

35
niacro

news

14

Spring 2006

THIRTY-FIVE AND COUNTING

In November 1968, a group of people met in Belfast to consider the possibility of starting up an organisation which, to quote NIACRO's first annual report, would "help to co-ordinate interested groups and individuals, and promote work for the welfare of the offender". A working party was set up in October of the following year. In due course, they approached the then Ministry of Home Affairs, who agreed to grant-aid the new Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders.

The first Organising Secretary, Bob Byers, started work in April 1971. He and the new Executive Committee were led by the redoubtable Bessie Maconachie as Chairman (in the decade which was possibly the high point of feminism in the 20th Century, NIACRO News wouldn't have wanted to be the person who suggested to Miss Maconachie that she be described as anything other than the Chairman).

And that's how the story began. In the 25th anniversary year, Harold Good, who at that time was chairing the Executive Committee, spoke of the formation of NIACRO. He pointed out that we started work just as the conflict was entering its most violent phase. "It was not an easy time to develop the difficult role of speaking for and representing the interests of offenders and their families", he wrote in the annual report. "But, in the midst of cataclysmic social and political breakdown, NIACRO began its life championing the vision of justice and restoration for even the most ostracised members of our society."

During this 35th anniversary, we'll be digging into the archives to put together a short history of NIACRO and the changing social and political context in which we've worked. We'd be delighted to hear from anyone who has a story to tell from the early days, or a publication, conference programme, photograph or other item



Aideen McGinley addressing the 35th anniversary awards ceremony

of memorabilia which we could borrow. Contact Pat Conway (pat@niacro.co.uk or 028 9032 0157 ext 262)

The Celebrations Begin!

A lunchtime event held in the Canada Room at Queen's University Belfast on Tuesday 25 April was the first in a series of events to mark the anniversary. It was also the perfect opportunity to congratulate and celebrate with participants from the ReachOut and Jobtrack employability programmes who were successful in achieving qualifications over the past year.

Our Chairman, Richard Buchanan, launched the 35th anniversary celebrations, and CEO Olwen Lyner made the point that the success of the organisation springs from the interest, dedication and enthusiasm of its people – Executive Committee, staff, volunteers, service users – and the ongoing support from funders. In

continues over →

also in this issue:

niacro and the
prisoners' families

niacro's work on
the 'silent sentence'

thirty-five
years on

niacro celebrates

community
restorative justice

niacro's views on
restorative justice

prisoner
ombudsman

interview with
Brian Coulter

particular Olwen thanked the funders from European branch of DEL who have shown faith in NIACRO through funding employability programmes for almost 20 years.

“I’m delighted that we’re opening our 35th anniversary celebrations with today’s ceremony,” Olwen said. “The trainees here today have all shown great motivation and commitment to trying to access the labour market. Mainstream programmes aren’t always an option for our clients. We can give them the individual support which may just make the difference, while they are in prison or when they are released, or indeed if they are serving their sentence in the community.”

Aideen McGinley, Permanent Secretary for DEL, expressed her delight at being invited to attend and present certificates to students. Aideen acknowledged the difficulties faced by offenders and ex-prisoners when attempting to change their lives and move away from offending. She said that her department shared the vision of enhancing learning and skills for all, but particularly those who faced particular challenges. Aideen offered the support and commitment of her department to NIACRO into the future.

Over 200 individuals have gained certificates, and 24 came along on the day to get their certificates in person from Aideen. Their achievements covered qualifications including Essential Skills; Forklift, Telescopic, and HGV driving certificates; community relations certificates; NVQ catering modules. Most notable were the five people who got A-Net+, I-Net+ and MCP IT certification – a bundle of initials which describes industry-related qualifications requiring a great deal of motivation and dedication to achieve.

Gary, one of the trainees who got an award shares his thoughts on the recent past with NIACRO News

“The difference between coming out of prison a few years ago and now, is because there’s now an organisation willing to help to stop people re-offending. There are people willing to talk to us not at us. People who are willing to assess our individual needs for a better future; not only for ourselves but our communities.

When I got out of prison the future looked uncertain for me but after speaking and working with NIACRO I realised they were the key to helping me build a future for myself and my family. Working with NIACRO I have been able to think about how to disclose the fact I have a conviction, and undertake training to help me get a job.

I have the second chance I needed to begin my life again. No-one is saying

that it will be easy, but now it’s up to me. I hope that other people will take the opportunities being offered and move forward constructively.

My next stop is employment and it’s thanks to NIACRO that I can now realise my potential. I would like to thank NIACRO and Probation for helping me along the way.”

