

Whistleblower asks PAC to find out why he is omitted from prison investigation

Noel McGree at his home in Portlaoise: 'I am not included in the investigation appointed by the Department of Justice because they refuse to engage with me,' he said in his letter, which calls for the PAC to clarify the matter. Picture: Moya Nolan

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A whistleblower who drew attention to alleged wrongdoing within the Irish Prison Service has asked the Public Accounts Committee to clarify why he is not being consulted as part of the investigation he instigated.

Last February, Justice Minister Helen McEntee wrote to the PAC to say her secretary-general Oonagh McPhillips had been instructed to appoint an independent investigator to examine the catering procurement behaviour of voluntary mess committees within Irish prisons.

A 2019 audit of the IPS's catering services had found a number of "non-standard, high-value food items" — including fillet steaks, rib roasts, prosciutto and catering chocolate — were "repeatedly purchased" in one prison.

Noel McGree, a now-retired prison officer, who made a number of protected disclosures alleging wrongdoing in different facets of the prison service, said, in a letter to the committee, that the coming investigation will deal with issues he had raised and which have since been referred for criminal investigation.

"But I am not included in the investigation appointed by the Department of Justice because they refuse to engage with me," Mr McGree said in his letter, which calls for the PAC to clarify the matter.

After all, I am just the whistleblower and whistleblowers are viewed with disdain.

"They have decided to investigate an issue without including evidence from the person who... reported the issue and **suffered for doing so**," Mr McGree, who retired from the prison service in January 2020 aged just 47, added.

In response to a query on Mr McGree's letter, a spokesperson for the Department of Justice said it is "not in a position to comment" on individual protected disclosure cases.

However, on a "general basis" disclosers are "not excluded from the process and each investigator can contact the discloser in relation to the allegations raised in the disclosure", they said.

It is the investigator who investigates the allegations and the discloser must allow the work to be carried out in an independent manner."

The investigation into the mess committees is scheduled to begin shortly and to take "in the region of five to six months to complete", Ms McPhillips told the PAC in late May.

Last December, director general of the IPS Caron McCaffrey told the PAC that the mess committees would shortly become subject to a signed service agreement in an attempt to increase oversight regarding stock procurement.

Link to original article

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40311734.html>