the varied sentences, the challenge to provide suitable courses and to sustain interest and commitment is a very difficult one.

This difficulty is unfortunately compounded by the frequent temporary re-deployment of Prison Officers who, among other duties, provide security in the school. This results in the entire school or part of it remaining closed or postponed for several hours. Consequently classes are cancelled and the school day disrupted. The women are then sent back to their rooms and it is extremely difficult to reassemble them in the classroom when the officers resume duties at the school. This happens frequently, for example six days in each of September, October and November. It is particularly acute at the end of each quarter when leave must be used up. This is frustrating for the women and can adversely affect the good work of the teaching staff and the officers themselves who are a valued part of the school.

This staffing difficulty is not confined to the school.

Complaints have been received from women who have been approved for Temporary Release (TR), mainly on compassionate grounds, and who have had their TR cancelled at the last minute because staff were not available to escort them. It is difficult to qualify for such TR and having done so and built up the expectation of the outing, it seems particularly harsh when the privilege is withdrawn for staffing reasons. We know that management and staff have tried to deal with these disappointments but we would urge that the staffing issues or rostering difficulties are resolved to prevent recurrences.

CHAPLAINCY

At this stage we would like to acknowledge the work of the religious Sisters in the Chaplaincy service. For those who wish to avail of it, they provide spiritual and pastoral care. Their comforting support can be crucial to many women facing the challenges of prison life or personal crises such as family bereavement, illness, family worries and disappointments such as outlined above. They are independent and professional women and valued contributors to the multi-disciplinary team. One Sister retired recently and her gentle presence will be missed. The prison is fortunate that one Sister, who has been with Dochas for some time, remains. She has recently been joined by a second Sister whose appointment we welcome.

WORK TRAINING

A number of training courses are available but generally at the most basic level.

The training kitchen is currently providing a 'Skills Foundation Certificate in Basic Food Preparation' course which lasts fourteen weeks and is City and Guilds accredited. Unfortunately, though valuable, it can only be provided at the basic level. According to the providers, it could be built on to progress the participants knowledge and skills in food preparation, hygiene, and presentation to a level which would prepare at least some of the participants for worthwhile employment on release. We understand that efforts were made to progress this and that funding was found to do so but it did not proceed. It is to be regretted that such a practical course from which at least some of the women could have derived considerable benefits, was not progressed. It is particularly regrettable in view of the fact that excellent facilities and personnel are available on site and that the courses are very popular with the women.

Other courses include a basic computer skills programme. Hairdressing and Sewing courses are ongoing for which City and Guilds accreditation is being sought. It is confidently expected that this will be achieved in the near future.

A small number of women are undertaking third level courses. The use of computers is essential in order to access various academic resources and complete course work. Studies have been disrupted constantly because of Internet access restrictions. We fully appreciate that security considerations are paramount and therefore internet use must be closely monitored and controlled. We would ask however that the necessary protocols and security precautions are put in place to enable these women continue their studies with the least possible disruption whilst ensuring there is no breach of security.

VISITING AREA

This is a small area, part of the existing downstairs canteen. It is warm and clean, is decorated in a child friendly manner and has a reasonable supply of books and toys.

The number and duration of visits depends on the status of the prisoner. As many families live considerable distances from the prison, there are concerns that it is very difficult to maintain relationships with family, particularly children. The problem is twofold: firstly the duration of the visit (30 minutes) and secondly, for many, the prohibitive cost of travelling to the prison. This has very serious consequences for the mothers and their children and families. The prisoners acknowledge that many of the prison officers try to deal compassionately with this dilemma. However the VC would like to see some form of subsidy being made available to facilitate travel to the prison by children and their guardians. We would also like to see longer visits being allowed for children visiting mothers in order to help foster and maintain this crucial relationship.

MOTHER AND BABY UNIT

While the VC remains very concerned at the detention of mothers with infants, this dedicated Mothers and Baby unit provides warm, safe and comfortable accommodation for mothers with infants up to the age of one year. It is well stocked with the necessary products and the Prison Officers are caring of the needs both of expectant mothers and nursing mothers.

During the year we received complaints that hospital appointments were missed due to the unavailability of staff to take the mother or patient but we are satisfied that this was not a regular occurrence and efforts have been made to ensure it does not happen again.

KITCHENS AND CATERING

The cookers, shelving, worktops, walls, floors and utensils have invariably been impeccably clean. Stores were in very good order and all pre-packed goods were in date. Complaints have been made about the quality of the food and lack of variety. The VC found the food plentiful and adequate. However improvements could be made by adding more variety. We understand that changes are currently being made which should help.

TUCK SHOP

Women are constantly complaining that the prices in the tuck shop are too high. These women have very meagre resources but we are informed that because of the central procurement system nothing can be done. We are at a loss to understand this and would ask that this long outstanding complaint is taken seriously and addressed.

