Justice Committee

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

Written submission from Bowhouse Visiting Committee

At this time of austerity it is incredible that the Scottish Government would appear to be determined to change the function of the Visiting Committee

With regards to the proposed Scottish Government document to change the format of Prison Visiting Committees I would like to make the following comments:

In the past year there have been revelations about certain discrepancies within Ayrshire & Arran Health Board brought to light by Rab Wilson (supposedly a whistleblower). When I was chair of Ayrshire & Arran Health Council, the administration at the time decided to abolish Health Councils and replace them with a supposedly official body. To-day no one knows who they are or how they can be contacted. Similar to prison visiting committees the Health Council investigated and complained about any malpractices within the Health Service. We did realise that the NHS frowned upon this type of Health Council as they did not like complaints. This was evident with the initial suspension of Rab Wilson. Those Councils were totally voluntary and unpaid, similar to Visiting Committees. Perhaps if the old style Health Councils had still been in existence the complaints reported recently could have been dealt with before reaching the national press.

It has been brought to the AVC’s notice that a few directors of prisons (not Bowhouse) have been feeding the Justice Minister information about why Visiting Committees should be abolished. If I was Director of a prison I would also want Visiting Committees abolished. I wouldn’t want complaints or criticism of my prison. The purpose of the totally independent Visiting Committees is to ensure that the welfare of prisoners is being looked after and that all health and safety aspects are being carried out. At Bowhouse Prison at least two members of the VC visit every fortnight and over the year many complaints have been made and investigated.

It is well known that Mr MacAskill has a reputation of not changing his mind and seldom replies to letters. He certainly has never replied to my letter. It has also been claimed that the supposedly new consultation is with the same people who were consulted before. Obviously the same conclusion will be reached.

There is no shame in changing direction if it is justified and in the case of Visiting Committees, Bowhouse Visiting Committee feel that change is not justified particularly when you see the support we have had in both local and national press.

Prison Visiting Committees are totally voluntary without any payment. The quango which the Minister appears to prefer will cost money and can’t possibly be independent. It is true that Visiting Committees can be improved. Perhaps the Scottish Committees could be run on the same lines as English and Welsh Visiting Committees neither of which is being abolished.
Would this new committee, whoever it may be, be prepared to go into prison in the middle of a night if an incident took place to be an independent witness and ensure that everything was done by the book? Or be called in at a minute’s notice to sign a Birth Certificate or other documents as the present committee can be called to do.

I can only comment on Bowhouse Visiting Committee which in my opinion does an excellent job the members being amongst the most caring and reliable people I have ever known. Many have already intimated to myself that if paid monitors were brought in to oversee the role of Visiting Committees they would not wish to be part of the Committee. Their reason being that it would no longer be independent as paid monitors cannot be termed independent.

Obviously the Minister has not thought his idea through or perhaps he is only talking to the people who consider the V.C Committees a nuisance

Jim Currie JP, MBE
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