A Collaborative Approach to Working with Vulnerable Prisoners: The Establishment and Operation of the High Support Unit at Mountjoy Prison

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Summary: The management of vulnerable prisoners, especially those with mental health difficulties, within the Irish prison system has been the subject of concern and criticism over a number of years. There has been particular concern about the situation in Mountjoy Prison as it has consistently suffered from issues of high prisoner numbers, high prisoner turnover and poor infrastructure. In 2011 the establishment of a High Support Unit within Mountjoy Prison was recognised by the World Health Organisation through awarding its work a prize in relation to healthcare initiatives within prisons. It was further recognised when it won the main award at the Irish Healthcare Awards for 2011 and also won a Taoiseach’s Award for Public Service innovation in 2012. This paper traces the background to the establishment of the High Support Unit, highlights the value of a multi-agency and multidisciplinary response in this area of criminal justice and considers the implications for the Probation Service in working with offenders facing mental health difficulties. The paper suggests a need to transfer the learning from Mountjoy Prison not just to other prisons in Ireland, but also to the integrated management of offenders in the community.

Keywords: Prison, forensic mental health, assessments, special observation cells, interdisciplinary working, high support, Probation Service, Mountjoy Prison.

Introduction

It has long been recognised that within prison and in the offender population in the community there are higher levels of mental illness and mental health difficulties than within the general population (Danesh,