

THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE TRAINING UNIT VISITING COMMITTEE

We wish to submit the annual report of The Training Unit Visiting Committee for 2009. A total of twelve monthly meetings were held here in that period and it was very gratifying to note that such were very well attended by all members.

The offender population capacity of this institution increased in 2009 from 96 to 117. This was necessitated by the overcrowding in other prisons. In some cases offenders were required to share a room with another. Throughout 2009 the offender population remained high with a daily average of 111. As part of the sentence management programme between 15-20 offenders attended various courses on a daily basis throughout the year outside the confines of the institution. Pace and Priorswood House accounted for the majority of these participants followed by Community based projects and University Courses.

Ms. Kathleen Diamond was elected Chair of the Committee and Ms. Deirdre Kenneally Vice-Chair for 2009.

In January of this year Governor Declan Murphy informed the Committee that offender employment in the Training Unit Workshops had increased. The ongoing problems with policing the perimeter wall to prevent contraband being thrown into The Training Unit was also discussed. Mr. Noel Coade, committee member continues his sterling work on the Prison Library.

In February, Governor Murphy informed the Committee that offender employment in the workshops area had again increased since the previous meeting. With regard to the ongoing problem with the perimeter wall he is to meet with the Garda Chief Superintendent for this area in the next few days. Invitations were extended to the Psychologist, Ms. Moloney, the Chaplain, Sr. Mairéad and the Senior Probation Officer, Mr. Williamson to attend any monthly meeting of the committee.

In March the Committee expressed their concern that with the increase in offenders now in the Training Unit a change for the worse in the atmosphere within this institution was noticeable. Committee member, Ms. Foster was dismayed at the sight of extra mattresses on the floors of some offenders rooms to facilitate the increase of offenders now in the Training Unit and was not in keeping with the ethos of this institution. A letter expressing the Committee's concerns was drafted up and sent to Mr. Dermot Ahern, Minister for Justice. An invitation to Minister Ahern and Judge Michael Reilly, Inspector of Prisons to attend one of the Committee's monthly meetings was issued.

In April, Governor Murphy informed the committee that since the last committee meeting his staff numbers had decreased by 7. Retirements accounted for 5, whilst 2 staff transferred to other institutions. This equated to an 11 per cent drop in his staff numbers. However, the offender population has increased by 22 per cent since January, 2009. To date he has received no replacement staff for those he has lost. The Committee felt this was a very unsatisfactory situation. Ms. Moloney, the Prison Psychologist attended the April meeting and gave a brief discourse to the committee

of her work with offenders within the institution. Committee member, Ms. Kenneally commented that she was appalled to see extra mattresses on floors and chamber pots in offenders rooms in the Training Unit. Mr. Coade is liaising with Assistant Governor Conlon and the Librarian, Ms. Gomez to get the new computers and software fully operational in the library.

In May, the Chairperson, Ms. Diamond read out to the committee a letter she sent to Mr. Dermot Ahern, Minister for Justice, expressing the committee's concerns about the reduction in staff numbers and increase in offender numbers in the Training Unit. She said that she was also expecting a reply shortly from Mr. Brian Purcell, Director of the Irish Prison Service, to an invitation for him to attend one of the committee's monthly meetings. Mr. Coade informed the committee that they had encountered security problems with the new software purchased for the new library computers but were working on a cost effective solution to overcome this problem. Ms. Kenneally raised her concerns about the present location of the committee meetings within the Training Unit from a security and safety perspective but Governor Murphy assured her that it was a suitable location from a health and safety perspective within a semi-open institution. Mr. Heraghty asked the Governor about the committee sampling prison food as had been the practice over the years, but the Governor informed him that this practice was now discontinued and that accredited bodies such as An Bord Bia now carried out this function. Committee member, Ms. Foster asked about the feasibility of the committee visiting High Park, a juvenile institution in Northern Ireland.

In June, Mr. Coade informed the committee that in order to overcome the ongoing problems with the new computer software recently purchased for the library, Governor Murphy had generously agreed to supply the library with a computer and the necessary software to run it. The library is now well stocked with books and educational material for the offenders. As Arts week is fast approaching, committee member, Ms. Foster encouraged members to visit and support various events throughout Arts week.

