



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Prison Service Reform Programme: Update

16 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

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|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Mr Mark Adam | Northern Ireland Prison Service |
| Mr Ronnie Armour | Northern Ireland Prison Service |
| Ms Sue McAllister | Northern Ireland Prison Service |
| Mr Max Murray | Northern Ireland Prison Service |

The Chairperson: I formally welcome to the Committee meeting Sue McAllister, the director general of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS); Mark Adam, the strategic change manager; Ronnie Armour, the director of human resources and organisational development; and Max Murray, the director of estates, all of whom are from the Prison Service. I will now hand over to you, Sue.

Ms Sue McAllister (Northern Ireland Prison Service): Thanks, Chairman. Before we start the formal session, I want to take the opportunity to notify members who are not already aware that, tragically, one of our new recruits passed away during the course of last night. He was found in his room at his boarding house, next to the Prison Service College in Millisle, by two of his colleagues this morning. The young man in question was from the Limavady area. Ronnie Armour and I will visit his parents, who are his next of kin, after this session. Mark and I spent some time at the college this morning and saw the other recruits and staff, who are obviously distressed. I just wanted to make members aware of that and to say that, as we get more information from the PSNI, which is dealing with this as an unexplained, unexpected death, we will make sure that people are kept informed of the facts.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Ms S McAllister: Thank you for welcoming us. I formally welcome all of you to Magilligan. We are grateful for this opportunity to brief you on our progress on the Prison Service reform programme. We provided you with a detailed briefing note in advance of our meeting. In my opening remarks, I will, with your permission, briefly expand on a few of the issues covered in that paper.

As we are in Magilligan today, I think that it is appropriate that I begin with the estate strategy. You will be aware that the Minister made a statement to the Assembly on 19 March in which he updated Members on his final decisions around provision for young offenders, women offenders and the shape of the adult male estate, including the future of Magilligan. The development of the prison estate is an important part of our overall reform programme in prisons and across the justice system. It is an opportunity for us to create an environment that will promote change and rehabilitation, reduce risk and enhance public safety, at the same time as providing accommodation that not only is fit for purpose but provides value for money.

The Minister has committed to the reconfiguration of Hydebank Wood as a secure college, and work to explore how that might look is at an advanced stage. He is also committed to the provision of a separate facility for women, combining custodial and community provision. A cross-departmental working group has been established to determine the size and configuration of that facility, and it is hoped that it will become operational as early as 2018. Work to develop a business case for the reconfiguration of Maghaberry into three separate areas, including a high-security facility, is under way, and it is anticipated that a new accommodation block will be available in 2017.

Members will be aware that the Minister has committed to the redevelopment of Magilligan on the existing prison site. A strategic outline case that identifies the need for the redevelopment and that includes high-level estimates of the capital and resource costs involved has been developed and submitted for internal Prison Service approval. It is envisaged that the redevelopment will be conducted in three phases, concluding in 2020.

With the Committee's permission, I want to brief you on two specific aspects of the reform programme, as requested by members. Those are the current position on the employability strategy; and the voluntary early retirement (VER) scheme.

You will be aware from previous meetings that we have developed and consulted on a draft employability strategy. I am grateful for the opportunity to hear the Committee's views on that, but you might like to note that we are already working in its spirit, driven in part by the engagement with the north-west on the future development of Magilligan. We have established a Magilligan prison elected members group, with representation from the north-west borough councils, chambers of commerce and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. The group identified a number of sustainable work opportunities for prisoners in custody at Magilligan, and that support helped to influence the decision to keep Magilligan prison open. We are encouraged by the group's willingness, post-decision, to continue in partnership with NIPS.

We will look to develop partnerships with stakeholders across Northern Ireland and to learn from others to ensure that purposeful activity in all our prisons is improved for all prisoners throughout the estate. Examples of that are engagement with Business in the Community on a mentoring scheme for prisoners and the establishment of a dialogue with the Timpson group, which is one of the biggest — if not the biggest — employers of prisoners and ex-prisoners in the UK.

You will be aware that the VER scheme was launched on 8 November 2011, following the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) approval of the business case. A total of 554 staff applied for the scheme, and to date, 360 have left the service in line with the original approved business case. DFP has now approved an extension to the scheme, and the remaining staff have been told that they will be able to leave the service. A number of staff have withdrawn from the scheme, and a number have left for other reasons — for example, age retirement and ill-health retirement. As a result, there are now 157 staff waiting to leave the service under the VER scheme.

NIPS secured funding for staff to leave under the VER scheme, with the exception of seven governors and 20 senior officers. We will continue to bid for additional funding to allow those staff to leave. As has been the practice, staff will be allowed to leave the service when it is operationally possible for them to do so.

As you will appreciate, this is only one aspect of the changing make-up of our staff. We are continuing to recruit custody officers; to date, we have deployed 241 new officers, and a further 39 are in training at the Prison Service College. Plans are in place to appoint a further 40 custody officers from that competition this month and in June. In addition, office support grades and night custody officers have been trained and converted to custody officers.

