

Accessing Services for Offenders (ASFO) Response to Prisons 2020 – Driving continuous improvement in the Prison Service

Introduction

The Accessing Services for Offenders (ASFO) is an umbrella group of voluntary organisations working with people who are or have been in custody.

Following on from the Ower's Report references to partnerships, "*Voluntary and community sector organisations are also key partners, and are already involved in some successful and innovative schemes. But real partnership involves joint planning, not just delivery, and a commitment to facilitate and support this work as part of core business, both operationally and financially*", ASFO has had a keen interest in prison reform and any role it can play to support the reform agenda. It has been involved in a number of initiatives including holding a number of events in prison settings showcasing the range of services offered by its members and producing a directory of those services which has been made available to all establishments.

ASFO welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ***Prisons 2020: Driving continuous improvement in the Prison Service***, consultation.

Our response

Our response relates to four specific sections of the consultation: -

Vision and Strategic Priorities; Our People; Our Services and Our Partnerships.

Vision and Strategic Priorities

Q1. Do you believe NIPS has appropriately summarised its role and defined its key strategic priorities? If you have answered "no" please outline your views in relation to changes you would wish to suggest.

- a) No. There are a range of issues and below we outline these.
- b) The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) does not seem to have responsibility for those in remand (currently there is only an obligation to keep those on remand in a safe environment).

- c) There is insufficient support for those on remand and a need for more holistically delivered support services. This lack of support can lead to further issues of reoffending and reintegration for this group.
- d) There is no clear definition of “Stakeholders” – it would be useful to provide clarity as to how stakeholders are defined and who may potentially be in this group.
- e) The strategic priority of “delivering safe, secure and decent custody” should be the key priority for the NIPS.
- f) There is ambiguity between delivering “safe, secure and decent custody” and “develop a fit for purpose estate”. It would be useful to look at the connections between these two priorities and how they overlap.
- g) “Promote public confidence” should be reworded to either “gain” or “achieve” public confidence to reflect the importance of understanding public perception and the journey involved in ensuring public confidence is moving in a positive direction.
- h) Information/clarification on reallocation of funds would be useful. It would also be helpful if there was greater transparency on the rationale for reallocation decisions. For example, access to clear information could help ensure that pre-paid/allocated services are delivered as per contracts, such as in education and training.
- i) There is no mention of using digital technologies to improve services and provide value for money. There could be a better use of IT in education and training for example.
- j) In relation to the aim “Achieve better outcomes for people in our care” there needs to be information on the processes which will be used for recording and evaluating this. Are there outcomes and indicators available and if so do they measure impact and change? For example, in relation to placing people in training, are the qualifications offered the only ones available, or are they ones which will assist prisoners with a credible pathway into those sectors of the job market where there is demand?
- k) The vision strapline “Making the community safer by supporting people to change” is similar to PBNI’s which is “Changing lives for safer communities.” This makes it difficult to differentiate which organisation does what in strategic terms.
- l) Processes are not mentioned in the strategic priorities. Priority needs to be given to creating more seamless processes for those in custody who are moving towards release and reintegration.
- m) Improving public safety is not mentioned in the strategic priorities.
- n) There is no mention of rehabilitation in the role, vision or priorities.
- o) Setting the work of NIPS within the context of wider justice system would be useful.
- p) There is a need to go beyond target tick boxing and look towards longer-term outcomes for prisoners. Currently the focus is on risk management rather than prisoner rehabilitation.
- q) There are no criteria for measuring the degree to which the vision ‘Making the community safer by supporting people to change’ is being achieved.

- r) The work in prisons must connect with the wider justice system - we need partnerships for beyond the gate.
- s) Overall it appears that resettlement is not a priority and that a containment culture dominates the work of the Prison Service.

