



**NIACRO'S RESPONSE TO THE NIPS
CONSULTATION ON THE DRAFT
LEARNING AND SKILLS STRATGIC PLAN
2010 - 2013**

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Mr Alan Patterson
NIPS, Learning and Skills Branch
2nd Floor
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 3SU

Dear Alan

I enclose NIACRO's response to the NIPS Consultation on the Draft Learning and Skills Strategic Plan 2010 - 2013.

NIACRO, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, is a voluntary organisation, working for almost 40 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. NIACRO provides services under the headings of; working with children and young people who offend; providing services to families and children of offenders; supporting offenders and ex-prisoners in the community and working with prisoners.

NIACRO receives funding from, and works in partnership with all the main criminal justice agencies in Northern Ireland.

If there is anything else you require please do not hesitate to contact us. We look forward to receiving the final policy document.

Yours faithfully

Heather Reid

SERVICE MANAGER – OFFENDERS IN THE COMMUNITY
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RESPONSE to NIPS LEARNING & SKILLS STRATEGIC PLAN 2010 – 13

NIACRO welcomes the proposed Learning and Skills strategic plan for the incoming 3 year period. Particularly NIACRO endorses the significant shift within NIPS to focus education, training and learning in its broadest sense within an employment - led resettlement process that contributes to a reduction in offending.

The objectives as set out in the plan appear to reflect a desire to provide a service which meets the varying and complex needs of individual prisoners by ensuring that Learning & Skills is integral to the sentence planning process. NIACRO fully supports an individual needs - led approach to offender learning as this model has already been successfully adopted within the Jobtrack programme.

Whilst welcoming the plan NIACRO would wish to take this opportunity to raise the following 3 points:

1) Culture and Challenges.

The overall plan is predicated on the ability of NIPS to provide a service that supports and encourages offender focussed work. This will require a significant shift in culture and thinking across the prison estate. Appropriate programmes or interventions should be based on offender needs rather than on what is more easily facilitated or less resource intensive.

The intention to match training and learning with the needs of the labour market is something which NIACRO has recommended previously. However NIACRO recognises the significant challenges this will bring in ensuring the required flexibility of services that maintains “fit for purpose”.

Given our experience in working across the 3 establishments NIACRO believes that unless fundamental change is made to culture and shared values/ethos of the prison system in dealing with offenders and a focused commitment to rehabilitation and resettlement needs, then any proposals to improve offender services will not succeed. The question remains as to how NIPS will ensure that this happens.

2) Multi – agency / Partnership

The plan clearly identifies a multi - agency approach to support the NIPS Learning and Skills strategy. As an organisation that has worked closely with NIPS for a number of years, NIACRO very much welcomes a public commitment to this model. With increased demand on decreasing resources, NIACRO believes all parties (stakeholders/partners) must think creatively and combine the wealth of experience, skills and commitment that exists within and outside the prison system.

NIACRO accepts that it is difficult to truly define partnership working when funding is provided on a sub - contractual basis. We propose the term “inter-dependent” to better reflect the clear roles of the various parties providing interconnected services.

3) Targets

NIACRO queries the targets presented in Year 1.2010-11 in relation to outcomes for Jobtrack participants. The current agreed employment target in Jobtrack is 30% of all leavers (both prison and community). This target was assessed as achievable at commencement of the current contract when unemployment was at an all time low. The economic downturn and consequent rise in unemployment combined with new legislation has increased barriers for individual with convictions. As a result Jobtrack’s success rate has dropped from 34% to 20%. This exceeds mainstream DEL programmes for long term unemployed.

NIACRO would warn against targets that are currently unrealistic and significantly adversely affected by external economic shifts. Given the introduction of this new focus for L& S, a target of 20-25% would seem more realistic and achievable. The final target must be based on agreement with the Jobtrack partnership.

Overall NIACRO welcomes and supports the proposed Learning and Skills Strategic plan. We hope our comments are considered within the final plan and welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the points raised with Learning and Skills personnel.