

Minister of Justice  
94 St Stephen's Green,  
Dublin 2.

Portlaoise Prison Visiting Committee Annual Report 2020

To the Minister of Justice,

Introduction.

Portlaoise Prison is a closed high security prison for adult males. It is the committal prison for those sent to custody from the Special Criminal Court and prisoners accommodated here include those linked with subversive crime. Currently, it houses approximately 230 prisoners in three different wings. Ultan Moran is the main Governor.

Covid 19 has without a doubt, affected us all throughout 2020 and continues to do so even now as we rush headlong into 2021. We have become so used now to hearing the numbers given out every evening on the news, so many sick and so many dead. The effects of the pandemic have also hit the prison population hard. Many in prison have also lost loved ones and many more are in fear of what the future may bring for them and their families. The burdens of grief can often become magnified when viewed through the lens of a long prison sentence.

The Irish Prison Service distributed Covid Information leaflets on a regular basis to all prisoners.

The Visiting Committee members were available to meet prisoners, but restricted in doing so due to Covid.

Members visited on the following dates:

January 8<sup>th</sup>, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, January 29<sup>th</sup>

February 05<sup>th</sup>, February 12<sup>th</sup>

March 4<sup>th</sup> March 11<sup>th</sup>

August 05<sup>th</sup>

September 09<sup>th</sup>, September 20<sup>th</sup>

Training Day – Members attended a training day via Zoom on October 14<sup>th</sup>.

## Education (Academic year 2019-2020)

A broad curriculum is offered to students including the traditional range of subjects such as Mathematics, English, History and Art. Further areas include ECCL, Literacy/Numeracy, ESOL, Yoga/Relaxation techniques, Zumba, Music Recording and Soft Skills. Also student directed programmes such as Crime Awareness, Addiction Studies, Parenting, Pre – Release, Family Learning Programme and Peer to Peer Literacy are offered.

### **State Exams:**

#### Leaving Certificate Candidates.

Total Students registered LC 2020 -6

Total Students registered for Calculated Grades -5

Total Grades awarded – 4

Total Students awarded Grades – 3

All candidates are registered to sit Leaving Certificate as per DES directive.

#### Junior Certificate

Learners 1, Subjects 1

Candidate registered on MATRIX system.

#### Non Exam Focused – Personal Development Programmes

Arts Council of Ireland Writers in Prison Scheme – 25 students.

Recreational Cookery: focusing on basic hygiene and cookery skills – 150 students.

Lifers Recreational Cookery Programme – 12 students.

Arts Council of Ireland Artists in Prison Scheme still life painting in Oils – 15 students.

Start your Own Business Programme – 8 students.

Pre – Release programme – 18 students.

Addiction Awareness – 10 students.

Confidence Building – 12 students.

Family Learning & Parenting Programme.

Parenting Course – 6 students.

Story dad's CD programme – 15 students.

Memories with my dad programme – 18 parents.

Thinking of you programme – 12 parents.

Card Making Programme – 50 students.

Knitting workshop – 10 students.

Number of students currently enrolled: 235

Proposals for 2020 - 2021

- Ethnic Minority Liaison teacher role
- To extend GAISCE programme to Silver Level
- Apprenticeship Audit – update of 2018/2019 statistics
- Family Learning Programme.
- Guest Speaker Programme – Pint of Science, Traveller Mediation Services and College Connect
- To explore further suitable links with WIT
- To explore further suitable links with NALA
- Introduce Microsoft Specialist

A Pilot NALA Adult Literacy scheme was introduced whereby prisoners were trained at level 6 to teach other prisoners to read. This scheme was very successful. See APPENDIX A.

- **Medical/Counselling services**

Doctor on duty 4.5 days a week.

Nurses are in situ and available 24hrs/day and 7 days a week.

Psychology and Counselling Services are available but resources are limited and long waiting lists remain an issue.

Chaplain services are available and widely praised within Portlaoise Prison.

Psychology are continuing to offer their services to all prisoners, although all group sessions are cancelled due to Covid. It is hoped that group sessions can resume in the coming months.

Dental services are available, one morning session per week.

Probation Officers/ Training Liaison Officers are available.

Addiction counselling is available with a long waiting list.

The committee would recommend the provision of extra resources for all the areas mentioned above.

- *Library*

The Committee visited the library and noted that there is still no librarian assigned to the Prison.

There is no longer a grant available for the purchase of new books.

The Laois County Librarian was contacted and as a result, a large amount of books were donated to the Prison. The Main Prison Service Library has also been providing books for the jail.

Unfortunately, there is still a short supply of foreign language books.

- *Visitors Centre*

- The Visitors Centre is fit for purpose, with lockers and good facilities available.

- *Work/Training.*

- *Fabric Workshop*

Inmates make all sorts of furnishings, toys, Christmas stockings, Easter bags etc. Inmates do a lot of embroidering for clubs or businesses on tee-shirts, jackets etc. Orders are received from Staff, Charities, Services do up prices and proceed with requests. The workshop does a certain amount of charity work every year.

