

Visiting Committee Report

Wheatfield Prison
Year 2020.

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12 th March, 2021.

VISITING COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT YEAR ENDING 2020.

We, the undersigned members of Wheatfield Place of Detention Visiting Committee are pleased to present the Annual Report year ending 2020.

The Visiting Committee comprises of six members at time of writing this report. The sixth member was appointed and had one visit in December 2020. Unfortunately, another two members were unable to attend meetings from April through to December 2020 due to COVID-19 and their own personal situations.

During the earlier part of the COVID-19 situation only one member of our Committee personally visited the Prison on a weekly/ fortnightly basis. And I as Chairperson kept in contact with Governor Maria Connolly on a regular basis.

Our regular meetings resumed on 9th June, 2020 with 3 members in attendance.

The first meeting each month meets with the Prisoners who requested a meeting. Our Return Visit is made by two members of the Committee and they impart to the Prisoners the result of our consultation with the Governor regarding the issues that they raised.

During 2020 Governor Connolly continued with her impressive work to bring continued energy to the Red Cross Training for Prisoners, huge support for An Gaisce Awards.

The School and Workshops opened daily and operated very well at the beginning of 2020.

There were many more Classes and Workshops opened and interesting courses available for Prisoners. Then while we visited Wheatfield Prison on 10th March, 2020 all changed.

The COVID-19 epidemic had arrived in Ireland. On that visit the Prison started to gear up to protect the Prisoners and Staff. We as a committee attending our Monthly meeting in Wheatfield on that day were very impressed indeed by the meetings and arrangements that were in full swing that morning.

Governor Marie Connolly and all of the Governors that we meet with throughout this most unusual year have been open and supportive of all our requests. In fact all the Staff in the Administration Office and Prison Officers who support the Committee Members while visiting the Prison itself have been most helpful and courteous

Visiting Committee visits to Wheatfield Prison in 2020

COVID-19 made it difficult to carry out our usual visits to the Prison each month.

From 10th March until 9th June 2020 we did our best to continue engaging with the Governor and one of our Members visited regularly and Governor kept the Committee up to date with how the Prison Service and Prisoners were dealing with the COVID-19 situation.

From 9th June 2020 we were able to return to Wheatfield and meet in person with the Prisoners who requested to see the Visiting Committee.

At the beginning of the first Lockdown P19s increased but after a period Prisoners settled down. Prisoners were very aware of the dangers of COVID-19 and while physical visits of their families ceased the introduction of increased phone calls and the availability of Video calls to their families helped enormously.

Skype/Video links for communicating with Families both in Ireland and for those Prisoners whose families live in other parts of the world was a huge success and we would encourage the continuation of this type of communication as a normal way of Prisoners keeping in touch with their families.

This we believe it is one of the positive results of the COVID-19 Lockdown and indeed we urge that Streaming information to each Prison Cell is the way forward to engage Prisoners in Education, Personal Skills information, Healthy Foods, Life Coaching etc. The Wheatfield Education Unit published a Booklet "Wellbeing Manual" Authors, Sinead Duignan and Orla Brennan. This type of information for Prisoners is invaluable and would be perfect for a STREAM SERVICE.

Normally we would visit parts of the Prison on a regular basis. The School, Workshops, Yard, the GreenHouse Project, Kitchen etc. but of course this was not possible for most of this year 2020.

Facility corridors, wings and landings.

It was very fortunate that by end of 2019 the installation of the New Cell Windows was completed and the Cleaning Regime the Staff organised was a very great assistance when COVID-19 arrived.

Since 2019 there has been a huge improvement in the cleanliness of all areas in the prison. The housekeeping of cells and corridors has continued and makes a great difference throughout the prison. There is also a Certified Project/Course that Prisoners can join which could lead to work when they are discharged from Prison.

During this COVID-19 time it was a very positive for the Prison as hygiene was paramount in keeping Prisoners and the Prison safe.

Drugs.

During the early days of COVID-19 it was reported to our Committee there was a very definite reduction in drugs getting into the Prison and Prisoners were experiencing the fact that they were less stressed. (no doubt the Methodone Programme was running) but some Prisoners saw it as an opportunity to live without drugs.

Unfortunately , drugs re appeared. The Perimeter Wall is a great difficulty for the Prison Authorities. Its is a daily/hourly pressure/struggle to try to keep Prisoners safe from the onslaught of Drugs/Mobile Phones coming over this Wall. Although the Gardai did arrest many outside the wall and prevented drugs getting into the Yards during the Lock Down. The Committee feels very strongly that this issue should be tackled as an emergency. The pressure on Prisoners to be involved in supplying in the Prison is horrible. We believe while the Prisoner is in the Care of the State the Prisoner should be reasonably protected from Drug Gangs whose only driving force is to make money on the backs of Prisoners and their families.