We are in a period of transition, but I firmly believe that NIPS is well positioned to meet the challenges that lie ahead. The new staff have settled in well and continue to build their skills. I pay tribute to all

our staff, particularly those experienced members of staff who will not be leaving under the VER scheme. They have ensured a continuity of business in this transitional time, and their vast experience has proven to be invaluable.

I also want to give the Committee an overview of the wider reforms of the service. As you are aware, these are wide-ranging and challenging for everyone across our service. My management team and I remain focused on making the necessary changes.

Members will be aware of the continued review of the corporate governance framework. This work was commenced on foot of the publication in December 2010 of the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) report on corporate governance arrangements. Although the inspection did not make specific recommendations, officials have worked to ensure that the principles that were subsequently incorporated into the prison review team report are being implemented.

Our target operating model (TOM) was implemented at all prisons in October 2012. The model was developed to address high staffing levels and working practices that were outdated and ineffective. This is still in a transitional phase and will remain so until all staff have left under the VER scheme. As a consequence, the TOM is not yet fully staffed and has been operating with staff shortages, particularly at Maghaberry prison. That presents a challenging operational environment at establishments. As well as managing the exit of staff and the recruitment of custody officers to mitigate those challenges, NIPS is taking forward an evaluation of the TOM.

The Prison Service remains committed to the development of a modern approach to searching and safety that is less intrusive than our current methods. It has always been the view of NIPS that in order to preserve the security of each establishment and the safety of prisoners, staff and the wider community, the requirement for full searching on entry to and exit from the prison must remain until a satisfactory alternative can be found.

NIPS has progressed its own application to obtain a licence initially to pilot and potentially to use a transmission X-ray full-body scanner. The Minister of Justice, following receipt of the NIPS justification application for the use of transmission X-ray full-body scanners, registered it with the Department of Energy and Climate Change on 2 May.

This is, of course, only a part of the wider reforms that are being taken forward by the Department of Justice (DOJ) around alternatives to prosecution, reducing the number of people held on remand and introducing a fine enforcement strategy. These are a critical part of the programme and will help to divert people from custody and allow NIPS to make efficiencies and channel our valuable resources in the most effective way.

Stakeholder engagement is a vital part of the work of the reform programme team. Since January, five workshops have taken place with key stakeholders from the statutory and community and voluntary sectors. The workshops were based on the following themes: resettlement; purposeful activity; women's services; young people; and healthcare provision.

As part of this ongoing engagement, a further event will be held on 27 June that will bring together the discussions from the workshops and outline practical measures that will be introduced. A paper will be sent to the Committee prior to the June event, and an invitation will be sent to members.

The reforms are about more than just completing 40 recommendations from the prison review team report. When we talk about the recommendations, it can be easy to be drawn into the process rather than the outcomes. Ultimately, we want to help to keep communities safe in Northern Ireland by working with offenders to reduce their risk of reoffending. We are making good progress, and I am confident that we are on the right road to achieving our goals.

I have given you an overview of the challenges and the actions that are being progressed. We will continue to keep you informed of further developments in a timely manner. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon. I welcome your questions on those and any other issues that you would like to discuss.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for that. I have a number of questions, and then I will bring in other members. I have previously spoken about what I think of the way in which the VER scheme was managed, so I will not repeat all that. Much of that was not on your watch, but hopefully we are getting to the end of the process for a lot of people, and the sooner that happens, the better. What needs to happen to facilitate those officers who remain to leave the service as soon as possible?

Ms S McAllister: I will ask Ronnie to answer that because he has more of the details than I do.

Mr Ronnie Armour (Northern Ireland Prison Service): As Sue said, in March this year we secured additional funding from DFP, which allowed us to move just over 130 staff from letter 3 to letter 2, which means that those individuals have been given a guarantee that they will be allowed to go. We have said to them that, now that we have secured the funding, we will continue to release them in tranches, as we have been doing, when it is operationally possible to do so. As I move around the various prisons, I have said to staff that we have a number of challenging operational months ahead of us, with the G8 summit, the World Police and Fire Games, and so on. We have been conditioning expectation that the next few months will be challenging for us.

The Chairperson: So funding is not the issue.

Mr Armour: Funding is not the issue for those staff. We did not secure enough funding to move from letter 3 to letter 2 for 27 members of staff. They remain in the letter 3 category, and we will need to secure funding for those individuals. We are actively pursuing that priority.

The Chairperson: Will another recruitment exercise be needed?

Mr Armour: We have run another small recruitment exercise. We want to make sure that we can bring in new recruits at any stage over the next couple of years. We need to do further work on our requirements with the ongoing evaluation of the target operating model, but we stand ready to bring people in should we need to do that.

The Chairperson: Of the 27 who remain, there are seven governors.

Mr Armour: There are seven governors and 20 senior officers.

The Chairperson: That is the breakdown. How many governors were in the initial —

Mr Armour: Off the top of my head, I think that about 15 or 16 governors wanted to go. Roughly half of them have been moved forward to letter 2, and the others remain.

