

Office of Inspector of Prisons Inspection Framework 2020

Tuesday 15th September 2020

Inspector of Prisons, colleagues and invited guests.

Inspector, thank you for inviting me here today and providing our service with an opportunity to respond to the new Inspection Framework for your Office.

Earlier this year, in February, we welcomed the Inspector and her team to our College, where Governors and members of our senior management team listened to you present your vision for the Office and its Strategic objectives, of which this Inspection Framework was highlighted as an integral part. I am delighted, that despite the disruptions of this year, which have impacted us all, your Office has prioritised the launch of the Inspection Framework.

I welcome it not only as a key strategic objective for your Office but also as an important development for the Irish Prison Service.

The Irish Prison Service greatly values the collaborative approach that characterises our relationship with the Office of the Inspector of Prisons. As we have heard from the other speakers here today also, national and international oversight and scrutiny go hand in glove with the rule of law and an emphasis on a human rights based, prisoner centred approach. These features characterise the approach taken by the Office of the Inspector.

However, penal reform and cultural change, is not merely about compliance and abiding by the rule of law but also about the introduction of international best practise. It is about making improvements and progress. The emphasis on this dual aspect by the Office of the Inspector has contributed to and instigated significant reforms in the prison system in this country.

Awareness and research of international developments in penal reform, developing guidance, advice and proposing practical models of best practise have paved the way for the introduction of significant reforms in areas such as prisoner complaints, prisoner healthcare, monitoring of vulnerable prisoners, and investigation of Deaths in Custody. The Inspector's recent publication, in collaboration with Maynooth University, in relation to the particular challenges faced by prisoners Cocooning from Covid 19 within our prisons was insightful and timely, continuing the excellent thematic reports from her Office.

So while in one way the publication of the framework today is a significant document and achievement in its own right, in another way it is the latest highlight in the continuation of a well-established collaboration. I can already recognise how the framework will assist the Irish Prison Service as we work towards achieving several of our own key objectives.

Reform must have a purpose and a direction informed by evidence and best practice. As we strive to improve our Service for prisoners, staff and the public at large, the Irish Prison Service is aware of the importance of independent expert voices and external perspectives, and is committed to listening and learning from them on that journey.

Mindful of the mission statement of the Office of the Inspector, "*supporting excellence in both delivery and outcomes in Ireland's prisons through an independent programme of inspections and investigations*", I am drawn to remark that the mission and vision of the Irish Prison Service is reflected in the five Focus Areas upon which this framework is based:

- Safety and security
- Respect and dignity
- Health and wellbeing
- Rehabilitation and development, and
- Resettlement

Our strategic goals and objectives are also reflected in the Framework. Last year the Irish Prison Service launched its three year Strategic Plan and I recall stating at the launch that our plan is supported by other developments, including the development of this new Framework for prisons inspections.

Taking in to account the financial, environmental and operational challenges that we face, our Service continues to work towards achieving the identified priorities in our Strategic Plan.

The Inspection Framework, while focused and structured in its approach, throws the net wide to include in scope, thematic and functional inspections that engage both prisoners and staff. I am pleased to say that the output of our actions under the 5 Pillars of our Strategic Plan, that is - staff support; prisoner support; safe and secure custody; an improved prison estate and governance - all work to strengthen and enhance the accountability, efficiency and effectiveness of the Irish Prison Service which will support our servicing and engaging with this inspection framework.

In addition, the introduction of a new functional structure at prison level, will further enhance our effectiveness and accountability on the ground and, when fully implemented, we look forward to the Inspector and her team engaging with us on its operation.

The governance landscape has evolved in recent years and our response to this supports independent oversight and the opportunity to engage in robust and rigorous debate. We are always interested and indeed eager, to learn from findings of and implement evidence based recommendations to improve our Service.

The approach and structure to the conduct and format of inspection under this Framework is logical, clear and supportive. This will provide the basis for strong engagement with the inspection teams. The transparent process is also important to manage and communicate expectations to a very busy front line operation.

