

## Remarks by Caron McCaffrey at the Launch of the IPRT Progress in the Penal System Report 2020

Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Thank you very much Aislinn.

I am delighted to join you all today for the launch of the *Progress in the Penal System Report* for 2020 and I too would like to congratulate Fiona and Michelle on the Report which, as always, is a very broad review of the penal system.

We have been operating in the most extraordinary times and people in all communities are experiencing unprecedented challenges. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on every part of our society, including our prisons.

The 2020 PIPS Report has focused on the impact of Covid-19 in our prisons and there is no doubt that prisoners, like those living in the general community, have been impacted by this pandemic.

I would like to acknowledge the positive comments made in the Report about our response to the pandemic. I am hugely proud of our response and the measures which we have put in place to keep those in our care and those who work in our prisons safe. I am deeply proud of all of our staff who have shown great dedication and professionalism in responding to the challenges we have faced. I would like to also acknowledge the important role played by the Prison Officers Association and acknowledge their support during this national crisis.

It is also very important to mention and recognise the vital role played by the people in our care in support of our objective to keep our prisons Covid free and to mitigate against its spread where cases have been detected. Without their understanding, support and adherence to infection control measures we could not have introduced the necessary actions to protect the prison population. Red Cross volunteers in all of our prisons have done tremendous work in helping us to communicate the measures we are taking and the reasons for them.

Those necessary restrictions have been difficult. Physical visits have been suspended, out of cell time has been impacted and providing access to important regimes and services has been more challenging, as we sought to keep our prison population infection free.

The World Health Organisation has advised that people deprived of their liberty, such as people in prisons and other places of detention, are more vulnerable to a Covid-19 outbreak. People in prisons live in settings in close proximity and thus may act as a source of infection, amplification and spread of infectious diseases within and beyond prisons. Prisons concentrate individuals who are susceptible to infection and those with a higher risk of complications.

The Irish Prison Service has significant experience in managing infectious diseases and our experience of managing Tuberculosis outbreaks has served us well in responding to this pandemic.

We have learned much from our experience with TB and through the establishment of infection control systems, at local and national level, we had a solid foundation to build our Covid-19 response on. We established at an early stage our Emergency Response Planning Team and

we are very fortunate to have a number of very experienced personnel in our ranks, whose expertise and advice has been critical to developing our response.

The establishment of our Contact Tracing System, which has been internationally recognised, has been hugely important in preventing this disease from spreading within our prisons.

In implementing our response to Covid-19 we have been mindful of the impact that our restrictions have had on the prison population and their families. We have sought to find the right balance between introducing necessary infection control measures and continuing to provide the necessary and essential regimes and services to prisoners.

The challenge of providing regimes and services has forced us to re-engineer the way services are delivered and to introduce new, innovative ways of engaging with prisoners and their families.

There is no doubt that the suspension of physical visits has been particularly difficult. At an early stage we introduced a new video visit system across the estate to allow prisoners to continue to have face to face contact with their families.

This system has become a hugely important service, and the general feedback from prisoners and families is very positive. A new Electronic Money Transfer systems have also allowed families to continue to provide financial support to people in custody.

We are very cognisant of the impact that a more restrictive regime can have on people in custody, most especially those who suffer from mental illness. It was important that prisoners in quarantine and isolation could continue to access psychologists and chaplains and this was facilitated on dedicated phone lines. A new automated telephone system allowing prisoners to contact these services directly from their cell has now been introduced.

Recognising the importance of support from family and friends, in-cell phones were introduced in Cork Prison and in the Dóchas and these have proven very beneficial. An additional 400 cells across the estate now have in-cell telephones, with a further 600 cells to be completed in the coming months. It is my intention to continue to introduce telephones in all prison cells across the estate as a matter of priority, as resources allow.

While the provision of education has been severely impacted with the closure of schools, our teachers have continued to provide material for in-cell learning in all locations to provide activity and opportunities for continued learning. A new initiative being rolled out is the development of an in-cell prison TV channel which can be used to provide information and support in-cell learning. In this regard, we are looking at options for developing e-learning systems which would allow students to continue their school work from their cell.

While these measures were introduced to mitigate against Covid-19 restrictions, many of these measures will continue to benefit prisoners and their families when we return to a normal regime after this pandemic.

I note the Report benchmarks 12 of the 35 PIPS standards and I wanted to briefly mention two of these areas - Prison Numbers and Mental Illness.

By the time Covid-19 had reached our shores in February last year, prison numbers had increased to over 4,200 and there had been considerable pressure on the system with overcrowding being experienced in a number of areas with Cloverhill and the Dóchas being particularly challenged.

As a result, we introduced a number of measures including increased use of Open Centres, widening the scope of structured temporary release programmes and the provision of additional accommodation in Dóchas, Wheatfield and Midlands following a cell capacity audit. With the onset of Covid-19, in consultation with the Department of Justice, we took steps to reduce the prison population to a level where we could ensure effective infection control measures.

The number of people in custody has remained below 3,700 for the past 10 months (although numbers have been increasing in recent days and we have 3,727 in custody today) and this is welcome but as we have seen in the past the potential exists for numbers to incrementally increase over a short period of time, especially with a return to a more normal courts schedule.

As the Secretary General mentioned in her remarks, a working group, of which I am a member, has been established and has developed a number of guiding principles which will inform penal policy going forward.

This will ensure that imprisonment is used as a sanction of last resort for those who pose the greatest risk and will allow us to work more intensively with those in custody which will ultimately lead to better outcomes for prisoners and reduced re-offending.

The Programme for Government included a commitment to the establishment of a Mental Health Taskforce and, as the Secretary General has mentioned, work is being progressed by the Departments of Justice and Health in this regard. The Irish Prison Service looks forward to working with our colleagues to identify actions that can be taken to ensure that those with severe and enduring mental illness get the appropriate care in an appropriate therapeutic environment. I think we are all agreed that, notwithstanding the very best efforts of our prison staff, prison is not the appropriate place to care for this very vulnerable cohort of our society.

In parallel to all of our work on managing the risk of Covid-19, we have continued to progress our work and invest in tools to support governance and accountability. Part of that includes developing tools and mechanisms to support self-assessment; self-audit; and self-regulation.

This, in turn, will facilitate more timely and accurate provision of structured data and information to our stakeholders and will build on trust and accountability.

Our data analytics tool, which I mentioned last year, is in the implementation phase. We are also developing holistic operational scorecards as internal management tools which will allow us to identify areas needing attention and support, using data and trends to identify systemic issues so sustainable solutions can be implemented.

We have also continued to enhance and develop prisoner supports, especially for those leaving prison, through new initiatives such as the Housing First Initiative introduced in partnership with our colleagues in the Probation Service.

I look forward with hope to when we can return our full focus to the delivery of these and other important Strategic Objectives including the continued implementation of many of the standards contained in today's report.

Thank you.