The Chairperson: An evaluation of the TOM is under way, and even from my experience here, I can see how a reduction in the number of officers on the landings in Halward House could work. It is open, it can be seen, and there are not many blind corners. However, when I was in H2, I could see how there could be difficulties with a reduction in manpower. Is the evaluation taking on board the feedback that you are receiving from bodies such as the Prison Officers' Association (POA) that there are areas in which the TOM is not working?

Ms S McAllister: The short answer is absolutely yes; we are listening to feedback. My colleagues and I walk around the prisons regularly, talking to staff and listening. Even when staff do not feel that they are being listened to because nothing happens immediately, that does not mean that we are not taking on board what they say. We have always said that it is important that we make sure that we have the right numbers of staff in the right places at the right time, doing the right things. That may mean that we prioritise having staff in prisoner-facing areas so that we make sure that those staff who are working directly in contact with prisoners are doing so in numbers that are safe and defensible. We might wish to ensure that we can maximise the numbers that are able to work in those roles by looking at how we do business differently in other areas. That might mean delivering other work at different times, with staff in different numbers or with different configurations of staff. So when we talk to our staff about the evaluation of the TOM, they should not presume that we are focusing solely on staff in residential units. They are the ones whom we see most often, so they are often at the front of our minds. Many other staff are engaged in things, sometimes for no other reason than that is the way in which we have always done it. Therefore, we are taking a very critical look at some of the other areas in which we have staff so that we can perhaps move them into prisoner-facing roles wherever we can.

Mr Armour: When we began the evaluation, we asked the POA for its views, and it submitted a number of written representations. Two of our own staff are now going round each of the prisons and

working with the local central detail office, taking the views of governors. We have the views of the POA. We will build that in over the next number of months to come out with a revised profile.

The Chairperson: With regard to the capital provisions, there is obviously a business case that will need to be worked up for the redevelopment of Magilligan prison and other areas. What indications are there from the Department that you will get what you need?

Mr Max Murray (Northern Ireland Prison Service): Interestingly, DFP economists and accountants visited Magilligan prison yesterday, along with some of our estate colleagues and me, and we walked the prison. When you walk the prison, it speaks for itself. It has had significant underinvestment over many years and needs radical change. In the discussion afterwards, they were very sympathetic, although they obviously could not give us carte blanche. The level of capital that is made available depends on the next funding round. Desertcreat is largely sorted out and out of the way, and we are competing for funding with the Dundonald hospital and a new mother-and-baby unit. If we can get the business case completed, hopefully it will be given due consideration.

The Chairperson: I have a final question. When we were with folk from the education side, they said that some of their work is bought in from the college. There seems to be a good working model whereby people are brought in and that service is delivered. I know that that is not the case in some other areas. Where do you envisage that education service going as part of the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme? Will it be wholly in-house, wholly outsourced or a mixed package?

Ms S McAllister: We have been absolutely clear on this: we see education, learning and skills as a crucial part of what we do. However, we would not say that its delivery is core business for prison officers. It is much better for it to be delivered by education professionals. So we will be moving to a model whereby education is delivered under a service level agreement or a commercial contract with an external provider, and we have started that process. We have scheduled an event within the next couple of weeks at which we will be giving information to organisations that may be interested in delivering that. We will start the process very shortly.

The Chairperson: Ultimately, is that where you see the best outcomes being achieved for individuals who take part in the education service?

Ms S McAllister: Absolutely. We have started to talk to potential providers, mainly further education colleges, particularly the North West Regional College, which already delivers education and is keen to do more. It believes that it will significantly enhance the quantity and quality of provision for prisoners and make it more joined up with what is being delivered outside. As part of our reducing reoffending and rehabilitation strategies, if people can move seamlessly from education courses here into education courses on the outside, that will be better for everybody.

The Chairperson: One concern that has been raised is about ensuring that the focus is on prisoners who find it difficult and that the service level agreement, or the people who come in to deliver education, are not results-driven. The people who are able to learn will get on and do that and will get their accreditations very easily. Those who find it difficult to get qualifications may be left behind. How has that figured in your thoughts?

Ms S McAllister: That is key to all of our thinking. We have been excited and encouraged by our conversations with further education colleges because they already deliver some exciting education to people whom we would consider hard to reach through education, such as those who have withdrawn from the formal education system and become disenfranchised. We are clear that the most important thing that we can do is to address very basic literacy and numeracy needs and enhance employability. So we will look at how we can deliver literacy and numeracy. It will usually be embedded in other activities so that it becomes more attractive and relevant. We also need to work very closely, as colleagues already do, with outside organisations to see what skills we need to give to people in order to genuinely enhance their chances of gaining employment when released.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much for what you have explained to us so far. I will follow on from the Chair's question about the delivery and provision of education. Obviously, a prison is not a nine-to-five business. Do those who may wish to come in from the outside have a clear understanding that the delivery of education is not just a nine-to-five business and that it has to be very flexible? On a recent visit to a prison in England, we noted that the education service, which was completely outsourced, was delivered in the prison on Saturdays and Sundays, traditionally difficult days because everything

is very quiet. Furthermore, because all those in the education service were recruited externally, if one person was not available on a certain day, perhaps due to sickness, it was not the prison's problem; it was the provider's problem. So, at whatever time of the day that person had been due to teach basic numeracy and literacy, somebody else was up to speed and able to take over. Could that model ever be delivered just through a further education college? Do colleges wholly understand what they may be letting themselves in for?

