

Cork Prison Visiting Committee

Annual Report

Herewith our annual report for 2006. Generally, it was a satisfactory year within the prison with no serious problems other than the perennial one of overcrowding.

Mr. Liam Metcalfe retired as Governor in June and was replaced by Mr. David Cowman. Mr. Metcalfe made a massive contribution to the overall operation of the prison particularly in the area of prisoner and staff welfare. Mr. Cowman was only with us for a short time as he succumbed to his illness after a few months as Governor. Despite his poor health he showed great commitment to his office, may he rest in peace. The late Mr. Cowman was succeeded by Mr. Jim Collins who is no stranger to the Cork scene and with whom the PVC have the same co-operative working relations as heretofore.

Overcrowding

This is still a big problem at times. When Courts are sitting – often until late in the evening – the conditions that exist then are not conducive to the effective or efficient running of the prison. Generally, extra officers have to be deployed, and in many cases prisoners have to be released to make the necessary room available for the incoming committees. Looking back at the incidents that occurred in the prison over the year, there is a consistent link between overcrowding and prisoner tension.

Improvements

The policy to keep the prison drug free is fully supported by us and is most effective as of now. The exercise yard is being maintained to its maximum security to prevent contraband reaching the prisoners from the outside. This is helped by the CCTV room being manned at night and the continued vigilance of staff is praiseworthy in preventing drugs being available to prisoners.

The 'D' Block has been completely revamped in the interests of prisoner safety and welfare. The kitchen and food preparation areas have also been upgraded, as has the laundry section with new washing machines installed. The installation of an individual TV in cells has certainly reduced prisoner restlessness. The provision of personal electric kettles for prisoners has also helped enormously. This is an old prison, space is at a premium, and modernization is needed, particularly in the area of in cell sanitation.

Education | Workshops

We are pleased that the prisoners have available to them facilities for education, improvement of skills and various activities in film making, art, hurley making etc. Non-nationals are assisted in improving their English if desired. Prisoners are also offered pre-release advice in respect of housing, employment, medical and social welfare rights, etc.

Conduct

Conduct of prisoners over the year has been generally good. One serious assault occurred where one prisoner suffered severe lacerations to the head and face. The matter was capably dealt with internally and the injured prisoner made a full recovery.

Our Committee met once each month within the prison. On meeting days any prisoner who wished to see us was facilitated by two members meeting him. On the period between meetings

two members were available to meet prisoners – who requested same. Most of the requests of prisoners covered transfers to other prisons for family reasons, medical problems, problems with staff or other offenders, or punishment thought to be unfair. On all occasions our members listened to their requests/complaints and advised them of the procedures involved. The request made or problems experienced were brought to the notice of the Governor and at our subsequent meeting we were updated as to the results of these representations. The problems/requests are dealt with speedily except where requests for transfers to other prisons are made as there is normally a waiting period involved. Members on a rota basis, visit and inspect the prison facilities viz. kitchen and laundry, in particular at mealtimes. At all times the food and hygiene was found to be of a high standard, as one would expect from a kitchen that received a Q mark in 2005 for quality and hygiene.

Over the year 3 new members joined our Committee and as more than half of the Committee are now new members we feel it would be important to be able to visit another prison to compare and contrast the conditions, attitudes and ideas involved in a different environment.

In order to up-date all members of the Committee, during the year we had presentations from representatives of the various statutory and voluntary groups who contribute and support the welfare of the prison population in its broadest sense. These consisted of the Probation and Welfare Service; Education Unit; Addiction Counsellor; Justice and Peace Group and Social Worker involved in pre-release.

Visits to other prisons, which were part of the education of members of PVC's have not been allowed in the past two years. It is felt, that with so many new members a visit to a modern prison would assist and give members ideas of what works well. The exchange of ideas and the observation of new methods has much value in an overall consistency of implementation.

Thanks

The Committee wish to express their appreciation to the Governor and staff for the courtesy and help offered us at all times. Also, to the various groups and individuals who assist the staff in the overall welfare of the prison population viz. Fr. Michael Kidney, Chaplain Dermot O'Connell, Probation and Welfare, Colm Herlihy and his staff in the Education Unit, the Simon Community, St. Vincent de Paul, AA, Legion of Mary and other interested groups all continue to help in the smooth running of the prison.