- *Framing Shop*

Inmates make frames for all occasions, all sizes and colours with mounts also available.

They have put together some amazing frames to include Jerseys, flags, 21 & 30 year medals etc.

They make frames for a lady who creates beautiful keepsakes, “best Mam/Dad, Grandmother/Grandfather, Godparent” etc.

- *Horticulture*

The Inmates cultivate and grow a huge range of flowers. These flowers will be sold in hanging baskets or pots. Displays can be picked to suit your preference.

Inmates also grow vegetables and herbs for the Staff Mess.

- *Catering*

The Main Kitchen caters for all prisoners.

The Mess caters for all our Staff. Both kitchens employ prisoners to train and work in these areas.



- *Computers*

The computer shop prints all the prison booklets, journals and prisoner documentation.

- *Laundry*

The Laundry service runs 7 days a week. Inmates launder all clothing and bed clothing for all prisoners across the prison. This is one of the busiest places for prisoners to work in as they work to a strict timetable to ensure all prisoners are catered for.

- *Gym*

There is a large Gym in C4. Before Covid, it could cater for approx. 35 prisoners, but it currently can only take up 18 prisoners per session. The Gym accommodates everything - weights, exercise machines, badminton. Football is played in the yards.

- *Waste Management*

Waste Management is a full time job. Inmates gather and dispose of all waste into each category. They look after all areas of the prison.

### **Maintenance and Appearance of Buildings.**

The assessment of the Admin building/Castle was carried out. The remedial works have been completed. Further structural defects will be repaired and redecorated when the building has dried out.

- **Memorial Garden**

The purpose of the Memorial Garden is to recognise the service and contribution made by the staff of Portlaoise Prison to preserve our Nations security during one of the most turbulent periods in Irish history.

The Portlaoise Prison Staff Memorial Garden was officially opened by the Minister for Justice and Equality Charles Flanagan TD on Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020. Construction of the Memorial Garden commenced in 2018. The garden includes a plinth and the original bell from the old Portlaoise Prison Church (now demolished). The garden also includes a rockery which includes stone from the former Governors Residence and other now demolished buildings from the prison. The metal work and stone work were completed by Wheatfield Prison. (Appendix B).

In conclusion, we would like to thank the Governor of the Prison and the Management team and the staff for the courtesy and assistance provided to us on our visits to the Prison at all times during the year.

The Committee also want to recognise the great assistance the Red Cross has provided to the jail during the Covid Pandemic.

**Anne Turley (Chairperson)**

Anne Turley

**Colette Fennelly**

Colette Fennelly

**Michael Hough**

Michael Hough

**Martin Moroney**

Martin Moroney

**Brendan O Dowd**

Brendan O Dowd

**June Bourke**

June Bourke

**John Moran**

John R Moran

# Here to help

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## Peer-to-peer literacy projects are transforming the lives of people in Portlaoise Prison.

Forty-one per cent of incarcerated people in Ireland left school before the age of 14. As a result of educational and wider inequalities, the average literacy level of prisoners is much lower than the general population. During the last two years, NALA has been involved in several projects aimed at building the literacy skills and confidence of people who are imprisoned.

### The first year

In February last year, following discussions between Laois and Offaly ETB, NALA and teachers from Portlaoise Prison's Education Unit, it was agreed that NALA would provide training sessions to support the development of a peer-to-peer literacy ambassador programme. The project involved the students raising awareness of literacy among their peers and promoting how literacy can help build confidence, support relationships, health and general feelings of wellbeing.

In summer 2019, the literacy ambassadors planned a project to promote the prison's Education Unit. They designed posters and flyers in plain English and displayed them on different floors, known as landings, throughout the prison. Promotional flyers were also distributed in prison laundry bags for people to find when they collected their laundry. One of the slogans the ambassadors used in the promotional materials was "We are here to help".

The literacy ambassadors said that they gained a lot through their participation in the programme. They felt it helped them share the love of learning they had developed during their time in prison.

Many spoke of feeling like this was their opportunity to give something back to their community and to support others to develop their literacy skills and confidence. Their positive experiences as literacy ambassadors inspired the group to become even more ambitious and teachers in the Education Unit encouraged them to consider training as peer-to-peer literacy tutors.

### Progress in 2020

A year later, six men from the group have graduated as literacy tutors. Despite the summer of lockdown and many hours of isolation in their cells, they have kept their determination to finish their portfolios. They have successfully completed their certificate in the NALA and Waterford IT Developing Literacies 1, a module of the level six Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development.

Feedback from the students who have taken part in the tutor training programme has been overwhelmingly positive. The participants call themselves 'The Peers' and they are known throughout the prison for helping to remove the stigma associated with literacy and going back to education. On the prison landings, it is now a good thing to be seen with books under your arm. The positive impact of 'The Peers' is confirmed by teachers from the Education Unit who say that the numbers of people turning up for support has increased.



Appendix B.

