

## **2020 Dochas Centre Report**

*The Dochas Centre featured in media reports in the course of the year.*

*This report will not deal with issues raised previously.*

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## **Introduction**

Since my appointment as Chaplain to the Dochas Centre in November 2020, I have been cordially received by the Governor and Staff and facilitated in the conduct of my work at all times. I have been fortunate to join two other part-time Volunteer Chaplains who have considerable experience of work in the Dochas and have been invaluable in insuring continuity in service during the interim since the departure of my colleague the former full-time Chaplain. Mention should also be made of the valuable work done by the Locum Chaplain. Their contribution is much appreciated by the Governor and his Staff and the Women of the Dochas. I am indebted to them for their support and advice.

The Dochas Centre is a closed, medium security prison for females aged 18 years and over. It is part of the Mountjoy Prison Campus and is the committal prison for females on remand or sentenced from all courts outside the Munster area. Chaplains provide a non-judgemental, supportive outreach to those in custody and their families. Chaplaincy is a pastoral presence and support for staff on duty in the Dochas Centre. Support for the women, families and staff is held with respect and confidentiality. Chaplains are present at times of crisis, illness and bereavement and work confidentially within the prison system to sustain the trust within our role. Chaplaincy arranges spiritual visits and provides opportunities for prayer and reflection. Chaplaincy is a person-centred approach with a focus on the emotional, spiritual and pastoral needs of the person.

The women of the Dochas are drawn from all parts of Ireland and are housed in eight different houses configured around two different communal areas. Crimes committed by the women range from capital crime to loitering. The accommodation ranges from basic upon committal to a level appropriate for enhanced prisoners. Each house is supervised by Prison Staff who assist each prisoner in the progress of their sentence. The relationship between the women and the Prison Officers is impressive. The Dochas is served by a Health Care Unit that caters for the welfare of the women and by a School that provides educational opportunities to enable the women to progress through their sentence. There are no babies or older children in the Dochas at this time.

The daily routine comprises free association in the morning, afternoon and evening preceded by periods of lockdown. Visits have been suspended since the onset of the Covid 19 Pandemic. New Committals and prisoners who go outside their bubble are required to isolate for an appropriate period. Access by visitors from support organisations is restricted as well.

## **Covid Restrictions**

Covid 19 restrictions have interrupted the provision of Sunday Eucharist and access by visiting clergy who would have been available to attend the women in the prison. The Prison Oratory where the Eucharist was celebrated is too small to accommodate numbers of women who have to observe social distancing regulation. During this COVID period when the celebration of the Eucharist was permitted it would have required to have two Masses to supply the two sections of the prison. Even then the numbers would have to be limited, so in fact that would have reduced the community aspect of the celebration. On balance, we Chaplains have decided to suspend community celebration until the restrictions are lifted.

Contact with the Dublin Mosque has been established and the Organiser at the Mosque has provided prayer mats and beads as well as copies of the Koran for the Moslem prisoners to use. These have been distributed. When restrictions permit, it is hoped to introduce Friday Prayer.

Educational activity has been interrupted as the school was also suspended and workshops had to close in line with public health regulation. As already mentioned, Church services have also been suspended. This has created an unnecessary interruption. Lockdown has imposed restrictions throughout society as Government tries to protect individuals contained within their "own bubble".

There is an arguable case however that the prison population is unique insofar as it constitutes its own bubble. The regulation about social distancing only applies where the risk of infection exists. The risk of infection is from the staff. If the priest/celebrant/ teacher is wearing a mask/visor and is socially distant the risk is reduced to within public health regulation. Chaplains however are not infectious disease control experts.

All society has experienced some degree of lockdown during 2020, but a prisoner's freedom has been considerably reduced already. Whatever freedom available is precious because the alternative is boredom and frustration. Boredom is the Number One enemy of the incarcerated. The old proverb about idleness being the devil's workshop was never truer.

## **Technology**

IPS has rightly enjoyed a reputation for infection control during the 2020 phase of the pandemic. During most of this time, prisoners have been denied actual visits by their families. Virtual visits have been arranged by video link for those families who may be contacted by email. Professional visits and court appearances have increasingly been arranged by video.