In July, the monthly meeting was also attended by Mr. Stephen Langton, of the Mountjoy Prison Visiting Committee, who spoke at the end of the meeting vis a vis the ongoing role of visiting committees throughout the Irish Prison system and asked members for suggestions and recommendations to be sent to him as he hopes to produce a Visiting Committee instruction type manual in conjunction with the Irish Prison Service. Committee member Ms. Foster was an appointed visitor during the month and commented on what she saw as the worrying trends in the Training Unit. For example, dietary options for offenders reduced, cutbacks in workshops employment due to staff shortages and loitering by offenders throughout the institution.

In August, Governor Murphy informed the committee that he feared that the workshops would be closed more often due to staff retirements, sick leave and no staff replacements for those recently retired. He also informed the committee that he offender Tuckshop was only open one day a week now. Mr. Coade informed the committee that a prisoners library committee was been set up shortly which would liaise with both himself and Assistant Governor Conlon with regard to books and literacy needs for the library.

On September 17th, at the monthly committee meeting, Governor Murphy informed the committee that a violent and serious incident amongst some offenders had taken place in the Training Unit on Saturday evening of the 12th September, 2009. He praised staff for their professional and successful handling of a very difficult situation. The Electronics workshop staff have retired or taken a career break and this workshop is no longer operational. With the ongoing staff shortages being experienced, the remaining workshops open are being run with a skeletal number of staff. Committee member, Mr. Heraghty viewed this as a very worrying situation and proposed through the chair to send a strongly worded letter to Minister Ahern expressing their concerns.

Assistant Governor Willie Conlon updated the committee on the progress of the revamped Training Unit Library. A library committee has been established amongst the offenders and a number of new educational DVDs have been acquired. At the end of this month's meeting the Visiting Committee expressed their concerns and sadness in the way the Training Unit was heading.

In October the Committee discussed Ms. Kathleen Diamond's recent participation on RTE Radio One's Liveline Programme. Committee members, Mr. Coade and Mr. Twomey visited during the month and commented on the good and friendly atmosphere in the Training Unit. The Art room, Kitchen and Library came in for particular praise.

Mr. Coade gave a very positive update of the Training Unit Library in November. The Library Committee is working well and has been received with great enthusiasm by all the inmates. Regular meetings are taking place and much work is being done. The Committee extended an invitation to Mr. David Williamson, the new Senior Probation Officer, to attend a monthly meeting of his choosing with the committee and with an eye to the future, Ms. Foster requested that Mr. Don Baker, musician, be invited to play a gig for the offenders similar to the very enjoyable gig he played here the previous year at Christmas time. The question of the committee visiting another institution for a monthly meeting was raised from the floor and this will be explored with the relevant section of the IPS. Ms. Diamond informed the committee that a delegation from the IPS, Mr. Seán Aylward, Mr. Brian Purcell and Mr. William Connolly would attend the December 3rd meeting of the committee.

The highlight of the December meeting was the attendance of the above mentioned senior IPS officials. Both sides expressed their views on the present situation in the Training Unit in a frank manner. The IPS delegation were of the opinion that the Training Unit as it now stands had outlived its original purpose and envisaged a more modern and better Training Unit Module within the proposed Thornton Hall Complex when this project comes to fruition.

In summary 2009 was a difficult year for the Training Unit with the offender population increasing but the staffing levels decreasing. This was a very worrying trend for the committee who felt that the Training Unit was losing its ethos and pleasant atmosphere. The Electronics workshop no longer exists and the other workshops are being run by a skeletal staff. The committee praised the excellent work being undertaken vis a vis the library and the cleanliness and quality of the fare available in the kitchen was alluded to frequently. The December meeting with the senior IPS officials gave the committee a chance to voice their concerns and for the

IPS officials to outline their plans for the Training Unit within the new Thornton Hall Complex. Governor Declan Murphy was complimented on the continued co-operation of himself and his staff with the Visiting Committee in all their endeavours throughout the year. Finally to any member who suffered a bereavement during the year we would like to express our deepest sympathy to you.

Kathleen Diamond Ms Kathleen Diamond
Deirdre Kenneally Ms Deirdre Kenneally
Geraldine Foster Ms Geraldine Foster
Mr Mr Richard Brennan
Mr Noel Coade Mr Noel Coade
Donal Doran Mr Donal Doran
Mr Christopher Faulkner Mr Christopher Faulkner
Tom Twomey Mr Tom Twomey
Mr Tom Heraghty Mr Tom Heraghty
Mr Charles O Malley Mr Charles O Malley