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. We receive funding from, and work in partnership with all the main criminal justice agencies in Northern Ireland.

NIACRO is pleased to see the draft Family Strategy and welcomes many of the elements of the Action Plan. It is particularly helpful that the Action Plan is broken down into the various stages in the process from arrest to release.

We welcome the acknowledgement that the maintenance of relationships is important both for rehabilitation of the prisoner and for the emotional and social development of affected children. This latter area must receive particular attention when implementing the strategy. Therefore, we recommend the strategy also references the child’s right to a family life under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Reception/induction**

A key element in the implementation of the strategy will be to ensure that the full range of staff who come in contact with a prisoner will have knowledge of the available support services for families and be equipped to assist families by making referral to these services.

This is important, as throughout the period of imprisonment, the prisoners’ attitude and view may change. For instance, those who refuse offers of support refused at admission may change their mind at a later stage.

**First 24 hours and within first week of custody**

It is crucial within an early stage after imprisonment; the prisoner should be able to meet with his/her family to talk about the admission to custody and to reassure any affected children.

While this may be logistically difficult during the first 24 hours, it should take place within the first week of custody, in order to best meet the needs of the child. During this visit, prison staff should also make sure the family has access to information and material relevant to them, such as visiting times and details of transport to and from the prison.

**Mitigating the impact of inter-prison transfers**

An inter-prison transfer can pose issues for families when changes to a prisoner’s placement involves new and/or complex travel arrangements. This is evident when public transport and/or a family routine no longer synchronises with visiting times. Anecdotal evidence from the families NIACRO works with, suggests this problem is growing.
Financial Assistance

Financial assistance through the assisted prison visit scheme is a significant and valuable resource to families. Discretion must be built into the scheme to take account of special circumstances. This includes situations where children are in the care of a parent estranged from the prisoner. In such cases, NIACRO recommends the children should be entitled to assistance in their own right.

Information and Support

The role of the Family Officer is significant in responding to the family’s need for information, advice and support. NIACRO recommends this role remains protected and is not reduced to meet other day to day operational pressures. Further, it needs to be equally resourced across the prison estate with Magilligan and Hydebank Wood prisons maintaining a similar service to that of Maghaberry.

Regular visits and children’s visits

Regular visits are important both for the prisoner and for the child and family. While appreciating the need to maintain good order we would argue that restriction on children’s visits as a consequence of a prisoner or other visitors’ actions is in conflict with the needs (and rights) of the child.

NIACRO strongly recommends that changes in visiting times or arrangements are not made unilaterally. Consultation with affected parties such as the voluntary agencies who offer services in these areas and, more importantly, the families themselves, should be compulsory when such decisions are being considered.

The strategy states that families ‘shall be able to leave money and clothing at the prisons during visits’. This seems to be unnecessarily restrictive. While appreciating that facilities ability to receive money and clothing might be limited, NIACRO recommends this should read that families ‘shall be able to leave money and clothing at the prisons any time it is open for visiting.’ This allows families greater flexibility.

Support prior to release

NIACRO recommends to effectively prepare for a prisoner’s release and return to a family unit, in the Prison Service should investigate the development and implementation of Family Group Conferencing. Currently operating in the JJC, this model of practice helps a family identify strategies for dealing with change and has been shown to aid transition. It also has significant capacity to restore damaged relationships, providing a more stable and supportive environment for the prisoners return.
The Interagency Strategic Advisory Group

As a matter of factual accuracy it should be noted that the “NIACRO Strategic Advisory Group” referred to in the draft was in fact an interagency Strategic Advisory Group. It has been replaced by a “Families and Children of Prisoners Interagency Group.” The group comprises representatives from NIPS, NIACRO, Barnardos, Action for Children, Health and Social Services, Quakers, Prison Fellowship and the Youth Justice Agency.

The group is currently developing a strategy which will embrace two components:-

- Promoting direct services to the children and families of prisoners
- Promoting awareness among universal and specialist services of the vulnerability of children and families of prisoners

NIACRO views the Interagency Group as a significant forum for developing services with prisoners and their families. We look forward to the continued involvement of NIPS representatives and believe that the forum can make a significant contribution to the achievement of the goals of the Strategy.