The risk based approach being implemented under the framework aligns with the steps that we are currently taking to further embed active Risk Management across the whole service. Our goal in implementing a better reporting and risk management system is to support and inform better decision making and outcomes, which further enables us to take a more proactive approach to our Service and implement preventative measures.

Another area where we are aligned with the Inspector is our aim to develop and enhance our capability to manage and analyse data as we develop our evidence based approach. We gather a lot of data across the Service and it can provide very useful and important information that will inform decision making and help us to identify and develop important initiatives in targeted areas.

We are currently reviewing all of the information we gather and how we can improve our data analysis and reporting to allow for us to make faster, more informed business decisions, backed up by facts and to have a deeper understanding of stakeholder requirements. This fine tuning will, in turn, facilitate more timely and accurate provision of structured data and information to the Inspectorate and will build on trust and accountability with our many stakeholders.

It is important, however, to keep data and data sets in perspective, and we therefore welcome the variety of approaches to information gathering in the inspection process through use of surveys and interviews.

The Inspection Framework puts forward that the Irish Prison Service consider developing and implementing a policy of self-assessment on a quarterly basis across all of its establishments, with responsibility for completion of the self-assessments sitting with the Governor in each prison establishment.

I stated earlier that the governance landscape has evolved in recent years and it continues to evolve. Our service has a myriad of legislation and standards to which we must comply and provide assurances under. As well as the Inspectorate we have visits from the CPT and Visiting Committees and our standards of internal controls are tested annually by the Internal Audit Unit of the Department of Justice and by the C&AG as well as in the courts.

We want to be challenged and strive to raise standards. As an organisation we are very open and willing to engage with our stakeholders with the key aim of improving our Service, be that through responding to Reports from the Inspector of Prisons, or considering important research carried out the Irish Penal Reform Trust such as the annual PIPS Report. We also look forward to considering the findings from PRILA following their research project, which looks at independent prison oversight and monitoring and we will reflect on this with a view to again learning and improving our Service.

We are on a journey to respond more effectively to findings and recommendations from all of these reports and part of that includes developing tools and mechanisms to support self-assessment; self-audit; and self-regulation.

Effective regulation requires systemic change through awareness, training and organisational cultural change.

We support collaborative governance – we are building our capacity to support our prisons in managing risk and compliance through an enhanced risk management structure and to ensure that our service is in a position to respond to audits in a pro-active and time-bound manner. We are developing a culture of compliance through the provision of more support across the estate by establishing the functional structure. We support performance, improvement, growth and innovation across our estate.

This is not without its challenges, however, and we must remember that our service is a dynamic operational front line service where staff are intuitively managing and reacting to risks they face on a daily basis.

We are striving towards an open culture of questioning decisions and sharing knowledge of “near misses” whereby we maintain accountability by constantly and visibly contributing. Our aim is to a constant monitoring of performance; constant learning and constant improvement.

Effective implementation of self-regulation is technically and culturally challenging, but through taking an iterative approach to learning and development and through the provision of support to our staff by educating, enabling and engaging them, we are confident that we will achieve a maturity level that allows for self-assessment. We support ethical behaviour and a learning and a collaborative culture.

Despite the many achievements that we have realised over recent years, there is still much to be achieved and I am certain that through working in partnership and maintaining open dialogue with the Inspector and her Office, we will continue to learn and improve as an organisation.

I am confident that the implementation of this new inspection framework will have a positive impact on our Service and indeed for our broader stakeholders.

I am hopeful that the Inspection Framework will become part of the fabric of the Prison Service, and will be about collaborative capacity building that supports prisons to improve and reassures our stakeholders that the Irish Prison Service continues to meet its obligations, best standards and its objective of contributing to the communities we serve, playing our part in making a safer Ireland for all.

In short, I hope that we can continue to work together to raise standards and improve lives.

Ends.