



Inquiry on Reducing Adult Reoffending

Written Submission to the Public Accounts Committee

01 April 2025



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Submitted: 1st April 2025



Key Recommendation

Niacro believes the Public Accounts Committee should:

1. Support the Department of Justice to achieve cross departmental support for a new Programme for Government Strategy on Offending and Reoffending to arrive at one vision for what needs to be achieved to bring about real change.
2. Support the Criminal Justice System to develop and deliver trauma informed rehabilitative programmes focused on intensive support and existing best practice models and in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.
3. Support the Criminal Justice System organisations to develop agreed outcomes, and data capture and linking of data to support the measurement and delivery of those outcomes, so decisions on effective resourcing can be made.
4. Advocate for greater reliance on community-based alternatives to custodial sentences, particularly for non-violent offences, to reduce reoffending rates and promote rehabilitation.
5. Strengthen the role of restorative justice practices, enabling those who cause harm to make amends and rebuild trust within their communities.
6. Support the call for more multi-year resourcing of the voluntary and community sector in true partnership to deliver outcomes and support reduction in reoffending, learning from existing good practice and the lived experience of all people impacted by the Criminal Justice System.
7. Support the legislative developments required to transform the Criminal Justice System, including Sentencing reform, Raising the Age of Criminal Responsibility and reform of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Order.

Background and Introduction

Niacro welcome this opportunity to provide a briefing to the Public Accounts Committee as it conducts its inquiry into reducing adult re-offending. We will take this opportunity to brief the Committee on some of the work of Niacro and how we work to contribute to reduce reoffending by working with the people who use our services to achieve better outcomes, as well as working with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in developing and implementing strategies and programmes that address the issues.

About Niacro

Niacro has been working in Northern Ireland since 1971 and is committed to reducing crime and its impact on people and communities across Northern Ireland. Guided by a vision of society where the rights and needs of all people are equally respected and protected, our strategic plan is aligned to DoJ priorities, and our goals are as follows:

1. Crime reduction through support
2. Safer and inclusive communities
3. Reduction of young people entering the CJS
4. Insight drive change
5. An effective and efficient organisation

Niacro's diverse range of services includes mentoring, employability programmes, finance and debt advice, and family support programmes; we create meaningful change for **over 7,000 people** annually and facilitate

over 30,000 prison visits across the prison sites each year - See details of the range of service provision in the attached Appendix 1.

We work closely with the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and the Probation Board (PBNI) both at a strategic and operational level and deliver a range of programmes and services designed and delivered together with aims to reduce re-offending which focus on:

- Strengthening family ties
- Maximising opportunities for training and employment
- Supporting stability with housing, health and finances

Our approach to delivering and improving rehabilitation also involves our policy work, through which we play our part in shaping public policy and helping to make change – for the better – to the criminal justice system. We believe that the knowledge and experience we gain from our work gives us the obligation, the authority, and the responsibility to seek to influence policy makers, service providers, and the wider public.

At Niacro we aim to have an impact on policy and practice by communicating our key messages and engaging with relevant public bodies. We are committed to ensuring the voices and the lived experience of our service users and the people in contact with us is at the heart of everything we do, including the examples of feedback on our services and support contained in this briefing document.

Introduction

Niacro recognises that the Department of Justice (DoJ) and other key stakeholders across the Criminal Justice System (CJS) have been working hard to reduce adult reoffending over years, and that more recently this has also been in the context of the Covid pandemic, an increasing prison population and unprecedented pressures on departmental and agency budgets. In addition, and to support the flow and efficiency of the system, the DoJ have a substantial legislative portfolio to advance e.g., the draft NI Justice Bill, and the requirement to bring about further legislation in relation to sentencing.

Niacro believes that if reoffending rates are to be improved, it is critical that the CJS in Northern Ireland needs transformation to enable that progress to be made and it will require a multifaceted approach that addresses systemic challenges whilst fostering collaboration among government departments, public, private and community and voluntary organisations. A crucial element in driving this transformation and reducing adult reoffending lies in adopting a comprehensive, collaborative, and well-resourced approach that places people - victims and witnesses, people who have offended and families - at its core.

This briefing will set out our contribution and recommendations under the following themes:

1. Strategic leadership and collaboration for shared outcomes.
2. Delivery of trauma informed rehabilitative services.
3. Resourcing of effective sentencing approaches in prisons and in the community.

