

The Mountjoy Prison Visiting Committee

Annual Report 2009

To Minister for Justice
Mr. Dermot Ahern T.D.

In 1997 the introduction of the Visiting Committee report stated that the report was short. Not because they had little to say about Mountjoy Prison, but because they had said it all before, in 93,94,95,96 and now in 97. It was decided they were going to make minor changes to the 96 report and resubmit it!!!!!! Well we could almost do the same in 2010. The same major problems exist, even though improvements were made to security, the regime remains largely the same. Still chronically overcrowded, vermin infested more drugs in the prison than sweets in the tuck shop, filthy facilities and no structured approach to a prisoner's day. In 2007 we welcomed the introduction of new prison rules under the Prisons Act 2007, and promised to enlighten the Minister as to their impact in Mountjoy. We now report that elements of the Act are continuously broken.

Physical Education & Gym

Generally speaking the gym needs more space and more equipment. Time for gym activities should be made available to those in the base requesting it, for at least the hour long recreation they are entitled to.

Separation Unit

We are very disappointed at the failure to open this unit by the end of 2009, as promised in September.

Ready for occupancy other than fire certification, plumbing, electrical items and agreement on manning levels.

Surely the issues going into 2010 were known at the outset of the project and should have been resolved long before now.

Cells should be single occupancy only.

Industrial Cleaning

A training programme has been put in place for areas outside cells. An instructor has been appointed and he will lead the programme.

A handbook for the cleaning teams for each landing will be made available.

Proper protective clothing must be provided appropriate to the specific task.

Medical Centre

A fine facility, well run and the service provided have improved to a high standard, particularly the dental section.

There are two holding cells, two surgery rooms, X-ray room, doctors' rooms, counsellors, speech therapy rooms and general medical room.

The changes in the operation of this unit in the last year have resulted in a substantial reduction in complaints.

Arising from our observations in 2009, we would ask and encourage all staff and management to be more aware of prisoner's general health.

Waste Management:

This work is carried out by a team of prisoners obviously dedicated to the work and well supervised. However much more needs to be done and further additions to equipment necessary.

We have been informed that equipment is in the store in Santry awaiting collection/delivery. We understand there are plans to do this soon.

Overcrowding

Overcrowding does not facilitate safe and secure custody for prisoners or a safe working environment for staff.

Despite assurances that the extra bed spaces being provided nationally would improve conditions at Mountjoy, this is blatantly not the case.

Special cells are being used for accommodation and also a special cell in the medical unit, because of a defective floor, has not been fit for use for at least six months.

On numerous occasions management at IPS have spoken and written of the duty of care to all prisoners, yet the prison system continues to accept prisoners from the courts, without question, into unsafe, unhygienic and overcrowded conditions.

We cannot accept that nobody can liaise with the Judiciary on this issue.

Previously we pointed out that incarcerating people to these conditions is a punishment additional to the intended deprivation of freedom intended by the courts.

Again we must ask that alternatives to custody be found for offences not considered serious enough for a custodial sentence.

Legislators must assist in producing answers to this huge problem. There are still thousands of warrants for non payment of fines in Garda stations awaiting execution.

In 2007 concern was expressed when the number in custody was 570, now we get figures closer to 650.

But for the dedication and commitment of prison staff, the situation might be even more volatile than it currently is.

This situation is leading to special observation cells being used for accommodation on a regular basis. 20% of prisoners in the base are sleeping on the floors, accompanied by assorted vermin and cockroaches. Mountjoy needs urgent attention until Thornton Hall is open.

A decent regime for all is essential. The 2007 prison rules governing custodial care in Mountjoy cannot continue to be broken.

There continues to be a constant stream of fines committals, taking up inordinate amounts of time and effort. This situation is ridiculous and must cease. The time would be better spent keeping the workshops, library, the school and other rehabilitative measures open.

The Department and IPS must resolve this issue with the assistance of the Gardai and the Judiciary. The promise that the extra bed spaces provided nationally would help reduce the numbers in Mountjoy never happened.

Kitchens

Generally the kitchens are satisfactory from a food and hygiene point of view. We would suggest that washable plastic cutlery and plates be utilised. A pack containing the required utensils and condiments should be supplied, and money saved could be used to employ more officers for the workshops.

An audit of this situation would be very useful. In work and training there are currently 23 vacancies which impacts negatively on the ability of management to keep workshops open.

Maintenance

Due to maintenance staff having to escort outside contractors within the prison, essential maintenance and repair work is being neglected/ignored.

It would seem obvious that management needs to look at the number of people required to carry out these essential works. We would question the necessity of having maintenance staff carry out escort duties. Another way to deal with a lot of these maintenance problems is to enhance and to enlarge the concept of internal work parties.

Workshops and Library

Overcrowding, staff shortages, absenteeism, escort duties and staff holidays and other leave options are among the reasons that workshops, the library and schools are closed on a fairly regular basis. These services are the backbone of rehabilitation and should not be closed, as often as they are. Workshops are routinely running at 50% of the set programme. Also the library had 613 cancelled library sessions.

In 2008 they totalled 369. Since 2004 staff shortages in the prison has impacted negatively on the service. In 2009 visits to the library halved from 2008.

The library is an essential part of the non classroom education system and is a core component.

It must be given every opportunity to remain open. A vacancy on the library team has been in existence since November 2003. Also there are currently 13 vacancies in the workshop system.

DRUGS;

Higher nets must be provided at yards and a review of the camera system carried out.

A dedicated structured approach to reducing and eventually stopping dependency on drugs should be implemented as a PRIORITY ISSUE.

Work Parties:

The shutting down of the external work parties was a bitter blow to the committee and unfortunately no advance notice was deemed necessary for us, despite the Director General being informed of our commitment to this project on more than one occasion. We would like to see it reinstated without delay, with incentives to engage with rehabilitation measures.

Toilet Facilities

Generally toilets are in a bad state and urgently require proper cleaning and repair. A review of how these are constructed is essential, as it is very easy to damage them.

All damage is not caused by prisoner vandalism. It is also the case that the incorrect material and design are being used in constructing toilet walls and particularly showers.

We have been advised ,following our representations on incell sanitation, that trial installations are being carried out. However we firmly believe that trials are not the way forward and a programme of fitting out all cells should commence without delay and treated as a matter of urgent necessity.

Reception Area

Throughout 2009 we reported regularly on the unsuitability of this area. No natural light, no air conditioning, and cells which are only 8' X 8' which have solid doors.

If these are to be kept in use, at least the doors should be replaced with bar type doors. Also we hope that using this area as overnight accommodation has ceased.

The amount of clothing a prisoner is allowed plus a list of other items permitted should be determined and rigidly adhered to. No prisoner should be in a position to claim loss of clothing and other personal effects to the extent claimed,

A room adjoining the reception has clothes dryers which have not worked for at least 2 years.

Prisoner time should be structured i.e. getting up in the morning, cleaning out cells, going to school, workshops or other meaningful activities, encouraged and helped to take responsibility.

Failure to engage should have consequences. To this end an appropriate sanction system needs to be in place.

We thank the Management and staff for their time and effort with us over the last year.

Our sympathies to all the relatives and friends of those who died in 2009, connected to all our prisons. May they rest in peace.

Stephen Langton
(CHAIRPERSON)



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C.P.A.
A.T.I.