During this time Staff have been obliged to use video link to conduct meetings, reviews, case conferences etc. Technology has clearly been recognised as the way forward. Unfortunately infection control also appears to be the future as well.

In order to provide the range of services available to prisoners, IPS installed telephone facilities in prisoners' cells. Prisoners could contact a range of services without having to leave their cell. TeleChaplaincy as it became known enabled prisoners to avail of the service of a Chaplain during periods of lockdown.

### **In cell telephones**

TeleChaplaincy relied on a team of external Chaplains answering prisoners' calls. The same arrangement could be made to enable prisoners to contact the Chaplain within their own prison. The installation of telephones in prisoners' cells has shown what the future can look like. For most of the year prisoners in isolation have been offered access to a phone by running extension cables along the landing to reach prisoner's cell. Unfortunately the risk of infection will be with us indefinitely. Health and safety of both prisoners and staff alike would suggest that IPS should install telephones in all isolation cells, indeed in all cells. The ad hoc arrangement to meet the needs of the pandemic should be turned into a permanent installation.

TeleChaplaincy however will not replace the value of face-to-face contact.

## **Religious Service Broadcast**

To alleviate the boredom of prisoners during the pandemic, Netflix was made available for each prisoner. This was a very practical initiative. Essentially the success of infection control was the compliance of the prison population itself. Incidence of violence between prisoners as well as the consumption of drugs has considerably reduced during the pandemic. IPS needs to learn from this achievement and prepare for what the new normal will look like. If Netflix can be broadcast into every prisoner's cell then it should also be possible to provide a broadcast of a religious service celebrated in the prison for the prison population as well.

The broadcast of religious services is not proposed to replace the actual service where the community of the prison would communally gather, both Women and Staff, but it would be a possible alternative similar to the online arrangement in the community when communal gatherings are restricted or when the Women cannot attend Mass for whatever reason.

Chaplaincy would also be able to pre-record material of benefit and prisoners should be able to access the material at a time of their choosing. Such pre-recording facilities could benefit minority language groups and other faith groups as well.

## **Video Links**

Because prisoners are unable to attend compassionate visits to sick or deceased relatives or attend their funeral, it has been possible to organise a video link to provide virtual attendance. This has been ad hoc to date and depends on the availability of the technology and the competence of staff to make the connections happen. IPS needs to formally establish the structure by which it would be automatic for the prison to be able to offer the facility whenever actual attendance is not possible.

## Custom and Bad Practice

Increasingly, prisoners are being sent to the Dochas with pre-existing mental illness. Prison is not a suitable place for a mental patient. The help that is required is not available in prison. The Dochas has medical staff who are trained to deal with mental health patients. The Prison Officers who supervise such prisoners are not trained to deal with mental health patients.

Some prisoners with mental illness issues can be extremely difficult to deal with and Staff can be subjected to very demanding and at times degrading treatment. It is a tribute to the Governor and Staff of the Dochas how they contend with difficult situations despite the personal cost to themselves in terms of the psychological and emotional drain that circumstances create. Staff in the Health Care Unit do an exceptional job on a daily basis.

Prison Staff are no different from any other employee of the State. They shouldn't be expected to have to deal with situations that they are not trained to deal with. The State is being negligent in allowing itself and its employees to be exposed to such a liability. Custom and bad practice has been allowed to develop where untrained prison staff accept these extreme situations as part of their duty. What is even more remarkable is how they conduct themselves with credit in executing their duty which those responsible for creating would not even attempt under any circumstances.

The Prison Service is too well aware of how prisons are constantly being used as the dumping ground for other agencies' problems. Offenders whose offence is rooted in mental illness invariably get sent to prison because the State cannot accommodate them elsewhere. This imposes a duty of care on the Governor and his Staff which the normal exercise of their duty was not designed for. **Prison Officers are not trained to handle psychiatric cases.** This means then that the Court System has assigned citizens who come before the Courts to facilities that were never designed to accommodate them and to be cared for by inexperienced civil servants who are not even sure if their best efforts are appropriate.