You are right to say that education is not your core business. As prisons move away from delivering education, is there still an opportunity for prison staff to understand what education is being delivered? In that way, rather than staff just being told that it is no longer their job to deliver education, they can engage with prisoners on education, meaning a holistic view being taken to its delivery.

I have some questions about the reform issue, but perhaps we should deal with education first.

Ms S McAllister: I can hold only two questions in my head. The answer to your first question is yes. It will absolutely give us a much more flexible delivery model. You are right in saying that we should seek to deliver regime opportunities at weekends and when there are not quite as many competing activities. I do not know whether FE colleges are the only organisations that could do that, but the ones that I spoke to were clear that they could. They look and feel very different from how colleges used to look and feel. So they are already able to deliver modular and flexible courses alongside other student provision.

You are correct that, as part of the prison officer role, we are working up the role for offender supervisors, which will be to engage in managing prisoners' sentences, including their learning and skills.

Mr Dickson: That is very helpful.

I now turn to the new staff coming into the Prison Service, new grades and the whole area of change management, which is all very welcome. I am sure that training is being delivered. Perhaps, Chair, at some stage, we may get an opportunity to see exactly what training is being delivered to new staff. Can we be sure that existing staff know what training new staff have received, what their expectations are and how the interface between existing and new staff is being managed?

Ms S McAllister: Absolutely, yes, and that is working on the ground. Ronnie, do you want to comment on how we are managing that so that recruits at the college go into prisons during their first eight weeks and afterwards?

Mr Armour: We run an eight-week training course at the college and, very early on, the new recruits are given the opportunity to see what it is like in a prison through being shown round one. This is a foundation course that prepares them for prison work, but it is not the end of their training. They learn and gain a lot from working with experienced staff in the prisons, including on the landings, so the training programme is really a rolling programme, not just an eight-week course.

Mr Dickson: I am particularly concerned that existing prison staff should not feel threatened or sidelined by new staff. The recruits are the shiny new people, and perhaps the existing staff are not. How is that being managed?

Ms S McAllister: That is a good point. We manage that by facing up to the fact that it is potentially an issue, so we have been very clear that it was a possibility. We made it very clear, throughout the training for the new recruits and in our conversations with experienced staff, that there is a very important role for experienced staff in supporting the new officers. Yesterday afternoon, I was at the square houses in Maghaberry, in which there is a mix of the two groups, and the conversations that I had there reassured me that that is happening in practice. New younger staff said that they had had loads of support from the existing staff; that they understood their concerns; and that existing staff helped them with knowledge and approach. So that is happening, but it is about relationships and giving the experienced staff permission to play the role of supporters and informal mentors.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much for your presentation. First, I would like clarification on something. Your presentation states that 80 new recruits are expected to join the service and begin training in May and June. Sue, you then said that there will be 40 new custody officers in May and June. Are those separate, or are they all one and the same?

Mr Armour: The new recruits are all custody officers.

Mr Elliott: So the 40 new custody officers are among the 80 beginning training between May and June.

Mr Armour: Yes.

Mr Elliott: That is fine.

Sue, you also talked about outdated working practices. Will you expand on that? Which working practices are outdated, and how do you plan to change them?

Ms S McAllister: That covers a whole range of things. We have said, for example, that, historically, in all our prisons, we felt the need to have a one-size-fits-all solution to certain issues. In Hydebank Wood, which houses women and young offenders, the way in which we manage their visits, searches and drug testing is exactly the same as for high-security prisoners in Maghaberry. That is an outdated and inflexible approach. It means that we spend more time and use more staff doing things that are not risk based. We are not resourcing according to the risk, and we could be using those staff to do different things at different times. If you were a prisoner, you would, for example, have your cell searched to make sure that you had nothing illicit. On average, that would happen every 14 days, irrespective of whether you were a category A prisoner in Maghaberry, a woman serving a short sentence in Hydebank Wood, or a young man in Cedar House on enhanced status. That clear waste of resources needs to be addressed. The provision of hospital escorts is another example. Traditionally, we send prisoners to hospital with two or sometimes three prison officers, whether they are escorting category D, A or B prisoners and irrespective of whether those prisoners have previously been on home leave. We have had instances where —

Mr Elliott: How does that fit in with the training of new recruits? Does that mean that there is less flexibility in where they can serve, or will they all undergo the same training but tailored to different requirements?

Ms S McAllister: As Ronnie said, the eight-week training is the induction into the service and incorporates an initial introduction to control and restraint skills, security, diversity, equality and all that is applicable. The more detailed learning happens when they go into the prisons. New custody officers coming here to Magilligan will learn different ways of supervising prisoners from those going to Hydebank or Maghaberry.

