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Midlands Prison Visiting Committee.

*Minister Dermot Ahern,
Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform,
94 St. Stephens Green,
Dublin 2.*

Dear Minister,

MIDLANDS PRISON VISITING COMMITTEE
ANNUAL REPORT 2009

*The Visiting Committee are pleased to present to you the Midlands
Prison Annual Report for the year 2009.*

Psychology Services

The Psychology Services provide a comprehensive service to the prisoners in the Midlands Prison. Mr. Brendan O Connell was appointed Senior Psychologist in April 2009. He is assisted by two further Psychologists on site (one is on maternity leave until September 2010). Also there is a Final Year Psychology Student in training two days per week. As a result of Staffing a significant reduction in average waiting times has been achieved. In agreement with local management the services acquired extra consulting space on A wing by splitting the former consulting room in two. It is also agreed to carry out similar work in the D division consulting space.

However, it is of concern that, without further resourcing, the Service will reduce to two Psychologists in September 2010 and this would invariably impact on the Service's ability to respond in an appropriate and timely manner to the complicated and significant mental health and offence related needs of their client group.

Probation Service

The Probation Service have continued to be committed to providing a Probation related service to the Midlands Prison targeting primarily prisoners on statutory orders from the Courts, Sex Offender, Life sentenced prisoners and Parole Board reports. This comprises of a large proportion of the population in the Midlands Prison.

The team in the Midlands Prison comprises of three Probation Officers, a Clerical Officer and a Senior Probation Officer who is also the Senior Probation Officer for Portlaoise Prison.

The Probation Service endeavour to work as part of the multi-disciplinary team in the Midlands Prison and this is evident this year in their commitment to the Lifers Group, attendance at review meetings, case conferences etc. They work closely with the Linkage programme to ensure prisoners are involved in meaningful employment or training on release.

They also have responsibility for the supervision of many sex offenders on post release and last year three Probation Officers were trained in a sex offender risk assessment instrument to enhance and support their interventions with sex offenders both pre and post release.

Medical Services:

The Visiting Committee met with Dr Rasool and had the opportunity to inform itself of the Medical Services within the Prison.

The Committee recognise that the Midlands Prison have an excellent Health Care Team. There are two full time doctors and highly qualified nursing staff to care for the diverse needs of the prisoners. Nurse led clinics such as phlebotomy and vaccinations are run on a regular basis. However the team have increasing prisoners on methadone programmes and we recognise that a drug treatment team consisting of nurses, doctors and an addiction counsellor would greatly enhance their work.

Education/Work Training Services:

The School continues to expand their wide variety of Classes and Programmes within the Prison.

A six week Fit for Life course runs twice yearly and also a very successful Health Week was also facilitated by the P.E department.

A number of students completed the An Gaisce Programme and the Visiting Committee would like to congratulate all those who received awards in this field.

The Committee commends the other programmes including Pre-release, Lifers Programme, Integrated Sentence Management and Literacy Classes. The Midlands Prison are very committed to their Adult Basic Education Plan which is much welcomed.

The School also welcomes the installing of new computers and computer facilities in their Computer & Open Learning Rooms and are looking forward to improved computer facilities in the A Division.

The Committee would like to compliment the local management of the Industrial Training Workshops. The Courses & Skills attained and the completion of Safe Pass Courses and Manual Handling Courses can only enhance the prisoners prospects of gaining meaningful employment on their release from prison.

The Horticulture area provides gainful employment for a large number of offenders and great credit is due to the Staff & Prisoners alike for their year round work in this area. The beautifully maintained gardens, flower beds and hanging baskets both

inside and outside the prison, during Summer and Winter are a credit to all involved in this ongoing project.

Catering/Kitchen:

The Committee commend the quality of food and hygiene standards at the Midlands Prison. We congratulate the Governor and his staff on achieving the Emerald Award for the fifth consecutive year and also their increased scores in the Excellence Ireland Catering & Hygiene Audits. The Kitchen continues to be a major source of employment for the prisoners on an ongoing basis.

Positive Sentence Management:

Prisoner applications with regard to transfers and temporary releases continue to be considered on a daily basis. Also a monthly review meeting is conducted with an Official from Prison Operations, Prison Governor and Heads of Function within the Prison to deal with requests. The Committee are concerned about the increasing number of committals to prison on non-payment of fines. The committee felt that prison is not a suitable place for the containment of such prisoners. Management of the Midlands Prison are ensuring in so far as possible to transfer such prisoners to open centres etc. and encourage them to pay part of the fines with a view to being released on temporary release.

Prisoners Requests

The Committee saw a total of 67 prisoners throughout the year. The number of prisoners requesting to meet with us increased this year. In view of the high numbers of committals and high numbers transferred from other institutions this was inevitable. The majority of the requests related to applications for transfers to other prisons and the searching procedures since the new search units were implemented. Prisoners Visitors are frequently being stopped by the passive search dog. The Committee is satisfied that the introduction of the Search Unit and Passive Search Dog has played a major part in reducing the availability of Drugs and Mobile Phones in the Prison.

