**Note on Oireachtas Penal Reform Seminar on St Patrick’s Institution**

**15th November 2011**

The seminar was structured around two 20 minute presentations by (1) Emily Logan, Ombudsman for Children and (2) Professor Harry Kennedy, Director of the Central Mental Hospital followed by a discussion with the TDs and Senators present.

**The Ombudsman for Children’s presentation**

Emily Logan, Ombudsman for Children (OCO) spoke on her work in St. Patrick’s with the 16 and 17 year-old boys. Ms Logan explained that the remit of her office under the Ombudsman for Children Act, 2002 does not include investigating complaints from children detained at St Patrick’s and repeated her call for a legal amendments to give her the power to investigate complaints from this particularly vulnerable cohort of boys. She also sought urgent clarification from the Government that it will follow through on its Programme for Government commitment to close St Patrick’s and proceed with the development of the National Children Detention Centre at Lusk as soon as possible.

The Ombudsman discussed the main findings contained in her Report on young people in St Patrick’s Institution published on 9 February 2011. In 2007 the OCO commissioned research to identify the kinds of barriers facing children in the achievement of their rights. Children in the criminal justice system were identified as a group who face multiple barriers to the full enjoyment of their rights. The Report, which is based on a series of consultations with children detained in St Patrick’s Institution, sets out findings and recommendations from the OCO to the management of St Patrick’s Institution and the Irish Prison Service. The report also includes a formal response to these recommendations by the Irish Prison Service. The OCO’s chief recommendations relate to the areas of family, health, education, safety and protection, complaints and inspections and rehabilitation and integration. In her oral presentation she focused on:

* Family (e.g. visits, including the barriers caused by long travel distances and the short duration of the visits);
* Health (including mental health and fears of discussing problems because of the “Pad”, the common name for the Safety Observation Cell); and
* Complaints (boys at St Patrick’s have no faith in the internal complaints system and are, therefore, not inclined to raise complaints).

The OCO concluded by stating that there are many great people working at St Patrick’s Institution, attempting to deliver as positive an environment for their charges as possible under the difficult circumstances. However, she also stated that it had emerged from her recent Human Rights Training sessions at the medium security prison that there are some prison officers who do not want to be there, who feel that working at St Patrick’s Institution affords them lower status than colleagues working at other “adult” prisons. Moreover, most prison officers at St Patrick’s have no child-specific training and are very reluctant to view the 16 and 17 year olds as children.

**The Director of the Central Mental Hospital’s Presentation**

Professor Harry Kennedy, Director of the Central Mental Hospital discussed the initial audit of findings from the community in-reach project which the CMH is operating in St Patrick’s Institution. He started off by saying that *prison culture* is a universal thing and is the same the world over, whereby certain key premises apply, namely: (1) “Don’t say anything”; (2) “ Don’t grass”; (3) “Don’t appear weak”; (4) Drugs are good; (5) “It’s Us versus Them”.

Regarding the question of where prisoners come from, Professor Kennedy stated that according to Penrose’s law, the population of prisons and psychiatric hospitals are inversely related. The over-representation of people with mental health problems in prisons is beyond doubt. There are certain common characteristics of young male offenders:

* Men, generally, do not access GP or mental health services;
* Men follow dysfunctional pathways;
* Men access mental health services via the criminal justice system;
* Men suffer debilitating effects of mental illness very early on and lose decades to the illness if untreated.

Regarding the 16-20 year olds at St Patrick’s, Professor Kennedy said that adult mental health services were not suitable or welcome to this group, and child services are equally unsuitable and unwelcome. Professor Kennedy’s research project at St Patrick’s is based on Pat McGorry’s Melbourne model of intervention. Pat McGorry is the Clinical Director of ORYGEN Youth Health, and Executive Director of the ORYGEN Research Centre. ORYGEN’s 250 clinical and research staff provide leading expertise in early psychosis, mood, substance use, and personality disorders. McGorry and the ORYGEN project have done research on young people who are “ultra high risk” of developing psychosis due to problematic drug use.

No research had been done to date on young people who were “ultra-high risk” in the prison setting, and that is the focus of the work been undertaken by Professor Kennedy and his colleagues from the CMH at St Patrick’s Institution at present. So far, 100 young offenders between 16 and 20 years of age were interviewed. 40% of these were children: 14% were 16 and 26% were 17. 1 of the 100 was assessed as already displaying signs of psychosis. **24% were diagnosed as *ultra-high risk***. Most of the young people had been intoxicated constantly since the age of 12, starting with glue, moving on to cannabis and then harder drugs. The initial statistics suggested that ecstasy use in particular increased a young person’s UHT risk by 10.5%, by comparison with headshop drugs (3.5%), benzodiazepines (2%) and cocaine (2%).

Professor Kennedy emphasised the need for a healthy environment for young people with mental health issues. Prisons are toxic. It is way too easy to get drugs. More drug-free units are crucial, particularly for the young age-group, if only to prevent schizophrenia and other debilitating mental illnesses. At a minimum it is better to defer the onset of mental health problems, and reducing access to drugs is key in this regard.

Professor Kennedy spoke of the desirability of incentivizing remission by being drug-free and the need for a process of culture change. St Patrick’s must become a healthier institution if the complex needs of young people are to be properly addressed.