

Prison Report of Angie Zelter, 4th August 2017.

Introduction

I was on remand from 12th to 14th July 2017 in Cornton Vale Prison and for 14 days from 14th to 26th July 2017 in Edinburgh Prison. I am writing this report in the hopes that it may be of use to the prison and prison inspectorate.

I have been in many prisons in the UK and abroad for nonviolent direct action against nuclear weapons, against logging in old growth forests and in support of peaceful protests against military occupation. I am therefore naturally interested in prison conditions and often write up notes on my experiences from 'inside'.

I was held on remand with my 2 colleagues in Cornton Vale for 5 months in 1999 and then acquitted of all charges in a landmark decision. I wrote a full report then which can be compared with this present report and can be accessed from the following link:-

<http://tridentploughshares.org/cornton-vale-prison-report-by-angie-zelter/>

Cornton Vale

Although I only spent 2 days at Cornton Vale I was amazed and extremely pleased to witness the transformation in the prison. The most important was having a flushing toilet in the cell. But also the general level of cleanliness and care was so much better than before and access to the gym and to outside exercise did not have to be argued and protested for but were granted easily. The staff were pleasant and helpful.

I especially liked the opportunity given to the prisoners to have 'breakfast gym' as this was an added incentive to go to the gym as you had breakfast cereals, yoghurt and fresh fruit after doing gym. Quite a few prisoners took part. I also noticed that in the exercise yard there were guinea pigs that the prisoners could take care of and this seemed like a good idea although as a new prisoner I was not told I could handle them or help feed them.

The only problem I had was not being given immediate access to my high blood pressure pills every day even though I had brought them with me. They were in the original pharmacy packaging and I am known not to be a drug or alcohol abuser. I had not been allowed them whilst in police custody the previous day and night and I had people on the outside trying to ensure I was given them to no avail. Luckily I was seen by a nurse on my arrival and when she discovered that my blood pressure was dangerously high she sensibly gave me one daily dose of my ramipril, amlodipine and small aspirin that came with my possessions. The next day I was told I would be spending only one more night in Cornton Vale and would then be sent to Edinburgh Prison. That day I saw a Doctor and was not allowed access to my own tablets as a new prison prescription would have to be made out and my own Doctor contacted first but I did discuss with her the importance of contacting Edinburgh prison to inform them that I would need my high blood pressure tablets as soon as I arrived. This was because I foresaw there would be similar problems and delays there. Unfortunately, this did not work and it took a further 4 days before I was able to see a doctor and get new medicine prescribed. This was because they would not use the medicine I had brought in but insisted that a new prescription would be needed and that I had to see a further Doctor for that and get it ordered from a pharmacy! It did not help that I was transferred on a Friday and nothing was done at all until the following week! The prison,

not just the NHS, have a duty of care and if someone is transferred with the correct medication in their possession to treat a serious and potentially life-threatening condition they should be able to take it as soon as necessary. Delay in accessing medications is obviously a particular issue at weekends and should be sorted as soon as possible.

Edinburgh Prison.

On arrival at Edinburgh Prison I was pleased to be given a clean cell with toilet and shower facilities and a kettle and TV. The Call bell was not clearly labelled for use only in emergencies and therefore I used this once to ask if the lights could be turned out. Most of the women said this was a common mistake and I would suggest that it be re-named to save hassle on all sides!

As it was a week-end I had no proper induction for quite some days. In these cases it would make more sense to at least give out the very well produced briefing pack that was eventually given to me during the full induction. This contains basic information about the procedures in the prison and is very good. Time goes very slowly, especially the first week in a prison, and it is less stressful if the routines are explained at the beginning.

I found it really good that exercise in the open air, rain or shine, was freely offered. It was a good idea to make this a time when prisoners are otherwise shut in their cells as this encourages the inmates to go out into the fresh air if only to sit and chat with others. I noticed many more women took up this opportunity than had been the case 17 years ago when exercise was not regular and often overlapped with work, education or visits and had to be missed.

I had brought a book in with me and this was not allowed in the police cells or prisons and I was told this was because books were often 'dipped' – something I was not aware of. I was therefore at a loss for reading matter. Luckily at the reception desk there were some books and puzzles that kept me occupied until I was able to get to the small library which was really appreciated. It might be good to have a greater selection actually on each unit.