Prisoner Reception Area:

From March 2020 All new Prisoners on entry to Wheatfield was confined for an isolation period of 14 days before being placed with the General Population of the Prison. That also applied to Prisoners who left for reasons of interview with Gardai in Garda Stations or Court.

All these precautions kept the Prisoners and Staff safe during this period.

Facilities on the Prison Grounds:

There is a very high quality flower and plant nursery. It gives training to the Prisoners who have engaged with the scheme. The Prisoners involved are serving life sentences and are on an enhanced regime. The Programme operates at a very professional level and provides flowers for public areas. There is also a project which recycles rain water and adds environmentally to the greenhouse project . The grounds are always well maintained.

A substantial waste management programme also operates within the prison.

Kitchen/Catering

The kitchen continues to operate at a very high level. The Kitchen has been inspected by outside authorities and has received the relevant accreditations. The Kitchen and the Stores operate at a professional level.

There is a 28 day menu cycle in operation. There are also arrangements for special food diets and those Prisoners who have difficulty with their diet are facilitated. There is a special board to facilitate those with dietary issues.

The food is of good quality and variety. The kitchen cleanliness is above reproach. The training that Prisoners receive is excellent and very important both for understanding a healthy diet, and on release they will have a good knowledge regarding a healthy diet and cooking for themselves and their families. The experience in the Kitchen for a Prisoner can also be an opportunity for employment on leaving the Prison. Enhanced Prisoners also have the opportunity to work in the Prison Officers Canteen which gives them experience should they on release also desire to work in the hotel or catering business.

Library/other facilities

This is a very important resource for Prisoners. There are Literacy problems that some Prisoners have which in the past created difficulties in their school days and later in life and therefore schools is a very daunting place.

The introduction of an Information Streaming Service or Information Loop channel could be explored which could encourage more usage of both the Library and Adult Education. Also, projects and Apps that assist with Dyslexia could offer a Prisoner an opportunity to engage with further and Second Chance Education. There is a Touch/Type Read and Spell app which can assist with gaining knowledge to read and write with confidence. (Maynooth College have this App available)

www.jumpstartinglearning.com a CPD course by the Department of Education in Maynooth.

Froebel Department of Primary and Early Education. It relates to Dyslexia ;and reading difficulties.

Prisoner's Cells have a TV. Games Consoles and other Games i.e. Chess or Playing Cards are also available

Education:

There are many and varied courses and subjects that Prisoners can engage with while in Wheatfield Prison. There is a large number of subjects available :

There are 35 Teachers on staff, 14 Full time and the remainder on half days. There are 53 subjects available, which include Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate subjects. There are also courses for Post Leaving Certificate. We would consider that a Prisoner who wishes to have a qualification in an area that they have already completed part of a course, have a flair for or would consider continuing the course on release could be facilitated while in Wheatfield Prison.

This committee wonders about the many number of courses available and might there be a survey done with Prisoners regarding their Interests and Requests for Subjects that might entuse them. It might be a module of a course that they can connect with when they leave Prison. We also think that a change of **Name for the School** might help encourage many more to engage with education. Calling the Service **Second Chance Education or Adult Education** may not have the same conotation of school memories for a lot of Prisoners. Modules of 4 to 5 weeks might seem more possible to encourage Prisoners to engage, with a Certificate at end of module to encourage continuing with their subject and education.

Programmes also include Pre Release 8 week course and Parenting Classes.

The Red Cross also provide courses. Courses include, Mental Health tips, Donor Awarness talk, Cancer Awarness week, Show Racism the red Card, Overdose Prevention Workshops.

An Gaisce Awards have become very successful with many Prisoners taking part in 2020. There were 32 Participants and 5 Gold Awards and 8 Silver Awards was a brillian success. Unfortunately, Covid prevented the Awards being presented to the Prisoners with members of their families invited to wittness their success.

The Education Service working arrangements had to be changed to cope with how the Prison, Prisoners and Prison Staff were operating due to COVID-19 . This was necessary in order to keep everyone safe in the Prison. Classes needed to be smaller due to the size of the School Area, and the decision to divide the Prison to cope with Covid. And in order to offer as much educational opportunities as possible. It was decided to offer Modules of Subjects that would give Prisoners as many oppotunities as possible to continue with Education during this difficult time.

Normally Evening classes are also available from 5.30-7.00pm and 10 Teachers provide this service.

During 2020 this was a difficulty that the Education Department in Wheatfield had to cope with.

