

Annual Report Dochas 2008

The visiting committee for Dochas Prison was set up mid way through 2008 and held monthly meetings from July together with interim visits where members met with prisoners and staff.

The activities for the time covered by this report therefore reflect:

- A period of establishment of a Visiting Committee
- Meetings with relevant authorities including both Governor Lonergan and Governor Mahon.
- A general familiarisation by members of the Committee with the workings and responsibilities within the prison.

Dochas is a female unit, designed to accommodate 85 prisoners but frequently runs at 136% capacity around 115 prisoners. This is clearly a problem which impacts on physical conditions for prisoners and prevents the correct use of leisure space designed to facilitate recreation. This must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

From initial inspections the Visiting Committee finds:

Kitchens in the prison are well kept and hygiene standards are comparable to commercial outlets serving food. Toilets in the kitchen area are well maintained and accident logs kept up to date. Menus are prepared on 28 day rotation and in general seem to be adequate. Food is varied and nutrition balanced.

The education and training centre comprises a school and a training unit. A diverse range of subject areas and vocational skills training are undertaken in these facilities. Mainstream education courses are on offer throughout the academic year and vocational training workshops are available all year round. Literacy and numeracy skills assistance is also available along with dedicated English as a second language classes.

Physical education is catered for in Dochas and facilities include a gym, an indoor multi – use space and an outside recreation yard.

Medical attention is offered in a full medical wing at Dochas prison which is well equipped. Comments from women regarding this service were

generally good. In particular positive feedback was received from those attempting to address issues of addiction or control methadone reliance. Dentistry however poses difficulty in the prison and women complained of long waiting times. This was raised with authorities and dealt with but will continue to be monitored by the VC.

Counselling facilities and other supports are available to the women in Dochas prison and there appears to be an adequate system in place to offer help to women. The pastoral service is good and was commented on favourably by a number of women. Courses are offered which address issues including family matters, personal development, goal setting etc A volunteer programme to diversify activities is a possibility and the Visiting Committee will work with prison authorities to examine whether this can be facilitated.

A particular concern for those women who are mothers is separation from their children. This is particularly an issue for women serving longer sentences or where there is limited family support. The VC would like to engage with prison authorities to review means of maintaining parental bonds to the greatest capacity within the context of a prison sentence and to improve parenting capacity for those mothers leaving prison

Media attention, including the use of photos has been a cause of concern to some prisoners. The Visiting Committee recommends a review of access to information and photos of prisoners.

Preliminary visits indicate a prison that is well run with prisoners' interests being correctly attended to.

The Visiting Committee would like to thank all those who have assisted in the setting up of a Visiting Committee at Dochas Prison. Finally, we would like to thank Governor Mc Mahon and her staff for their co – operation.

Members Dochas Visiting Committee.