



When Pandemic Strikes:

NIACRO's
Experience and
the Changing
Needs in our new
Environment

niacro news



Impact of COVID-19

How the pandemic affected
operations and service users



Employer Survey

A Study looking at Employer
Attitudes of Hiring People with
Criminal Convictions



Policy Influencing

The Rights of Children Whose
Mother is Sentenced by Criminal
Courts

Welcome to the latest edition of NIACRO News!

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We publish this journal to share with readers the story of how we work to achieve our aims of supporting adults in the community and prison, children and young people and families affected by imprisonment.

In March 2020, all of our ways of working, how we interact with others and our wellbeing was affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. It affected all sectors, causing stress and disruption to organisations/departments/business owners about how they could keep delivering services and products, pay the bills and their staff and keep everyone safe from the virus.

The pandemic has tested resiliency and adaptability in our professional and personal lives. Social distancing moved our workspaces into our living rooms, bedrooms, or kitchens, and our usual interactions became virtual and more planned.

In our 43rd issue of NIACRO News, we will share with you some of the ways we responded across our services to continue to improve outcomes for those in prison and in communities during the early phases of the pandemic. We will also highlight key

events and achievements that took place prior to the pandemic, and what we are currently focusing on as we seek to reboot our operations.

Among other things the pandemic has provided opportunities to address gaps. We will look at this on page 13 as guest columnist Dr Shona Minson describes the impact on children of a parent serving a custodial sentence and how she strengthened judicial guidelines in England and Wales to ensure the courts have information as to how their sentencing will impact dependents. She then makes the case for Northern Ireland adopting the same measures.

As we know holding down a paid job can be the best way to reduce re-offending, yet many recruiters still ask about criminal convictions too early in the application process leading to many people being excluded from employment opportunities. We share results of our employer study where we found that 97% of employers we surveyed believe that rehabilitation of people with criminal convictions is possible. The results are promising as we begin to advocate for Ban the Box. Find out more on page 10.

NIACRO will continue to sustain vital and essential programmes, no matter what challenges lie ahead or what our new normal will look like. We hope you enjoy this issue.

Thanks for reading,

The Editor



Feedback

If you have feedback on any aspect of NIACRO News or would like to contribute to the next issue, please contact our Public Affairs and Communication department by emailing:





Aspire project worker Donna receives her Skills for Justice qualification from DoJ Permanent Secretary Peter May

Peter May- DoJ Permanent Secretary Visits NIACRO



In our previous issue of NIACRO News, we highlighted how collaboration between the Voluntary/Community Sector and statutory agencies strengthens support for those inside and outside of the Criminal Justice System. In late February 2020, the Department of Justice Permanent Secretary visited NIACRO.

During the visit, Permanent Secretary Peter May heard from a panel of NIACRO staff about how our programmes align with, and complement, the Department of Justice 2019-2022 Corporate Plan priorities as follows:

- Embed a Culture of Lawfulness
- Support Safe and Resilient Communities
- Address Harm and Vulnerability
- Challenge Offending Behaviours and Support Rehabilitation

Embed a Culture of Lawfulness:

Staff from Aspire, a Probation Board programme funded through the Tackling Paramilitarism Task Force (TPTF), discussed the one-to-one support we provide to young men (aged 16-30), helping them to face the challenges associated with criminality. Peter May heard how those supported by Aspire have increasingly complex and chaotic lifestyles, with many basic needs not being met. Our mentors help to bring much-needed stability, especially concerning addictions, poor mental health, and issues with accommodation.



Peter May, with NIACRO CEO Olwen Lyner, listening to Senior Practitioner Mark Johnston from the Get Real project.

Support Safe and Resilient Communities:

APAC (Assisting People and Communities) staff outlined how they provide home-based early-stage intervention support for people at risk of losing tenancies because of anti-social behaviour. Similar to Aspire, issues of addiction often contribute to the service users' situations. APAC identifies and addresses needs through assessment and individualised action plans, working with people to help support a secure housing outcome.

Address Harm and Vulnerability:

NIACRO Family Links staff spoke about our work to address harm and vulnerability by supporting family members of people in prison with practical and emotional issues e.g. visits to prison, changes to financial circumstances, and supporting children to deal with changes in the household. Family Links offers three tiers of support for children dealing with the impact of imprisonment in the family, providing both early age and early-stage intervention. Family Links receives about 1,500 referrals from people in prison every year. The service also includes events to help build families' social networks and provide opportunities to meet with staff from the Prison Service to build engagement.

Challenge Offending Behaviour and Support Rehabilitation

Get Real¹ and Working Well² are projects which serve to challenge offending behaviour and support rehabilitation.

Get Real works to support those involved in hate crimes and challenge prejudices through restorative interventions, community education programmes and diversity training for statutory agencies and front-line workers.



Peter May meets with some of NIACRO's Executive Committee members.

Working Well is a Northern Ireland wide employability support programme for people with convictions with services located in prisons and the community, supported by specialist disclosure advice. Education and employability are confirmed as positive contributors to rehabilitation and the prevention of reoffending.

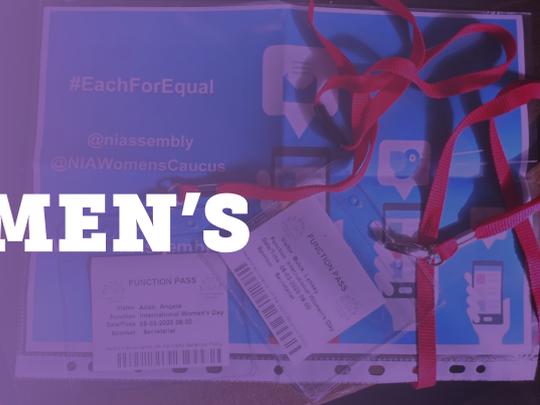
There was also a recognition event for NIACRO staff who had completed Skills for Justice accredited qualifications, with the Permanent Secretary presenting them with these certificates.