Most recently a prisoner was remanded to the Dochas Centre after having spent over a year in a psychiatric facility. The prisoner was clearly unwell and confused to the extent that after

a few days in custody the prisoner wanted to know what hospital she was in. From as soon as she arrived in the Dochas Centre the prisoner remained in bed all day. Prison was obviously not the place for that prisoner, yet the prisoner had been charged, arraigned in Court and remanded to prison. After considerable intervention by the Governor and Health Care Staff, the prisoner was removed back to the psychiatric facility that she had come from. This put a demand on Staff and prison time in the middle of a pandemic that should not have occurred.

While Staff were dealing with this prisoner two other prisoners on the same landing were even more difficult to deal with: both were self-harming and both were violent. Both of the prisoners had been treated for mental illness before coming to prison. One of the prisoners had been brought to the Dochas Centre infected with Covid 19. The other prisoner was returned to the psychiatric facility where she had been a patient. That prisoner however was returned to the Dochas after she behaved in the same violent way that she had behaved in when she was being held in the Dochas previously. Obviously she had been referred to the psychiatric facility for specialist treatment. How was she expected to receive that treatment when she was returned to the Dochas? This is a clear example of the Dochas being used as a dumping ground.

Covid has preoccupied all our thinking for almost a year. Hospitals filled to capacity are part of everyday discussion. At this time of terrible fear and anxiety in the community, no one is going to be surprised to hear that the Central Mental Hospital has no bed space available either. The difference however is that the CMH had no available space before the Covid 19 pandemic. Most prisons have prisoners suffering from mental illness who have been waiting for a bed in the CMH for over a year.

Invariably patients waiting for a bed get knocked back in the waiting list when a more “urgent” case presents itself. The new mental health facility being built is perceived as being the answer. It is anticipated unfortunately that the new CMH will be full as soon as it opens. Prisoners will still be waiting for a bed.

For Governors and more particularly for the Officers who have to work with the prisoners with mental illness waiting for a bed in the CMH, the wait is soul destroying. No one seems to care. Staff do their best, but they have to endure the risk, they have to watch as the prisoner

deteriorates in front of them. There is very little incentive to motivate staff who never imagined that they would become unqualified psychiatric ward assistants.

The public however are being increasingly exercised about their own mental health issues as a result of the restrictions of the COVID pandemic. At what point does it become an issue that the untrained prison staff could develop their own mental issues as a result of being obliged to supervise prisoners who have been diagnosed by the CMH Prison In-reach Services as patients with serious mental health issues. It is obvious that mental health issues in prison are going to proliferate.

Irish Society has excavated the scandals of the Industrial Schools, the Magdallen Laundries, the Tuam Babies, etc. The role of the sub-contractor Religious Orders helped to deflect the responsibility for the scandal away from the State. The question that is never asked is how the State allowed these scandals to happen.

Prisons are increasingly being described as the dumping grounds for mental health issues and the scenario has all the makings of a scandal of the future. When that happens the State will not be able to hide behind the Religious Orders because the State is singularly involved at every level, including employing unqualified staff to supervise diagnosed mental health patients.

Foreign nationals who cannot produce the proper accreditation for residency in Ireland and are detained by the Garda National Immigration Bureau invariably end up being sent to prison. The Dochas receives the female detainees. They are accommodated in the same way as suspects who are remanded by the Courts.

## **Discrimination**

Although the Dochas women constitute a very small percentage of the national prison population, women constitute 50.39% of the Irish population. The number of beds allocated to the Women's Unit in the CMH is 10 out of an overall capacity of 94. A number of these beds are occupied by long-term patients, so that in actual fact there are considerably less than 10 bed spaces available. This means then that for over half of the female population of the country the number of specialist beds available in the national mental hospital is numbered in single figures.

The question that arises is, "Are women being discriminated against?" An Taoiseach recently referred to a history of misogyny in the State, so the question may be even more pertinent.

Apart from a wing in Limerick Prison, all the other prisons in Ireland are for men. This is because only a small percentage of the prison population are women. Men who are remanded to prison are sent to Cloverhill. Men who are sentenced can be sent to any one of a number of prisons and as they progress through their sentence they can be sent on to other stepdown facilities including two open prisons before their eventual release.