CHILDREN & FAMILIES

Imprisonment can have a harmful effect on families, and the children of prisoners are more likely themselves to be at risk of offending. Research carried out by David Farrington and Joseph Murray in 1997 shows that children of offenders are at a high risk of offending, and therefore in the mid 1990s the service expanded its focus to include prisoners’ children. The Farrington research showed that almost two out of every three male children who had a father convicted of an offence were likely also to gain a criminal conviction and this statistic rose to 93% where both mother and father had convictions.

More recent research carried out by Joseph Murray in 2005 suggested that the long term effect of separation by imprisonment – compared to separation for other reasons like divorce or death - was more long-standing and led to worse outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people have described the impact of separation from a parent because of imprisonment as being similar to a bereavement, but without any of the usual channels to express your grief, anger and sorrow. They also have to deal with the practical implications of maintaining contact and coping with social stigma.

This is not just an issue about the rights and needs of children, partners and parents, though that is important enough. It’s clear that people leaving prison have more chance of staying out of trouble if they have stable and strong positive relationships. So support for families

also feeds into the overall aim of reducing crime and re-offending.

NIACRO has recognised this from the start – in our first, 1971, annual report we celebrated the preparation for a “Wives’ and Families’ Centre” in the Old Lodge Road, which opened in January 1972. It says a good deal about the context in which NIACRO was established that, just six months after that, bombs planted at a filling station across the road caused damage severe enough to make the centre unusable. A replacement site wasn’t found until several years later. In the 1984/85 annual report the centre is reported as being “very heavily used...often overcrowded and the staff stretched to the limit”. The visitors’ centre at Magilligan opened in 1975.

“Wives and families” groups were established in the mid-70s, and a minibus came into service in 1982 as part of the Bridge project in Derry/Londonderry.

It’s possible to see a clear development in our work with families and their issues over the years. It has grown in scope and range, of course. It still springs from a humane desire to ease the pain of having a family member in prison, and it still offers very practical help. But it is more systematic, more likely to be a partnership with statutory or other voluntary agencies, and more assertive in lobbying for improvements to services, policy and legislation.

Some of the work we do with families is described on the following pages of NIACRO News.

PRISON LINK TO FAMILY LINKS

The Prison Link project, a partnership between the Probation Board and NIACRO working with other agencies, ran from 1987 to March 2006. It helped the families and children of prisoners keep in contact during the period of imprisonment.

Prison Link adapted and developed over the years as the numbers and categories of prisoners changed - in particular, following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The social climate also changed, with society expressing a major fear of crime and a demand for more and more draconian sentences for offenders. Families of prisoners are even more affected by this change in the social climate, given that they remain in the community and have to deal with people's attitudes towards them and their family members every day. Negative attitudes are often found also in mainstream and community services and even if they aren't, families often believe that they're there.

A survey of over 250 people who use Prison Link was carried out in January 06. Most people said they needed help when children were visiting prisoners, more child centred visits, childcare at home, and individual support for children and young people in the community.

The Prison Link survey also shows almost 90% satisfaction with the current service and almost 80% of the people in the survey said they would recommend Prison Link to others. When asked to reflect on why they would do so, people gave reasons like service reliability, value for money (in terms of transport) and the supportive and

non-judgemental character of the project staff. Their comments included:

- Providing good information and support, feel like I am not alone in coping with this.
- Staff are very efficient and understanding, you are treated like a human being. It was good for me and partner to know there was someone I could relate to.

Moving on

NIACRO and the Probation Service reviewed Prison Link during 2005 and some important decisions have been taken about the future of the service. Family Links is a new service building on the experience and evaluation of Prison Link. From 1 April NIACRO has been the lead managing agency for Family Links (the name was chosen by the people who were surveyed for an evaluation of Prison Link). The Probation Board continues as a partner, joined by the Youth Justice Agency and other partner agencies from the statutory and voluntary sector.

A very important new development is that the service will be extended to the Juvenile Justice Centre which currently has about 150 young people in custody each year, about 40-45 of whom are serving a sentence. A September 2005 evaluation of our services in the

JJC identified the need for support for families, and young people asked for visiting facilities to be improved to help them maintain positive contact with their families.

Family Links will offer a service to **all** families of prisoners. The services will include: an information pack; telephone support; home visits; one-to-one support for adults, children and young people; referrals to other agencies; transport; links to visitors centres and prison visits staff; support groups; focus groups; buddying or peer support and volunteer involvement. Family Links is unique in Europe; it is the first service to offer support to prisoners' families at the earliest opportunity following committal and to have a specific brief to support children and young people in order to reduce the damage that imprisonment can do.