Peter May's visit confirmed NIACRO's position as a valued partner for the Department of Justice, working collaboratively towards Outcome 7 of the Programme for Government; "having a safe community where we respect the law and each other".

1 A project supported by the European Union's Peace IV programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

2 Part-funded through the Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme 2014-2022 and the Department for the Economy.

Young Women invited to **INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION**



Young people from NIACRO were delighted to be chosen to attend this year's 'International Women's Day' celebration event in the Assembly Chamber at Stormont, Parliament Buildings.

On Friday 6th March the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Alex Maskey MLA, hosted a special debate with more than ninety young women aged 16-18, representing a mix of schools and youth organisations. Three young women attended from our Independent Representation (IR) and Independent Visitor (IV) Schemes, accompanied by our project workers Angela Adair and Lynsey Buick.

The theme was 'Each for Equal' and young women delivered speeches on issues ranging from women's health and education, to the need to increase and better support women participating in politics, the workplace and society. Issues discussed included the **#metoo** movement, mental health awareness and period poverty, and we were delighted that one of our young people was chosen to have her poem read aloud that described being a young woman in the care system.

The award-winning poem 'Care Kids', written by a now 16-year-old NIACRO IR participant¹, describes her experiences of care and how it feels to be a young woman in the system. Her poem, which won the National Overall prize for the 14-17 age category of the 'Solstice Prize for Young Writers', and features in their 2019 anthology, was read by Angela to the Stormont audience.

The poem received great praise and we have received correspondence from a few people since; "Please let (the poet) know that since the event I have been asked by a teacher who attended the event with her school to pass her poem on. She was so moved by her words. Well done to Angela for reading it out - the words are so powerful and need to be heard.

Many of our staff became emotional throughout the event and the words have stayed with them. They talked about the poem in our recent meeting after the event and how moving it was". Nichola Mallon MLA has also since written to say, "the poem stopped everyone in their tracks" and that she would like to call into Lakewood or write to the poet to tell her how powerful her poem is.

Our young people had such an extraordinary and enjoyable experience at Stormont and said they would love to attend next year if possible. The event has given them an insight into the power of young women's voices and how important it is to come together as a collective to celebrate and advocate. They could see and hear from the various contributors on the day how adversities and inequalities can be channeled and challenged into something positive, and we are confident that this experience has greatly boosted these young people's sense of empowerment.



1 <http://www.writingeastmidlands.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SOLSTICE-2019-ANTHOLOGY-FINAL-PUBLICATION.pdf>

Care KIDS

Tammi-Leigh Ferrin (15)

We scream, we shout, we kick and slam doors
But no one understands the pain we've been
through before.
We take drugs and get drunk till we can't feel
pain no more.
Then bring us to secure accommodation where
we're locked behind 12 doors.
You will never see us cry, not even a tear
Cause we have learnt a sign of weakness is
something to be feared.
We smile, we laugh but that is our fake mask.
All our wee hearts are broke, and some can't be
fixed
We have all learnt to deal with our problems
through fighting with our fists.
We have no place to call home, always feeling
alone.
Sick of hearing "phone call at 6", "LAC meeting
tomorrow"
"these are the rules that you have to follow"
"family contact at 9" "core meeting at 10"
Everything we say you write down with a pen.
"you can't be with him, nor with her, we're only
saying this because we care"
It's like we are all screaming for help, but no one
can hear,
But we can't ask for help because that's also
something to be feared.
We fall asleep wondering why we weren't
enough
We wake up every morning more emotionally
tough,
Like nothing in this world would ever bother us.
We fall in love with each other but it's not love;

it's just lust,
Because how could we love anyone else when
we think no one loves us?
The sad thing is we would do anything to make
sure someone else isn't bad
because we know what it's like to feel so sad.
We still stand tall even though it's been tough
Even though it's been hard, even though it's been
rough.
We miss our friends a lot, and family so much,
and would
Do anything to get back in touch.
We use and abuse but you blame and accuse,
You type up on the computer your views
For your next meeting to review our behaviour
You make my life decisions based on a piece of
paper.
We run away, need a place to stay, countless
drug debts that we cannot pay.
We sell our clothes, we sell our shoes, for any drug
for us to use.
Something needs to be done. Something needs
to change.
But if things go wrong you are not to blame
We need more support we need more love.
After all we are all still very young, and such a
cruel world we live among
I hope and pray that every care kid makes it to
the light at the end of the tunnel.

Introducing you to Fiona Greene - NIACRO's New Director of Operations



After a thorough and robust recruitment process, NIACRO is happy to introduce you to Fiona Greene, our new Director of Operations.

The Director of Operations role is a newly defined role within NIACRO's Senior Leadership Team to help provide direction and leadership in the delivery of high-quality services in line with our strategy, contractual commitments and values.

Fiona comes to NIACRO with a wealth of experience. Having studied law at Queen's University, Fiona has been working in the Voluntary/Community sector for 26 years. She comes to us after serving as the Director of Care for Northern Ireland Chest, Heart & Stroke where she was the senior lead for all services and client programmes; before that she was Policy and Strategy Manager with Victim Support NI.

Fiona also has vast experience serving on various voluntary boards across Northern Ireland, recently as Chair of the Long-Term Conditions Alliance NI, and is currently a board member with Law Centre NI.

She has always been driven by a professional focus on social justice issues, collaboration and partnership building, efficient service development and influencing policy.

When asked how her induction has been and what she is most excited to accomplish at NIACRO, she had this to say:

"Since I started in May I have been blown away by the work that NIACRO is doing, and by the level of commitment displayed by everyone across the organisation. I am very happy to be back in the area of Criminal Justice and to have a role that involves supporting the development and delivery of services and programmes that are making a real difference to the people we are here to help. While a lot of my time so far has been spent meeting staff and external agencies via Zoom, I have enjoyed socially distanced working from the office recently and meeting my colleagues in person! I know that as we approach our 50th-year NIACRO is in a strong position to meet the challenges ahead, and I am looking forward to making my own contribution to the organisation's legacy as well as achieving outcomes for our service users."