HEALTHCARE

The Healthcare team under its Chief Nurse Manager is responsible for healthcare delivery. A general practitioner attends each morning and a psychiatrist attends

twice weekly. A psychiatric nurse also attends. The HealthCare team provides not only the full range of primary health care but all other services necessary within the Centre from examination of newly admitted women, to medication management, counselling and counselling referrals, linking with ISM and other supports, participation at inter- disciplinary meetings and so forth. It is a busy centre. They are currently operating with a staff shortage of 2 roster nurses and a daily 8am to 5pm nurse.

Since February 2015, Dochas has been without a Psychologist on site. The importance of this support to the women cannot be overestimated. The VC is informed that a locum psychologist is to be appointed and that nursing appointments will be made soon. At the time of writing these appointments had not been made.

RECEPTION

This area which is a woman's first contact with the Centre is well kept and has a good store of clothing for women who need them. It is important that women are given up to date information about the Centre and leaflets are available in reception. Management have put in place procedures to ensure these information leaflets are up to date and brought to the prisoners attention.

NUMBERS

The Dochas Centre is designed to accommodate 105 women. On random checks undertaken by the VC throughout 2015, we found that numbers regularly reached 120. While numbers never reached the high levels of a few years past, this overcrowding resulted in serious difficulties in accommodation with consequential adverse effects.

For example, five women were housed in the recreation room of one house. They shared a small shower room cum toilet. They had nowhere to keep their personal belongings. Personal hygiene and privacy were seriously compromised. The mattresses, pillows and bedding were old and inadequate. Tensions understandably ran high.

Prison management attempted to alleviate this situation but were unable to do so. We are concerned that this pattern of regular overcrowding will continue and consequently the unacceptable knock on effects resurface.

DRUGS

We are aware of and have received complaints about the presence of illegal drugs within the prison. Many women have told us that at times they are afraid to leave their rooms fearing the aggressive behaviour of those who have taken drugs. This problem seems to be growing and we would urge that all the necessary resources are used to tackle this serious development.

STAFF

Throughout the year, we have had constant interaction with the staff at the Centre. These officers work hard in a very challenging environment. Their role is a highly responsible one and the manner in which they carry out their duties crucial to its success. Many have been praised for their help and support by the women, are compassionate in their dealings with them and are clearly supportive of the IPS mission statement that the relationship of prisoner and staff should be one of mutual respect. As with every organisation, Dochas has its flaws and complaints have been received about unfair treatment and favouritism being shown by some officers.

The VC believes that training officers in dealing with women prisoners is essential and should be on-going. It is also essential that time is made available for officers to attend on-going training and therefore the rostering difficulties already alluded to must be resolved.

HOMELESSNESS AND ACCOMMODATION ON RELEASE

Homelessness, the lack of supported and safe accommodation and the difficulty in accessing supports and help post-release must be addressed for those many women who need it. It is disheartening to see the excellent work of the in reach and on campus services, the work and input of the officers and most importantly of the women themselves being undone quite simply because the only refuge for many, on release, is a nightly hostel. We have seen chaotic women being brought into the centre, stabilised through the efforts of support personnel and staff within the centre and through their own cooperation and effort. We have seen some of these women ultimately released from Dochas, i.e. from State care, with no access to on-going treatment and with no accommodation except nightly hostels. They are immediately thrown back into the chaotic, dangerous environment which helped fuel their problems in the first instance and end up back on the streets and before long, re-offending.

While there are programmes including residential treatment programmes available on release and much positive supportive work undertaken by various agencies, there is an insufficiency of places and difficulties in accessing them. For example, it is claimed that Abigails, which provides a very limited number of beds (fifteen) will relieve the problems from Dochas. This is not the case as this excellent supported accommodation providing residential addiction therapy programmes and counselling for women, takes referrals from the probation service as a whole, and not just Dochas. This results in long waiting lists, delays in getting places or failure to do so and thus for some, a swift return to homelessness and its consequences.

We would urge that the serious problems of homelessness and supported accommodation are adequately addressed.

PART TWO

ALTERNATIVES TO THE PRESENT SYSTEM OF THE DETENTION OF WOMEN OFFENDERS

The Dochas Visiting Committee is of the strong view that a progressive, gender specific programme for dealing with women offenders should be devised, supported and fully implemented without delay. This programme should have at its core an open or step down facility and community based open conditions devised to support and progress enhanced outcomes for women offenders, prepare those who can for employment and assist all in their successful re-integration into families and community.

We believe that the present system of detaining a complex mix of women offenders in a comparatively small tight campus cannot be deemed a gender informed approach which will deliver positive outcomes for the women, their families and the community, despite the best efforts of personnel and the delivery of the currently available programmes.

The VC recognises that not all female offenders will be suitable for an open/step down facility. We also recognise the need to balance the rights and sensibilities of victims with those of the offender and we acknowledge that the sensibilities and safety of the community within which services are to be provided must be fully addressed.