Committee's Visit to other Prison.

During the year the committee had the pleasure of visiting Castlerea Prison in Co. Roscommon. We thank the Governor and staff of the Prison for the courtesy and hospitality afforded to us on our visit.

Developments & New Initiatives

Integrated Sentence Management:

- *The Government in its Programme for Government has stated that a structured sentence management programme for all prisoners should be introduced. The Management team here in the Midlands Prison have introduced this programme recently. Initially 20 prisoners are on a pilot programme. The programme involves all the service providers both internal and external working with the prisoner to develop and deliver a plan for the prisoner while in custody. This plan also extends beyond the prisoners release. The committee welcome this new initiative and commend staff and management on implementation of the new programme.*

Lifers Programme:

- *This programme was also introduced in the Prison in 2009 due to the large numbers of Prisoners serving life sentences. All participants meet every 2 months and the agenda is set out by the prisoners themselves. There are a number of additional privileges introduced for this group for e.g. extra phone call to family, family friendly visits, DVD nights, occasional group meals.*

STEPS Programme:

- *This programme is a 7 day programme designed to help people develop their personalities with modules on communication skill, motivation, personal effectiveness, personal development and self worth.*
- *The introduction of these new programmes and initiatives can only be a positive way forward for all inmates and staff in the Midlands Prison. We very much welcome such ventures.*

Introduction of visits by prior arrangement:

- *The Committee welcome the introduction of the booked visits system introduced in early 2009. Visits are pre booked and visitors are allocated an agreed time for attendance. This has proven very beneficial for both Management and Visitors alike. It eliminates long queues forming in the Visitors Centre as there is minimal waiting time once the visits are booked in advance.*

Announcement of the New Prison Building at Midlands Prison

- *The Visiting Committee welcome and are delighted to have received the news from Mr Brian Purcell on the commencement of this new building project in March 2010. The Committee feel that it is vital to alleviate the overcrowding and pressure for prison spaces within the system.*

Environmental Waste Management Award:

Once again this year the Midlands Prison achieved the 14001 standard for the Environmental Management System. This certificate is an International Award certified by Certification Europe Ltd. Great credit is due to the Prison Management, Staff and Prisoners under the direction of Assistant Governor Mc Cormack and her team on retaining this award. The Committee appreciate how difficult it is in these current times with the constraints on both Staff and Budgets and congratulate all involved in maintaining such a high standard.

Conclusions:

The Committee are very concerned to note that the phone blocking system introduced here on a pilot scheme two years ago is still not fully commissioned. It does not seem to be any further advanced than this time last year. The Committee are disappointed that this is not prioritised as it would be of great assistance to the Governor and his staff in further preventing the illegal usage of mobile phones in the prison.

It is with regret that the committee mention the death of a prisoner who took his own life by hanging in January 2009. We are happy that Management and Staff of the Midlands Prison handled this situation

with the utmost care and professionalism as was possible in the circumstances.

Overall 2009 has been a good year for the Midlands Prison. The New Security Unit and New Canine Unit is continuing to enhance the security within the prison. The committee also acknowledge the increase in prisoner numbers during the year and commend the Management and Staff on their excellent management of this situation in difficult circumstances.

The Committee also noted that due to Staff Retirements, the Prison lost two Governor Grade Staff with no replacements during 2009. They would like to recommend that the Prison operate with a full compliment of staff in light of the rising numbers in custody and the profile of those prisoners housed within.

The Committee were delighted to welcome the Director of Prisons Mr. Brian Purcell to one of our meetings during 2009, where he addressed the Committee. We found this meeting to be very informative, productive and worthwhile and looked forward to this being an annual event.

Good wishes is extended to the two Governors, Liam Burke and Pat Cleary who retired during the year.

In conclusion the Visiting Committee wish to acknowledge the continuing high level of commitment and professionalism extended by Governor Edward Whelan and all his staff in their delivery of service at the Midlands Prison. The Committee would like to thank all concerned for the professional manner in which it has been allowed to carry out its functions. Gratitude is extended to Gov John Malone and Gov Edward Mullins who met with the committee on each of its visits. We would also like to thank former secretary Siobhan Mc Donald and welcome new secretary Eileen Fennelly, who joined us during the year on transfer from Mountjoy Prison.

Finally the Committee commend all staff and services working in the Midlands Prison for their continued commitment and dedication and look forward to working with them again in 2010.

Jennifer Murnane O'Connor
Chairperson.

Jody Gunning
Vice Chairperson.

Jack Bourke

Colm Wylie

Brigid Teefey

John Cronin

Dr. Abdul Bulbulia

Paddy Boland

Nuala Halpin

Mel Kelleher

Mary King