Welcome aboard, Fiona!

The Buildings are Closed but at NIACRO it's Business as Usual



In response to the Coronavirus outbreak, we've had to change how we do things while continuing to meet the needs of our service users.

In March we found ourselves in a rapidly developing situation requiring us to consider guidance from the Public Health Agency, the local Assembly and our funders and partners. Our initial priority was to ensure we could continue to deliver our range of services but also to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

As the situation unfolded and with the requirement to "follow the science", we ceased group work and risk assessed face to face working and the access to our buildings. Staff who worked in host locations like prisons, understandably became unable to work there as before.

In anticipation of a mandatory lockdown, we planned for our people to be able to work from home, ensuring they had the right equipment and connection to do so.

When lockdown came into effect on the 23rd March kitchen tables became an office desk, and a new way of working took hold!

With a strong commitment to supporting our service users during these difficult times and with our offices closed to the public, we immediately set up a Helpline for people to be able to contact us for support. A freephone number alongside our normal main number was opened and widely publicised through social media and through our partners,

offering support in a range of areas including: Benefits & Welfare; Managing Money & Budgeting; Accessing Accommodation; Identification Support; Opening Bank Accounts; Health & Wellbeing; Family Support as well as support with Employment or Education and Training.

We are continuing to provide support through our helpline which is opened, Monday to Thursday 9.30 am to 4.30 pm and Friday 9.30 am – 4.00 pm. We have staff answering calls and responding to email queries, connecting people to the right services depending on their needs.

If you require any further support or information please contact us on 028 90320157 or 0800 169 2207 or email admin@niacro.co.uk.

We have worked closely with all our partners and funders during the pandemic, it was business as usual as far as possible with the majority of our services continuing to deliver remotely through telephone and online support. This support was particularly important during the early release of prisoners under the Prison Service COVID-19 Early Release scheme.



The use of technology has been an important factor in providing us with the opportunity for connection with both staff and service users during this time. A range of events have been organised with our staff and volunteers to try to maintain social interactions.

Technologies have also been adopted by the Prison Service to facilitate 'virtual visits' allowing families to maintain contact with family members in prison. Whilst the technology is useful, NIACRO acknowledges the importance of face to face contact in supporting the wellbeing of families who may struggle even more without it. Moving forward we are committed to working with the Prison Service on a menu of ways in which contact between those in prison and their families and friends could be supported.

In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic we have been continuously assessing and adapting our service delivery models to respond to the developing situation. We are now engaged in a rolling review of what we have learned which will guide us as we work towards defining our 'new normal'. We have completed risk assessments and are guided by new protocols for working in the office and with service users in different settings. Our recovery plans are mindful that we need to stay in step with key partners and our funders. A key strength of NIACRO has been our adaptability and resilience. We need to ensure that the lessons that we have learned about the adaptations that can be helpful in delivering services are sustained as we move forward stronger and with focus.

NIACRO is committed to continuing to provide our vital services and programmes to our service users and meeting the expectations of our partners and funders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to safely do this, we designated the 7th of September as our 'Reboot' Day. To safely mitigate and prepare for this day, NIACRO's Senior Leadership Team:

- Sought advice from our Insurers
- Closely worked in line with partners and funders
- Consulted staff and the Union
- Developed staff rotas to maintain social distancing
- Assigned workspaces to be used when in the office
- Supported travel to work plans
- Introduced staggered start and finish times
- Established team recovery plans - expectations and instructions for face to face contact with service users
- Provided instructions to Team Leaders to go through with staff on returning to offices
- Developed new risk assessments for NIACRO buildings and external staff locations
- Agreed new safety protocols
- Continues to support working at home as appropriate during this recovery period

For the foreseeable future all visitors to our offices need to come via appointment only. All services are accessible by calling the Helpline numbers.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON HIRING PEOPLE WITH CONVICTIONS IN NORTHERN IRELAND



In November 2019, NIACRO surveyed 115 employers across a range of sectors, to gain insight into employer practices and concerns, and to investigate what may encourage employers to hire people with convictions.

The survey coincided with efforts by the Department of Justice, working with Business in the Community Northern Ireland, to raise the profile of the “**Ban the Box**” initiative in Northern Ireland. Ban the Box is campaigning to remove the tick box regarding convictions on the application form and thereby reduce the possibility of discrimination.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

The survey results indicate that overall, employers have positive attitudes towards people with convictions in Northern Ireland; we found that the majority of employers:

- **WOULD CONSIDER HIRING SOMEONE WITH A CONVICTION**

Less than 1% of employers would “definitely not” consider hiring someone with a conviction, with the remainder of the responses broken down in Figure 1.

Would you consider hiring someone with a conviction?

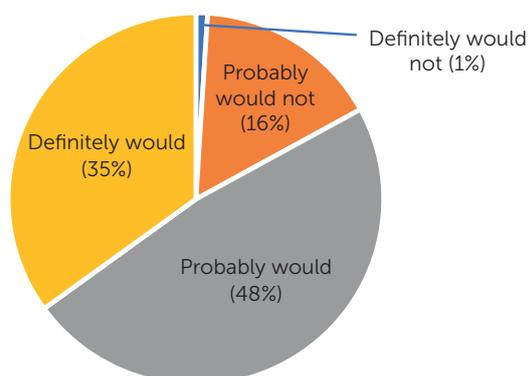


Figure 1.

- **PRIORITISE SAFETY:**

The safety of current employees and/or clients is employers’ main concern when considering employing people with convictions.

- **WANT TO BE FAIR:**

Promisingly, 97% of employers believe that rehabilitation of people with convictions is possible. This is perhaps because 85% of survey respondents know someone with a conviction, and 61% have worked with someone with a conviction.

RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

Working Well’s Disclosure Team regularly support employers to implement fair and transparent recruitment processes with respect to hiring people with convictions, so we were interested to learn about employers’ practices. We discovered that:

- 28% of employers are unsure if they have a policy, or statement, of non-discrimination towards people with convictions.

Employers with such a policy/statement in place felt more confident about knowing when to ask applicants about convictions and felt more informed and supported about the recruitment process.

- 82% of employers ask applicants to disclose convictions on the application form, but only 36% give applicants an opportunity to provide explanations for their convictions;

This means as many as 64% of those applying for jobs are not currently being given a chance to explain their convictions on the application form.

Further findings addressed:

WHAT WOULD MAKE EMPLOYERS FEEL SAFE?

Employers identified the following as helpful means by which they would feel safer employing people with convictions:

- **Proof of Rehabilitation**

Disclosure statements enable applicants to explain the circumstances that led to their offence and conviction(s) and to demonstrate how they have moved forward since. These statements have an important role in informing a potential employer, helping them to understand the individual's circumstances and how they have rehabilitated since the offence.

- **More Resources**

Employers feel there is a lack of information and support regarding employing people with convictions.

Access NI's Assessment tool which helps prospective employers to risk assess employing an individual with a conviction, and NIACRO's Employers' Guide, are beneficial in informing and supporting employers to hire people with convictions.

WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE FAIR RECRUITMENT?

- **Corporate Social Responsibility Recognition**

An award or accreditation for employers, that confirms good practices and a willingness to support people with convictions into employment.

- **Positive Balanced Media**

The media often promotes a stereotype of people with convictions and yet this study has shown employers' main concern is safety. Positive media stories, such as employer testimonies, may help employers to overcome fears associated with hiring people with convictions.

WHAT WOULD ENCOURAGE CONSISTENCY?

- **Clear Policies and Procedures**

The survey highlighted how beneficial policies or statements of non-discrimination towards hiring people with convictions can help in building employers' confidence and sense of being informed and supported.

NIACRO recommends that employers have clear policies and procedures in place regarding employing people with convictions, and that they are supported by organisations such as NIACRO to do so.

- **Work Placements**

The survey results tell us that the more experience employers have, the more likely they are to hire people with convictions, so programmes that support these interactions are vital.

Work placements provide invaluable opportunities for employers and people with convictions to meet to build their confidence to support successful future recruitment.

CRIMINAL RECORD CHECKS

- **Most Employers conduct Criminal Record Checks**

When asked whether checks are carried out, the response breakdown was:

>>	Yes	44%
>>	No	15%
>>	Depends on role	35%
>>	Unsure	6%

- **Practice Varies**

Whilst it is encouraging that the majority make applicants aware at advertisement and application form stage, a number of employers are making applicants aware of this too late in the process. We advocate for making all applicants aware of their intention to carry out checks early in the process.

Stage in Process when People are Informed Criminal Record Check will be conducted

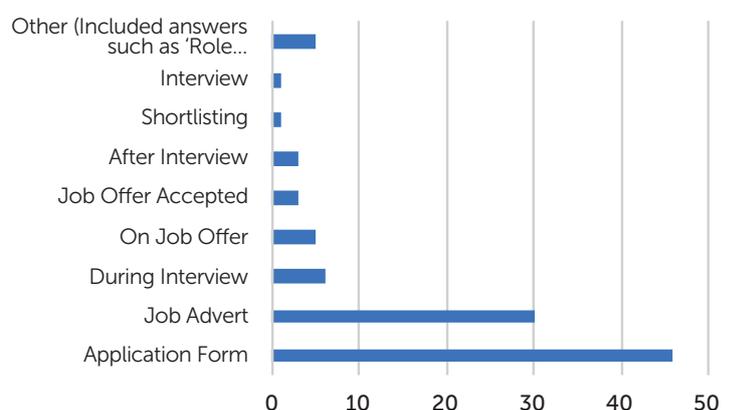


Figure 2.

Figure 3 summarises the breakdown of types of checks being conducted.

Criminal Record Check Required

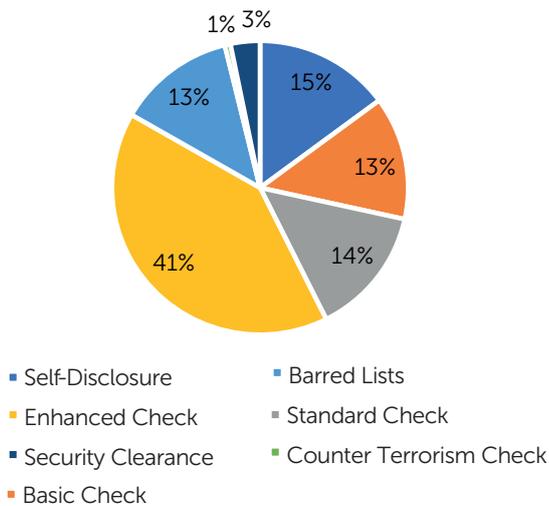


Figure 3.

The table above tells us that a significant majority of respondents to the survey required an Enhanced Access NI background check. The types of organisation who require this level of check are usually (but not exclusively), those in statutory agencies, the healthcare sector, educational provision and in those sectors dealing with confidential or financial information. This correlates directly with the most recent Access NI statistics on applications for the three main levels of check available. Access NI has in fact seen increases in the applications for the Enhanced check level whilst at the same time seeing decreases in applications for the Basic and Standard levels on a year on year basis.

The survey highlighted generally positive and encouraging attitudes amongst Northern Ireland’s employers, yet there are inconsistencies in practice that indicate that employers will continue to need guidance if we are to eradicate the possibility of unfair discrimination. In particular, we found that most people with convictions still don’t get a chance to explain their convictions on the application form. This can mean employers consider the conviction primarily and not the merits of the particular applicant including the circumstances surrounding the conviction. By ‘Banning the Box’, it is more likely that employers will consider the applicant and not the conviction.