It is recognised however that women offenders are for the most part involved in minor offences, largely of a non violent nature. They are very often traumatised, homeless, have suffered domestic violence, are victims of sexual and physical abuse, addicted to drugs and alcohol, unemployed, under-educated and in a great many cases are suffering with mental health issues.

Many are mothers or the primary carers of other relatives. The serious consequential impact of the detention of mothers with children is fully recognised.

There has been progress in the treatment of women offenders and we want to acknowledge this and the excellent work of the Irish Prison Service and the many agencies, including the ISM, IASIO, the Probation Service, and the many other Supports, Organisations and Agencies both on site and in-reach all of whom give invaluable support and practical help to the women. Together with the management and staff at the Dochas centre, they underpin the successful operation of the many positive and progressive programmes which have been rolled out within the past few

years including Incentivised Temporary Release, the Community Return programmes and Supervised Community Service.

Despite these welcome and positive initiatives, much more needs to be done.

Our views have been informed through our constant interaction with the women themselves, the staff at the centre and through the supports and services working with the women in the centre. Crucially, they reflect the positions and conclusions contained in numerous reports and reviews we have consulted. It would be impractical to list them all but we will refer specifically to two:

- 1. Joint Probation Service – Irish Prison Service Strategy 2014-2016. An Effective Response to Women Who Offend.**
- 2. The Strategic Review of Penal Policy. Final Report. July 2014.**

The Joint Probation Service – Irish Prison Service Strategy has noted: “The much lower rate of offending in the general population amongst females compared with males, coupled with the lower level of risk of harm posed, has resulted in a tendency to provide generic offender based services to women offenders, designed for men in the first instance” (ref. p.7). The Joint Strategy then goes on to acknowledge the need to develop a Gender Informed Approach in working with women offenders.

As part of the development of this approach, the Irish Prison Service commits itself to a number of strategies including exploring the development of an open centre/open conditions for women assessed as low risk of re-offending (ref. p.10).

The Strategic Review of Penal Policy Final Report 2014 (SRPP)

This report, the outcome of the working group commissioned by the Minister for Justice and Equality to undertake a review of penal policy, was submitted to The Minister in July 2014. The report is critical of, among other things, the lack of open prison facilities for women.

They made the following recommendation (recommendation 23): “The Review Group, noting that in light of the nature of their offending, female offenders often require less stringent security conditions, recommends a greater focus on step down facilities, supported accommodation, and the use of more community based open conditions for female offenders.

The Dochas VC unreservedly supports both the Joint Probation Service – Irish Prison Service Strategy 2014-2016 and the Strategic Review of Penal Policy Final Report 2014.

Unless a system is devised and implemented which caters to the myriad needs of a very needy group of women, we believe the aspirations of reducing crime, enhancing outcomes and reducing reoffending will not be met.

We fully understand that shaping appropriate responses to the question of alternatives for women offenders is a complex and multi-layered challenge. To devise evidenced based alternatives requires research and considerable input from all stakeholders, including the women themselves. However it is disappointing to note that this acknowledged deficit in the treatment of female offenders remains despite the recommendations of many researched reports and reviews, both national and international.

The female prison population in Ireland is small, ranging somewhere between 135 to 150 between Dochas and Limerick Prison. It is a concern of the VC that because the numbers are small, that this group of women may be removed from consistent and meaningful consideration and thus from much needed on-going targeted support, including expenditure.

There are Open Prisons and Open or Semi-Open Facilities within the Irish penal system. The Training Unit in Mountjoy is a semi-open prison. Loughan House and Shelton Abbey are both open prisons. Open facilities are available at Thornton Hall. We have visited the latter two superb facilities.

These four open or semi-open facilities are available only to male offenders.

The VC believes that the complete absence of gender appropriate open/step down facilities or community based open conditions for female offenders emphatically represents the unequal treatment of a needy cohort of detained persons, viz women.

CONCLUSION

1. We believe that the Department of Justice and Equality and the Irish Prison Service have embraced the need for change and we are grateful for this. Much more needs to be done and we ask, with respect, for the pace of change to be accelerated.

2. We re-iterate our belief that many of the ongoing difficulties we have referred to could be more fully addressed in the wider context of alternatives to the present system of the detention of women offenders.

3. We urge that the research deemed necessary to shape the appropriate responses should be undertaken without delay, completed within a realistic but defined time-frame, and the ensuing agreed outcomes and recommendations resourced, supported and implemented.

4. We ask The Minister for Justice and Equality to implement Recommendation 43 of The Strategic Review Group on Penal Policy Report 2014 which recommends that The Minister establishes a mechanism to ensure the implementation of actions arising from the Strategic Groups report which would report to the Minister on a six monthly basis on such implementation. These reports should be published.

Anne Delaney.

Chairperson,

Dochas Visiting Committee.

Noel Cloake

Dochas Visiting Committee.

Christine Ryan.

Dochas Visiting Committee.