Justice Committee

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

Written submission from Paul Laidlaw

For your information, since October 2006, I have been a Public Member of the Inverness Prison Visiting Committee (IPVC), appointed by Highland Council. This appointment is voluntary. The views and opinions within this letter are entirely personal; they do not reflect any view or opinion from the IPVC or the AVC.

I believe the changes that are being proposed should be viewed in an extremely positive manner and bringing the monitoring of prisons under the oversight of HMIP can only enhance this extremely important role. I do believe both prison monitors and lay visitors are required to fulfil the expectations of this reform, and from reading the Order, the roles are appropriately drawn—with a couple of minor changes.

I believe the monitoring of prisons will be enhanced due to the fact that the prison/lay monitors will have the gravitas of HMIP behind them. Prisons are inspected every three to five years, I believe, and with prior notice of such inspection, allowing both good and bad practice to pass sometimes unnoticed. With prison/lay monitors visiting regularly, and hopefully unannounced, such practices can be picked up earlier, allowing praise or criticism to be voiced. Working with HMIP should allow a better trained prison/lay monitor into the prison to look into matters that many VC members might shy away from. Another positive will be HMIP controlling budgets, a major criticism of many members was the control wielded by individual prisons in regards to their VC budget, an anomaly I could not understand.

Two items come to mind that I believe will enhance this reform. First the lay monitor should be independent, working within rules laid down by HMIP. Without this independence I feel the lay monitor role could be restricted in attempting to fulfil their duties. Second is to get rid of the word ‘lay’, it is an outdated word. Independent could be easily substituted.

Paul Laidlaw
7 November 2013