Normally there are issues of difficulty around getting to 22 hr lock up prisoners if they request to engage with the Education Department in the Prison as the amount of staff required to get one teacher to a prisoner on 22hr lock up is very demanding for the service. As Security and Safety of both is required. COVID-19 added to this problem.

As we are now in the Modern World of Technology there could be an oppotunity to use Skype within the prison for 1 teacher to engage with several Prisoners with a subject and this would assist with security necessary for each and every Prisoner who wants to engage with the Education Service and a particular subject.

With the success of providing Links for Video calls, Streaming would be a positive step in providing much needed resources that could engage Prisoners in many directions with help for addiction, Family Problem Solving, Work prospects, etc.

Repairs in School Area: The ceiling in the School Corridor is in very bad condition and is in need of prompt repair.

Training Workshops continued during Covid

We have visited these workshops on many occasions and commend the instructors who are dedicated and proud of their work and facility. Unfortunately we could not once COVID-19 arrive.

The facilities offers carpentry, metalwork, construction, printing and painting workshops. Prisoners receive a high level of training and skill sets upon completion of these courses.

There is a substantial supply of tools, machinery and equipment available to Prisoners to enable them to carry out their work and complete their course. The skills learned in these WorkShops are of great assistance to Prisoners on leaving Prison as they seek employment especially now in this climate of employment .

The Prison also has links with outside agencies i.e. charities in which some of the products and services of prisoners from these WorkShops can be utilised.

Physical Activities

The Gym is a very popular pastime. The Gyms have a very good selection of equipment. During the 1st Lock Down the North Gym was closed as North 2 Area was designated for Video Calls/Links for Prisoners for contact with their families.

It is important that the equipment is well maintained. Prisoners on Basic Enhancement get a minimum of one hour per week and those on Enhancement get a minimum of 2 hours per week. There is also a Sports Hall where indoor Soccer can be played. And other indoor sports if requested. The Committee believes that Sport facilities are very important to aid the physical and mental health and fitness of Prisoners.

During COVID-19 the Prison Service provided the use of the Gym and while the hours were not as would be normally expected, everybody worked with the situation as is was.

Outdoor activity on the tarmacadam areas is also a very important facility. The yards are looking quite tired and crumbly and although the committee understands that there are many issues needing finances in the Prison in future Budgets this could be looked at and addressed.

The Perimeter Wall Netting at this location is an ongoing problem. Nets requested by Management to deal with Drugs/Mobile Phone being thrown over this wall are needing urgent attention or replacement.

Laundry

Wheatfield has its own Laundry Services, which services both Cloverhill and Wheatfield. This facility also offers Prisoners training opportunities. The laundry is a very busy area and is conducted in a professional way. We have never received any complaints regarding this service from Prisoners. The Committee would note that the **machinery is quite old and could most probably be replaced when budgets allow.**

Garden and Flower Enterprise

There is a very high quality flower and plant nursery in the grounds of Wheatfield. It gives training to the Prisoners who have engaged with the scheme. The Prisoners involved are serving life sentences and are on an enhanced regime. The Programme operates at a very professional level and provides flowers for Summer Baskets and Bedding Plants for public areas. Although staffing issues caused delays the work continued during the Summer despite COVID-19.

There is also a project which recycles rain water and adds environmentally to the greenhouse project. The grounds are always well maintained.

A substantial waste management programme also operates within the prison.

Prisoner Mail

Prisoner's mail service is generally handled with efficiency. Incoming and Outgoing Prisoner mail is censored for inappropriate remarks, comments and material. Prisoner's can receive private mail **from Legal Personnel** if it is **in a separate envelope** within the original envelope. There is an option for a Prisoner to have personal and sensitive mail directed to the Visiting Committee. Generally the inmates are satisfied with the system as it is. Should there be complaints the Committee will follow up on those issues raised.

Other Services/Facilities

Wheatfield has links with external groups such as the Red Cross (mentioned previously), The Samaritans and Merchants Quay Drug Services and Chaplains. These Groups provide excellent services and support for Prisoners who engage with them. The Samaritans have trained inmates to become listeners. This is a very valuable resource as inmates have someone to talk with who have similar experiences and circumstances.

22hr Lock UP

This is a very tough and isolating situation that a Prisoner finds himself in. It can arise either by The Prison Authority's decision regarding risk to the Prisoner himself, other Prisoners or by the choice of the Prisoner himself due his fear of violence that he may experience with other Prisoners in Wheatfield whom he has had interaction with before entering Prison.

