Justice Committee

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

Written submission from HMP Inverness Visiting Committee

1. Whether or not the proposed changes are a positive step?
The Inverness Prison Visiting Committee, like other Visiting Committees, is, as the present system requires, composed of a certain number of locally elected members and lay members. This in itself results in much divergence of opinion on the suggested new system as laid down by the Cabinet Minister in the Draft Paper. As a result in discussion of the questions we have been asked to comment upon, there has been no majority agreement.

With regard to Question 1 - whether or not the proposed changes are a positive step, our elected members answered with a definite NO.

This is not the case with our lay members who feel that a change in the structure and organisation of Visiting Committees is necessary and that the proposed changes are indeed a positive step.

2. Whether or not the proposed structure of monitoring becoming part of the Chief Inspector’s functions is to be welcomed?
The major concern of the members of the Inverness Prison Visiting Committee with regard to this issue is the whole question of INDEPENDENCE. This is seen by members as being the core concept of the purpose of Visiting Committees. To align the prime task of monitoring with the Chief Inspector’s functions would seem to our members to be dispensing with this basic and important concept.

Whilst it is accepted that this can be seen to be a positive step forward in that it removes the contentious issue of Visiting Committees being funded by the SPS, it appears that lay monitors will be subject to the direction and control of the Chief Inspector. This does not suggest independent monitoring.

We would have welcomed the formation of a separate organisation perhaps linked in with the Justice Department.

3. Whether or not the roles of prison monitors and lay monitors are required and if so whether the roles are appropriately drawn.
We would agree that lay monitors are required. Their role is to monitor the welfare of prisoners to ensure that they’re properly cared for whilst in custody and detention. With the present system there is no established structure other than the committee of which the Prison Visitor is a member. Having a paid monitor would play a supervisory role and provide the necessary support and training, which is currently lacking.

In the Proposed Explanatory Document, Section 27 (1)(b), para. 3.16 pg.24, the use of the word MUST was found to be offensive and dictatorial.

HMP Inverness Visiting Committee
7 November 2013