

Launch of Ombudsman for Children Report on St. Patrick's Institution on 9 February 2011

Ombudsman, ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to be here this morning at the launch of the report by the Ombudsman for Children on St. Patrick's Institution.

While the Ombudsman for Children does not have a statutory function relating to the inspection of prisons including St. Patrick's, as both our organisations share a common desire to promote the protection and welfare of the boys in our care, the Irish Prison Service was happy to facilitate the consultation process which led to the drafting of this report.

This report provides a valuable insight into the perceptions of offenders in St. Patrick's Institution and their views on how well we meet our objectives and where we might improve. We have paid attention to their views and have introduced a number of changes as a result and are working on other changes. Some suggested changes are not possible for operational and security reasons.

The report documents the views of a selection of offenders. Its purpose is to highlight rather than verify their perceptions. In doing so, the report identifies a number of discrepancies between the young people's perceptions and the operation of certain procedures in St. Patrick's. This indicates the importance of our communications with the young people so that they have a clear understanding of the prison rules and regime. We acknowledge that perceptions are important and that there are many areas where we could do better. Our responses to both misperceptions and areas for improvement are incorporated in the report. I appreciate the opportunity the Ombudsman for Children has given us to present our views in this way.

The Irish Prison Service accepts that St. Patrick's Institution is not the most appropriate setting in which to detain juvenile offenders. The Irish Youth Justice Service, an executive office within the Department of Justice and Law Reform will take responsibility for the detention facilities for all boys under 18 years of age when new secure accommodation becomes available in Oberstown.

In keeping with the spirit of legislation and policy in the area of youth justice, boys (aged 16 and 17) and young male adults (aged 18-21) are segregated insofar as possible as regards accommodation, education, work/training and recreation/exercise. The Special School (B Division) was opened in April 2007 specifically for this purpose. It has a bed capacity of 44 and is self-contained. This has created a safer and enhanced regime for under-18's, with communal dining

In effect, offenders aged 16 and 17 have little or no contact with the offenders who are aged 18 to 20. Separation is of course only one aspect of their protection as children, but it is an important one.

I should mention that the most recent report on Ireland by the CPT which is due to be published shortly will comment positively on the accommodation in St Patricks and further enhancements are underway.

Every effort is made by prison management and staff to ensure that the specific needs of this cohort of prisoners are met on a day to day basis. Our involvement in this consultative process and our ongoing co operation with the Office of the Ombudsman for Children has resulted in further enhancements of the regime in place. I would like to discuss some of these as laid out in the report.

Committal and orientation

All offenders get an information booklet on committal. This outlines their rights and obligations. A new version has been developed in conjunction with the Ombudsman for Children's Office and will be going to print shortly.

An audio version is also in the pipeline. A two-day induction course for new committals is also being introduced.

All offenders are met soon after committal by a member of prison management who check out their needs and concerns and inform them of their rights and obligations. Referrals to other services are made as a result of the committal process.

The preparation of individual sentence plans focus on the boys' needs and strengths and help them make the most of their time in detention and assist their reintegration back in to the community. Particular emphasis is put on education, work and training and maintaining links with their families and with community-based services. The Ombudsman is right in pointing to the need for genuine interagency cooperation and adopting a holistic approach. The sentence planning process provides a structure for achieving that level of integrated service.

Education, Work and Training

All the boys are interviewed soon after committal by the head teacher and the industrial manager in charge of work/training. They assess the boys' interests and encourage participation in education and work and training. A wide variety of education courses are available exclusively for the under 18s. The level of participation in education in the prison as a whole is over 50 percent and is higher among the under 18s.

Various initiatives to improve the access of protection prisoners to education, the library and resource centre and outdoor exercise are in place since October 2010.

Opportunities for work/training have been limited because of the need to keep the age groups separate. However, new options have been developed in laundry and industrial skills. The young people who work as cleaners are provided with training and certification in industrial cleaning. They must now also participate in education.

Recreation

Substantial changes have been made in relation to recreation activities that take account of the suggestions made in the consultation process. The recreation area was painted by the boys, the art class painted murals and we expect delivery of football tables / board games and computerised chess games shortly. Facilities such

as the pool table and cues get damaged from time to time but defects are remedied on an ongoing basis.

A new resource centre exclusively for the under-18s will complement the library and will be open for business this month. The boys will have access to a range of newspapers (community) and magazines that will facilitate keeping in touch with the events in their local community.

Maintaining relationships with family and friends

IPS shares the objective of maintaining links with family and community and is reviewing ways to maximise the frequency, duration and quality of contact, subject to safety and security constraints.

Visits in the main visiting area are screened. This has had a significant impact on the availability of contraband and has been commented on favourably by many families to the management of the prison on many occasions. Improvements to the acoustics and the introduction of phones in the visit area have helped reduce communication difficulties and will be reviewed on an on-going basis.