Working Well and Employment Outcomes during COVID19

The Working Well team has continued to provide employability support to participants referred by our partners PBNI and NIPS during the COVID-19 crisis. By adapting our approach, we are pleased to say that between April and June we continued to achieve the following outcomes during this very uncertain time. We:

- Enrolled over 90 participants
- Supported 39 participants into paid employment
- Progressed 49 participants into further education and training.

“I would just like to thank you for all the help, (worker) has went above and beyond to help me! I cannot thank her enough!!” **Participant**

“I feel working with (worker) has been really helpful, she is always on hand if I have any queries. She has done so much to help me, thank you.” **PBNI Area Manager**

“The Lockdown from 23/3/20 made a profound impact upon our agency and threatened to not only disrupt but possibly end so much established work with partner agencies. I am happy to report that whilst there was some disruption, our team was able to continue to make referrals to Working Well. A major factor in maintaining this was the willingness and ingenuity of NIACRO staff to adapt to telephone support and other means of communication. PBNI staff reported good levels of communication and felt that WW was continuing to offer and deliver a service to our clients.” **PBNI Area Manager – July 2020**

We would like to thank Hannah Brown for facilitating the study and the following organisations for supporting and promoting the survey:



SHOULD COURTS CONSIDER THE IMPACTS ON CHILDREN WHEN A MOTHER OR PRIMARY CARER IS SENTENCED?

By Dr Shona Minson



Dr Shona Minson is a British Academy Research Fellow at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford. Formerly a barrister her research focuses on the rights of children whose parents are sentenced in the criminal courts.

Since 2012 my research has focused on the rights of children whose mother is sentenced by the criminal courts.

When fathers are imprisoned most children remain with their mothers in their home but 95% of children whose mother goes to prison have to leave their family home. The immediate consequences for such children are wide-reaching and affect every area of their lives. They change carer, home and school and are often separated from siblings. They may move into increased poverty, experience stigma and shame and develop behavioral problems.

Impact begins at imprisonment but does not end with the mother's release. Children who have experienced parental imprisonment are less likely to be in education, training or employment in later life, are more likely to have mental health and addiction problems and are likely to earn less than their counterparts aged 30. A recent study found that children who experienced maternal imprisonment were more likely to die before the age of 65 than their peers.

Although in England and Wales case law and Sentencing Guidelines have, since 2011, made it clear that there should be consideration of child dependents in sentencing decisions, this was not always known or acted upon by sentencers¹. However, since 2018 there has been a growing recognition that all sentencing decisions must properly take account of the impact of sentence on dependent children. A series of films, *Safeguarding Children when Sentencing Mothers*, based on my research on this topic and providing information on both the duties on sentencers and impacts of maternal imprisonment on children, are now used in training for the judiciary, probation, solicitors and barristers. In 2019 the Parliamentary



Dr Minson with Children & Family Services Programmes Manager Tracey Gillen, and former NIACRO Deputy CEO, Donnie Sweeney

Joint Committee on Human Rights undertook an inquiry into the right to family life of children whose mothers are imprisoned, and their report included recommendations about sentencing practice. Following that enquiry, the Sentencing Council published a 'General Guideline: Overarching Principles' in October 2019 which provides an 'Expanded Explanation' of the mitigating factor 'sole or primary carer for dependent children'. It now states that in every case where the defendant is the primary or sole carer for dependents, it is the court's duty to ensure that it has information about the impact of any sentence, custodial or non-custodial, on those dependents. It confirms that the impact of a custodial sentence on dependents may make a sentence disproportionate. It also requires the court to consider the impact of imprisonment on pregnant women and on their unborn babies.

These changes go some way to addressing the problem of treating children separated from their parents in family proceedings in one way, whilst treating children separated from their parents in criminal proceedings in another.

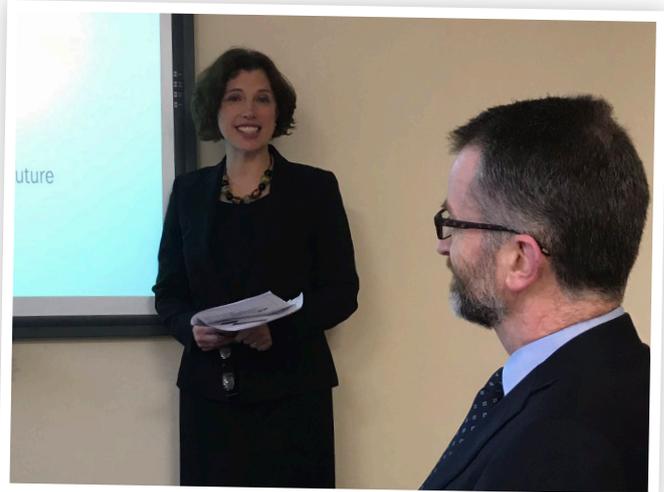
1 Shona Minson (2019) *Maternal Sentencing and the Rights of the Child*, Palgrave

In family proceedings the child's best interests are the paramount consideration of the court and they are protected by the Children Act 1989, neither of which apply in criminal proceedings. This differentiated treatment is discriminatory and breaches Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which the UK has ratified. The approach is previously taken in adult criminal sentencing also breached Articles 3, 12 and 20 of that Convention (a child's best interests are a primary consideration of any court, a child has a right to be heard in any matters concerning them, and the state has a duty to support children separated from their parents). A child's right to family life under Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 must also be respected and considered.

In Northern Ireland, the guideline case on the sentencing of mothers is the case of R v Conlon from February 1997, and the judgement relies on cases heard in the English Court of Appeal in the 1980s. Those authorities are now out of date and do not reflect the increased understanding of the lifelong detrimental effects the imprisonment of a primary carer can have on children.

