Justice Committee

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

Written submission from Open Estate Prison Visiting Committee Castle Huntly

With reference to the call for evidence on the Public Services Reform (Prison Visiting Committees) (Scotland) Order 2014, The Open Estate Prison Visiting Committee Castle Huntly welcomes the opportunity to submit views on the proposed reforms.

We have been structured our responses around the four questions under the Call for Evidence, as follows:-

Question 1.

Whether or not the proposed changes are a positive step.

- Visiting Committee members are volunteers, who are from outside the prison and independent from it. This should be reflected in their name. Their value should be recognised. I believe that these Lay, or Independent Monitors as we would suggest, should be appointed to each individual prison with the opportunity to regionally meet up regularly to discuss the work of their individual prison.
- Many rota visits and also extra visits are carried out at present. Regular visits give a better understanding of the working of the prison. It is hoped that visits to prisons will not be reduced. It is essential that continuity is maintained.
- There should be good contact between Lay or Independent Monitors. They should work as a team at each prison and share their visit records.
- It is essential that the roles of Inspection and Monitoring are clearly defined.

Question 2.

Whether or not the proposed structure of monitoring becoming part of the Chief Inspector’s functions is to be welcomed.

- It is hoped that if monitoring and inspection are combined, it does not lead to the blurring of boundaries and responsibilities.
- It is essential that monitoring of prisons is seen to be independent in order that they can fulfil their function and be able to assist prisoners.

Question 3.

Whether or not the roles of the prison monitors and lay monitors are required and if so whether the roles are appropriately drawn.

- Monitors should be appointed to each prison and visit on a 6 week cycle for continuity in order that they are familiar with the prison they are appointed to. It is they who should be recognised as Prison Monitors.
- The 3 or 4 Prison Monitors could be known as Prison Monitoring Coordinators and would be employed by HMIP who would oversee the (Lay) Independent
Monitors. There is no reason to suppose that because they will be in a ‘paid’ position that they would be anything other than professional in their approach.

- There must be a mechanism for all Monitors to meet up regularly to discuss prison matters. The new Lay or Independent Monitors must be afforded the opportunity to discuss the new function they hold.

**Question 4.**

**Other comments on the draft order.**

- The role of the VC member has been changing over the last few years. The New Complaints Procedure works very well with the PFC1 Standard Procedure and PFC 2 going to the Governor as a Confidential Complaint. The Prisoners’ Forum affords Governor, Management, Prison Officers and Prisoners to discuss the many issues put forward by the Prisoners. A VC member attends these meetings and they can observe the problems that have arisen and see them come to fruition. This function should continue within the new Monitoring system. The role of the VC member has changed and now few complaints are written into the VC Complaints Book. VC members are approached with an issue which they take forward and relay the response to the prisoner. It is hoped that this part of the VC remit is not lost.

- There should be fixed terms of service of 3/5 years with staged intakes to ensure that fresh eyes are brought into service.

- At present VCs are appointed by Local Authorities and there appears to be no age limit. S.G. voluntary appointments mainly cease at age 70. This requires clarification at an early stage in the current process.

I trust that the Justice Committee will give careful consideration to our views which we hope will influence the final wording of the draft Order.

Vera Joiner
Chair
5 November 2013