Justice Committee

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

Written submission from Addiewell Prison Visiting Committee

As a committee, we feel strongly that the independence of any monitoring of prisons is upheld. We feel we provide a unique service, for both prisoners and staff, and over the five years HMP Addiewell has been operational, (including the teething problems a new prison encounters), have established a good relationship with staff and earned the trust and respect of prisoners seeking our assistance.

As with all functions, there is a need to encompass change – not least the name, but whilst respecting all the legal obligations which have to be met by Scottish Government, we feel the needs of the client group should be paramount.

Question 1  Whether or not the proposed changes are a positive step?

- We agree in principal that the changes are a positive step, however, we are concerned about the difference between paid/lay monitors, what is the added value of the paid monitor apart from being an area manager for the chief inspector.
- A prison monitor is a prison monitor.
- Will the paid monitors go through the same selection process as the lay monitor this is not clear, there is no real transparency in the roles.

Question 2  Whether or not the proposed structure of monitoring becoming part of the Chief Inspectors functions is welcomed?

- It is paramount that prisoners and prison staff see the monitoring process as unbiased, independent and maintains confidentiality where appropriate. The trust given to VC member at the moment means that our work can have positive outcomes for all.
- We can only hope that the Scottish Government are sincere in their comments in para 1-12 of the Proposed Explanatory document, and that “any instructions issued by the Chief Inspector and Paid Monitor” (7A-5(a),7B-4(a)) do not cross these boundaries.
- Monitors can and should play a big role as the eyes and the ears of the Inspector, but there needs to be clear instruction of how our independence is relayed to prisoners.

Question 3  Whether or not the roles of the prison Monitors and Lay Monitors are required, and if so, are appropriately drawn?

- As stated earlier, a Prison Monitor is a Prison Monitor, currently VC’s are fulfilling this function albeit under a different name, so of course they are required.
- We have a problem with the title of Lay Monitor, especially as at the moment we have the Lay and Elected Member divide.
- It should be clearer that “Lay Monitors” visit the prison weekly.
There is no clarity as to how Monitors will be selected, it is important that men and women with a wide variety of skills and life experience from the local community are selected.

It seems that payment of expenses is arbitrary 7B(6).

**Question 4  Other Comments**

- Whilst we accept changes are needed, has any thought been given to the costs of training and servicing Paid Monitors, other than their salaries?
- Will the monthly visit by the paid Monitor take the place of our current bi-monthly Committee Meetings?
- Does this remove the current requirements for Chair / Vice Chair & Local Training Coordinator?
- The selection process needs to be equal for all. Many council members on committees do a good job, but some are only there because their council has put them forward rather than it being voluntary – which defeats the object somewhat.
- Independent volunteers, with proper training, are an asset as often they are the only contact a prisoner has with the outside, and can diffuse situations that occur with communication gaps, a problem in all big organisations.
- As with all legislation, hopefully this will not sound impertinent, but please remember you are taking decisions about real people both inside and outside the establishments.

Yvonne McCabe, Chair
Gina Placey, Vice Chair
8 November 2013