Justice Committee

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

Written submission from the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance

1. We are concerned that the proposed changes will mean that prisoners within the SPS will lose an important safeguard if the Prison Visiting Committees are abolished. We believe that the PVC have a different role from that of the Chief Inspector of Prisons. As volunteers the PVC members are completely independent from the SPS and other statutory services and have a unique position of trust amongst the prison population. We believe that the PVC represents an important safeguard for prisoners, in addition to inspection.

2. We believe that in addition to PVC the committee should also consider the importance of access to independent advocacy. According to a number of reports about the Scottish Prison population, a large proportion of prisoners have a diagnosed mental illness or learning disability. Therefore they have a legal right of access to independent advocacy as defined by the Mental Health (Care & Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003. Currently access to independent advocacy within the SPS is patchy and not everyone entitled to independent advocacy is able to access it.

3. Many people who seek Independent Advocacy support do so because they feel that their lives and circumstances are incomprehensible and unmanageable. Their options have been severely limited; they feel they have no choice over things.

4. The process of advocacy aims to support that person to consider their situation and possible options, helping to make sense of their world. Advocacy also will help them to speak up or speak up on their behalf, ensuring that their voice is heard. This will contribute to lower stress levels which can lead to improved health.

5. Today’s society tends to focus on problems, needs and deficiencies. Services are often designed to fill gaps and fix problems. People become passive recipients of services; things are done to them rather than with them. They are disempowered by the very systems that are in place to support them.

6. In supporting individuals to consider their situation and find out about options and possible courses of action advocacy supports people to make informed choices while considering the possible outcomes of those choices. Advocates work to ensure that the person’s wishes and views are heard and taken fully into account either by supporting them to speak up or by speaking up on their behalf. Advocacy aims to empower those they work with, ensure that they are as fully involved as possible in any decisions made about them and help them take control over their lives and circumstances.

7. Many of those who contact advocacy organisations are isolated and lack informal social support networks. In their work advocates will aim to support individuals to make connections with others and to be included in their community. Collective advocacy helps groups of people with a shared issue or agenda come
together to work to improve services, raise awareness and influence policy and legislation. We are aware of a number of initiatives in the UK where Prisoners Councils have been established giving prisoners a voice, a forum to help them raise concerns and address issues.

8. We strongly urge the Committee to consider the points we have raised.

Shaben Begum MBE
Director
8 November 2013