



IPRT Position on Closure of the Training Unit, Glengarriff Parade, Dublin 7

April 2017

IPRT welcomes recent initiatives by the Irish Prison Service to better support normalisation and rehabilitation of prisoners, including the introduction of Independent Living Skills Units in Wheatfield Place of Detention and the development of a new policy for the Sentence Management of People serving Life Sentences.

In this context, IPRT is concerned at the proposed closure of the Training Unit semi-open facility on 1st May 2017. In principle, IPRT welcomes proposals for provision of ‘super-enhanced’ or lower security level accommodation in Mountjoy West. However, IPRT strongly believes such provision should be in addition to and not as a replacement for semi-open or open prison facilities. It is IPRT’s position that until alternative semi-open or open facilities are made available in the Dublin area, it would be preferable to make improvements to structure and management to keep the Training Unit open in the short-term.

The points on which IPRT’s position is based are set out below.

Open Prison Provision

1. The current provision of semi-open or open low security accommodation in the Irish prison estate is already low at 9% of bed capacity. The current “minimal” provision of low security capacity is reflected in the Irish Prison Service *Capital Strategy 2016-2021* (2016) which identified the need:

to significantly upgrade existing and develop a small number of new open or semi-open or low security centres in appropriate locations to supplement the minimal existing low security capacity and its sub-optimal location and accessibility in the country.¹

¹ Irish Prison Service *Capital Strategy 2016-2021*, p 26: http://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents_pdf/capital_strategy_2016.pdf

2. Closure of the Training Unit would represent a reduction in open or semi-open provision by 96 places (27%) to 6.7% of bed capacity.² In the absence of alternative semi-open or open facilities in the Dublin area, IPRT believes closure of the Training Unit runs contrary to the *Strategic Review of Penal Policy Final Report (2014)* recommendation 18 in which the Review Group recommends an “increased use of open prisons” and that “an additional open prison be considered for the Dublin area”³. The need for increased open prison provision was also among the five recommendations of the Oireachtas Subcommittee on Penal Reform (2013)⁴.
3. There is an increasing percentage of life-sentenced prisoners within the prison population. The number of life-sentenced prisoners doubled from fewer than 150 in 2001 to 344 in 2015. Consequently, an increase in open and semi-open capacity is needed to respond to the growing number of people being recommended for transfers to less secure facilities to aid their rehabilitation through normalisation.
4. The Whitaker Report (1985) advocated for a penal policy “based on the principles of minimum use of custody, minimum use of security, and normalisation of prison life” and viewed open prisons as “the best means of minimising the harmful effects of custody”. IPRT advocates for open prison provision to comprise 30% of the Irish prison estate in the longer-term, in line with the Nordic model which achieves higher rates of successful rehabilitation.

Principle of Normalisation

5. There is an acute need for pre-release facilities that facilitate normalisation in urban settings, particularly Dublin where a significant number of prisoners will settle on release.
6. The principle of normalisation which informs regimes in semi-open, open and pre-release centres – such as communal dining, non-uniformed officers, and enhanced family visits as the norm – cannot be met within closed prison facilities, such as Mountjoy West.

² Based on Irish Prison Service bed capacities, excluding Cloverhill remand facility.

³ Department of Justice and Equality (2014), *Strategic Review of Penal Policy: Final Report*, p. 60.

⁴ Recommendation 5 of the Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality *Report on Penal Reform*, March 2013: <https://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/Penal-Reform-Report-13-March-2013-Final.pdf>

Impact on Prisoners

7. Transfer from the semi-open Training Unit to the closed “behind bars” prison environment of Mountjoy West will be experienced as regression by prisoners. It may be particularly difficult for prisoners who may be institutionalised. It will also take away a much valued goal and marker of progression for prisoners within the closed estate.
8. Prisoners currently recommended by the Parole Board for temporary release will continue to be facilitated in Mountjoy West. However, IPRT is highly concerned that these prisoners will be vulnerable to pressure from the general prison population to bring in contraband, including threats to their physical safety. IPRT believes this presents a significant risk of reversing hard-won progress achieved by individual prisoners towards rehabilitation.

Impact on Families

9. The loss of the only semi-open prison facility in the Dublin area will have a significant impact on families, who also benefit from regular enhanced visits as part of the pre-release process. This is particularly critical during the pre-release period. Strong family relationships are the strongest protective factor against risks of offending on release. It is also an important support for children, partners and parents anticipating the return of their family member back home after a long absence.

Parole Board

10. IPRT is concerned that any reduction in open and semi-open prison facilities may impact on the Parole Board’s ability to recommend prisoners for programmes. This may have the unintended effect of delaying prisoners in their progress towards rehabilitation and recommendation for release. This may have negative implications for prison resources over the longer term.

Structure of the Training Unit

11. IPRT acknowledges that the current building is in poor condition and requires refurbishment. IPRT also notes that the Inspector of Prisons (2014) previously identified that the Training Unit was not being fully utilised as a semi-open facility preparing long-term

prisoners for release.⁵ However, until alternative semi-open or open facilities are made available in the Dublin area, IPRT believes that it would be more appropriate to make improvements in structure and management to keep the Training Unit open in the short-term. This would require strict adherence to policies governing the suitability of prisoners accommodated there.

12. IPRT notes and strongly welcomes the successes of the Community Return Programme and the Community Support Scheme. However, this does not negate the need for a semi-open centre that facilitates normalisation in an urban setting, such as the Training Unit. If insufficient numbers suitable for a semi-open regime cannot be identified across the wider prison population, it may indicate that paths of progression towards rehabilitation are not being adequately facilitated elsewhere in the system, or that the Training Unit is not currently perceived as an effective facility.

Staffing Levels

13. IPRT recognises the impact of retirements and the recruitment embargo that existed until recently on prison staffing levels. Open centres that hold only prisoners assessed as suitable for low security regimes require lower levels of staffing and are less resource intensive than closed security prisons.

Older Prisoners

14. IPRT welcomes that the Irish Prison Service is actively considering ways to address the identified complex mental and physical health needs of the increasing numbers of older prisoners. IPRT recognises the significant challenges this group presents to the Irish Prison Service, as identified in our research⁶. IPRT would welcome inclusive consultations, including with health professionals and others, regarding the suitability of the Training Unit and alternative sites for the location of such facilities.

For more information, contact IPRT on 01-8741400 or director@iprt.ie

⁵ Inspector of Prisons, *An overview of Mountjoy Prison Campus with particular emphasis on the Separation Unit by the Inspector of Prisons*, July 2014 at 2.17: <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB14000234>

⁶ Irish Penal Reform Trust (2016), *"In here, time stands still": the Rights, Needs and Experiences of Older People in Prison*, available at: <http://www.iprt.ie/contents/2968>