Most women however who are remanded to prison are sent to the Dochas Centre and then subsequently remain there after sentence, for life in some cases. Stepdown facilities are limited. Women in prison tend to be forgotten about. Women are unequal in the eyes of the Penal System. The Dochas Chaplaincy allocation for example does not provide Chaplaincy Cover for a full week as it does in most of the male prisons.

The women who are sent to prison and grab the headlines are the high profile cases of murder. The bulk of prisoners don't make the headlines. The majority of this category are invariably charged with theft – to feed a habit or feed a family. The value of their theft rarely makes it into four figures. Low value crime, deceit, re-offending is not exceptional crime. The women who end up in the Dochas are the offenders who get caught.

Travellers constitute a cohort of the general prison population. There are Traveller women in the Dochas Centre. Before anyone rushes to judgement, maybe there should be questions

asked as to why there has been an underspend of nearly €68.8million since the Traveller Accommodation Programmes began in 2000. The obvious question to ask is, would the money have made any difference to the women in the Dochas? The answer to that question may be academic by comparison with the question, why was the so much money withheld from a recognised ethnic minority?

## **Custodial Sentencing of Women**

The Dochas has been criticised in the past for having too many prisoners in custody. That issue has been resolved. Overcrowding was not the fault of the Dochas. If the Court sends a prisoner to the Dochas for detention, the Dochas' hands are tied.

The question of capacity could have been more realistically addressed by reviewing Sentencing Policy. Other jurisdictions in Europe and the UK already exclude the prison option for certain categories of offence. Addiction offences for example could be more effectively dealt with through proper treatment.

**In 2019, the numbers committed under sentence of less than 3 months was 693, less than 6 months was 1607 and under 12 months was 1153. (IPS Annual Report 2019). Statistically the number of women sentenced to less than a year in prison would amount to less than one hundred.**

The problem with short sentences is that they do not provide the time for prisoners to engage sufficiently to benefit from their time in prison. It is a waste of time sending them to jail. Worse still, the prisoner sent to prison for a short time could be exposed to worse risk such as drug addiction and leave prison worse off than when they came in. The problem with raising the issue is that judges could be encouraged to increase sentences thereby compounding the problem. The whole value of custodial sentencing needs to be looked at.

In 2019 the Director General assured the Irish Prison Chaplains that the policy was under review.

In 2020, IPS arranged for the release of those low-risk prisoners who had only to serve a few months of their remaining sentence in order to take the pressure of the prison system in the face of the pandemic. Yet repeatedly during the pandemic the Courts continued sending people to prison to serve sentences that only amount to a few months. This is inconsistent. One prisoner in the Dochas has actually been sent to prison for loitering. The Justice System needs to seriously look at why it sends people to prison. It could start with the custodial sentencing of women. There does not appear to be any cost benefit analysis of the appropriateness of custodial sentences versus community service sentences.

The impact of removing a mother from the bosom of a family in the middle of a pandemic, when schools are closed, at Christmas or other holiday time, for trivial larceny offences must rank as one of those commentaries on the type of society we live in. Of course people shouldn't commit crime but who is being punished, the criminal or the criminal's dependents? The cost of the legal proceedings would pay for restitution.

## **The Vulnerable in Society**

As a result of the pandemic, society has become more aware of the vulnerable in their midst and the need to protect them from the ravages of the virus. On the other hand society still insists on its pound of flesh to protect it's vulnerability to the virus of crime.

Government could find the resources to rescue the collapse of the banking system. Government could find the resources to pay workers to stay at home during the pandemic. Government could find the resources to protect the vulnerable from a life of addiction, homelessness and petty crime. Government instead sends the weakest and most vulnerable in society to prison at the cost of the tax-payer and the fabric of society.

Defendants get the justice they can afford. Those who are well off get the representation in court that money can buy. The poor do not enjoy that luxury. The poor invariably end up in prison. Social background means that there is a greater possibility of a poor person ending up in prison. Unemployed, homeless and/or addicted and the likelihood exponentially increases. Mother and Baby Homes, Institutional Abuse, Clerical Abuse are the horrors of the past. We like to think that those days are over but in fact they have been replaced by Direct Provision, Homelessness and Drug Addiction. The Irish Government's Special Rapporteur on Child Protection, Dr. Geoffrey Shannon, has described Direct Provision as "institutionalised poverty". This comment may be significant. The number of homeless families has increased by 232% since July 2014 when the monthly figures started being published. By the end of 2020 there are almost 9,000 homeless people in the State. It would seem that the past is very much alive and well.

