

## **Justice Conference – 19 June 2012**

**Address by Director General of the Irish Prison Service,  
Mr. Michael Donnellan**

**“Looking to the future: delivering an efficient prison service  
for Ireland”**

### **1. Prisoner Case Study**

Brian comes from the midlands area. He is 27 years old and has been known to the criminal justice system since he was a teenager. Brian, like many young offenders, had a chaotic childhood. He had little family support. His father suffered from alcoholism and his parents were separated. His relationship with both parents was strained and he did not live at home from an early age. He left school at 15 after completing his junior cert.

Brian has no history of violence and has been described as a vulnerable person. Easily fooled and easily led. He had a drug habit and most of his crimes were to feed this habit.

Brian was committed to St Patrick’s Institution in 2002 where he served a number of days for failure to pay a fine having been caught shoplifting. This was his first experience of imprisonment. Later that year, he received a 6 month sentence for larceny. In total he had 33 charges against him ranging from criminal damage to theft from cars and shops. He was 17 years old and unemployed.

He was committed again over the following 3 years for similar offences and spent long periods of time in custody both as a remand and sentenced prisoner.

While in St Patrick’s Institution in 2004 Brian worked as a cleaner on the B landing. He worked hard and kept drug free. He applied for and was approved a transfer to the drug free unit (D Wing) to help him deal with his drug addiction. While on the D wing he began his first engagement with the addiction counsellors. He remained drug free and was eventually transferred to Shelton Abbey Open Centre in 2005.

He was recommitted to prison in 2006. He had moved on from simple drug user and was starting to dabble in drug dealing to get extra money to feed his own heroin habit. In December 2007, Brian received a 2 ½ year prison sentence for the possession of drugs for sale and supply.

While drug free and in the stable environment of Midlands prison Brian started to receive regular visits from his mother and other family members. This had a positive effect on him and he seemed determined to deal with his addiction issues.

In April 2008 he transferred to Mountjoy to attend the detox programme. Following successful completion of the detox programme in June 2008 he transferred to the Training Unit.

During his time in the Training Unit he worked in the Welding Workshop. Given his engagement with his addiction counsellor, his positive engagement with prison staff and his efforts to remain drug free he was accepted for a place in the High Park Treatment Programme and granted temporary release in June 2009.

Brian came back into custody again in March 2010 when he received a 17 month sentence for robbery and theft. He had returned to his old life and lapsed back into his old ways and was abusing drugs again. He received further sentences of 4 years and 3 years for Robbery and Burglary respectively and under normal circumstances would be due for release in May next year.

On his return to custody in the Midlands he recommenced his engagement with the addiction counsellor to address his addiction issues. He engaged with prison staff and in work and training in a positive way and completed a building skills course. He also worked as a cleaner on his landing.

Prior to receiving this sentence he commenced a new relationship and his partner visited him regularly while in prison. Prison staff noted that this stable relationship proved to be a positive influence on his life. He has demonstrated renewed determination to use the services available to him in prison to address his issues with drugs and aid his rehabilitation.

Brian was transferred to Shelton Abbey open prison at the start of this year. While in Shelton Abbey, he attended the Carpentry Workshop and achieved FETAC accreditation. He worked on the farm, under the supervision of the farm manager who found him to be hard working. He got involved in the Bothár Project, caring for the calves which he was made responsible for. He performed all other tasks assigned to him with great endeavour, liked to be busy and was a good mixer with other prisoners.

Brian has been drug free since July 2011. In May of this year he was approved for participation in the Community Return Programme. This is a programme for earned temporary release coupled with a requirement to do community service. He has recently transferred to another county to complete his 25 weeks of community service allowing him to move away from his old life and bad influences and facilitating him in starting a new life with his girlfriend - something he has been striving to achieve for some time.

## **2. Opportunities offered by imprisonment**

As we can see from Brian's story, prisoners on committal to prison present with a multitude of complex problems, the solution to which are not solely within the remit or gift of the criminal justice system.

Many come from chaotic backgrounds, have had a very poor experience of the education system and have at best very basic literacy and numeracy skills. Many have struggled with alcohol and drug addiction and are unemployed.

All prisoners share one thing in common - they have been sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment.

The Prison Service is responsible for engaging with prisoners in a realistic and meaningful way in order to address these issues so as to reduce reoffending and enhance the reintegration of the prisoner back into society thus increasing public safety.

Rehabilitation is not achieved overnight and the Prison Service possesses no magic wand which allows it to singlehandedly address the complex range of problems many prisoners have. Indeed, many prisoners may not be fully rehabilitated by their eventual release date and go on to reoffend. Brian's story bears testimony to this.

