

**CASTLEREA VISITING COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT 2003**

**Submitted to Mr. Michael McDowell, TD
Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform**

Committee Members:

Michael Nevin (Chairperson)
Nuala Carroll (Vice-Chairperson)
Susan Meagher
Paul Hogan
William Burgoyne
Christy Gorman
Eddie Brady

Introduction

There were twelve monthly meetings on the first Thursday of each month and all meetings were very well attended. Each month two members also visited at irregular intervals and conducted a complete tour of the prison. Traditionally the committee consisted of twelve members but this has been reduced over the months to seven. This committee has worked very hard in the promotion of humane containment for the prisoners at Castlereagh.

Accommodation crisis

We wish to reiterate to the Minister our concerns for the lack of follow-up services for offenders on discharge from prison. As highlighted in previous reports, some prisoners are homeless on discharge and we urge the Minister to liaise with other departments and agencies to rectify this situation.

Overcrowding

We are also very concerned about the overcrowding situation at Castlereagh. This puts enormous strain on resources and causes immense difficulties for staff and prisoners. Castlereagh is running at full capacity and beyond it on an ongoing basis especially the remand area. It is disappointing to note that the Minister has not revisited the issue of refurbishing the vacant section of the prison.

Prisoners with psychiatric problems

A matter of grave concern to the Committee is the number of prisoners with psychiatric problems being committed by the courts. The prison is not equipped to deal with these people and while the staff must be commended for the excellent work they do in this area, the shortage of beds in the Central Mental Hospital should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Suicides and attempted suicides

It is with sadness that we report one suicide which occurred during 2003. We offer our condolences to the family of the victim. This was very traumatic for all concerned. There was also a number of attempted suicides throughout the year and but for the professionalism and vigilance of staff, further tragedies would undoubtedly have occurred. This further highlights the need for a full psychiatric service to be provided at the prison.

New courthouse

We wish to compliment the Minister on the provision of the new courthouse. This is a facility which when fully utilised will tremendously reduce staff costs in providing escorts and will also eliminate the dangers associated with long distance escorts.

The Grove

Another positive initiative in Castlerea is the opening of the new houses in the Grove area. This is a progressive step and is vital for the rehabilitation of long term prisoners. It is maintained to the highest standard and is working extremely well despite negative media publicity.

Education Unit

The ongoing educational facilities at Castlerea are of huge benefit to the prisoners. Courses include Junior Cert, Leaving Cert and Open University. Classes are also conducted in good housekeeping practices to assist prisoners on discharge. Eleven prisoners completed a nine week course in drug and alcohol awareness and received their certificates on 6th June. The classes are very popular and are very well attended and most prisoners will admit to having benefited enormously from these classes. There are also a number of FAS sponsored projects being conducted at the prison. The Committee are in favour of these courses and would like to see the education unit expanded.

Workshops

There are currently eight vacancies for staff in the industrial area. We believe that once the industrial relations matter is sorted out these posts will be filled. It is unfortunate to see workshops such as the Computer Shop and the Concrete Shop closed because of lack of staff because traditionally these two areas have proven to be very popular amongst the prison population and would provide occupation on a daily basis for a large number of prisoners. We hope this situation will be resolved in due course.

Work is provided in carpentry, laundry, leather, mould and fabric. This work is therapeutic for the prisoners and occupies a large number on a daily basis.

Facilities

We wish to compliment the management and staff on the very high standard of hygiene in the kitchen and the quality of the food is second to none. The experience and skills gained by prisoners working in the kitchen is invaluable to them on release.

The accommodation for the prisoners is of a very high standard with in-cell sanitation and the visiting area is clean, bright, spacious and very well run.

Probation and Welfare Service

There is only one Probation and Welfare Officer attached to Castlerea. While he provides an excellent service it is unacceptable that one person is expected to meet the demands and needs of up to 200 prisoners at any given time.

Chaplaincy

There is one Catholic Chaplain attached to Castlerea Prison and the other religious denominations are catered for by visiting clergy.

Prisoners before the Committee

In addition to prisoners that the Visiting Committee have met in the course of their visits to various areas of the prison there were some written requests and several verbal requests to meet the entire Committee. All requests were discussed at length and the relevant course of action taken. The relatively small number of prisoners looking to see us is an indication of how well the day to day running of the prison is conducted.

Conclusion

In general prisoners in Castlerea seem well adjusted and seldom cause problems of any real magnitude. The prison is well run and prisoners are treated in a dignified and humane manner. The Committee would like to acknowledge the courtesy shown to them by the Governor and the staff over the year.

Signed:

Michael Nevin

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Susan Meagher

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