

DUNGAVEL REMOVAL CENTRE

Report of visit by representatives of the STUC to Immigration Removal Centre at Dungavel - Friday 28 May 2004

Representing the STUC –

Anne Douglas	Prospect	Chair STUC General Council
Veronica Rankin	EIS	Chair STUC Women's Committee
Mary Senior	STUC	Assistant Secretary
Agnes Tolmie	UNIFI	STUC General Council member

The STUC Delegation between them has a wealth of experience in the trade union movement, and specifically in education, equality and diversity matters. One representative also has considerable experience as a prison visitor.

The STUC welcomed the opportunity to visit the Dungavel Removal Centre as this reflects a closer working relationship on this specific issue with the Government Minister responsible for Immigration and Asylum in the UK.

The visit was arranged following a meeting between representatives of the STUC General Council and Des Browne MP, Minister for Immigration, in April 2004. At the beginning of March 2004 the STUC Women's Committee met with Scotland Office Minister Anne McGuire MP and had also asked to be allowed to see Dungavel.

The STUC has for considerable time taken an interest in asylum and immigration issues. It has developed policy through Congress motions, responded to Home Office consultations on asylum and immigration issues, arranged a very successful demonstration outside the Dungavel Detention Centre in September 2004, and petitioned the Scottish Parliament calling for the mainstream education of children in Dungavel. It has also sought a constructive dialogue with Home Office Ministers.

The Home Office facilitation of our visit recognises that the STUC has a stake in and a legitimate concern about asylum and immigration - a reserved matter - as it impacts upon Scotland, and

where elements of it impinge upon devolved matters such as education, health and social care.

It is worthwhile emphasising that education within Scotland has a separate history, development and structures. There is a consensus in Scotland about the benefits of a state funded, comprehensive system of education based on the right of every child, regardless of their background, to full access to the education system. Equality of access and outcome is central to this. This is reflected in education legislation. The education of children within Dungavel, therefore, is contrary to the beliefs and expectations of the people of Scotland. The education of children in this or any other detention centre is and will remain a matter of grave concern to the STUC.

Concerns raised by the STUC about the existence of the centre are on the basis of principle. They do not reflect a criticism of the employees who work within a system and an institution not of their making. The STUC was at pains to point this out at the time of the most vocal criticism of the government's policy of detaining people, and in particular, families with children, in the final stages of the asylum process prior to removal. This criticism was sharply focused by, but was not solely because of, the lengthy detention of the Ay family who remained in Dungavel longer than most.

The reception by members of staff of the centre was courteous and informative with the opportunity to ask questions about the centre. The STUC delegation was met by the Home Office Representative on site who monitors the contract with Premier Detention Services on behalf of the Home Secretary. The Deputy Manager of Dungavel and the original Manager, who now has responsibility for the new removal centre at Heathrow, also joined the STUC delegation for preliminary discussion.

Members of staff who met STUC representatives were open and honest about their experiences as employees and the effect on them of external criticism and high profile media coverage. They were anxious to advise us of their commitment to ensuring that the people who pass through the centre to their final destination, wherever that may be, are treated with respect and dignity.

Over an hour was spent with the Home Office representative, Deputy Manager and previous manager, exploring issues of concern. The range of questions posed included mental health, education, processes, special needs and general welfare issues regarding both staff and people detained. The STUC representatives are aware that some questions regarding areas of policy are not for employees of Premier Services to answer.

After the opening discussion, a guided tour of the centre provided a brief sight of the living conditions and services of those awaiting removal.

No areas were debarred except private quarters occupied at the time of the visit. It was pointed out that many asylum seekers sought comfort in their rooms for a greater part of the day.

The areas visited were as follows:-

Reception area	bright and clean with adequate facilities for discussion
Medical room	cramped but this is undergoing review
Education unit for children	well thought out and organised but lacking natural light
Crèche/nursery	well thought out comfortable space but lacking natural light
Kitchen, Milk room	clean and bright with adequate facilities. Concerns that the milk tins had photographs of the baby the milk was for with the word "detainee" written on the baby's picture.
Laundry	clean and bright with adequate facilities
Adult education unit,	well stocked but lacking natural light
Art and craft room	Impressive displays of residents work, and range of equipment.
Computer suite	Well equipped
Library	Limited books but staff aware of this.

Gymnasia	Well equipped
Dining area	Canteen-style, clean and bright. Concerns at plastic cutlery / plates. Menu indicated that a range of cultural and dietary requirements were catered for.
Family Bedroom	Comfortable, clean
Rooms	comfortable, clean
Visitors area	Comfortable, with refreshment facilities.
TV/Cinema room	Adequate for purpose
Religious area	Bright and suitable for range of purposes

Every effort is made to ensure that all cultures and religions are catered for in terms of worship and dietary requirements. There is a Chapel available for a number of religious beliefs and a Mosque. Religious advisors appropriate to a number of faiths visit the centre.

