

Young people and

System still coping with the loss of Spike jail

SINCE the closure of the prison on Spike Island, all young offenders are now sent to Dublin for detention.

The Fort Mitchell prison on Spike — which had spaces assigned for young offenders — was closed permanently in 2004.

The closure of the Shanganagh open prison around the same time meant St Patrick's Institution, which is part of the Mountjoy complex, became the only facility for housing young male offenders. It is run by the Irish Prison Service.

In his 2006-2007 report, the then Inspector of Prisons, Mr Justice Dermot Kinlen, said the open prison in Shanganagh and the prison on Spike were used by offenders who actively wanted rehabilitation.

He said there had been a wonderful, if under-resourced, educational ethos in the Spike Island facility.

Liam Herrick of the Irish Penal Reform Trust said: "The closure of the prison on Spike Island is a major issue. It was a good facility, particularly for education."

"Any person who is over 16 is being sent to Dublin for detention, with problems for family access."

He said another issue which needed to be addressed was the fact that St Patrick's is a medium security facility, and there is no longer an open facility for young offenders since the closure of Shanganagh.

There had been repeated calls from the Prison Officers Association for the re-opening of the Spike Island prison to help alleviate over-crowding in Cork Prison on Rathmore Road.

There were 102 cells in Fort Mitchell but the site has now been handed over by the Department of Justice to Cork County Council for development as a tourist attraction.



THE area of child welfare has come under the spotlight with the release of the Ryan Report. In the first part of a six-day series on youth justice, Security Correspondent ANN MURPHY looks at the issues surrounding detention of young people in Ireland.



NEW proposals for detaining the country's young offenders will be published next month.

The blueprint will be contained in a report by the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) following a review of the country's four detention schools and St Patrick's Institution for Young Offenders.

The report comes on top of the Ryan Commission findings, which stated that abuse was endemic in institutions for young people run by 18 religious orders.

The Ryan report shone a spotlight on youth detention in Ireland, and led to a renewed criticism of the ongoing detention of 16 and 17-year-old boys in St Patrick's Institution.

Today, the number of children in detention is under 500, between St Patrick's Institution and four other detention schools, all in Dublin.

The detention schools come under the remit of the Irish Youth Justice Service, which has commissioned a report due out next year on the levels of re-offending by under-18s. It is the first time such research has been done in Ireland.

The report by the IPRT on youth detention is currently being finalised and will look specifically on the detention schools and St Patrick's Institution, where young males aged between 16 and 21 years are currently held.

The detention of 16 and 17-year-olds in St Patrick's is a controversial temporary measure, bridging the gap until a new national detention centre is opened by the Irish Youth Justice Service in Oberstown in Dublin.

Executive director of the IPRT, Liam



LOCKDOWN: Above, an officer on duty inside St Patrick's Institution, top, where young male offenders aged between 16 and 21 years are currently detained. Picture: Maura Hickey

Having under 18s in St Patrick's is totally unsuitable...

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-Jesuit priest Fr Tony O'Riordan

Herrick, said the study of the St Patrick's facilities had been undertaken to ensure that the best practices currently in use would be merged with the best international standards in the new centre at Oberstown.

He said: "It will provide a roadmap for child detention in Ireland. There are aspects of the current schools which work very well but also areas which could be improved."

Although the new development will provide a modern centre for young offenders, there are concerns that the measure is not enough.

Jesuit priest Fr Tony O'Riordan is a regular visitor to prisons, including St Patrick's Institution and is concerned at the fact that the new centre will again be in Dublin.

He argues that if there has to be detention of young people, all centres

should not be in Dublin because travelling to the capital places an added burden on the families of offenders.

But he feels even more strongly that young people should not be in detention at all.

Under the Children Act 2001, there is a provision that the detention of children should only be used as a last resort.

Fr O'Riordan said: "Having under-18s in St Patrick's is totally unsuitable and the main issue is the regime — it is effectively a prison regime, but yet these are children, who are in the care of the State."

"Children in St Patrick's are in a regime where their normal rights do not apply because they are in a prison setting."

He said that care of under-18s placed in St Patrick's should be the responsi-

bility of the Office of the Minister for Children, not the Irish Prison Service.

He added that the vast majority of the underage offenders in St Patrick's had been sent there for crimes which were more on the nuisance scale than for serious crimes.

He points out that the 1985 Whitaker Report on the Irish Penal System recommended the closure of St Patrick's — something which is unlikely to take place before a new prison complex is developed at Thornton Hall to replace Mountjoy.

Fr O'Riordan said: "I know there is a plan in place but the deadlines keep being missed."

Plans to develop Thornton Hall received a setback in May, when negotiations between the Irish Prison Service and the Leargas Consortium who were to build the new complex were

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