Mr A Maginness: Today's visit has been very productive. I am impressed by the prison here, although the buildings housing the accommodation leave a lot to be desired, which is, in part, what the estate strategy is about. What we saw today was impressive, and I hope that it continues. However, when we were in Halward House — good accommodation on which you are to be complimented — one question that arose related to what the inmates of that section do during the day. They did not seem to have sufficiently worthwhile activity. Despite the good conditions and prisoners whom I thought were conforming and co-operative, I felt that that was a deficit.

Ms S McAllister: We know that we do not have enough activity in Magilligan, and that will be addressed through the estate strategy. Max, will you say something briefly about the activities area that is planned as part of the new Magilligan?

Mr Murray: One of the prerequisites for a new plan for Magilligan — we have already produced exemplar designs to demonstrate to the Minister how we can develop the prison — is that there are sufficient activity places for all prisoners. We are building a prison here with certified normal accommodation for 600 but capable of managing 800 prisoners, and there will be sufficient activity places for all 800. A new central block will include sufficient educational and work opportunity spaces, and there will be flexibility in the building so that it can be reconfigured for production workshops or whatever else we source at the time.

Mr A Maginness: Do you accept that there is a bit of a deficit there?

Mr Murray: Alan Longwell would acknowledge that 200 prisoners here do not have jobs, and all of us at this table agree that this is not acceptable.

Mr A Maginness: I have a question that arises from the report on the prison review. A chart on page 27 details the percentage of prison population on remand/pre-trial detainees. What is very striking is that 28.4% of prisoners in Northern Ireland are on remand compared with 13.6% in England and Wales, 16.5% in Scotland and 14.2% in the Republic. That seems exceptionally high: it is not just a marginal difference; there is a significant differential between here and other jurisdictions. Is there an explanation for that?

Ms S McAllister: I am not an expert by any means, and others may have different views, but my understanding is that some of that is because of different approaches to bail. There is less bail accommodation available, so even when people do not need to be remanded in custody, they are because there is no alternative accommodation available for them. Potentially, another factor is a more risk-averse approach to making decisions about remands in custody, but that is not a matter for us. Everybody who comes through our gates is received into custody. Whether someone comes into custody unconvicted or post-sentence is not a matter for us. However, we are working with the wider DOJ on producing more alternatives to immediate remands.

Mr A Maginness: What you are saying is that, to some extent, the courts are not admitting people to bail. Obviously, that is a matter for the courts to deal with.

Mr Mark Adam (Northern Ireland Prison Service): It is fair to say that the courts are aware of what needs to be done. Some of the work for the Faster, Fairer Justice Bill looks at alternative disposals and how to speed up the time on remand. We are doing some work to try to get a better understanding on each side, the impact that it will have on decisions made in court and what it will mean for us.

Mr A Maginness: Sue, you said that there may be more bail hostels available in England and Wales, and possibly in Scotland.

Ms S McAllister: Bail hostels are run differently. They are run by different parts of the criminal justice system or outside organisations. We do not have those here, so we have less accommodation available.

Mr Easton: Thanks for your presentation. I want to ask about your evaluation of the TOM. I was in the section for prisoners aged over 50, a category that Jim would fit into. *[Laughter.]* I spoke to a couple of the prison officers there, and, if I picked this up correctly, women prison officers are working in what is predominantly a section for sex offenders. It concerned me that a female prison officer could be working alone in that part of the block during the night. I am not saying that the section is a free-for-all, but all prisoners have a key to their room. I find that a bit bizarre, but maybe that is just me. How can you guarantee that that is the right thing to do? I feel very uncomfortable about a female prison officer being alone on a sex offenders' wing during the night. There is no way in this world that a squad of prison officers could get to her in time should something happen. That is my opinion.

Ms S McAllister: It is worth pointing out a couple of things. The term "sex offender" encompasses a vast continuum of offences. Someone convicted of any offence and deemed to represent a risk to prison officers in the way that you described would not be in Magilligan, and they would not be in that H-block in that environment. We risk assess everybody who goes into the type of environment in which they have their own key and access at night.

Obviously, we can never, ever give a guarantee because our job is inherently unpredictable. We recognise that and take appropriate measures to manage risk. We can never eliminate risk, but we can manage it properly and as safely as possible.

From time to time, we will have prisoners who should not be living in proximity to female prison officers. However, we do our female colleagues no favours if we are overprotective and overly restrictive about what they can and cannot do, and I say that as a woman who has worked as a prison officer. We know that prisoners are often better behaved when we normalise the environment by having a mixture of male and female officers, and that is only to the good. If that individual female officer has concerns about her safety in certain circumstances, she should speak to her line manager, who will talk that through with her.

Mr Easton: Do not get me wrong — she was not complaining. I was just concerned when I heard that.

My next question is on the estate strategy and the newbuild. Will ordinary rank-and-file prison officers get a chance to input into that? For all the experts, architects, security system people, and so on, those working on the ground know what is best.

Ms S McAllister: Yes, and those living there: prisoners as well as prison officers. Max, do you want to say something about consultation?

Mr Murray: In the design of the new blocks opened at Maghaberry — Quoile House and Braid House — and in the design of the 360-cell block being planned, prison staff have been heavily engaged, right down to, for example, the design of cell doors. Elements of the cell door that we use are very much influenced by prison staff: the viewing hatch, the pill hatch and the bottom viewing hatch, which is used if somebody is lying behind the door. Most definitely, prison staff will be engaged.