1. Strategic Leadership and Collaboration for Shared Outcomes

Cross-departmental collaboration

Niacro emphasises that **leadership** and **collaboration** are critical to transforming the criminal justice system and reducing offending and reoffending. To achieve this, Niacro advocates for improved cross-departmental coordination and stronger partnerships between the CJS and the voluntary sector, underpinned by a **measurable, outcomes-focused** approach working toward the same vision.

Niacro welcomes the commitment within the NI Programme for Government under Safer Communities to develop a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending but stress it is critical that there is a

collaborative approach as well as collective ownership across all departments to address the social, economic, and health-related factors that contribute to reoffending.

Through collaboration and collective ownership, the following government departments can play a vital role in supporting the Department of Justice to reduce reoffending by addressing the underlying causes of crime:

- **Department of Health:** Provide trauma informed mental health and addiction services, ensuring people receive the necessary treatment and support to break cycles of reoffending; implement the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Review of Children's Social Care Services (June 2023) and ensure less children are caught up in the CJS.
- **Department for Communities:** Offer housing assistance and social support to help people resettle into the community, reducing the risk of homelessness and social isolation; continue to provide Supporting People initiatives to sustain housing tenure and address anti-social behaviour; lead on the development and delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- **Department for the Economy:** Resource employment and training initiatives equipping those in contact with the CJS with skills and opportunities to secure stable jobs; work with other sectors to support businesses to safely and fairly recruit people with a criminal record.
- **Department of Education:** Implement educational initiatives for children and young people focusing on literacy, numeracy, and vocational skills to improve their prospects and reduce risk of offending; support early intervention services and provide alternative pathways to meet the social and educational needs of all children; introduce a Strategy to reduce early school leaving.
- **Department of Infrastructure:** Ensure affordable and accessible transportation for the whole population is available to support people and families toward social inclusion and participate.
- **Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs:** Create community-based projects, such as environmental conservation programmes and programmes addressing the impact of crime on the rural population.

Niacro believes that the recent Programme for Government commitment presents a vital opportunity to transform the justice system and tackle the intractable issue of re-offending rates as detailed in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on "Reducing Reoffending in Northern Ireland" (June 2023)¹.

While the DoJ will take the lead, the Northern Ireland Executive must embrace this effort as a collective responsibility. A unified approach will not only strengthen justice reform but also deliver shared success on the wider societal issues that matter most.

A unified Criminal Justice System

Just as there needs to be a more joined up approach across government departments, there also needs to be a more unified approach within the CJS to ensure service pathways are integrated to deliver improved results and support people to be successful.

Meaningful collaboration among organisations is crucial to ensure reforms are comprehensive rather than fragmented. Achieving this requires a unified vision and shared goals and outcomes, alongside improved coordination among these CJS specific organisations for greater effectiveness. Niacro recognise that the CJS operates across multiple agencies and sectors, including police, courts, prisons, probation and rehabilitation services, with the overarching aim of building a just, equitable, and peaceful society as well as keeping people safe. However, to realise this vision, it is essential to address all components of the system rather than focusing narrowly on one or two areas.

Effective collaboration demands enhanced data sharing and stronger connections across information-sharing platforms to improve the system's efficiency and accessibility. Additionally, modernising the system requires leveraging data and research to identify trends and implement targeted interventions, ensuring resources are utilised more effectively and efficiently. The role of the voluntary and community sector in supporting data collection and collation should be considered as part of any overarching plans to improve data linkage e.g.

many Niacro service users will remain in contact with us, long after they have left the formal system. Niacro staff currently input into PRISM, and support NIPS and PBNI with collation of information against outcomes.

The voluntary sector plays a crucial role and must be acknowledged as an essential partner within the system, rather than being viewed as an optional or supplementary addition. The voluntary and community sector is pivotal to ensuring that all resources and assets are maximised and all funding to support the CJS is leveraged. We have also gained the trust and confidence of service users and their families to enhance participation in services.