The Scottish judiciary has been involved in making a Scottish specific set of training films on the issue, and the idea has also been mooted

with all those involved in sentencing in Northern Ireland. Although the numbers of children affected each year by the imprisonment of a primary carer may be small in the region, the impacts on those children will affect the rest of their lives. It may be time for Northern Ireland to ensure that its practices are in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.



In November 2019 Shona presented her research findings at NIACRO to an invited audience of representatives from DoJ, PBNI, NIPS, Judicial Studies Board and individuals from academia and the legal profession. There was an appetite to see a series of films, or similar, be developed for training the judiciary, probation, solicitors and barristers in Northern Ireland.

An Interview with Barry McMullan and Hannah Brown About Launching NIACRO's Money Supporter Pilot

NIACRO's Money Supporter Pilot, (Working Age/New Parents) launched in January 2020. Funded by the Money and Pensions Service, the Pilot is designed to empower practitioners and families with the aim of embedding money guidance in the delivery of existing services.

The overriding objective of the Money Supporter Pilot is to "provide training for practitioners who are already engaged with the target populations to give them the confidence, knowledge and skills to deliver money guidance alongside their existing support services."

The Pilot was intended to run for 6 months but due to COVID-19 it was extended to the end of September 2020. Hannah Brown was appointed in February to the post of Project Worker to the Money Supporter Pilot. Here, in an interview with Barry McMullan, (Senior Practitioner for Adult Services), Hannah explains her involvement with the Money Supporter Pilot (MSP).

BMcM: Hannah, can you explain the original project design and target groups for the Money Supporter Pilot (MSP)?

HB: The Money Supporter Pilot was developed to build the confidence, knowledge and skills of staff in our Family and Children's Services, supporting them to engage parents they support in conversations about money, financial capability and financial inclusion. A second aim of the project was to encourage parents to complete the training, support them to learn more about managing their finances, and help them build the skills and knowledge needed to share these insights with others who are in similar situations. The

training was intended to be delivered by an AdviceNI tutor to groups of 12 (staff and then parents) in NIACRO's offices.

BMcM: How have we incorporated co-design into the MSP and what are the benefits?

HB: We worked very closely with the staff and parents, who would be completing the training whilst designing the project. Initially, we met with the staff and a representative from AdviceNI to explore staff's expectations of the training, including what they hoped to achieve and what they would like to learn. This information was then used by AdviceNI when developing the training and assessments. Following this, along with a facilitator from St. Giles Trust, we met a group of parents who had shown interest in completing the training and again asked for their input into the design of the project. This included what supports they may require to enable them to complete the training, as well as what format the training should take to make it most accessible. Overall co-design has been a vital factor in this project, and it has ensured the training was manageable for learners and that it met their expectations.

BMcM: In March the momentum of the pilot had a setback when COVID-19 forced a shutdown of the traditional tutor-led training-room based training format. How did you respond to this challenge?

HB: This was a challenge! We had completed a ½ day of training with staff when a concern related to COVID-19 meant that the training had to be stopped. After this, events led to staff working from home etc. which meant the training was not able to occur as planned. We worked closely with the staff and parents to discuss how we could adapt the training to continue. Thankfully AdviceNI adapted the training and were able to offer it in an online format, meaning it could be completed around existing workloads and commitments.

BMcM: Did moving to an online model of delivery present any difficulties for participants? What support/back-up did you offer?

HB: The staff in particular appeared to appreciate the online format, it seemed useful that they were able to work it around their existing workloads. With regards to parents there were also some who preferred this format, particularly those who were not comfortable interacting in a group. They seemed pleased that it could be completed from home, as and when suited them. There have been some difficulties, particularly surrounding parents' IT skills and access to electronic devices, however, with supports provided by me and AdviceNI, we have been able to overcome these difficulties and make adaptations based on their needs. AdviceNI have been very flexible and adaptive.

BMcM: What were the challenges in getting families to participate in the MSP?

HB: I found it challenging to recruit parents to engage in the training, particularly with the COVID-19 pandemic, as training was not a priority. For the parents we had already recruited to the Pilot, the difficulty was maintaining their interest and motivation especially when we were reshaping the training from a classroom-based model to an online model and timeframes were shifting from those originally proposed. However, through ongoing contact and updating parents as developments happened, an understanding relationship evolved which ensured parents persevered with the process.

BMcM: Have training beneficiaries enjoyed the training? What have they learned from the process? How will they use the learning in their own communities?

HB: To date all beneficiaries appear to have enjoyed the training. Staff practitioners completed evaluations and it showed an average increase of 30% across their skills, competencies, confidence and knowledge in the topics covered by the training, and generally showed positive feedback saying the training was very informative and that they appreciated being able to work it around their existing workloads. Parents who have completed the training to date have also provided positive feedback, finding the training to be very informative. They found it to be a fantastic opportunity to learn something new and indicated that the information learnt will be very useful and they are excited to use the information and tools to help support themselves, and their families and friends.

BMcM: How many people have completed the training to date?

HB: To date 15 staff have completed the training and successfully received an OCN qualification. 12 parents were registered for the training and 6 parents have successfully completed the training with 4 of them receiving an OCN qualification. (This element was voluntary for parents). There are still 2 more groups due to complete the training; 24 learners consisting of NIACRO staff, external organisation staff, and more parents.

BMcM: Is there potential for MSP to be upscaled?

HB: I think there is definitely potential for the MSP to be upscaled. There is a lack of availability of this type of training for both parents and staff, as has been identified by the strong interest after offering this training to external organisations. I believe the MSP has provided useful training, and tools, that can be used in many ways that would increase financial capability.

Already Chaotic and Then a Pandemic Strikes: How Aspire Continues to Provide Support to Young Men Moving Away from Offending Behaviour

NIACRO's Aspire Community Engagement works with marginalised young men between the ages of 16 and 30. Part of the Aspire programme, funded under Tackling Paramilitary Task Force, it supports those who are at risk of becoming involved or further involved in criminality.