Mr Wells: What mechanism is used to do that?

Mr Murray: Usually, focus groups are used. When I was preparing the outline business case development for Magilligan, before it was suspended two years ago, we met staff in focus groups and went through exemplar designs. So the governor arranged for a number of people to meet at the likes of the programme development unit. There were 15 or 20 staff sitting around here, and we ran through plans, discussed options and took on board their views.

Ms S McAllister: Within the next few weeks, Max will move to his full-time role as director of estates and will have much more opportunity to do that sort of consultation in a more systematic way. We have time to do that as we prepare the business cases.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much for the presentation. I thank the staff for facilitating today's visit.

I was in Maghaberry recently, and it was very obvious that there were new staff there, but it was less obvious here today. We were not as aware of staff today because of the way that the prison is managed. How will you appraise the impact of the new staff?

Ms S McAllister: That is quite a tricky question because there are all sorts of ways in which we can measure their success. Ultimately, our success should be measured by how much we impact on reducing reoffending, but there are some more immediate measures that we can use. From looking at our performance, it is very difficult to say that something has improved simply as a result of having new staff. We would expect things to get better with new staff. It is part of our drive to change the culture by having a mix of staff who are more representative and come with different skills.

Mr Murray: I have two points to make on that. First, it is important that we start to get a grip on outcomes for prisoners and on what prisoners are doing. You could argue that, as was pointed out in relation to the number of unemployed prisoners, they are not attending the number of constructive activities that they should be. I would like to think that that will improve as the new staff become energised and enthusiastic and fully embrace the new engagement agenda of working with prisoners to address their offending behaviour and prepare them for release.

Secondly, we are doing a survey on prisoners' quality of life, significant elements of which are safety and the respect with which they are treated when in custody. So we hope that we will have a baseline from which we can judge the situation, and we will be able to look for an improvement in prisoners' assessment of the way in which we do our job.

Mr Armour: From an HR perspective, all the feedback from governors and experienced staff on the new recruits is very positive. The director general and I spent considerable time in prisons, meeting experienced staff and the new folk. Although we do not have any firm evidence of their impact, which is what you asked for, it is pretty obvious, even at this early stage, that both sets of staff are working well together and that the new staff are making a difference.

Mr McCartney: Do you keep an eye on that?

Mr Armour: Yes, absolutely.

Mr McCartney: I have been here on a number of occasions. It is very obvious that, despite the limitations of the buildings, there is a fair amount of very positive work going on. We heard today that 200 people are not employed. What can be done to ensure that that does not continue in the short term? For as long as that continues, it will undermine positivity.

Ms S McAllister: It is worth saying that when we talk about prisoners who are not employed, we are referring to those not engaged in full-time activities off the wing, such as education and workshops. It does not mean that we do nothing with those prisoners. We try to organise a mix of part-time and full-time employment and attendance at education, so it is not the same 200 all the time. Then, we look to engage prisoners in activities on the wing —

Mr Murray: In gymnasiums.

Ms S McAllister: Yes, or time is used by prison officers on the wing to engage with prisoners. Of course, prisoners also have visits. As we get better at timetabling all those things, we can optimise access to the activities that we have and reduce the number who are idle. There should not be prisoners who are lying in their beds during the day. We should be a bit more sophisticated than that.

Mr McCartney: Are we satisfied that Foyleview is at its maximum, or could it be increased?

Ms S McAllister: No, it is not full. The governor and I have had conversations as recently as last week about the need to optimise access to Foyleview because it is the nearest that we have to an open prison. That is our opportunity to put people in conditions of lesser security and actually test them. That is work in progress.

Mr McCartney: Will there be resources to make it larger — to increase it if required?

Ms S McAllister: We are not using all the spaces that we have at the moment.

Mr McCartney: Max covered the newbuild a bit. Magilligan is like a potted history of every type of prison design. No doubt, at the particular time, they were the perfect model, and then, within a number of years, we found out that they were not. How do we, in future, ensure that whatever new design comes here is the design that is best suited to continue what is best here?

Ms S McAllister: Mark, do you want to say anything about looking at other models?

Mr Adam: Obviously, the design of prisons has evolved hugely. The advantage that we have had over the past five or so years is that there have been a number of fairly new builds in a relatively short time. We are pretty much leading the way in some of our designs, such as the new units that you may well have seen at Maghaberry and taking that thinking and refining and improving it for what we build here. There is a bit of luck in being able to build a number of things in a fairly close period of time. An awful lot of designs have been 15 to 20 years apart. That drives people to the desire to just do it differently because it is 20 years later and they would like to build a very different looking building, such as when the square houses came along, what is known as the old Bullingdon model, and all the things like that. They wanted to be radical rather than just finding something that works and refining it. We have had the luck of doing that.