Effort is made to provide a sufficient variety of activities and distractions for residents to ameliorate the pain of waiting for the inevitable. (Some people are successful in their appeal.)

This includes –

- educational resources, formal and informal,
- the opportunity to study e.g. the European Computer Driving License
- art and craft
- television and cinema
- books, newspapers and videos (on line newspapers overcome availability problems)

Medical, dental and mental health needs are provided for by fully trained medical staff and counsellors. The delegation were advised that there is a nurse available 24 hours a day, and a doctor on site 6 days a week. Residents are examined by a nurse within 2 hours of arriving at Dungavel, and seen by the Doctor within 24 hours of arrival. Premier employs a Psychiatrist who holds a surgery once a week, and the Doctor is also able to treat patients with mental health requirements. The medical staff,

although employed by Premier, are bound by the same ethical / medical codes of practice as staff employed by NHS Scotland.

Accommodation is clean and well kept with individual units for men and women as well as family units. Residents have access to telephones, a shop and are provided with £3.50 a week to spend. We were also advised that some residents enter the centre with their own monies.

Of particular interest were the education units and nursery. Effort has been made to ensure that education and care is provided. The work of young people and adults is evident in the work areas with wall displays of art and craft that has been undertaken. The classroom for children is well organised and industrious. Unfortunately, the teacher was on mid-term break at the time of the visit. It was not possible, therefore, to discuss issues with her. There were few children in the centre and only one using the classroom, supervised by a classroom assistant. This nine year old boy, with a broad Glasgow accent, honed in Sighthill, proudly displayed his gold star rated work and his passion for football.

A list of names on the classroom wall suggests that 116 children have spent time in the school since the teacher was appointed in 2003.

There is an outside play area with children's climbing frame and a picnic table. However, this is adjacent to a large power generator and set against the backdrop of the 20 foot barbed wire fence.

There is a member of staff responsible for the library without a qualification as a librarian but who is aware that resources require improvement.

Employees whom the visiting party met on the tour were very open about the work they do. There was an apparent high level of job satisfaction with everyone being clear about their responsibilities.

Members of staff advised the STUC representatives that they gained a great deal from their experiences with such a wide variety of people entering and leaving the centre. Some attachments were forged but there was also a high level of awareness of the transitory nature of the stay of the people sent to Dungavel.

There was a degree of defensiveness by certain members of staff about their work. Their concerns about the demonstration of last September and perceived negative views held about them were well aired. They took no succour from reassurances that this was a political issue not directed at them as workers. The STUC delegation detected that there may be training needs for staff on diversity issues.

Of the members of staff on duty at the time of the visit, there seemed to be a high proportion who had worked previously within the prison service and were aware of the difficulties of working in a secure, controlled environment. This is not surprising as some had worked in Dungavel when it was an open prison.

The Chair of the Independent Monitoring Board, who accompanied us on part of the visit, is a former inspector of prisons with a long experience of this type of work. (He is also on the Independent Monitoring Board of HMP Barlinnie) . He believes the conditions of the centre and the competence and quality of the staff are of the highest order. He appeared to have an excellent relationship with Premier Detention Services management.

Notwithstanding the good facilities, the experiences of the staff, their job satisfaction and their genuinely held belief that they are doing a good job with people in distress, it was the opinion of the delegation that nothing they witnessed will alter their views on Dungavel. Certain aspects of the visit only served to reinforce the fact that it is a prison. The lack of bars on the windows did not mitigate the effects of the surrounding barbed wire or the rules and regulations required by a secure unit.

It is difficult to form an impression of the centre on so short a visit other than it is a well run prison. On the day it was quiet with approximately 75 people being detained, and 10 people in total in the family unit. The staff reported that they did not know the background of the people being detained in Dungavel, and were not made aware of the reasons for individuals or families being detained. Their responsibility is to perform the duties required of them as employees of Premier Security services within the context of the Immigration and Asylum Act.

The range of detainees which may include not only failed applicants but also criminals raises a number of health and safety

issues, adding force to the STUC's argument that children and families should not be detained at Dungavel. Work on the extension to Dungavel had obviously begun, and contractors were visible carrying out this building work.

The openness, curiosity and friendliness of a nine year old boy served only to reinforce our belief that this is not a place for families or children. It must be possible for the Home Office to harness its considerable resources and expertise to find a solution that is far more in keeping with the aspirations and ambitions of the labour and trade union movement.

STUC
30 June 2004.