Our People

Q4 *How can we improve communications with our staff and those who work with them in the prison environment.*

- a) There needs to be improvement in communications, both between prisons staff themselves and with personnel from other agencies operating in prisons.
- b) Our sense is that NIPS structures are stratified leading to formalised lines of communication. Creating space and opportunities for informal conversations between staff in all grades and between NIPS staff and people from other agencies would improve communications. This would help both staff and external agencies to share ideas and expertise more easily. It would also mean that problems could be identified and dealt with in a timelier manner and enable holistic responses when an issue has more than one causal factor. Overall, a more informal style to communications would promote a collaborative culture and help place those in the care of the Prison Service at the centre of everyone's efforts.
- c) Training in active and empathic listening would improve communications both within the Service itself and when prison staff are working with other agencies and prisoners themselves. Active listening would help deepen understanding of prisoner's issues and improve problem solving, leading to better outcomes for prisoners, staff and other support agencies.
- d) The partner organisations have a wealth of experience, expertise and commitment which can contribute greatly to helping the Prison Service reach its vision of 'Making the community safer by supporting people to change'. However, we believe that Prison Service staff are not fully aware of the scope of the services which ASFO members can offer and are therefore not being used to their full potential. We believe that better communication and sharing of information between NIPS and ASFO would lead to prison staff being better able to access support services from ASFO members which would greatly help them in carrying out their work.
- e) The personnel of ASFO organisations spend a lot of time developing relationships with certain key prison staff. However, often we find that when prison staff move on we must start all over again with another with new NIPS personnel and spend considerable time and energy re-educating and building relationships. Sometimes replacement staff don't fully appreciate the value our organisations can add and as such are not always inclined to invest time and effort into building a relationship with ASFO staff. Therefore, we would recommend that during the handover period NIPS should ensure new staff are made aware of the services our members can offer and create opportunities for ASFO personnel to meet with incoming NIPS staff.

- f) There are senior staff and governors who have championed and implemented good practice involving partnering with third sector organisations. However, sometimes when they transition into new roles the momentum behind the positive changes they have made is lost. This can leave third sector service delivers feeling vulnerable as incoming staff may not value the good practice which their predecessors developed. We would recommend that recognised good practice is incorporated into NIPS policies so that there is continuity when senior staff change roles.

Q7 *How can we develop our leadership capability and in particular support first line managers?*

- a) We believe that a style of leadership is required which will address the hierarchical nature of the Prison Service. To help with this leadership is needed which promotes better communication across all grades of staff. This would lead to improved outcomes for the staff themselves and prisoners.
- b) Leadership is needed which encourages all staff to be receptive to ideas and opinions of colleagues and others operating in the prison environment.
- c) A leadership style should be developed which encourages flexibility in responding to problems and in taking opportunities for service improvements.
- d) To deal with the multifaceted needs of prisoners requires interdisciplinary approaches. Leadership within the NIPS should promote collaboration across the Service, and with other support agencies, to facilitate holistic responses to needs.
- e) There is scope for the Prison Service and other organisations who are working in the justice system to jointly advocate to improve outcomes for prisoners and their families. This would require leadership within the Service which is willing to lobby the Department of Justice, and others within government, for policy change.
- f) Across the Service a culture of team working needs to be supported by leadership which promotes a shared sense of responsibility for the work of the NIPS.
- g) The Service has many new staff and they need to be mentored so that experience and expertise is shared. There should also be a strong focus on coaching which encourages staff to use their skills and abilities to the full. Both mentoring and coaching will help to motivate staff and assist in their retention.

Q8 *What measures could we take to support staff health and well-being?*

- a) The Prison Service needs to recognise that front line custodial and residential staff are often dealing with prisoners' mental health problems and this in turn can have an adverse effect on their own health. As such prison staff need support and care packages, over and above what is currently on offer, to help them deal with this.

- b) Staff need support in the period after there has been a suicide in prison. Appropriate structures should be developed to support staff deal with the aftereffects of suicide.
- c) Some roles are stressful whilst others are less so. Rotation of roles would help rectify this and contribute to the sharing learning across the Service. However, when staff are being rotated the handover process should include introducing new staff to the ASFO personnel who they have been working with.

Q9 *In recognition of the diversity of those in our care would it be helpful to have bespoke staff training for specific prisoner groups? If so, what training would be helpful?*

- a) Yes, it would be helpful. There is too much over specialisation and a lack of communication between disciplines. Ways to break down barriers and actively promote interdisciplinary work are required so that holistic responses can be made to the needs of diverse groupings in prisons.
- b) There needs to be greater empathy for foreign nationals. The language barriers they face need to be recognised and catered for.
- c) Sometimes when a critical incident occurs there is not a specialist available. All staff should have training which enables them to act as first responder until other expert assistance is available.
- d) Generally, the lack of diversity in the Prison Service means that it can be difficult for staff to empathise with the needs of those from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. To help with this diversity training should be offered to all staff.

