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Tánaiste & Minister for Justice, Equality & Law Reform,
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Visiting Committee Annual Report 2007

We the members of the Visiting Committee at Portlaoise Prison are pleased to present our Annual Report for the year ending 31st December 2007.

The Committee meet on the first Tuesday of each month throughout the year and we are pleased to report that attendance at these meetings are very good.

Two members of the Committee are nominated at each meeting to visit the Prison unannounced during the month. During these visits the members visit all areas of the Prison and make themselves available to all prisoners who wish to meet with them regarding any grievances they may wish to discuss with the Visiting Committee members.

We met with some individual prisoners who had minor complaints and issues they wished to discuss. The Committee met with the Governor to discuss these issues and give their recommendations regarding same and are happy to report a satisfactory outcome on each occasion.

We are very pleased to report that work on the new C Block is almost completed and will be ready for occupation in March to April of 2008. We are pleased to learn that the D Block will then be closed down and the prisoners from this area will be housed in the new Block. The Visiting Committee has made many recommendations over the past number of years of the D Block being totally unsuitable for housing prisoners and staff working conditions are also very poor and thus we will be very glad to see it finally closed. We also look forward to the introduction of in cell sanitation in the new Block and a more modern and suitable building for the housing of all offenders in the Prison.

The general health of all prisoners throughout the year was good. We are pleased to report that the Medical Officer (Dr Chidley) along with the Nurse Officers and Medical Orderlies provide excellent care for the prisoners. We are very happy to learn that the Medical Officer's post will soon be upgraded to a full time post at this Prison and also that a visiting Physiotherapist will soon commence work at the Prison on a regular basis. We are also pleased to note that the vacant Psychologist post has been filled again and that he visits the Prison on a weekly basis and also if required on other dates. Other medical services are also provided by a visiting psychiatrist, dentist, chiropodist and optician.

The Catholic Chaplain Fr Drumm and the Church of Ireland Minister take care of the spiritual needs of the Prisoners throughout the year.

The Probation & Welfare Service visit the Prison on a regular basis and we welcome the appointment of a full time Officer to Portlaoise Prison. We also welcome the introduction of visits from the local Training and Employment Officer who visits the Prison regularly and assists prisoners with work and training on release.

The Education Centre has a teaching staff of 34 teachers ; 11 full time and 23 part time. 5 teachers from the National College of Art and Design also teach on a part time basis.

The nationwide census of participation rates in all Prison Education Centres conducted in May and November indicated a participation rate of 65 % in May and 76% in November at Portlaoise.

A wide range of subjects are offered at basic, intermediate and advanced levels. The Education Centre held examinations accredited by the following bodies : Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate, FETAC, Open University, Environmental Health Assoc., Trinity Guildhall, ECDL and the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

Visiting speakers from agencies such as Citizens Information Centre, Linkage, Educational Trust provided great assistance and were very informative and beneficial to the Pre Release Programme which is coordinated by two of the teachers.

The Education programme continues to develop and many prisoners took part in extra educational activities such as 2007 Art Exhibition at Dunamais Arts Centre, Listowel Writers Week, 3rd Annual Art / Craft Auction at local Parish Centre and Christmas Cake project.

The Industrial Supervisor in charge of the Kitchen and his team of Assistant Industrial Supervisors display very high standards in the preparation, cooking and distribution of food on a daily basis. A new 28 day menu was introduced recently which caters for both normal and vegetarian diet. Within its framework it caters for almost every medical situation and is based on a 3,000 calorie a day intake.

Prisoners working in the Kitchen area took part in a number of certifiable training courses which helps them maintain an interest in the work they are doing and also helps and assists them in the performance of their duties.

We wish to congratulate all working in this area on their recent achievement in being nominated in the top four in the category of food production and safety at the recent Excellence Ireland Awards ceremony.

We would also like to compliment Governor Whelan and his management team and staff for their success in implementing the new security procedures and additional measures which were introduced at the Prison during the year and we wish to acknowledge the good work at the Prison and how well managed the transformation at the Prison has been through out the year.

In conclusion, we would like to thank the Governor and staff of the Prison for the courtesy and assistance given to us during our visits to the Prison throughout the year.

Tom Colgan
Chairman

Anne Turley

Eilish Croke

Michael J Hough

Eithne Reddy

Susan Meagher

Richie Molloy

William Foley

PJ Long

Liam Mc Cabe

Claire O Mahoney