The Prison Service tries as much as is possible to prevent a Prisoner making the decision to seek 22hr lockup explaining the mental health issues that can arise through this isolation. These situation cause great suffering in Mental Health and a considerable stress on staffing. Each of these Prisoners is required to have 3 hours out of his cell. Consequently a tremendous amount of staff is required which can deplet staff in other areas, such as WorkShops and School.

Drug ISSUES

At the beginning of LockDown Drugs were not entering the Prison and many Prisoners were relieved with this situation. As time went by the Drugs returned. The Perimeter Wall is a huge issue. There were many arrests by Gardai during this time. The Drugs and phones entering the Prison is a serious issue that puts a lot of pressure on Prisoners who would rather not be involved. But of course there are Prisoners who are very motivated to enable the drugs to enter the Prison. This is a serious and ongoing difficulty both for the Prison Authorities Country wide and also for Prisoner's and their families. Despite the best efforts of the Authorities in Wheatfield Prison, scanners, sniffer dogs, Xray and bags searches and the Perimeter wall being monitored daily, constantly drugs enter the Prison. The stress both on Prisoners and Families to facilate drugs being brought into the Prison is enormous.

If caught the Prisoner will receive a P19 and his visitor will be banned from visiting him for 6 months and then 6 month on screens. This can be devastating for the Prisoner and his family. The Prisoner may also loose any enhanced position he had earned and be back down to a basic situation.

Prisoners can avail of drug rehabilitation programmes within the prison and the authorities encourage prisoners to use this service.

Yard Facility- and Issue of Drugs over the wall and the state of the netting.

Wheatfields Yards are large spaces. They are covered with netting in order to prevent drugs and objects being thrown over the perimeter wall. This netting is not succeeding in keeping the drugs out of Wheatfield and we strongly believe that a concerted effort by the Department is needed to

seriously address this very on going difficult situation. This wall is a huge difficulty for the Authorities in Wheatfield Prison. More netting and a solution to the security of the perimeter wall is essential. The Soccer Pitch is used in all weathers and is a great facility for Prisoners to release energy and play team games no doubt in a competitive way.

The Perimeter Wall

A huge issue that needs a radical plans to mitigate against drugs being thrown over the wall. Also if housing is being considered in that waste land behind the Prison, it could well be argued that those living in those homes could be under considerable pressure regarding activity of drug dealers and the lure for monetary gain using this wall to ply their trade. The wall in the opinion of the Committee members needs urgent attention and a very intense engagement of all the bodies who own the land to work together to solve and protect the Prison.

Discipline Regimes

The Institution operates three levels of incentivised regimes, basic, standard and enhanced standard. Depending on Prisoners engagement within the system they can be downgraded to basic.

All new committals are on standard. Within the basic programme there is a loss of certain privileges, such as no access to the gym, games consoles, premium employment, and accommodation. The committee believe this loss of privilege is fair. That is that these losses are administered to a Prisoner in a fair and equitable way. Clear rules are given to Prisoners on entry to the Prison. This loss of privileges should never be used on Prisoners without giving the Prisoner a clear indication of his infringement.

Although we see Prisoners who complain about their P19 and loss of privilege on understanding the situation that happened we can bring clarity to this difficult situation that the Prisoner finds himself in and encourage him not to loose faith and try to regain the privileges he lost.

For this system to work well there must be communication and clarity with the Authorities regarding the issue that brought the Prisoner to the position that he is loosing his privileges. The ramification of infringing the rules has to be clear at all times.

The enhanced regime has clear advantages, such as 7 hours out of their cell. Engaged in School, Workshops, Working in the Kitchen, Laundry etc. These activities are not only worth while, but can help and assist with the difficulty of being in Prison and the loss of freedom.

There is one incentive that appeals to Prisoners and that is the Open Prison. As there are only so many places and a Prisoner more or less needs to be near ending his prison sentence, it is not always a suitable fit for a lot of Prisoners. So there can be an amount of disappointment and anger when a Prisoner sees another Prisoner getting an Open Prison place and he is refused or does not get an offer. There can be many reason that the Authorities not only in the Prison but in the broader Justice System who can point to difficulties that they see in offering a Place to a particular Prisoner.

Drug taking in Open Prison.

There is no Methadone Programme in the Open Prison Service. Therefore when a Prisoner is transferred to an Open Prison he loses the assistance of the Methadone Programme and it appears that quite a lot of Prisoner Returns to Wheatfield are as a result of drug taking. This might be an area that the Authorities could look at to assist those who have still not been drug free and are on a methadone programme.

Sentence Management.

Wheatfield operates an integrated sentence management programme. There is a dialogue between the institution and the inmates on how to get the best out of their time in Prison. This gives the inmates a clear understanding of their future within the prison. The Authorities have a positive approach regarding sentencing.

