

Introduction

There were twelve monthly meetings, on the first Thursday of each month, and all meetings were well attended. Two members of the committee also visited the prison, each month, and conducted full and comprehensive tours of the prison. The committee is under strength with only seven members for most of the year and a new member - Ms. Mary Hoade - taking up a position on the committee from November 2004.

Accommodation

This committee has previously highlighted the lack of accommodation for offenders on their release from prison and with that in mind committee members have followed up on this issue. Committee members have contacted local county councils and progress has been made on this issue. Some councils have worked closely with local health boards to provide accommodation and support services. The committee would also like to commend the Roscommon Partnership and Citizen Advice Bureau for compiling a booklet outlining the services available to offenders on their release from prison.

Overcrowding

This issue is continuing to be a cause for concern. Castlerea Prison has a remand wing with a capacity for 20 offenders but regularly has in excess of 30 - 35 offenders on remand. This along with constantly exceeding the maximum recommended prisoner population for Castlerea Prison places an enormous strain on resources and can create difficulties for Staff. The committee feel that this situation is intolerable and insist that a designated remand wing should be built as soon as possible to prevent the possibility of sentenced and remand prisoners mixing. During the year the committee discussed issues such as community service etc. as an alternative to a custodial sentence and feel that these issues should be pursued vigorously.

Prisoners with psychiatric problems

It is with regret that the committee must again highlight the problem of people with psychiatric problems and suicidal tendencies being committed to prison. This exposes both Staff and offenders to an unacceptable level of risk and trauma. Staff are to be commended for the professional manner in which they deal with these offenders. The committee feel that the shortage of hospital beds in the psychiatric area should be addressed as a matter of urgency. A prison term is not always the best way to deal with an offender with psychiatric problems.

New courthouse

The committee are pleased with the operation of the new courthouse at Castlerea Prison but feel that greater use should be made of this facility. This would greatly reduce cost to the Prison Service and eliminate the dangers associated with long distance escorts.

The Grove

The Grove area continues to be beneficial in the rehabilitation of prisoners. With its numerous workshops and educational facilities it is unique within the prison system and is working well despite negative media attention.

Education Unit

The Education Unit continues to provide a wide range of courses for offenders. During the academic year from September 2003 to June 2004 a total of 223 offenders were interviewed for the school. While 110 of these were either transferred out or released 123 attended the school. Students also sat the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate exams. FETAC courses were also well attended and 42 offenders attended other courses ie. Safepass, Teagasc, Open University etc. The Committee support the efforts of both teachers and offenders and wish them well in their endeavours.

Workshops

There were 3 additional instructors assigned to Castlerea Prison this year. The new instructors are in the areas of Carpentry, Health & Safety and the Fabric Shop. The committee welcome the additions to the Staff and with the ongoing work in the Leather shop, Fabric shop, Mould shop, Laundry and Work/Training area in the Grove feel that this work is therapeutic for offenders and contributes to their well being.

Kitchen area

As in previous years the standard of hygiene and the quality of food provided by both kitchens is to be commended for its high standard. The experience and skills gained by offenders in this area have proven beneficial to them on their release. The kitchen area has also had to adapt to a new 28 day menu and provide for the needs of ethnic minorities within the prisoner population.

Probation and Welfare Service

There is still only one Probation and Welfare Officer to deal with the needs of over 200 offenders. While he provides an excellent service the committee feel that it is necessary to highlight this as an area in need of improvement.

Chaplaincy

There is one Catholic Chaplain attached to Castlerea prison and arrangements have been made to provide for the needs of other religious denominations. No complaints have been made to the committee concerning the level of pastoral care in Castlerea Prison.

Prisoners before the committee

In addition to the offenders that the committee have met in the course of their visits to the prison there were some written requests and several offenders requested to meet the entire committee. All cases were discussed at length and the relevant course of action taken. The small number of offenders requesting to see the committee is taken as an indication of how well the prison is being run.

Inspector of Prisons

The committee met with Judge Kinlan, the Inspector of Prisons, on the 3rd of June 2004. A number of issues were discussed at length with Judge Kinlan and the committee were impressed with the positive approach and level of commitment he shows to his appointment. The committee are currently awaiting the publication of his report into Castlereagh Prison.

Conclusion

Castlereagh Prison appears to be well run with one of the lowest prisoner/Staff ratios in the country. However, this staffing level needs to be monitored closely to ensure that it does not fall below an acceptable level. The offenders are treated in a humane and dignified manner by the Staff and seldom appear to cause problems of any real magnitude. The committee would like to acknowledge the courtesy and help extended to them by the Governor and Staff over the last year.