The people who have been working on the estate — Max will add to this — have seen an awful lot around. The designers that we have been working with are responsible for recently designing the new women's facility outside Edinburgh, which is meant to be fairly cutting edge, and bringing those ideas to here. We are probably right at the top of the curve in our thinking and the designs that we are putting forward. There is a queue of people wanting to come to see what we are doing rather than vice versa. We are in a very positive position.

Ms S McAllister: We saw some very good new designs in Dublin recently. We have been looking at theoretical models and other buildings so that we can learn from other people's experiences as well.

Mr Murray: We have learnt our lesson from Maghaberry, where we took the latest design from Frankland prison in England. That is not the way to do the business; it is about going out there and seeing what is leading edge, as Mark rightly said.

Mr McCartney: That is the broad point. Sometimes, what people think of as a perfect model might suit one interest but does not suit the wider interest in the longer term.

I notice that the councillors' forum has recently been extended to Derry City Council. That is welcome. Do you have some sort of sense of what you hope the councillors' forum will achieve? The thing at Magilligan can be in an isolated location.

Ms S McAllister: We were always clear that we had to get this bit right if we were to justify keeping Magilligan on this site. I have already attended some of the meetings that Jonny McNaught and others have held with the councils. We have said to them that there are two bits to it. Probably the most important bit is that they work with us to look at how they can offer employment to people on release from this prison if they are being released into this part of Northern Ireland. They are up for that. They are talking about how they can create job opportunities for ex-offenders. As I have said, we need to factor that into our learning and skills agenda so that we are training people in the right things. They have also been talking about how they can offer opportunities to people while they are still in custody. So people, particularly those in Foyleview, will go out and work in the community.

We have said that it ought to be more than picking up litter. There is nothing wrong with picking up litter; litter needs to be picked up. However, if we are genuine about giving people skills, we need to get them to do more skilled and more meaningful work. There are lots of exciting things happening, including historical renovation-type projects, community-based projects and social enterprise-type projects, that prisoners could legitimately get involved in. They are very keen to engage with us. They know that that was part of the argument for keeping this prison open.

Mr McCartney: Both the Chair and Stewart Dickson mentioned education, which is important. This morning, staff presented a number of scenarios in which accreditation is perhaps not the outcome of very valuable educational work; for example, the mentor scheme in ability to read. We were hit with stark figures here and when we visited Hydebank. One in two people here is not at the basic level of literacy and numeracy, and the figure is higher in Hydebank. However, that is not projected as an outcome. No one gives us the statistics that X number of prisoners have gone from the lowest level of literacy to the next level and the next level over the past six months or the past year. We need to project that as well.

Ms S McAllister: You are right. We need to do a number of things. We have to be a lot better at targeting early those prisoners who need that sort of intervention and help them with basic literacy and numeracy. Key to a significant amount of what we do is accreditation. It is very good if we can give people certificates and recognise achievement through accreditation because people then get a portfolio that they can take out with them. However, it is not the only answer. There are other things that we do to skill up prisoners that do not lend themselves to accreditation, so we should not get too focused on it.

Interestingly, we were talking to James Timpson. Timpson's is opening a number of shops in Northern Ireland and is very keen to employ ex-offenders. It has asked us to identify some offenders in prison who are about to be released and whom it could interview and then give jobs to. These are proper jobs where you would not be able to differentiate between an ex-prisoner and an employee standing next to them. When we talked to James Timpson about accreditation, he said, "I am really not interested in that. I want people to learn how to mend shoes, put zips in, cut keys and make dog tags." He is not interested in that, but he will give people a proper job for a decent wage. In the past, I have certainly been guilty of thinking that accreditation is the only answer and that certification of courses that people have done is the only way of their having any validity. It is not, but it is key to that.

Mr McCartney: You touched briefly on the X-ray machine. Is there any timeline on that?

Ms S McAllister: No. As this has never been done before, we genuinely do not know whether it will be three weeks, three months or longer.

Mr McCartney: It is away from the Department.

Ms S McAllister: Yes, it is with the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

The Chairperson: Sue, I hope that you do not feel that you are literally in the firing line at the moment. *[Laughter.]* We can hear the firing range, but our members are equally on target at times.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, Chair. Thank you for the presentation. Over the years, criticism has often been levelled against the Prison Service that its provision of health services to prisoners leaves a lot to be desired. How robust would you say the procedures that you now have are in not only physical health but mental health and suicide risk? How confident are you that they are as robust as they need to be?

Ms S McAllister: Again, it is a work in progress. We know that having healthcare delivered by the health trusts is a better model. It gives us more flexibility and gives patients who also happen to be prisoners more access to a range of services. It is not perfect yet. Max is the lead on healthcare, and he may want to say something about this. We have done a lot of work to address how we manage drugs and prescription medication in the prison, and we are looking at how we provide mental health support. I have gone on record as saying that we deal with people who fell through the net before they became prisoners, and we get them at the very end of that road. There is a lot more that we could do, and we need to be clear that the healthcare service that we deliver for patients in prisons is every bit as good as people get in the community. That includes some of the things we are talking about now: improving on smoking cessation, helping people with sleep clinics and helping people with addictions. In short, I think it has got much better over the past 12 months, but we still have a lot to do.

