

Mountjoy Prison Visiting Committee

Annual Report 2003

We are pleased to submit our annual report for 2003 to Mr. Michael McDowell, TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

In last year's report we requested that the plans drawn up by the Mountjoy Redevelopment Group for upgrading the prison be reactivated. These plans provided the basis for the modern redevelopment of Mountjoy. However, this has not occurred and instead the Minister has announced that he is considering disposing of the Mountjoy Prison complex and moving it to a green field site probably in the Dublin area. It is unfortunate that nowadays economics appear to totally dictate policy direction but we appreciate that while Mountjoy has been part of Irish society since 1850 the time has come for it to be either refurbished or replaced. We recognise that over the years the management at the prison have done their best but limited financial input, coupled with an old and decaying building, have rendered their efforts impossible. Should the decision be taken to entirely replace Mountjoy, we urge the Minister, in the interim, to provide the resources to carry out vital remedial work to make the living conditions for prisoners more humane.

Also in last year's report we welcomed the Minister's announcement of 11th December 2002 that padded cells were to be replaced as soon as possible with new safety observation rooms. Unfortunately this has not yet occurred and padded cells continue to be used on a regular basis.

Furthermore, we request that matters highlighted in previous reports and in our report of July this year be re-visited as a matter of urgency.

We again reiterate our concerns about the draconian, primitive, unhygienic and unhealthy system of slopping-out. This system still prevails and will continue until a decision is made about either the refurbishment or replacement of Mountjoy Prison, which we hope, in the interest of staff and prisoners will be sooner rather than later.

The recreation halls are in a desperate condition. They are overcrowded, the ceilings are very low and the lack of smoke extractors creates a very unhealthy environment for both prisoners and staff.

The main gate office, where prisoners are held awaiting committal, is in need of upgrading. It is cold, drab, dull and in bad repair.

Despite the foregoing, there continues to be a great atmosphere at Mountjoy Prison and in general there is a good healthy relationship between prisoners and staff.

We welcome the installation of televisions in cells which has proven very beneficial in the reduction of self-injuries and attempted suicides. Another welcome initiative is the two-monthly family visits for prisoners serving sentences of life imprisonment.

Chaplains

All the major religious denominations provide chaplaincy services to the prison. During the year, Fr. Declan Blake, a full-time catholic chaplain at Mountjoy for a number of years transferred as Head Chaplain to Arbour Hill. Fr. Declan will be sorely missed as he always had the best interests of the prisoners at heart. The chaplains are a dedicated group and work way and beyond the call of duty to ensure that the needs of the prisoners and their families are met.

Connect

The Connect Project continues to be very worthwhile and satisfactory.

Drama

We would like to congratulate the cast and staff on the production of "Moll" by John B Keane. We thoroughly enjoyed the play and the standard of acting was top class. Lighting, stage management, props, background and music were all of such a high standard. The benefits from the drama productions are wide ranging. They have the capacity to facilitate personal development, improve self-esteem and confidence, introduce the concept of teamwork and develop team spirit and finally it enables people to get a real insight into the dynamics of playing characters alien to themselves. We would like to congratulate the producer, Mabel Troy who did a wonderful job as did a number of outsiders and staff. Eithne Mulhern did a Trojan job as usual in organising and administering the whole project. €50,000 was raised during the week of the play for the Special Olympics.

Education

The educational programme provided mainly by the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee and the Department of Education has completed another successful year. Overall co-ordination of these services is the responsibility of the Co-Ordinator of Education.

A review of National Curriculum for all prisons referred to in our 2002 report has been completed and is with the printers at present. Publication should be achieved early in 2004. Indeed it is fair to say that the educational system is subject to ongoing analysis and review under the Prison Education Council. This Council is comprised of representatives from all the prisons who hold regular meetings at least on a quarterly basis.

There are approximately 200 prisoners on the roll at the present time. Special arrangements are made to take education to prisoners who are on segregation. During 2003, 22 prisoners sat for the Junior Cert with 6 for the Leaving Cert and 5 who have sat Open University exams.

Kitchen

Once again the kitchen in Mountjoy Prison is operated to the highest standards in hygiene and service. This year it gained yet another "Excellence Ireland" award. Prisoners work in the kitchen alongside staff and this year 11 prisoners completed their training. A variety of menus are prepared and diverse cooking methods are used to cater for non-national diets. All cardboard wrappings and used cooking oil are recycled from the kitchen area.

Methadone Maintenance

180 prisoners are currently on Methadone Maintenance. Those on maintenance do not have the opportunity for transfer to other prisons as most of them do not provide Methadone Maintenance treatment programmes. This is unacceptable as all prisoners should have the opportunity of transfer to other prisons as Mountjoy is very confining long-term.

Probation and Welfare Service

We are pleased to note that the Probation and Welfare Service now have their full compliment of staff. We feel that this agency can now help with the homelessness problems amongst both the male and female prisoners.

Suicides

One man and one woman committed suicide during the year. We offer our condolences to their families and friends. They were tragic ends to young lives.

Workshops

We would like to compliment the prisoners and staff in the carpentry and fabric workshops for their excellent contribution to the 2003 Special Olympic World Games. 80,000 Coloured flags were made in the fabric shop for the opening ceremony of the games which created a terrific display of colour. Special cushions were also made for the medal giving ceremonies and they also made 10,000 towels for the athletes. The carpentry workshop made podiums, barriers, etc. Great credit is due to all concerned and their efforts contributed to making the World Games a tremendous success.

Dochas Centre

Rather than replicate last year's report on the Dochas Centre we have decided to **highlight** specific and important urgent matters.

Minister John O'Donoghue officially opened the Dochas Centre in September 1999 and it was built to accommodate 70 prisoners. If the number of prisoners continues to increase the purpose for which this high-class facility was built will be lost.

We recommend that more counsellors be appointed and that more back-up services be put in place for prisoners, especially those on methadone maintenance and drug detox programmes.

The situation regarding the committal of psychiatrically ill prisoners to the Dochas Centre must be discontinued. The prison is ill equipped to cope with such people as it places incredible strain on resources.

Homelessness is also a problem with the women at the Dochas Centre. Many of the prisoners have nowhere to go on release and often commit offences in order to be recommitted to prison. We recommend that the homelessness issue be tackled as a matter of urgency.

Conclusion

The Visiting Committee conducts monthly meetings in the prison and meet with prisoners who have requested to see them. Many of the complaints made by the prisoners are drug related, e.g. they were found guilty of receiving drugs on visits and they come to the Committee to deny the charges and appeal the punishments imposed. The visitors for the month check out their claims and come back to them within the month with their findings. In practically all cases there is video evidence against them. Following our monthly meeting the Committee visit various areas of the prison.

We acknowledge the competence and co-operation of the Governor and management and wish to record a special thanks to our esteemed secretary Eithne Mulhern. We are resolved to serve our function in full and look forward to working in close harmony with our Justice Minister, Michael McDowell and the Irish Prison Service.

Go mbeirimid beo ar am seo aris.

Paddie Connellan

Michael Donegan

Carmel Bolger

Desmond Gibney

Bernie Nolan

John O'Leary

Bridie Fitzgerald

PJ Morley

Betty Minihane

Stephen Langton

Basil McGill

Paddie Connellan

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