Since mid-December open family visits which are based on application and behaviour have been fully booked. Family visits take place on Tuesdays and Thursdays and are applied for by the offender and are only granted where he has been of good behaviour.

The new phone system allows for 2 calls per day and consideration is being given to installing phones in cells on a trial basis and allowing longer calls as part of earned enhanced regimes, but this is still under review. The option to bank calls is also being examined.

The deprivation of telephone calls is used as a sanction of last resort, for example, where calls were made to organise criminal activity. The claim that prisoners on protection are deprived of visits, phone calls or letters is completely without foundation.

Healthcare and specialist services.

The Irish Prison Service aims to provide a level of primary healthcare comparable to that available to medical card holders in the community.

Dental treatment, which was mentioned by the boys, is provided in the surgery in Mountjoy Prison and access is regulated to ensure segregation and safety of prisoners.

With regard to mental health, deficits in service provision which exist in the community including access to Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services are generally reflected in the prison setting. Nevertheless, offenders in St Patrick's have access to:

- A visiting Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist and Registrar from the Central mental Hospital
- An adolescent psychiatrist in addiction from the HSE who attends for one half session per week
- A Community Psychiatric nurse visits 2 full days per week

- The community forensic psychiatric nurse who attends the complex to keep a watching brief on relevant cases.

The IPS is, in collaboration with the HSE, examining proposals to further enhance mental health services in St. Patricks Institution.

St Patrick's also offers a diverse range of general and specialist services provided both by the Irish Prison Service and in-reaching statutory and non-statutory services. Among these are healthcare, psychological, educational, vocational, counselling, welfare and spiritual services.

These services are important in addressing offending behaviour, drug and alcohol addiction, missed educational and vocational opportunities, anger management and self-management in the interest of encouraging positive personal development in prisoners and preparing them for re-integration and resettlement on release from custody.

St Patrick's also offers a range of in-house programmes in the areas of addiction awareness, treatment and counselling (i.e. drugs, alcohol) and takes a proactive approach in developing and maintaining links with a wide range of community and voluntary bodies. I note that the report acknowledges the boys positive comments about the addiction counselling services and their benefits. There are about 50 bodies and groups with which the prison engages either on an in-reach basis or with a view to securing post-release placements.

It is important to mention also that various security measures have been taken aimed at eliminating drug supply. These include the installation of horizontal netting in the B Division exercise yard and mandatory drug testing. Plans are advanced for the random use of active search dogs in addition to the regular passive search dogs.

Some of the boys had complaints about the quality and quantity of food. The food provided in St Patrick's is to the same high standard as in all our prisons. A 28-day menu is in use and is based on healthy eating and daily recommended calorific guidelines. It offers a nutritious and balanced diet to all offenders. Minor additions to some choices have been introduced to meet the concerns of the boys. The boys have access to the prison tuck shop where additional food items such as confectionary and fresh fruit can be obtained. The quality of drinking water is tested regularly and is clean and drinkable.

Bullying and violence are simply not tolerated in St Patricks. All reports of bullying are investigated and staff are required to be vigilant to its occurrence.

A new anti-bullying programme is under development. CCTV camera coverage has been extended to include all common areas and all allegations of physical abuse are automatically referred to the Gardaí for investigation.

A specific point raised by the boys concerned the use of special observation cells. These are used for specific purposes under strict controls and contrary to the perception of the boys, they are never used as a punishment but used if a prisoner

represents a danger to himself or others. The purpose of the special observation cell will be made clear to the prisoners at induction and at the time of use so as to change misperceptions.

A child protection policy is in place in the prison. This was drawn up in consultation with the Irish Youth Justice Service and takes full account of the Children First National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children.

On the question of discipline, IPS shares the objective of transparency and consistency in its application and in striking an appropriate balance between security and rights. An introduction to the prison rules and behaviour that constitutes a breach of discipline will form an important part of the induction course being developed for inmates and information being provided to them in written format. The material is being developed in consultation with the Ombudsman for Children's Office.

It is important to point out that all formal complaints are investigated and all allegations of assault are referred to the Gardaí. Information on the complaints mechanisms will be provided during the new induction course.

The Irish Prison Service recognises the critical importance of staff interaction with the boys. They have a hugely important role in supporting them. Specific training has been provided in the past to the staff and we are working closely with the Irish Youth Justice Service and other agencies to ensure development and delivery of appropriate training.

I would like to say that as Director General of the Irish Prison Service I welcome this report from the Ombudsman for Children on St Patricks Institution. The Ombudsman's consultation and report has provided valuable information and an opportunity to improve conditions and systems in ways that are meaningful to young offenders.

I accept that there are always areas where we can improve. However there are many positives that need to be recognised and many on-going developments to be acknowledged.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the management and Staff of St. Patricks for their commitment and dedication to those in their care.

Finally, I would like to thank the Ombudsman and her staff for this report. I welcome the growing relationship between our two organisations and look forward to further engagement with them in the future.

Ends.