

**ABERDEEN PRISON VISITING COMMITTEE -  
ANNUAL REPORT FOR YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2010**

The campaign to retain a community prison in Aberdeen continued to be the central impetus of the Committee's work as a *committee* over the reporting year, but of course the fulfilment of its rota visits was at the very heart of its moral and legal purpose. These visits were conducted timeously and properly throughout the reporting period, and members raised a number of issues on behalf of prisoners, using the administrative arrangements in place in the establishment to pass on concerns from one rota visit to another, etc.

The imminent reopening of the women's unit was welcomed – the Committee had always been opposed to its closure – and members looked forward to convicted females having the opportunity to undergo re-integration in preparation for eventual release. This tied in with mentoring activities and also with the "Routes Out of Prison" project, which had been led most effectively by a fast-track working group, and was now very close to fruition.

The position vis-à-vis overcrowding had improved, and the prison population in March 2010 was only slightly above the contracted figure of 220 (225/230 on average). The situation was generally stable throughout the year, and there had been a successful period of good intelligence work that had uncovered mobile phones and chargers that should not have been in the establishment. CCTV in A Hall allowed staff to see and refer to recordings of incidents, and this had proved to be of considerable assistance in a range of ways.

The new visits facility was an approved scheme but a centrally-based project. A more user-friendly reception area was part of this. In particular, it was possible to separate prisoners/visitors from the likes of Committee members and solicitors.

Sickness levels were low and the Governor believed there were no evident problems of morale. Targets were being exceeded and the overall position was reassuring. As always, however, vigilance and good communication were unchanging aspirations.

On 3 November 2009, the Public Petitions Committee at Holyrood had agreed to seek a Parliamentary debate on the petition on community prisons. This petition had been framed in broadly philosophical terms, advancing the case for genuine community prisons rather than “community-facing ones”.

Its central thrust was that it ran counter to all progressive academic opinion to contemplate actually doing away with a genuinely local prison in a city the size of Aberdeen. The Visiting Committee was aware that there were arguments about existing locations; no doubt families in Dundee had to travel to Perth or further afield because there was no HMP Dundee. However, that was an existing situation.

On the contrary, there was a community prison in Aberdeen, and it was going to be lost because of a value judgement being made in the name of organisation. There might be worse things in the SPS estate than the loss of HMP Aberdeen, but they were not likely to be characterised as good public policy.

If there had never been a prison in Aberdeen, it would no doubt be regretted quite distinctively, but at least it would be possible to say that there were simply no funds available to improve the situation, just as there were no funds available to build a

community prison in Dundee, or any of the other small community prisons throughout Scotland which progressive academic opinion would affirm. Obviously, all of that was wholly unrealistic. Progressive academic opinion was probably some distance from a range of current realities. But Aberdeen *had* a prison, just as progressive academic opinion would tend to say it should have. Of course it was overcrowded and old, and it might well be that there was a place for a new HMP Aberdeen *and* a new HMP Peterhead, but there was no justification for the view that the needs of north east Scotland should be served by a single establishment almost forty miles away from Aberdeen.

The petition had reached the floor of the Scottish Parliament in January, and, in the course of a lively debate, many MSPs had been very supportive of the Visiting Committee's position. However, the entire matter had been referred back to the Public Petitions Committee where it ended up being wound up, leaving only the intriguing possibility that an MSP might submit a Member's Motion on the matter.

On 10 March 2010, the Vice-Convenor reported that £20,000 had now been contributed to the "Routes Out of Prison" project from Aberdeen City Council's social care budget, and that informal indications were that the Scottish Prison Service would match this. The wider steering group that had done so much to bring all of this about would now revert to being a broad overarching "reference group", with a streamlined project group to be set up to continue day-to-day management.

In the course of the reporting year, the Committee had invited presentations by Mr John Hannah (Aberdeen City Council's Homelessness Officer), Ms Caroline Crombie of the Christian Fellowship, a fourth year occupational therapy student, and, of course, a full report to each regular meeting by the Governor. All of these sessions had been

particularly fruitful. Throughout the year, as always, the Governor had had a very open and supportive approach to the work of the Committee.

Meanwhile the Convener had maintained his involvement with the Executive Committee of the Association of Visiting Committees for Penal Establishments in Scotland, and, as in recent years, a much higher involvement in Association matters had continued.

All in all, the reporting period ended with members looking forward to the support of the Governor and her extremely helpful staff in coping with not only the shifting landscape of running a prison but also the uncertainty caused by the closure decision. However, staff morale remained good, and the Governor's regular reports to the Committee had contained much that was impressive and reassuring.

- **GORDON LESLIE, Convener.**