The programme employs five mentors who provide much-needed practical and emotional support to these young men, many of whom have been recently released from short sentences in prison but are not subject to Probation supervision. Our partners in this work are NI Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland.

The role of an Aspire mentor often involves being an advocate when dealing with statutory agencies. We accompany clients on visits to the Housing Executive, Universal Credit and GP surgeries. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many of these services to close their offices to the public and move their provision online. This article looks at how NIACRO mentors have continued to provide a service during the pandemic lockdown.

The concern for mentors at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis was that all agency offices were closing which left questions about how this would impact their clients - but most services adapted quickly to the new arrangements. We were recognised as one of a number of trusted partners by the Benefits Agency and the Department for Communities, and worked closely together on complex issues with benefits applications or adjustments to benefits that our service users were experiencing.

One mentor observed: "It has been impressive to see how well some organisations have responded to the lockdown. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive was very quick to make adaptations especially in relation to the provision of quality emergency housing for single men. Once the lockdown started, hostel beds were impossible to get but the Housing Executive has gone the extra mile to get our clients housing during the crisis."

Another mentor, who has been with NIACRO for 10 years, said the lockdown had also provided an opportunity to work more closely with the

NIHE; "The Housing Executive has been very proactive in securing accommodation for our clients. I have also noticed that as we are adapting to new ways of working, I feel I have built up a better relationship with individual Housing Officers."

As well as practical help, mentors also provide emotional support. For staff, this is one of the most rewarding aspects of the job and social distancing measures have had an impact on clients' mental health. One mentor said: "Lockdown took away a crucial element of the service-meeting with clients in person. Working face to face with service users is important in building and maintaining a trusting, professional relationship."

"Although I can continue doing the practical part of the job from home, being remote creates a barrier to building those relationships. Having said that we have been in constant telephone contact with clients, and we are looking forward to a phased return to face to face interactions."

Yet, despite everything, mentors have been able to continue to deliver support. "Clients are still engaging which I feel reflects the quality of service we are offering. Despite the extremely challenging circumstances I know that we in NIACRO responded brilliantly by continuing to support all our clients."

While the current situation is far from perfect, we are able to get our clients the practical services they need and now with the easing of restrictions, we look forward to beginning to support our clients' emotional and psychological needs too."





NO NORMAL DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ASPIRE PROJECT WORKER

BY NAOMI DAVIS



What is a typical day of an Aspire Project Worker? Prior to lockdown, the appointments in my diary changed that regularly due to the needs of our service users that I couldn't pinpoint what a 'typical day' was.

COVID-19 has brought upon us additional challenges in an ever-demanding role, due to the often-chaotic lifestyle of our service users. Some other agencies and resources we rely on daily to fulfil our role have either ceased or limited their services – so for many of our young men, we are their only support.

The most demanding issue for our clients is accommodation. However, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) has been very proactive in securing temporary accommodation for these young men. I have liaised with various Housing Officers to review housing points and as we are adapting to a new way of working together, I feel I have built up a better relationship with individual Housing Officers. On the downside, only a few of our service users were offered their own tenancies due to COVID-19 restrictions so we now have many on the housing list with high points but NIHE is unable to offer them their own tenancies.

People who were newly referred to Aspire during this pandemic are not benefiting from the face to face contact that we ordinarily provide which I believe is a vital part of the service. We are working so closely with these young men supporting them with their mental health issues, drug issues, accommodation, strained relationships to name a few whilst never actually meeting them face to face. It is difficult to build a picture of how these young men are really coping and to gauge all of their needs as we are reliant on the information they provide by telephone. Face to face contact enables us to build up a better rapport, encouraging them to discuss personal issues with us so that they

can receive the appropriate support. I can't imagine discussing my thoughts and feelings by telephone, yet during this crisis it has been our only option.

Mental health and addiction services are also not offering face to face contact and yet many of our clients, due to mental health issues and previous experiences, are wary of telephone assessments and are reluctant to engage. Although I have emphasised the importance of face to face contact, my engagement levels with these young men are high as we are their only support service. Many of the young men who were engaging with Aspire prior to lockdown have all stated how they have missed meeting me face to face as they are feeling very isolated. I have noticed a decline in the young men's mental health due to the lack of face to face contact with support services.

Aspire has been busier since lockdown and I never expected it to be as busy as it has been. Prior to lockdown I would have supported a service user by taking them to an appointment or advocating on their behalf. Now, I have had to make numerous telephone calls back and forth with stakeholders and service users to get permission to advocate on their behalf or ring round to find who can help us when other supports have ceased. What may have been a thirty-minute face to face appointment is now a few hours of emails and telephone. The NIACRO team have been of great support to one another during this difficult time and will continue to do so as the situation unfolds.

Reflections from Delivering Get Real

Get Real, supported by the European Union's Peace IV programme and managed by the Special EU Programmes Body, seeks to challenge hate crime using restorative practice principles and approaches.

We do this through three separate yet connecting Strands:

- **Strand 1** - Get Real about Justice: restorative practice interventions with those who have offended and victims of hate crime or hate incidents
- **Strand 2** - Get Real about Identity: an 8-week OCN level 2 training programme 'Using Restorative Processes to Challenge Hate Crime'
- **Strand 3** - Get Real about Society: cultural awareness and hate crime training delivered to criminal justice agencies across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, all our delivery was halted in March 2020. The Get Real team then started to explore how we could continue to offer our programme despite lockdown



restrictions. We adapted our Strand 2 sessions to be delivered via Zoom over 6 x 2-hour sessions. In May we began Zoom virtual delivery to three groups totalling 34 people. Interest continued in the Strand and we are currently exploring future remote delivery with other community groups.

