

***Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform,  
94 St Stephens Green,  
Dublin 2***

***Report of the Visiting Committee, Dochas Centre to the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform***

Dochas Visiting Committee at the end of 2009 comprised eight members following the resignation of one member and appointment of two new members to the committee. Visits took place monthly with random visits by two members each month outside meeting times.

Dochas Centre continued in 2009 to be a well run prison. The Visiting Committee wishes to acknowledge the work done by Governor Mc Mahon and many of her staff to ensure a regime which seeks to engage with prisoners and ensures that incarceration is delivered on in a humane and just manner.

There were a number of welcome improvements during the year including some improvement in dentistry services in the prison, although the situation is not as yet fully resolved. While with some prisoners continue to wait unnecessary lengths of time for treatment, reports of prisoners in pain are no longer being received by the Visiting Committee.

Arrangements were facilitated by prison authorities to provide a shop facility in Dochas separate to the Mountjoy prison. While a seemingly unimportant detail this was an important issue for women in the prison who had made various representations to the Visiting Committee. The arrival of a shop has enabled women control personal purchases and budget accordingly. Provision of personnel to support the running of the shop has proven a challenge but the Committee would urge that this facility continue to be supported by prison authorities.

There are a number of ongoing and increasingly worrying trends which continue to be of concern to members of the Visiting Committee. Already a problem in 2008, increasing levels of overcrowding and the accessibility of drugs in the prison have continued to impact seriously on conditions for those women held in custody in Dochas Centre in 2009.

With regard to overcrowding, which was highlighted in 2008, this has continued to escalate with prisoner numbers reaching more than 150% prison capacity on occasion. This has resulted in Dochas Centre accommodating more than 120 women in a prison built to house eighty five women. The Visiting Committee wishes to advocate strongly for alternative accommodation and a degree of urgency in the examination of alternative sentencing.

Women have been accommodated in offices and recreation areas limiting the use of these areas for their designed purpose, a purpose which was clearly deemed necessary when the prison was built. In particular the accommodation of women in the Health Unit is an unacceptable solution and it is the view of the Visiting Committee that its continued use should not be sanctioned. Given that there is no training unit or open prison elsewhere for women, restrictions on the few available facilities which assist in rehabilitation represent an intolerable practice.

Drugs in the prison also continue to be a concern and authorities appear to be powerless to stop drugs coming in over walls etc. The incidents of drugs being brought into the prison have led to heightened tensions in Dochas and the Visiting Committee would advocate further dialogue between prison authorities, Gardai etc to tackle this problem. It is not acceptable that perimeters can be breached by those wishing to supply drugs to prisoners nor that prison officers feel that safety considerations prevent them from tackling obvious incursions when they arise.

The level of medical services available to prisoners in Dochas seems adequate, although increased numbers will inevitably place a strain on the system. Dochas medical centre has a dedicated unit staffed by suitably qualified personnel. While general health is catered for, the Visiting Committee question whether prisoners suffering serious mental health concerns can be adequately cared for in Dochas Centre. A doctor and nurse are available to meet the requirements of the prisoners. Additional support is provided by an addiction counsellor and psychologist. A visiting psychiatrist attends on occasion. Outside medical personnel including an optician are accessed where required. Regular meetings are held between prison authorities and medical staff which have also been attended by the Chairperson of the Visiting Committee. Incidents of attempted suicide and self harm appear to be carefully monitored.

Prisoners are assisted with detox programmes. About 1/3 of the women in Dochas are on methadone maintenance programmes. They have access to drug treatment programmes including methadone maintenance and are facilitated with appointments etc at the prison pharmacy. More intensive rehabilitation programmes during imprisonment should be considered.

The education and training dept consists of a school and training unit in conjunction with City & Guilds and Failte Ireland Catering which gives diverse skills and increases future employment potential for the women. Feedback from those attending is positive and, while welcoming this, the Visiting Committee would advocate that efforts should be continued to ensure that it is not always the same participants who benefit from programmes. Operation of the school continues to be very successful with women being encouraged to return to education at all levels.

Pastoral care is provided in the prison and is accessed by a lot of the women. This is very well integrated into the prison regime and strongly supported by Governor Mc Mahon and her staff. Depression and anxiety levels are significant and a major factor for a large number of women is access to and separation from children. The fear / reality of homelessness is important for some women and is addressed, insofar as possible, along with other problems by Probation Services. Women in Dochas would benefit from an extension of the Listener programme as offered to men in Mountjoy Prison and the Visiting Committee notes Governor Lonergan's support for this proposal.

The Visiting Committee continues to express concern at media coverage, particularly of high profile prisoners, which has impacted on certain individuals. The Committee would urge authorities to continue to monitor all such breaches of confidentiality.

In general, the Visiting Committee of Dochas Centre can inform the Minister that no significant events were brought to their attention or observed by them in 2009 which the Committee feel should be brought to the Minister's attention. The Committee is satisfied from visits to Dochas Centre that there is a good level of transparency in the running of the prison and that prisoners held there are held in a secure and just environment. The Committee would urge the Minister to give immediate attention to the wholly unacceptable levels of overcrowding.

Finally, the Visiting Committee commends Governor Mc Mahon and her staff for a strong level of commitment to the women detained which is exemplary and thanks Governor Lonergan for his willingness to engage in an open and frank manner with the Committee.

Eibhlin Byrne (Chairperson)  
Marian Quinlan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Bosco O Farrell  
Paul Connell  
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Margaret Richardson  
Marie Murphy  
Jacqui Mc Conville