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Acting Chief Executive IHRC

Irish Prison Service Human Rights Certificates Training Awards

Irish Prison Service, Portlaoise

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Good afternoon and thank you for having me as your guest today at this important event. The Irish Human Rights Commission is very pleased to be working in partnership with the Irish Prison Service College in developing a bespoke Human Rights Education and Training Programme for Irish Prison Service staff. As mentioned by the Director General, a Human Rights 'Train the Trainer' Programme has been developed by the Commission's Human Rights Education and Training Project and I would like to speak briefly about the course, its content and the overarching human rights framework wherein the programme is set.

A pilot five-day course was delivered to Training Liaison Officers, with the main aim of preparing them to deliver a two-hour human rights awareness training course to Prison Officers. The first three days were delivered in February 2013, with the final two days delivered in April 2013. Training Liaison Officers have subsequently begun delivering tailored training to staff in all Irish prisons in recent months.

The training programme incorporates the relevant human rights framework along with the practical application of human rights principles such as dignity, respect, equality, proportionality and transparency. The Training Liaison Officers received a thorough grounding in the basic human rights framework as it applies to their work; from the Irish Constitution to the main United Nations conventions and supporting standards relating to

prisons and the conduct of prison staff; and regionally from the European Convention on Human Rights and other European conventions and standards which relate to prisons.

Based upon this framework of international human rights law, many difficult and sometimes sensitive issues were explored via a human rights education methodology and through the use of participatory activities. These issues included: professional responsibility, good order and control, what constitutes torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment or inhumane treatment, non-discrimination and equality, dignity and respect, cultural and religious diversity, vulnerable groups (such as ethnic minorities, women and those with mental health difficulties), prisoner dynamics and relationships, and proportionality in decision-making.

Within the pack is a module designed to be delivered by Training Liaison Officers to Prison Officers over a two-hour period. The module may be expanded to three hours, at the Training Liaison Officer's discretion and with agreement from their Governor, by including one of the added options available in the pack. The pack contains detailed instructions to Training Liaison Officers on equipment, materials, participants, methodologies and course evaluation as well as the content of the international human rights standards that may be used in training.

At the end of Day 5 of this pilot course, some of the comments we received demonstrated a marked shift in thinking. Participants were asked to reflect on what they had learned over the five days and draft a short code of personal behaviour which they thought should inform their daily work. Their answers included remarks such as 'encourage prisoners to reach their full potential'... 'be mindful of the challenges that may face prisoners in a prison environment'...and that people '...should always be treated with dignity, respect and offered the same treatment that we expect to receive ourselves.' The launch today illustrates the end of this pilot period and I understand that the evaluation from prison staff and feedback from Training Liaison Officers will be considered to finesse the programme and continue to roll it out over the next number of years.

It is important to note, at this point, that this Train the Trainer Programme has been built on the strength of careful and close collaboration between the Irish Human Rights Commission and the Irish Prison Service over several years. Through a process involving many hours of research, meetings with key stakeholders in the Service, presentations to influential groups (including Governors), prison visits, as well as a considerable amount of other communication, the necessary trust and relationships have been built upon over time.

Dealing with human rights in the context of the Irish Prison Service has been a unique challenge for the Commission's Human Rights Education and Training Project. We have been more than impressed with the genuine level of engagement by the Irish Prison Service in the project. In times of staff shortages and cutbacks it is more important than ever therefore that, when the Prison Officer's uniform goes on, 'respect, protect and fulfil' engages.

The United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education, which informs the Human Rights Education and Training Project, speaks of empowering learners 'to identify and address their human rights needs and to seek solutions consistent with human rights standards.' One of the thematic areas of the World Programme covers supporting and identifying what are known as 'human rights champions.' Richie Roche can certainly be considered to be a 'human rights champion' for both his extensive work in developing the initial training programme and his role in embedding and supporting human rights within the Prison College.

We were heartened to see mention of the Human Rights training programme in the Inspector of Prison's recent interim report on the Dóchas Centre, where he remarked on 'the particular benefit to those involved in the training of officers charged with dealing with women prisoners.' The Inspector of Prisons has of course noted his concerns on the effects of homelessness on women leaving the prison system and on the importance of engagement with key statutory agencies in order to put in place a targeted response in relation to this and other issues. We regularly come across the need for interagency working throughout our human rights training, right across the civil and public sector. In particular, we are coming across many difficult issues faced by Local Authorities in the provision of social housing and other services. Through our provision of similar human rights training to

Local Authorities, we have been attempting to enable housing and other essential services staff to use the human rights framework in their approaches and we hope to soon engage parent departments in this work.

As some of you may know, Ireland is due to be examined on our obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, at a hearing that will take place in Geneva mid next year. This is the fourth time that the Irish State will have been examined in relation to its human rights obligations under this convention and judging by the List of Issues published by the Human Rights Committee last month a number of prison issues will likely arise such as in-cell sanitation, overcrowding, the numbers injured by inter-prisoner violence, how prisoner complaints are dealt with and the separation of remand and sentenced prisoners.

We see it as of key importance that the international human rights framework is embedded in all reform processes of the Irish Prison Service and have been heartened to see the IPS strategic plan reflect this framework and human rights language under the leadership of the Director General. We look forward to the day in which it will be easier to respond to UN committees on these questions because the design and implementation of our prison policies will have brought improvements in part we can hope because they are on a deeper understanding of the respect and dignity owing to the individual and how this continuum of respect and dignity extends beyond the time spent in prison so that recidivism is reduced and re-integration into society becomes the norm.

We are also delighted to have the global expertise of Professor Coyle to also draw on. Professor Coyle has led on the extensive UN Human Rights Training Manual (the International Centre for Prison Studies (ICPS) publication, *A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management: Handbook for Prison Staff*) which was a great help to us in developing this programme of work.

In closing, I would like to say that human rights training is part of a body of lifelong learning. I am sure that none of us here today see our collaboration as a 'tick box' exercise and the depth of the programme development also indicates this. We know there is much work to

be done but we are not overawed by the challenge. This is why we are public servants, we need to and can face up to difficult challenges.

As an independent statutory body soon to be merged with our sister organisation the Equality Authority to form the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, we will of course continue to analyse and comment on human rights and equality policy and practice in the State including the situation in Irish prisons. At the same time we look forward to many more years of working together with the Irish Prison Service in supporting you in developing a culture of rights which in time will hopefully become so commonplace that its occasional absence will be remarked on. That is the goal I believe we all share.

I would like to end by congratulating the Training Liaison Officers on receiving their certificates here today for their personal commitment to human rights and to putting themselves forward as agents of change in the best traditions of the public service.

Thank you.

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