The committee feel that Wheatfield's Authorities work hard to ensure that prisoners on enhanced regimes get an opportunity to apply for T.R or open facilities. There is a humane approach to prisoner sentences by the Authorities in Wheatfield. The Committee believes that when the Governor receives a request for information or transfer to another Prison by the Prisoner the Governor follows through and brings the request to a conclusion. The lines of communication must be open and clear at all times.

Visitor information.

The booking line has improved over the last few years. The use of an online form to book family visits is now available via the IPS website. (Irish Prison Services). If a visitor is barred, clear and fair time frames are now implemented. The paperwork for future visits should be issued at least a week before the expiration of the previous paperwork. Visitor review results should be communicated to the inmate in question.

More Notices to avoid litter being left in the Public Parking Area should be erected. Mostly now the entrance to the Prison is tidy and clean. There are occasions when people entering this area discard cups and papers as they walk along. And the appearance of the entrance can look neglected.

Institution Visits.

Depending on the regime that the Prisoner is on each inmate is entitled to a least one and a maximum of three visits per week. St. Vincent de Paul are now operating a visitor centre in

Wheatfield and it has been well received by families and Prisoners. For visitors there are security measures before entering the visiting area. There are Lockers where cloths and goods can be stored while the person is visiting there family member. Should a visitor be caught with bring a substance or object that is prohibited into the Prison they can be arrested and charged and also the Prisoner they are visiting can also be served with a P19 and loose his privileges.

There has been an introduction to a visiting room, which is set out for a more relaxed family visit. There are tables and chairs and the Prisoner has a more relaxed visit with his family.

Should anyone breach the rules, the visitor will be barred for 6 months (if not arrested) and on screen for the follow 6 months. The Prisoner will receive a P19 and loose privileges.

Deaths of close relatives of Prisoners.

No doubt all involved in the above situation require assistance with trained Counsellors and Psychologist and other medical services.

We would suggest for Prisoners who have a death of a close family member i.e. Parent, Sibling, Spouse/Partner, that an emergency **Wrap Around Counselling Programme** would immediately respond to the Prisoner. We are aware that the Governors will facilitate members of the Prisoner's family visits to help the Prisoner with some understanding of the death of their close family member.

We believe that the sooner the Prisoner gets the professional help he requires in those dark days the more effective it will be for the Prisoner while in Prison and on leaving the Prison.

Mental Health of Prisoners

Although there has been an increase of Psychologists in the Prison Service there remains many Prisoners who are very much in need of Pshychiatric assistance and or referrals on leaving Prison.

Health

Inmates have access to doctors, nurses, dentists and opticians. Should emergency treatment be required it is provided. Inmates receive fair treatment and follow ups as required in accordance with best practice. While there is a need for more psychologists, there has been movement in progressing this shortage.

The Committee believe that all prisoners who avail of medical care receive good care. While the Prisoners medical care is confidential it is essential that clarity of communication between the Prisoner and Medical staff and the Authorities in the Prison are kept open and clear.

Pain reducing Medication is a frequent request and there is a strict oversight of inmates trying to or storing medication. We would believe that a Counselling Service for Pain management would met that need.

Wheatfield run a programme for Prisoners called “Building Better Life Programme” for selected inmates. This course has been very successful for Prisoners who engage and is a considerable help with Mental Health Issue resolution. The Committee believes that this programme should be available to all Prisoners. We understand the monetary constraints and staff constraints. This programme could be offered to first time offenders and for very young offenders it could clarify for them the choices and consequence of their actions.

Chaplaincy

This is a very important and integral part of inmates welfare. The spiritual needs, care and trusting service is essential. Wheatfield has also made provision for inmates of different faiths. There seems to be no complaint that Prisoners are not being provided with this essential support.

Final remarks.

Unfortunately at the end of December, 2020 COVID-19 did enter Wheatfield both for Prisoners and Prison Staff. We would like to commend the efficiency of the Testing for Covid19. The Prison Governors and Staff and the HSE were wonderful and within a matter of weeks there was a return to as normal a service that could be envisaged in this COVID-19 time.

We would also like to state that the proposed new Law to be Enacted Re: Grooming of a Child by an Adult to Commit a Criminal Offence was welcomed by this committee.

Visiting Committee Members. Signatures:

Kathleen Gill _____

Joseph Fitzsimons _____

Stewart Stephens _____

New appointees. Mr. Thomas McTeague and Mr. Pat Hoey. Unfortunately because of COVID-19 it delayed their participation at our meetings in Wheatfield Prison. (Mr. P. Hoey has 1 attendance at end of December 2020.

Brenda Coyne (Chairperson) _____

