



NORTHERN
IRELAND
HUMAN
RIGHTS
COMMISSION

2 May 2008

Northern Ireland Prison Service
Prison Service Headquarters
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast BT4 3SU

Dear

Consultation on the Northern Ireland Prison Service Human Resource (HR) Diversity Strategy: *Make A Difference*

The Commission welcomes the development of a HR diversity strategy for the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) aimed at valuing and encouraging diversity amongst all staff. We acknowledge that the Prison Service is committed to facing new challenges in respect of encouraging a more diverse range of skills amongst its staff, as it strives to move away from an emphasis on security to developing a greater focus on rehabilitation and resettlement of those in their care.

The NI Prison Service itself has acknowledged that promoting change in the internal culture of the organisation has met with some difficulties. We note other challenges, in particular, the low turnover rate amongst prison officer grades and that NIPS has not recruited any prison officer grades since 1997, thus severely limiting opportunities to diversify. Further, that within this group, staff are predominantly male (83%) and predominantly from a Protestant background (80%). We also note that more progress in terms of diversity is being made in relation to recruitment of the new support grades.

However, this combination of factors places an even greater emphasis on the importance of the provision of comprehensive, high quality human rights focused training to all staff. The Commission

has highlighted issues relating to training in its research reports. For example, its recent report, *The Prison Within: The imprisonment of women at Hydebank Wood 2004-06*, made a series of recommendations including four that specifically relate to perceived training needs. We list these below for your information:

Recommendation 5: *All management, prison officers and professional service providers within the unit should receive comprehensive gender-specific training, supported by a training 'tool-kit', for working with women in custody. Key curriculum issues include mental health; suicide prevention and awareness; self-harm; physical and sexual abuse; young prisoners and human rights.*

Recommendation 35: *Prison staff working with 'foreign national' prisoners should receive appropriate training.*

Recommendation 54: *Prison service strategy and policies should demonstrate compliance with all relevant and applicable human rights standards, including those for women and children, establishing implementation baselines for the operational practices of their regimes.*

Recommendation 55: *All managers, staff and professionals should receive training in those standards including the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).*

Whilst some of these recommendations apply specifically to staff working with women and children, others relating to 'foreign national' prisoners and gender-specific training on issues relating to mental health, suicide prevention and awareness, self-harm, physical and sexual abuse and human rights, apply to all staff working across the prison estate.

It is also noted that the Staff Attitude Survey carried out in 2006 (which received a low response rate) reveals worrying trends in relation to the NIPS response to incidences of bullying, harassment and lack of respect amongst staff. This is particularly evident amongst the Prison Grades rather than the Administrative grades. It is imperative that these serious issues are tackled, along with the problem of low morale.

The process of moving prison officers away from a perception of their role as primarily enforcing security towards a more positive engagement with prisoners should form an integral part of all relevant training provision. Whilst the Commission has strived to

protect the human rights of those in detention by highlighting its concerns, it has also acknowledged the good practice from caring and motivated prison officers that exists within NIPS. In stressing the need for a comprehensive training strategy, the Commission wishes to highlight the importance of promoting a culture of human rights within the Prison Service as a means of improving staff morale and improving relationships with those vulnerable people in their care.

If we can be of further assistance to you, or if you have any further queries please get in touch.

Yours sincerely

Professor Monica McWilliams
Chief Commissioner