The Dochas Centre comprises the best efforts of the Prison Staff that incorporates IPS personnel and contract professionals offering psychology, psychiatry, probation, addiction counselling, housing welfare, education and chaplaincy. There is a multi-agency approach to putting Humpty Dumpty back together again, to restore Humpty Dumpty? The walls are getting higher and the falls are becoming more frequent. How do we measure success? Has restoration really been achieved or is there a new way of doing things?

## **Reciprocation**

Christmas in the Dochas Centre was marked by a benevolence in the extent of benefit and actual material presents that the prisoners received. This was much appreciated by the women. Grateful recipients requested “Thank You” cards to give to the Governor. That spirit of generosity was not wasted. That same spirit of productive engagement in the wake of the pandemic would be equally worth planning for.

Governors and Chiefs are required to maintain good order in their prison. That is why it is considered appropriate to redeploy staff (from supervising workshops etc). The prison population has played its part in maintaining good order by complying with all the privations imposed by the Covid 19 pandemic. The infection control success that the Irish Prison Service is so proud of has been a partnership between the stakeholders. The prisoners are the largest stakeholder.

The Covid 19 Pandemic will feature in history alongside the Famine. It would be edifying and just therefore if IPS ensured that in future the boredom threshold in prisons was raised as testimony to what was achieved during the dark days of 2020. This is not just a matter of a good celebration meal or a few days knocked off a sentence. Prisoners and Staff have worked hard to avoid the virus entering the prison and to maintaining good order in the prison. A tribute to what has been achieved requires an investment in avoiding making the mistakes of the past. The biggest mistake is suspending productive engagement such as workshops and neutral venue visits.

A commitment to not suspend workshops and NVVs would make sure that the sacrifice made by the prisoners during the Covid 19 Pandemic is recognised and reciprocated.

## **Chaplain recruitment**

2020 saw the appointment of a new Head Chaplain. This is indeed a welcome development. There is no mention of chaplaincy however in the IPS Strategic Plan 2019-2022. This explains why Chaplains were not consulted about the plan. It is difficult to understand how the organisation decides to appoint a Head Chaplain in 2020 when it was not referred to in its Strategic Plan.

Chaplains are recruited by an outside agency. Quite a number of chaplains have worked for IPS as locum chaplains employed by that agency. Some chaplains have worked as locum prison chaplains for several years before permanent appointment. By then they may have experience of having worked in several prisons and must obviously have suited their employer to be offered permanent employment.

Let alone are newly appointed chaplains required to serve a probationary period, IPS refuses to recognise the experience that the locum prison chaplains have gained doing the work that they will be expected to do as permanent staff. All new chaplains are obliged to start on the bottom grade of the pay scale.

It is not what chaplains do but what chaplains are that identifies them. The current recruitment process is robbing IPS of talented applicants.

## **Sacred Space**

Airports and shopping centres appreciate the value of their Sacred Space where people can enter and enjoy whatever the space offers them. The space is made sacred by the people who use it. The Dochas has an Oratory that has served the Women and Staff since the Centre opened. In Covid time it has been underused in view of the restriction the pandemic has imposed. It was re-opened during Advent and the Christmas Season and availed of by Staff. They appreciated its re-assurance.

The Oratory is the Dochas' Sacred Space and it is proposed to improve the ambience of the space to appeal to those who would like to use it. The Governor has already been part of that discussion and hopefully, when the circumstances allow, the Women will be able to take part in a programme to make better use of the space and do justice to a tradition started when the Dochas Centre opened.

## **Conclusion**

The Chaplains would like to express their gratitude for the support, assistance and encouragement that they receive from the Governor and his Staff. 2020 has been a challenging time for everyone. 2021 may be every bit as challenging, but with determination and common purpose let us hope to deliver the service to the Community of the Dochas that we deserve.

**The Chaplain, Dochas Centre, December, 2020**