We are exploring socially distanced delivery dates for Strand 3 with statutory organisations. With agreement pre-lockdown to deliver to 150 PBN staff, we are also looking at delivery for our partners in Probation Service of Ireland, (PSI), and the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI). We're still accepting referrals for Strand 1 but with the suspension of many court hearings, referrals have slowed down.

We have found over the lifetime of Get Real that, despite a lot of interest in Strands 2 and 3, the number of referrals for Strand 1 did not reflect reports regarding instances of hate crime. Proportionally, Northern Ireland has a reported hate crime ratio in excess of England and Wales with eight hate incidents reported

every day. Despite this, no specific offence of "hate crime" exists in Northern Ireland law and referrals of those who had been engaged in hate related incidents and crimes for Strand 1 were low, despite many efforts to promote the opportunity.

In the recent Review of Hate Crime Legislation led by Judge Des Marrinan, he reported:



"There can be no doubt that the current law is not working and our role is to establish how we can make it better."¹

However, making 'it better' does not necessarily mean harsher punishments. What we have found, and what we in NIACRO believe, is that a more appropriate approach for dealing with hate crime is through restorative practices and principles. Giving those who offend the opportunity to hear of the harm and impact of their actions and to give the victim a voice is a more positive approach which holds greater potential to change attitudes and behaviours. Education goes a long way towards challenging and changing behaviour motivated by hate.

We need to see changes to the legislation that will equip the courts to manage hate crimes more effectively to address issues that lie behind hate crime. We hope that when the recommendations are published following the Independent Hate Crime Review led by Judge Desmond Marrinan² they will reflect a positive approach to addressing hate-motivated behaviour, an approach which benefits the person who has offended, their victim(s) and the wider community.

Get Real will be ending in Spring 2021 but we hope that the legacy of the project's learning will educate and motivate others, within NIACRO and beyond, to continue this work. We believe it is important that restorative opportunities are open to all communities

1 www.agendani.com/hate-crime-legislation-review

2 See NIACRO's response to this public consultation here: https://www.niacro.co.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/NIA-CRO%20Final_Hate%20Crime%20Review%20Consultation_%202028%20April.pdf

across Northern Ireland and delivered by an accredited organisation with appropriately trained and experienced staff.

By the start of the final year, (April 2020), our Strand 2 sessions had already exceeded the target figure set for the end of the programme. To date, we have delivered Strand 2 to approximately 334 people in Northern Ireland and across three border counties of the Republic of Ireland. This is evidence of the high demand within communities to explore hate crime and its impact and learn about how our words and actions can impact others and how to appropriately challenge hate crime. Whilst this demand continues to grow, further opportunities to resource the work needed must emerge.

Get Real has found that there is great interest in the subject of hate crime and how to deal with it restoratively. Communities across the country have been keen to learn from us and to educate themselves and we hope that, as we emerge from lockdown, individuals and organisations in the Statutory, Community and Voluntary sectors will continue the work started by Get Real and make educative and restorative approaches more and more accessible.



Keeping Families Connected When In-Person Visits Weren't Possible

On the 23rd March, Northern Ireland Prison Service suspended all prison visits and most of its voluntary partners (including NIACRO) were no longer able to have their staff in the prison setting.

NIACRO recognised very quickly that closing prisons to family visits would mean a difficult time for families, so we continued with telephone and online support for families already engaging with us, and set up a freephone helpline for enquiring families which was promoted widely by NIPS, NIACRO and other partner organisations.

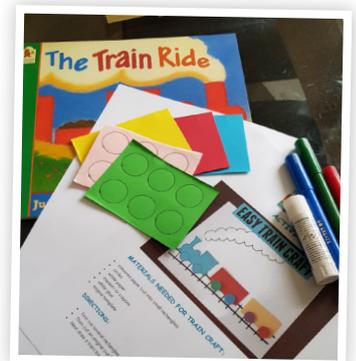
Family Links gets most of its referrals from our staff going into prisons to meet new committals. Therefore, since March we have been working with NIPS to establish alternative referral pathways. Whilst these have been tested and implemented, overall, there has been a fall in referrals to the project.

Family Links staff have been supporting families and children remotely from home, using telephone calls and online tools. Families continue to require emotional and practical support; from listening to worries and anxiety, to discussing children's challenging behaviours and having a member of staff accompany them to (on-line) meetings with social work teams or other professionals. The level of support is still driven by the needs and circumstances of each family. Some have required regular and frequent contact. For others, a fortnightly or monthly call is sufficient (a number of families are receiving regular calls from various different professionals and will reach out to us when they need us). We have continued to be able to refer families or the family member in prison to other NIACRO projects when appropriate.

The team has adopted a creative approach to engaging children remotely, playing games including hangman, naught and crosses, online challenges etc. These have been effective for building young people's confidence and making them more comfortable to speak to their worker via phone or online. Staff have also posted out worksheets to families including: a

COVID-19-time capsule; staying well at home pack (including coping with feelings of frustration and anger); NHS and Keyworkers 'Thank You' colouring sheets; Worry Tree Activity Sheets etc. We've found too that young people have enjoyed sharing their art, baking and stories with their project worker. In all of our interactions, some children are happy to come onto Zoom and talk about what is going on for them, others prefer to stick to text messaging, whilst some young people will speak to our staff on the phone, perhaps for a short time, before handing the phone back to their mum/granny.

To help families to stay connected with their family member in prison, NIPS introduced virtual visits. On the whole feedback regarding virtual visits has been positive. Families who previously were not able to visit the prison due to distance or restrictions by social services are now able to speak to their family member in a virtual visit which has the added benefit of being able to fit more flexibly around family life. Some foreign national prisoners and their families have also benefited from visiting one another for the first time. Whilst there were several inevitable 'teething problems' associated with the virtual visits, they have been meeting the immediate need for feeling connected, and whilst they cannot replace the benefit of visiting in person, we welcome the commitment that, for those who are unable to visit prisons in person, these virtual visits will remain in place.





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