A major study of prisoner re-offending by the UCD Institute of Criminology in May 2008 found that after 4 years, over 50% of prisoners released had not re-offended. The recidivism rate in Ireland is in the mid to lower range of recidivism rates when compared to similar countries internationally and is evidence that in many cases imprisonment does lead to positive outcomes for offenders.

The pathway to desistance is a long road and many factors must come into play before an offender can create a new non-criminal identity for themselves through changing their behaviour and their lifestyle. The Irish Prison Service plays a key role in helping offenders to break the cycle of offending. In Brian's case, although the road was long and arduous, the interventions and services available to him in prison and on release in the community; coupled with his willingness to embrace the opportunity for change, the strong inner resources or agency he possessed and his quest to seek a meaningful life for himself, allowed him to break his cycle of reoffending and begin contributing to society in a positive way.

## **3. What does an efficient prison system mean?**

An efficient prison system is of course about achieving the best value for money possible.

Recent reductions in budgetary and staffing resources makes the task of "providing safe and secure custody, dignity of care and rehabilitation to prisoners for safer communities" all the more difficult to achieve.

It does not, however, make it unachievable or impossible. In fact, it provides an opportunity for meaningful change.

The current economic reality presents the public service with a real imperative to critically examine the way in which we have worked and operated in the past and to come up with meaningful reforms which deliver better outcomes for citizens and greater value for money for the tax payer.

We must become leaner and more efficient and must re-examine our services with a view to identifying our most critical activities and priorities.

Reduced staffing levels and budgets across the criminal justice system means that enhanced cross agency working with a view to creating efficiencies and savings is now an absolute necessity.

But does a reduction in resources mean that the positive outcomes for prisoners in Ireland will be eroded and that the threat to public safety will be increased?

As Director General of the Irish Prison Service I am adamant that this will not be the case. In our ongoing restructuring and reform, we are placing the prisoner at the centre of our activities in order to ensure that we improve and not diminish outcomes for prisoners in our care.

An efficient Prison Service is, therefore, equally about the outcomes we achieve for offenders and society generally, the humanity with which we treat those in our care and the respect we show for fundamental human rights.

#### **4. Pillars of New Strategic Plan**

The recently published 3 Year Strategic Plan for the Irish Prison Service seeks to build on the many positive elements which make up our prison service. It provides us with a roadmap in order to achieve greater efficiencies and even greater outcomes for the prisoners in our care and thus for society as a whole.

Our Strategy is built on 3 central pillars, all of which are aimed at creating a more efficient prison system:

- Increasing public safety by maintaining safe and secure custody for all those committed by the Courts and by reducing reoffending and improving prisoner rehabilitation through the development of a multiagency approach to offending
- Ensuring Ireland's compliance with domestic and international human rights obligations and best practice
- Delivering reform and implementing change in accordance with the Public Service Agreement and the Integrated Reform Plan for the Justice and Equality Sector.

The foundation on which these pillars are constructed is a commitment to treat those in our care with dignity, fairness and respect.

## **5. Pillar 1 – Increasing public safety by reducing reoffending and improving rehabilitation**

Despite a reduction in resources across the criminal justice system, the imperative still exists for all of the agencies involved to continue to deliver on their respective objectives. For the Irish Prison Service, this has to be achieved through greater strategic joined up thinking and coordination with other agencies across the system, particularly the Probation Service.

Unless we have a coordinated, multiagency approach where all stakeholders work together to effectively plan the release of offenders and to then oversee their transition into the community, we will fail in our mission to improve public safety by reducing reoffending.

The progress prisoners make in tackling their offending behaviour while in prison can all but be lost without the necessary supports in place following their release- including accommodation, medical care, addiction services etc.

Over the coming 3 years we will take a wide range of actions to enhance sentence management from pre to post imprisonment including:

- enhancing sentence planning and prison based rehabilitative programmes including education, work training and resettlement programmes
- introducing incentivised regime policies in order to provide tangible incentives to prisoners to participate in structured activities and to reinforce incentives for good behaviour
- developing, through engaging with other statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector, specific strategies to deal with the needs of particular cohorts of prisoners including women and young offenders

We also hope to pilot a Social Impact Investment Bond which will focus on working with short term sentenced prisoners in a meaningful way helping with issues such as housing, medical care, substance abuse, training needs immediately on their release from prison and for a period thereafter in order to break the cycle of reoffending.

Through the more efficient use of our own resources and through taking the lead in enhancing communication, co-operation and collaboration with other agencies and bodies, including those in the community and non-statutory sector, we will strive to significantly improve outcomes for those in our care.

## **6. Pillar 2 – Compliance with human rights obligations**

In order to ensure Ireland's compliance with both our domestic and international human rights obligations and to ensure we adhere to best practice, a number of strategic actions will be taken over the coming three years.