One problem that I do feel needs to be addressed is access to a word processor for those of us who are representing themselves in court. In Cornton Vale 17 years ago I was eventually given permission to have a computer in my cell and to write out my defence notes, was able to get these printed out from time to time and to receive copious case and witness statements that enabled me to prepare a defence that eventually got me acquitted. I know that not many prisoners undertake their own defence but it is a right that we have in the UK and I was beginning to explore this option in Edinburgh Prison when my appeal on the bail conditions was turned down, and I thought I might be imprisoned until my case was heard. The first answer I received was that this would be impossible, then, when I appealed to the manager I was told that maybe I would be allowed into the 'education' classes to use a word processor but it was unclear what would have happened. I would like to put in a plea that this issue is sorted out as soon as possible and that self-representing prisoners are given access in their cells to a word processor. This could be brought in from the outside and checked thoroughly or provided by the prison. A few hours a day in 'education' without having the notes printed out is not enough to prepare a complex case. Quiet time in a cell alone with the word processor and notes are essential.

This brings me onto another linked suggestion, concerning boredom, turning lives around and self-education. There are many computer based learning programmes that could be brought into the individual cells. If computers programmed with courses (basic literacy and numeracy, foreign languages, health and safety, child rearing) could be brought into the cells of those prisoners interested, responsible enough and capable of benefiting from computer aided learning then much more progress in their education could be made. For instance, I was told that duolingo language training was offered in the education classes. This could be done just as easily in the cells and would use less of the teachers' time and free them up for the face to face teaching that is necessary for others.

It was very useful and appreciated that prisoners on remand are allowed a free letter that can be posted out every day. Access to the canteen was also appreciated especially as fresh fruit could be ordered. However, I was unhappy with not being allowed to know who had sent in money for me. I came in with no money and friends sent in some for me. I was unable to thank everyone as I was not told who sent in what. As a matter of policy each prisoner should be notified of any money being sent in and told from whom it comes.

The food was much better than 17 years ago in that there was an option to choose fresh fruit instead of stodgy, sweet puddings on most days. However, it was incredibly salty and although I asked for a salt free option I was told I should therefore choose the salad option. The salad option was sometimes not really salad but perhaps merely cold pasta in a mayonnaise sauce! I think that salt free meals could be provided along with salt for those who want it to add themselves. This would be healthier for everyone.

I also wonder if it is not possible for all the prisons in Scotland to grow as much of their food as possible and for the prisoners to be involved in this. Working the soil and producing food would be therapeutic and useful training for the outside world on release and would cut down on food costs after the initial start-up costs.

I received a shock when I went to an intermediate diet at Dumbarton and my property, telephone money and canteen money were all left behind. I did not know if I would be released or not but in fact the prosecution took off the special bail conditions which meant that I was released from the court. I then discovered that I was without a raincoat, or money, and was just dumped outside with no way of getting to the prison to get my possessions or money. Luckily I had friends in court and they had a car and were able to take me back to the prison to get my property and let me sleep over and eventually get to a railway station and get home to Wales. But what do other prisoners do? Whenever going to court the prison should ensure that all property is taken and that the prisoner has the resources to get home. No-one should be left on the streets with no support or resources to get home safely especially the many women prisoners who are especially vulnerable.

Conclusion

I want to thank the many prison staff who behaved in a caring and professional manner and to say that generally the conditions for prisoners was good. There were only 3 serious matters that need to be improved immediately and these are:-

1. Access to medication for serious medical problems like high blood pressure and the need to accept the medication the prisoner might have on them until alternative prison supplies are provided rather than leaving the medical condition untreated.

2. Proper safe care to ensure that prisoners are not left stranded after release either from prison or court. Property and travel money should be with the prisoner at all times when out of the prison in case of sudden release OR transport back to the prison provided.
3. Facilities for prisoners who are representing themselves to have access to word processors and printing out facilities.

There are also a few more issues that could be dealt with that would make prison more productive, fairer or healthier:-

1. A salt free diet offered.
2. Growing food as part of the work/volunteer programme – at least fruit and nut trees but also salads and herbs.
3. An accounting to the prisoner of what money comes in from whom.
4. In-cell learning facilities, preferably computer aided as this can be a very efficient way to learn.
5. CALL bell to be re-labelled in the cells as USE ONLY FOR EMERGENCIES

Sent to:-

HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland, Saughton House, Broomhouse Drive, Edinburgh, EH11 3XD. Scotland.

Independent Prison Monitoring Advisory Group, HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland Y1 Spur, Saughton House, Broomhouse Drive, Edinburgh EH11 3XD

HM Prison Cornton Vale, Cornton Road, Stirling FK9 5NU, Scotland.

HMP Prison Edinburgh, 33 Stenhouse Rd, Edinburgh EH11 3LN, Scotland.