NIACRO's Track Record

NIACRO has been asked by the PBNI to become the lead agency for Family Links because of our track record in delivering services to families and children through Prison Link. The other agencies - both funders, PBNI and YJA, and partners, Prison Fellowship,

continues over →

Barnardo's, and Ulster Quaker Service Committee, support the new model of Family Links and are committed to working in partnership to improve service delivery for all children and families across Northern Ireland. It is particularly important to NIACRO that the other voluntary sector organisations who are involved already in providing services for families and children of prisoners, whether through visitor centres or parenting groups, are part of the strategic management group for Family Links. This real partnership will help to ensure that families get a timely service from the most appropriate agency and it will reduce any risk of duplication.

HOW IT WILL WORK

The service will ensure:

- That families get information on what is available within 48 hours.
- That all families of prisoners across Northern Ireland will be offered the service.
- An assessment process so that families are offered support from the most appropriate agency.
- Consultation with and involvement of service users, especially children and young people, in developing the service.
- Growing links with the Prison Service to ensure that visiting arrangements are improved and meet the needs of children and young people.
- Greater awareness of the service, and closer links with mainstream services.
- An improved database.

The NIPS resettlement strategy is of great importance to the criminal justice system and how it is perceived outside the system. Family Links will play a major role in not only helping families to maintain appropriate contact while

a member is in prison but also to support families, both practically and emotionally, to play an active role in resettlement planning and implementation. It is of particular relevance that research has shown that where an offender has strong family ties the risk of their re-offending is greatly reduced and Family Links will help to maintain those ties.

The new service will be officially launched in autumn 2006 as part of NIACRO's 35th anniversary celebrations. We are really excited about taking on the challenge of developing Family Links into a first class service with our partners, the children, young people and families.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

NIACRO's Advice Service provides a welfare rights service to prisoners, their families, released prisoners and offenders in the community. Responding to the needs of users of Prison Link's family services, Jobtrack, and ReachOut, the service plays an integral role in NIACRO's resettlement work. Support offered to service users ranges from basic information giving, to advice on the merits of particular courses of action, to advocacy and tribunal representation. Just a couple of examples:

- CK was remanded to custody and applied for Housing Benefit the following day – but his landlord (a housing association) served an “abandonment notice” four days later, without making any effort to contact him. It was only through a friend that he knew his tenancy had been abruptly ended. NIACRO advised CK on what he could do, and helped him contact the housing association, pointing out that it had ignored his

statutory rights and their obligation to give proper notice. The housing association reversed their decision, so that the flat was there for him when he either got bail or was released.

- PK, the mother of a life sentence prisoner, had severe financial problems – with the mortgage, the bank, and other creditors. NIACRO successfully tapped into an ex-services fund (her son had been in the Army), acted as go-between with the bank, advised on other benefits she could claim, and helped her draw up a realistic repayment schedule which her other creditors accepted.

At critical stages throughout the criminal justice process (i.e. remand, sentence, pre-release, post-release) service users will need to claim benefits to maximise income to meet basic needs, and the advice service is there to help. But the long-term goal is to work with other NIACRO services towards increasing levels of employability and to encourage those who are able into training and employment.

The service is unique among its peers for a number of reasons. It's the only advice service offering support on a regional basis to prisoners' families and released prisoners irrespective of offence or political affiliation, and it is the only advice service operating on a regular basis in prisons in Northern Ireland. Other aspects which confirm its uniqueness are NIACRO's longstanding and successful relationship with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland through the Prison Link initiative and with the Northern Ireland Prison Service (and PBNI) through the EQUAL Personal Progression System and ReachOut partnerships.

You can get more information on the advice service from Barry McMullan (barry@niacro.co.uk) or phone the Amelia House switchboard, 028 9032 0157

CHILD AND PARENT SUPPORT



Parents at a Caps support event

The Child and Parent Support project (Caps) was established in Oct 2003 through Children's Services Planning in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area. Research carried out by CSP indicated that a considerable number of children under the age of 10 were coming to the attention of the police for activities that in an older child would have constituted an offence.

Following a successful application to the Children's Fund the project (the first of its kind in Northern Ireland) was established under NIACRO's management. It provides intensive support to the families of children aged 8-11 at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area.

Child centred

The Caps project is very much based on being child-centred and non-labelling, and on responding to the specific needs of children and families at risk. Caps aims to reduce the risk factors most associated with offending (things like impulsive behaviour, negative peer influences, poor school attendance or performance, inconsistent or harsh parenting, parents and siblings who offend). The more risk factors are in place, the more likely a child is to offend. Recognising these factors also helps us to help the child deal with them.

