Justice Committee

Public Services Reform (Prison Visiting Committees) (Scotland) Order 2014

Written submission from Marie McQuillan

“Visiting committee members provide a necessary and valuable outside perspective on the life and work of the prison. Visiting committees should ensure that conditions in prisons contribute to a safe, humane and decent environment in which prisoners’ rights are respected and where they are provided with opportunities to prepare for release in ways likely to reduce re-offending. Visiting committees visit establishments regularly and comment on these matters as well as providing robust, timely and fair responses to prisoners with issues or complaints.”


I have seen nothing in the new proposals which suggests that the above aims are no longer considered valid or desirable and the point of debate should therefore be how best to meet these aims. Although I have recently become a member of the Edinburgh Visiting Committee, I have not yet carried out any visits and my comments are basely solely on my understanding of both the current and proposed frameworks, in terms of their ability to meet the above aims.

The present system has a number of advantages over the proposed new system:

- The Visiting Committee is perceived by prisoners as not part of ‘the system’. It is important for prisoners to feel this independence, particularly when the VC member is reinforcing decisions taken by prison staff. In my view, a move to a department within the Inspectorate would have a negative impact on this. I also believe that each prison should view its current VC as an ‘internal audit’ function, as opposed to part of the external audit function of the Inspectorate i.e. it should be working with the prison staff to continuously review and improve. This should allow local practices to be improved in a non-threatening manner, by open discussion and agreement., which is less likely to happen when the chain of command of the monitors is a regulatory inspection body, even if the visits of the monitors does not form part of a regulatory inspection.

- The volunteers have a genuine interest in prison welfare and in carrying out the role untainted by any career aspirations.

- Under the current rotas, a prison is likely to receive at least one visit per week; a move to less frequent visits might mean that some remand prisoners arrive and leave the prison without any opportunity to raise any issues or concerns. The VC member can, and do, respond quickly to requests for urgent visits.

There are a number of ways the status quo could be improved:

- ensuring a standardised selection process and discontinuing the practice in some areas of appointing members to VCs without the need to undergo the selection process;
• providing a centralised and consistent training programme to ensure members have the right knowledge and skills to do the job and that there is a degree of uniformity of approach across different prisons; and
• admin support.

There may be a perception that creating a formalised structure will raise the professionalism of the role and remove any myths that VCs are made up of well-intentioned interfering busybodies.

However, my view would be that for such a structure to be part of the Inspectorate of Prisons would not be the best way to achieve that, for the reasons outlined above.

I believe that providing a more formal support structure behind the VCs, e.g. a Director of Visiting Committees reporting to the Scottish Ministers with a small staff to provide recruitment training and support services could being many benefits to the existing structure.

I urge the committee most strongly to reconsider:

a) the proposal to replace the VC role with monitors reporting to the Inspectorate;
b) the appointment of paid monitors – the paid staff in any new organisation should not be visiting staff but support and training staff, who could also perhaps provide a quality assurance function on the work of the VC itself; and
c) any reduction the numbers of visitors or frequency of visits.

Marie McQuillan
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