Our Services

Q10 *How well do you think the Prison Service performs in prioritising resettlement and rehabilitation.*

- a) We believe there has been some positive progress in developing the range of services available in the prison. However, resettlement and rehabilitation services are still under resourced and are not meeting needs, especially for those requiring therapeutic and wellbeing support whilst in custody.
- b) Resettlement services still take a back seat to security and other core services.
- c) Better assessment of realistic goals could be achieved for people whilst in custody. Often prisoners identify a support which would better prepare them better for release only to find that the Prison Service is unable to link them to this support.
- d) Resettlement should play a bigger role in the training and induction of staff. For many staff containment is their central concern and they do not give enough consideration to the benefits of effective resettlement.

Q11 What could the Prison Service do differently to better support people's transition from custody back into the community?

- a) Ensure that organisations who are supporting people in custody have the resources they need to help prisoners back into the community on release.
- b) A pre-release needs assessment needs to be carried out. For example, prisoners should be assessed to ascertain what their needs are in the first 72 hours after release, including how they are going to be met and simple logistics such as which bus or train they need to get.
- c) There needs to be greater recognition that a prisoner's needs don't end at the prison gate. There should be a much greater understanding that effective resettlement is the best means to reduce recidivism.
- d) Prisoners need to be trained in how to use IT and digital services. When released access to many services and benefits will require them to be able to use digital technologies.
- e) The NIPS should be more receptive to the use of day release and home resettlement.

Q12 Are there models of good practice that the Prison Service could adopt to improve its approach to resettlement and rehabilitation?

- a) One good practice is to connect the prisoner before release with the organisations which will be supporting them after release.
- b) There are many community and voluntary sector organisations operating in the justice system who are involved in prisoner officer training. The scope of this training could be further developed. Where appropriate provision should take place off site.
- c) More research is required at national and international level into what makes for effective resettlement.

Q13 What outcomes can the voluntary and community sector provide to assist with people's resettlement and rehabilitation?

- a) There needs to be a better measure of outcomes, as opposed to outputs, within contracts. There has been too great a focus on output measures such as, how many prisoners participated in a programme, how many have been assessed, numbers of support plans produced, sessions delivered etc. There needs to be more of a focus on measurement of outcomes and impact, such as the degree to which prisoners had their needs met, how far they managed to achieve stability upon release, what has been the impact on reoffending and have recalls decreased, etc.
- b) Voluntary and community organisations provide support across all pathways for prisoners. The sector needs to strengthen its connections through more collaborative working approaches, such as through the ASFO group. This will result in better coordination and improve their ability to offer joined-up services and facilitate a holistic approach to the needs of prisoners and their families.

- c) The sector trains many Prison staff and believes there is potential for further development, particularly in sharing of good practice in relation to resettlement and rehabilitation.

Our Partnerships

Q18. How could NIPS improve communication with our partners?

- a) Training for NIPS staff should be more robust with a much greater focus on the services offered by the third sector. The third sector are effective in supporting someone in custody, and beyond, and as such NIPS staff need to know the range of services it offers.
- b) A forum for third sector partners and NIPS staff within the prison estates would support better communication.
- c) The Prison Service and other agencies need to share of good practice as a key means to stop the cycle of reoffending.
- d) Prison staff should spend time with support agencies, such as those involved in ASFO, so that they can get a better understanding of how its members can support the work of the Service. Similarly, all agencies which have a connection with the Service should spend time in the prison environment.
- e) As a follow up to this consultation ASFO would recommend that a small task group comprising representatives of ASFO and senior staff from the NIPS, be established to consider how the ideas contained in this consultation response could be enacted.

Q19. How do you think NIPS could make better links with the community?

- a) NIPS staff should have the opportunity to job shadow in a support service operating in the community. Similarly, staff from the community and voluntary sector partners should have the opportunity to job shadow prison staff at all levels.