An outcomes-focused approach to service delivery

As mentioned above, voluntary organisations like Niacro are integral to supporting an integrated service pathway. Niacro believes its people-centred, outcomes-driven approach will help reduce crime and its impact by supporting rehabilitation, community stability, citizenship, and desistance from offending. Through rehabilitation-focused services, we assist individuals in the care of the NIPS, both in custody and during resettlement, fostering progress in the eight areas of our OBA based Outcomes Framework and we already have existing reporting arrangements in place to funders like NIPS, PBNI and the DoJ on delivery of these outcomes, having invested in a bespoke casework and data capture system. The outcomes we report on are:

- **Desisting from crime** (reducing anti-social behaviour / coming to attention of the police)
- **Supporting Relationships** (improving family connections and integrating into community life)
- **Health and Wellbeing** (improving physical and mental wellbeing, confidence, securing professional help for health or addictions)
- **Employment, Education and Training** (gaining new skills, completing training, securing employment)
- **Securing Stable Accommodation** (securing accommodation, retaining tenancy)
- **Securing Stable Finances** (achieving more stable finances, increasing confidence with managing finances)
- **Living with a conviction** (facing fewer obstacles, better understanding of implications of a conviction)
- **Having your voice heard** (voices are better heard, greater access to advocacy)

A collective and shared understanding of outcomes will be important in the development of the new cross departmental strategy, and Niacro look forward to supporting the development of further Outcomes within it.

Case Study for collaboration and shared outcomes

Research shows that securing employment is the most significant factor in breaking the cycle of reoffending.ⁱⁱ Similarly, engaging in and maintaining participation in training programmes has a proven impact on reducing reoffending.

Niacro has been delivering support programmes for individuals with convictions in the community and prisons for several decades e.g. SkillSET is our current programme to provide employability and vocational training. Funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the NIPS, PBNI and the Gallacher Trust, the delivery of this service is an excellent example of how criminal justice organisations, the voluntary and community sector, local businesses and service users are already collaborating to reduce reoffending and achieve success for people like Gary:

Gary is a 35-year-old man, now living in Belfast, after being displaced from his home city.

Gary was first referred to Skillset by the Prisoner Development Unit while in custody at Maghaberry prison. He had no family or friends to rely on for support due to his conviction. He had nowhere to live on release and no money or benefit support. This was his first time in prison, and he was afraid for his future.

Gary shared with us the difference having support from Niacro made for him:

“I met Kelly from Niacro – I was needing support with absolutely everything - with benefits, housing, banking, transport, GP and hopefully getting a job. I had never been to prison before, and I was afraid of what it was all going to be like when I DID get out. I wanted it to be that I could put everything behind me but talking to other boys I wasn’t sure how I was going to be able to do that. I have no family or friends. I am very thankful to the prison service for putting me in contact with Niacro.

As well as working with me herself, Kelly also put me in touch with other Niacro workers who helped me with benefits and housing referrals, and I got a place on their Transitions programme. Kelly spent a lot of time with me; she helped me get a CSR card and 360 excavator training. Before I left prison, she helped me do a CV, and to do a proper Disclosure statement – she explained that it would better to have this ready and make a fresh start right from the get to. She explained that Niacro were able to help people to do this and to be honest when applying for jobs. I needed help with getting ready for interviews too which was not a problem for Kelly.

Due to all this help and the fact that I had support from Niacro after I left the prison, I feel I was as prepared as I could be. It is so easy for people to relapse and be recalled to prison. I can’t believe that within 4 weeks of leaving Maghaberry I got a job as a digger driver. My employers know about my past because Niacro and the prison service were involved and supportive, so it meant that they had reassurance.

I am still looking for a permanent place to live and it’s so hard at the minute as there isn’t enough places. I am still getting help and SkillSET will be there for me over the next four months to make sure I stay in post.

I can’t believe that services like this exist. I am so grateful for all the support I have had, and part of me thinks I don’t deserve it....my own family has disowned me. I am not going back to prison under any circumstances and let Kelly down and I am going to take this as my second chance to make a difference ... for myself!”

Each year we work with over 700 referrals in the SkillSET programme and to date have achieved 17.2% of participants into Employment and 36% supported in education and training. We also work closely with DfC Work Coaches in the prison, and employers in the community to create realistic employment opportunities; we support disclosure statements and act as a point of contact if any issues arise following a job start. We also have a dedicated **Disclosure Helpline** and website **www.disclosureni.com** which has a bespoke calculator embedded in it, to support individuals with understanding if their convictions have been spent.

