

Strategies highlights key priorities for Irish Prison Service

Two new strategies for the Irish Prison Service mark a new chapter in the approach to imprisonment and substance abuse within Ireland's prison system, following an extensive consultation process to identify the strategic priorities that will shape its operations over the next five years.

Officially launching the Irish Prison Service 'Statement of Strategy 2023-2027' and the 'Drugs Strategy 2023-2026' at Mountjoy Prison last November, Minister of State at the Department of Justice, James Browne TD, said that they represent the culmination of extensive consultation and collaboration. The collaborative effort has involved senior management and staff from across the prison estate, and, for the first time, engagement with those in custody facilitated by the Irish Red Cross.

"This contribution has provided a roadmap for the Irish Prison Service to enhance prisoner rehabilitation, improve employee experiences, streamline processes, embrace digital platforms, and strengthen governance," he noted.

"Furthermore, the new drug strategy underscores our commitment to reducing the harm caused by substance abuse within our prisons. Prisons are their own communities within communities, and anything we can do to make this community safer, benefits us all."

Five key pillars to shape Irish Prison Service priorities over the next five years:

1. Prisoner Pathways
2. Employee Experience
3. New Business Processes
4. Digital Platforms
5. Governance Framework

Highlighting the commitment of the Irish Prison Service (IPS) to ensuring a safe and rehabilitative environment for both staff and prisoners, its Director General Caron McCaffrey said that both strategies "enable us to address the challenges we face while providing clear direction for the future. By working together, we can make a meaningful impact on prisoner pathways, employee wellbeing, operational efficiency, digitalisation and overall governance".

The IPS also unveiled its new Drugs Strategy 2023-2026, which outlines a series of goals aimed at reducing the harm caused by substance abuse within the prison environment. Building upon the commitments of the Irish Prison Service, 'Keeping Drugs Out of Prison Strategy', the new drugs strategy provides practical measures to be implemented by the Irish Prison Service in addressing the issue of illicit drug use over the next three years.

The publication of both the strategic plan and the drugs strategy is seen as a significant milestone in the ongoing efforts to transform the prison system in Ireland at a time when the system is undergoing significant challenges.



Minister of State at the Department of Justice, James Browne TD; Irish Prison Service Director General Caron McCaffrey, and Governor of Mountjoy Prison Ray Murtagh, pictured following the launch of both strategies in Mountjoy Prison on 29 November 2023.

IMPROVED PRISONER SERVICES

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) has welcomed many elements of two strategy documents published by the IPS. Saoirse Brady, IPRT's Executive Director, welcomed the particular focus in the strategy plan on examining alternative prisoner pathways for people who did not pose a risk of serious harm and reducing overcrowding in prisons.

She said that the strategy outlined plans for improved prisoner services to accommodate for the recent growth in the number of people in prison – including healthcare, rehabilitation, education, pathways to employment, and resettlement.

However, she warned that broader efforts across the criminal-justice system must focus on reducing the number of people sent to prison in the first place. Brady highlighted the IPRT's particular concern about the high rates of people on remand in prisons.

She also welcomed plans by the IPS to improve and expand its digital platforms – including the introduction of self-service kiosks and in-cell telephones and devices but added that these enhancements should not be a replacement for in-person visits.

IPRT acknowledged that Ireland's prison service was faced with "an extraordinarily difficult situation" regarding the impact that drugs had on the prison estate. "It is commendable to see the IPS recognise the need for meaningful and wide-ranging co-operation and partnership across all criminal-justice and support agencies to tackle the problem of drug use," the IPRT noted in a statement.