

Speech by Minister Frances Fitzgerald at the unveiling of the Irish Prison Service Commemorative Stamps

GPO Dublin 7th August 2014

Chief Executive of An Post Donal Connell, Director General of the Irish Prison Service Michael Donnellan, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I am delighted to join with you all this evening to unveil the Irish Prison Service commemorative stamp collection. This is indeed a historic occasion for the Irish Prison Service and is worthy recognition of the work and service provided by all of you who work behind the walls of our prisons. I believe that this historic occasion is heightened by the fact that the stamps are being launched here in the GPO, a location steeped in its own history.

Firstly I would like to congratulate An Post for creating this stamp collection which features the core objectives of the Irish Prison Service: Care and Custody, Rehabilitation, Restorative Justice and Education. Each year An Post produces, on behalf of the Irish Government, a programme of special and commemorative stamps. All suggestions received for special and commemorative stamps are vetted by an independent committee, the Philatelic Advisory Committee (PAC), which recommends the subjects for inclusion in the programme.

I know that the Advisory Committee thought carefully about this collection. The fact is that when we think of prisons it is easy for our first thoughts to be of the negatives. We think of prisons as places of punishment. We think of the prisoners in custody and, in many cases, the harm they may have caused. Our thoughts also turn to the many victims of crime who have suffered and are still suffering as a result of criminal behaviour.

So why commemorate prisons in stamps? Most members of society, during their lifetime, will not come into direct contact with the Irish Prison Service and most will

never set foot inside an Irish Prison. Through this stamp collection we have an opportunity to highlight to the public that prison is more than simply locks on doors or bars on windows. Prisons are not warehouses for criminals.

While prison is meant to be punitive through the deprivation of liberty, more importantly it provides an opportunity for a person who may have been marginalised by society, missed out on education or caught in a spiral of addiction and criminal activity to address the causes of their offending behaviour. It is the responsibility of the Irish Prison Service, its staff, its partners, both statutory and non statutory, to provide those opportunities through the provision of services such as education, work training, healthcare services and drug treatment, among others.

The commissioning of this commemorative stamp collection for the Irish Prison Service follows similar collections for other uniform services. An Garda Síochána were included in commemorative stamp collections produced in 1988 and in 1997. In 2012, a commemorative stamp collection was produced to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the Dublin Fire Brigade. Most recently in 2013 a stamp collection to acknowledge the work of the Defence Forces was also produced.

Given that the Irish Prison Service is one of the oldest public institutions in the state, dating from the decision in 1854 to establish a three-man board, the Convict Prisons Board, to manage convict prisons in Ireland, one could argue that a stamp collection to acknowledge the contribution of the Irish Prison Service is long overdue.

As I have said the collection represents the core objectives of the Irish Prison Service.

The first stamp in the collection represents Care and Custody and features an image of Chief Officer Shay Cunningham taken in Wheatfield Place of Detention. This stamp acknowledges the important work of our prison staff, represented by Chief Officer Cunningham, who increase public safety by maintaining safe and secure custody for all those committed by the Courts. The Prison Service is a resilient Service with a dedicated and talented workforce which has proven itself willing and able to respond to the demands made of it on a day to day basis.

The second stamp represents Rehabilitation and depicts a scene from one of the many prison workshops available across the estate. This stamp acknowledges the work done by all those working behind the walls of our prisons to aid the rehabilitation of prisoners thus contributing to public safety. Through the provision of rehabilitation opportunities, including work and training, prisoners are given an opportunity to acquire practical skills which will improve their chances of finding secure employment on release.

The third stamp represents Restorative Justice and depicts a scene of a prisoner engaging with the Community Return Programme. This acknowledges that through engaging with other statutory agencies, the Probation Service in this instance, and with the community and voluntary sector, the Irish Prison Service can provide improved prisoner outcomes. These programmes allow prisoners to take responsibility for their own actions and give back to society thus making amends for harm they may have caused.

The fourth stamp depicts education and acknowledges the valuable contribution made by educators in our prisons. Prison education, provided by the many Education and Training Boards is a vital means of rehabilitation. It is a fact that many prisoners have a poor history of engagement in education. The aim of the Education Service is to deliver a high quality, broad, flexible programme of education that helps prisoners cope with their sentence, achieve personal development, prepare for life after release. Success for our prison educators might not necessarily result in students receiving exam success, though many do, but might be in teaching a person to read for the first time or to simply write their own name.

While this stamp collection is a collection for the Irish Prison Service, it also is an acknowledgement of the contribution made by all working behind the walls of our prisons.

The Prison Service does not and could not function without the enormous effort and support from all the agencies and bodies which work along side it on a daily basis.

One of the Prison Service core values is **Collaboration**:

We work together, and we form effective partnerships with other agencies so that our performance benefits from a broad range of perspectives, insights and advice.

It is this broad range of perspectives and insights which ensure that the Prison Service can deliver on its mission of “**Providing safe and secure custody, dignity of care and rehabilitation to prisoners for safer communities**”.

One such collaboration has been the increased co-operation between the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service in recent years culminating in the publishing of a Joint Strategy in 2013 and a Joint Female Strategy earlier this year. Both organisations share the primary goal of maintaining public safety through the reduction of offending by those in their care. This partnership has greatly benefited both organisations and can be clearly seen in the many successes of the Community Return and Community Support schemes.

It would be impossible for me to individually acknowledge each partner organisation working with the Prison Service whether you are a state agency or from the community and voluntary sector. The Prison Service has many partners working to provide vital services to prisoners in area such as education; work and training; prisoner healthcare including mental health; addiction counselling; residential treatment; provision of housing or combating homelessness; training and employment; psychology and spirituality. Many of these agencies are represented here tonight.

I am delighted to see so many Irish Prison Service staff here tonight. Tonight is about you. It is rare that we get the opportunity to publicly celebrate your work and your service on behalf of the community. You should be proud of the work you do and the Service you represent. I want to take this opportunity to say to you how proud and grateful I am to each and every one of you for the professionalism,

dedication, hard work and commitment demonstrated by you all on a daily basis when carrying out your duties.

The work you do, often in difficult circumstances, may sometimes appear to go unnoticed; I want to assure you it does not.

I would like to finish by commending the Director General and the management and Staff of the Irish Prison Service for the dedicated work done, every day, in the Prisons across the state. I would also like to thank An Post for providing the opportunity to recognise this work, which is now immortalised in these wonderful stamps.

Thank you