Outcome measurement

In 2015 a Data Lab report showed a precursor to SkillSET the Niacro Job Track programme had a positive impact on reoffending rates:

“The one year proven reoffending rate for those who completed the Jobtrack Programme was 20%, compared to 32% of those in the matched sample of similar offenders. This represents a statistically significant difference.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The NI Audit Office Report on page 82 notes the effectiveness of a previous service delivered by Niacro for PBNi between March 2015 and April 2017 called RESET. We note that the 2016 Evaluation Report for RESET reported reduced prison call rates and likelihood of reoffending as well as other qualitative participant benefits. It suggested **‘potential cost reductions when comparing average scheme costs of £2,544 per person with costs per prisoner recall of £15,291’**.^{iv}

We are supportive of the DOJ to work towards similar evaluations and comparisons to reflect more recent outcomes. We have also provided PBNI with anonymised and specific outcome reports for services funded by them, to support their analysis of the impact of interventions on reducing reoffending.

2. Deliver Trauma-Informed Services and Support for Rehabilitation

Trauma-informed Support

We believe that a criminal justice system that prioritises rehabilitation is vital to reducing reoffending, and there is much work for us all to do to ensure that all pathways and services are delivered from a trauma informed perspective. Trauma informed approaches will:

- **Address Root Causes:** Recognises the impact of trauma on behaviour, helping people who offend process and heal from past experiences.
- **Reduce Reoffending:** By addressing underlying trauma, it can break cycles of offending and promote long-term rehabilitation.
- **Improve Engagement:** People in the CJS are more likely to engage with programmes that acknowledge their experiences and treat them with empathy.
- **Support Staff Well-Being:** Trauma-informed practices can also benefit staff by fostering a more compassionate and understanding work environment.
- **Bring a Holistic Approach:** Focussing on mental health, emotional well-being, and social reintegration, leading to more comprehensive rehabilitation.

To successfully deliver a trauma-informed approach for rehabilitation that will reduce reoffending within the Northern Ireland CJS transformation will be required and that transformation will require resources including training, time, staffing and further programme developments that will need integrated into the existing systems.

Over time, the lives of the people we work with have become more complex, and we have continued to respond by developing pathways and programmes which consider the impact of trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and the growing lack of effective access to addiction, mental health and other therapeutic services.

Niacro services such as ASPIRE, Connections, Transitions, INSYNC, Family Links and Visitor Centre Services see first-hand every day the impact of trauma and the ongoing impact on people who offend, their families and communities. Achieving lasting impact to reduce reoffending also requires longer term funding of all agencies and services, including the voluntary and community sector – a fact also addressed within the NI Audit Office report.

Strengthening families

Niacro are funded by NIPS, SPPG and the Western HSCT to deliver our Family Links Service to people in prison and their families with practical and emotional support, as well advice and signposting to other ways we can help e.g., benefits and debt advice and client assistance funds. Family Links works with 1,400 families per year, liaising with the prison staff to support personal development plans and supporting the establishment of improved family relationships. We also deliver the Visitor Centre services under a contract with NIPS, where we work within the prison sites and Welcome Centres to facilitate prison visits, including child centred ones.

Keeping community and family ties improves the resettlement of people leaving custody, improving the conditions for release and building a life away from crime. Reducing the chances of reoffending should be considered throughout the criminal justice process and should start as soon as possible.

Stabilising accommodation

The paucity of housing for people coming out of custody or at risk of reoffending in the community is also having a significant negative impact on the stability of the people who use our services. Having established and reliable accommodation is a building block to change and an enabler to support reducing reoffending. Our

mentoring services like APAC, Aspire, Transitions and Connections work intensively with service users to find accommodation, apply for benefits, and liaise with families and communities to ensure further wrap around support.

One key service that is vital to providing support to aid resettlement is our Transitions Service. Funded by PBNI Transitions offer one-to-one mentoring for people over 30 referred by PBNI who are likely to face significant difficulties upon their release from custody. By providing robust resettlement support for individuals leaving custody, including housing assistance, job placement, and mentoring, we can help them better reintegrate successfully.

One service user, David, told us:

“Niacro has been a lifeline and helped me to resettle into the community”.

3. Resource effective sentencing approaches in prisons and the community

Short Term Sentences

Niacro note the difficulty in delivering robust rehabilitation programmes to people in custody who are short term prisoners, or who are on remand. We note the significant disparity between the numbers of people on remand in Northern Ireland compared to prisons in England and view the issue as having significant detrimental impact on the work of Prisoner Development Units (PDU).