- We are seeking to align the existing bed capacity of the prison estate with that recommended by the Inspector of Prisons in so far as this is compatible with public safety and the integrity of the criminal justice system
- We plan to ensure that those released early from custody are placed on appropriate, structured programmes of temporary release

- We intend to re-engineer our prison system to give effect to the principles of normalisation, progression and reintegration
- In conjunction with the Department of Children and other stakeholders, we aim to end the detention of children in St. Patrick's Institution
- We have also embarked on a 40 month capital plan which will provide in cell sanitation in all cells and radically improve prison conditions in the older parts of the prison estate.

Central to adhering to our human rights obligations is a prison service with accommodation and facilities fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This will be achieved through the delivery of our 40-month capital plan – to which the Minister has allocated significant resources - which will provide in-cell sanitation in all cells and to significantly improve prison conditions in the older parts of the prison estate including Limerick, Cork and Mountjoy prisons.

Central to the achievement of our aim of ensuring structured, planned release from custody is enhanced cooperation with other statutory agencies such as the Probation Service and the voluntary and community sector.

As many of you will be aware, we have recently piloted an innovative scheme of earned temporary release for offenders who do not pose a threat to public safety coupled with a requirement to do community service. The Prison Service and the Probation Service are joint partners in the scheme and we have both recently dedicated staff and resources to facilitate its roll out nationwide.

By tapping into the resources and the structures available to the Probation Service in the community, the Irish Prison Service has released almost 200 offenders enhancing the reintegration of the offenders concerned and providing some respite in the chronic overcrowding we are experiencing.

## **7. Pillar 3 - Delivering Reform and implementing change**

The Irish Prison Service has been making significant strides in transforming and modernising the Service within the framework set by the Croke Park Agreement. Indeed we have been commended by the Implementation Body for what we have achieved to date and we are on target to realise the €21m per annum savings on pay demanded of us by that Agreement.

Over the last 12 months we have been examining in detail all current organisational, structural and operational arrangements with a view to introducing new policies, procedures and work practices so that our prisons can operate, with a reduced staffing level, in the most effective and efficient manner. Significant staff savings have already been achieved and significant new policies such as incentivised regimes introduced. This process is on target to be completed before the end of the year and will radically transform the efficiency with which our prisons operate on a daily basis.

Industrial relations within the Service have remained good during this challenging period, facilitating this improved service delivery.

In the coming months we will move to merge 8 of our prisons into 3 consolidated shared service campuses which will achieve significant savings at senior

management levels and will allow us to achieve greater efficiencies in the delivery of services on each campus.

Later this year the introduction of new administrative grades; which will allow prison grade staff currently carrying out administrative duties to be redeployed to frontline, operational duties; will also achieve considerable savings for the Service.

The Implementation Body has very recently acknowledged that progress has also been made on improving inter-agency cooperation in the criminal justice sector and community sector and in reviewing efficiencies in the Circuit and District Courts, working in close conjunction with the Judiciary, Courts Service and An Garda Síochána. In relation to these courts, a Working Group has been established to identify how greater efficiencies and cost reduction measures can be achieved with particular emphasis on how the agencies in the sector – An Garda Síochána, the Prison Service, the Probation Service and the Courts Service – interact with the courts and each other. We have been actively engaged in this process and are confident that very significant efficiencies can be delivered within the criminal justice sector through greater cooperation and joined up thinking.

Major efficiencies have been achieved by the Prison Service to date, however, I assure you that we will not become complacent in our effort to drive and implement reform while at the same time maintaining a service of which we can be proud.

## **8. Conclusion - The Prison Service of the future**

Our prison system today has a long and proud tradition of providing safe and secure custody and of treating those in our care with dignity and respect.

If an efficient prison service is concerned with providing value for money, improving outcomes for offenders, treating those in our care humanely and respecting fundamental human rights then by 2015, with the delivery of the actions contained in our Strategic Plan, will have achieved a more efficient prison system for Ireland.

Recognising that staff are our greatest resource, through the delivery of our transformation and modernisation agenda we will have achieved savings while improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the public service we deliver, through our staff and partners, to prisoners and the wider community.

Through adopting a multiagency approach to the management of offenders' sentences and their transition back to the community we will have achieved better outcomes for individuals like Brian and, by doing so, we will have enhanced public safety.

Through the elimination of slopping out and the improvement of the physical conditions in our older institutions we will have improved our compliance with our domestic and international human rights obligations.

My vision, which is shared by the Minister for Justice and Equality, for the Irish Prison Service of "a safer community through excellence in a prison service built on respect for human dignity" will have been delivered.