Mr Murray: The South Eastern Trust is in the lead in delivering healthcare, and I have every confidence in its willingness to try to improve healthcare provision in the service. It is not helped by the fact that it ran a recruitment campaign last year and recruited 11 nurses, and nine have since resigned. In the exit interviews, a lot of them said that the environment was not for them. In fairness to the trust, it is now looking at the implications of that and seeing what more it can do to attract people and, more particularly, to hold people. The trust has a range of alternatives in place with agencies to try to top up the staff, but you will appreciate that getting staff in on a part-time basis is not as good as having full-time staff.

On the drugs, they have asked for, and we have provided, an in-house pharmacy facility at Maghaberry, and that is proving, hopefully, to have beneficial effects so that the South Eastern Trust has full control over the pharmacy. We have moved to a model of supervised swallow for the prisoners on the four highest tradable drugs — attractive drugs — in the prisoner population to try to improve or manage the abuse of prescription medication in prison. That has had major beneficial impacts, particularly at Magilligan and Hydebank, and we are enrolling it presently at Maghaberry. Those prisoners who need the drugs are getting the drugs and not being bullied out of them, and those prisoners who did not need the drugs but were taking the drugs to trade no longer take the drugs. Those are the sorts of improvements that we are trying to make. The South Eastern Trust has just introduced a new GP contract, and that is now bedding in. So, we have new GPs working across the system. It will shortly, hopefully, go out for another recruitment campaign, and if that can fill the existing vacancies in mental health, it will lead to additional improvements.

Ms McCorley: How often do you review your suicide prevention strategy?

Mr Murray: Constantly. That is in my area of safer custody. The team that I have working at it is extremely conscientious, very hard-working and constantly looking to see how we improve our systems and processes. In the last death in custody report, the Prisoner Ombudsman made the point that she is satisfied with the existing processes and procedures but that those can be no substitute for common sense and compassion. If I could find a way of packaging common sense and compassion, I would distribute it to everyone. It is part of the wider change programmes to get the culture, attitudes and behaviours right alongside the processes and systems. We constantly keep it under review and respond to reports from CJINI or the ombudsman and look to see how we can improve.

This week alone, the Prisoner Ombudsman was in Hydebank Wood and did a training session with senior staff and senior officers to look at scenarios and difficult cases where prisoners have died in custody and to go through the learning points and lessons from those cases. We are trying to constantly push people to think differently about how they manage vulnerability, but the big challenge for us is the level of vulnerability. Sue made the point in an interview last week that, in the day preceding the interview, there were three occasions when staff successfully intervened and worked with prisoners to address issues, but those tend to get lost in the difficulties when somebody tragically takes their own life or nearly commits suicide.

Ms McCorley: How would you assess the drug problem in this prison?

Ms S McAllister: It is very difficult to say that we have not got a drug problem. We know that there are pockets in all our prisons where we have people with serious addictions. That said, issues around addiction would be a factor in risk-assessing people to come here to Magilligan. Therefore, those people with most acute addiction problems should not be here in the first place. However, in my conversations with the governor, I acknowledge that there is a small number of prisoners who use drugs and who deal drugs. However, when we talk about acute drug issues, we tend to be talking about Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood, rather than Magilligan.

Ms McCorley: Do you test prisoners for drug use?

Ms S McAllister: Yes.

Ms McCorley: Would it be only prisoners who you would — I know that you never know for sure who is and who is not using drugs. That issue was raised with us on a visit to Maghaberry by a group of prisoners who did not use drugs and who were being tested, and they were very aggrieved about that.

Ms S McAllister: We have a strategy for drug testing that has a number of strands. One is that we should randomly test 10% of our population or 5% if the population is above a certain size. In Maghaberry, for example, we should randomly test 5% of our population every month. The value of that is debatable once you have done it for a couple of years. However, it is worth doing it for a month occasionally to show you whether you have got more or less of a problem. My view is that, with finite resources, we should be testing more on the basis of risk or on the basis of compliance. For example, access to enhanced status and the privileges that that brings might include a commitment to have a voluntary drug test on a regular basis. For example, we know that our current requirement, which is that everybody who goes out of the prison on home leave is subject to drug testing, sometimes raises issues. However, at the moment, that is our policy and it would be wrong to deviate from that policy until we have reviewed it and decided that it is not the right policy and that we should change it. We may, at some point in the future, decide that we want to have a different approach to drug testing. However, if we are serious about drugs, which we are, and if we have a problem with drugs in our prisons, which we do, we have to have a fairly robust approach to it, even where that might irritate certain small groups of prisoners who would contend that they should be excused from drug testing.

Ms McCorley: If someone tested positive, would they be denied their home leave?

Ms S McAllister: Yes.

Ms McCorley: Is that why you do it?

Ms S McAllister: Yes. Well, we do it as a deterrent as well as to identify prisoners. Certainly, we also do it as an incentive to prisoners not to use drugs because they know that they will be tested and they know that home leave is dependent on a negative drug test.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Nobody else has indicated. Sue, I think that you are staying for our next session. I thank the rest of your team for coming along today.