Niacro staff work closely within the PDU environment, and we have already supported NIPS with backlogs of Personal Need Profiles. We note the ongoing review of the Prisoner Development Model, and we have already met with the review team to provide our thoughts and contributions. It is, however, clear that while the existing PDU model is strong, delivery of it is too often hampered by other tasks within the prison setting taking priority. Competing priorities within the prison context can negatively impact on NIPS staff, but also on the delivery of Niacro programmes and ultimately the retention and participation of people in custody within services designed to support rehabilitation and promote desistance.

At present Niacro offer a range of our services to short terms prisoners e.g. Family Links Service to keep families in touch during custody; Visitor Centre services; the SkillSET employability programme, and FAMM – our Family and Money Matters debt service – which helps people in custody and their families deal with the financial impact of imprisonment in a variety of ways like setting up bank accounts post custody. We also note the ongoing pilot service being delivered by our colleagues in Extern, which will look at outcomes post custody to reduce reoffending based on a social work model of delivery.

Remand and Bail Support

One of Niacro’s key policy challenges to the CJS is to reduce the number of people on remand, and to introduce bail support services as one mechanism to support this. At Niacro we have delivered bespoke services to women in prison for many decades, and our current service called “Connections” which is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and works with over 60 women per year within and through the CJS – delivering one to one mentoring, a weekly women’s group, accredited training, and opportunities for volunteering and advocating for themselves and others. Through this support women have regained contact and custody with their children, as well as formed supportive positives networks to move forward. One woman we supported told us:

“I would have been lost without Connections. It has given me so much. I have my kid’s back full time. I have a job, and I haven’t used drugs in nine months”.

People who use our services tell us how important wrap around mentoring support is for them, and we anticipate that we will continue to work with NIPS, PBNI and others to ensure adults bail services are successful, noting the DoJ intention to commission a pilot service for women in 2025/26.

Community Based sentencing

Community-based sentencing in Northern Ireland has a strong rehabilitation focus and evidence suggests that individuals subject to community sentences are less likely to reoffend compared to those serving short custodial sentences^v.

Niacro would be supportive of greater community-based sentencing across the range of disposals available, and increasing the use of non-custodial sentences, such as community service or restorative justice programmes which can reduce the stigma of imprisonment, promote reintegration^{vi} by sustaining housing, employment and maintaining key family relationships.

We recognise the extensive work completed each year by colleagues within PBNI and if more community sentences were made available that their resourcing will have to increase to meet the demand of additional caseloads, as well as the development of databases to promote data collection and data linkages to other parts of the system to support the monitoring of outcomes.

In addition, Niacro **would recommend further resourcing of the voluntary and community sector to provide wrap around and mentoring support to people subject to community sentences** e.g., our PBNI funded Transitions programme, which works with people after custody or our Aspire Community Engagement support service, also funded by and delivered in partnership with PBNI. The funding for Aspire is due to cease from March 2027, and Niacro would take this opportunity to highlight our concerns around the lack of support which will be available for up to 500 people per year in the absence of EPPOC funding, and the consequential impact on both quantitative and qualitative outcomes with regards to reoffending.

In Conclusion

We strongly urge the Public Accounts Committee to give due consideration to Niacro's evidence-based recommendations for reducing adult reoffending in Northern Ireland. Drawing on our expertise, insights, and actionable proposals, we believe our contributions hold substantial potential to assist in transforming the CJS and effectively reduce reoffending rates. Niacro exist to reduce crime and to reduce the impact of crime, especially on victims, witnesses and communities; we are committed to supporting the NI Executive, DoJ and criminal justice colleagues to reduce offending and reoffending.

Contact Details

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ⁱ ‘Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland’, Northern Ireland Audit Office, 13 June 2023.

ⁱⁱ “Improving Resettlement Support for Prison Leavers to Reduce Reoffending - Nao Report,” National Audit Office (NAO), June 19, 2023, <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/improving-resettlement-support-for-prison-leavers-to-reduce-reoffending/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reoffending analysis for a sample of offenders who completed the Niacro Job Track Programme during 2010-11, Northern Ireland Data Lab Bulletin1/2015 (May 2015).

^{iv} Page 82, Northern Ireland Audit Office Report, 2023.

^v “Improving Resettlement Support for Prison Leavers to Reduce Reoffending - Nao Report,” National Audit Office (NAO), June 19, 2023, <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/improving-resettlement-support-for-prison-leavers-to-reduce-reoffending/>.

^{vi} Source: DoJ Sentencing Review, 2019 - [chapter-6-----community-sentencing-22.10.19.pdf](#)