Caps offers support both directly to the child and to his or her family, and through group work. We support parents individually and by helping them engage more effectively with their children.

Caps also works with children to help them think before they act, consider the consequences of their behaviour, understand others' feelings and solve difficulties by negotiation rather than aggression. Strong emphasis is also placed on building social skills and challenging harmful influences from their peers. Work with children is carried out either individually within the family or in a groupwork programme. We are, for example, currently running a programme for a group of young boys preparing to move from primary to secondary school and who are deemed to be at risk. This initiative is being run jointly with Monaghan and Armagh Diversion Exchange (MADE). It aims to enhance the boys' social skills and hopefully help them make a successful transition to second level education.

The project is all about early intervention. The agencies involved in Caps are obliged all too often to concentrate on responding to crises. We need to think about the benefits of intervening quickly, while the child and his/her family still have something going for them, and there is potential for maximum positive impact.

Evaluation

A recent external evaluation of Caps by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland suggests that the programme is having a significant impact and is well received by families and referrers alike. Based on completed cases, the findings indicated that the work of the project had positive impact on the following (most common) risk factors:

- Child's risk of offending 91%
- Parental supervision/management 90%
- Peer influences 82%
- General behaviour in school 86%
- Academic performance 75%

continues over →

For some of the children attending the project poor school attendance was a very significant issue.

However, as they began to engage with the service and their academic performance improved, attendance rates increased noticeably.

The following are a sample of the comments made to the evaluator.

- Children described Caps as a “really cool” experience and all those interviewed agreed that they would “do Caps all over again if they could”. As NIACRO has found over and over again in other projects over the years, children valued the relationship with the NIACRO worker: “Sometimes I can’t wait to see X ‘cos I’ve always loads to tell her...I tell X lots of things I wouldn’t tell anybody else about.”
- All the parents interviewed were positive about Caps, especially on the extent to which they had been consulted, kept informed and involved in all aspects of the child’s engagement with the programme. “I felt listened to and that what I say matters.” One father was left on his own when his wife, who had a serious drug problem and mental health difficulties, left. Caps provided support and advice to Dad and two of the children who had begun to engage in offending behaviour. By the time the case was closed, the children were no longer offending and social services were planning to withdraw because things had stabilised significantly for the family. The father said. “I was left on my own when she [partner] upped and left. It was hard for them [children] and it was hard for me too. I thought Caps would be all talk and do nothing but to be fair they have been great for us all...I’d go so far as to say Caps is what has helped us all turn the corner and stay together.”
- Social workers commented that some of the children (and parents) they had referred were

‘agency resistant’ or had extensive experience of ‘agency intervention’ going back over many years. In this context they were particularly impressed with the extent to which Caps was able to “hang in there and... establish a genuine relationship”.

- Referral and agency representatives praised the programme’s ability to deliver ‘joined up’ targeted services for vulnerable children and their families.
- Educationalists were impressed by the impact on children for whom school attendance and performance had initially been problematic. The teacher of one of the children in the household whose father is quoted above said, “The involvement of Caps in that particular young person’s life will probably be one of the most valuable experiences that child will have to look back on”.

If you’d like to know more about Caps, contact Martina McCooley
Tel: 028 3751 1433

BEING CHILD-CENTRED

One of the important services offered by Prison Link, now Family Links, is the “child centred visit”. It doesn’t take much imagination to see how strange and upsetting a visit to a prison could be for a child; a child who might be already badly affected by the upheaval to family life caused by a prison sentence. During a visit, parents may have important practical subjects to talk about, may be themselves upset, may not be able to pay the child a lot of attention. So the idea is that a visit is set up where child/ren and father can

have each other’s undivided attention. Children can bring a favourite toy or schoolwork or pictures to the hour-long meetings, which also include lunch – mothers lunch together in the visitors centres at the same time.

The first child-centred visits took place in Magilligan in 2001 and were described in the January 2002 NIACRO newsletter as “already an enormous success”. Now they are available in Magheraberry as well.

The current rather ad hoc arrangements inside the prisons fall short of what we would like – for example, a planned visit may be cancelled at the last minute. This is of course devastating for both child and parent, and it was an issue NIACRO News brought up with the head of the Prison Service when we interviewed him for the last issue of NIACRO News. This is a humane and valuable service, we recognise the support that the prison staff are giving it, and we’ll go on working to ensure that it runs smoothly.



REDUCING HATE CRIME IN EUROPE

Hate crime legislation in NI came into force in September 2004, with the effect that courts were obliged to take into account, when sentencing, the fact that an offence involved hostility based on religion, race, sexual orientation or disability. Courts were also given powers to give longer sentences for certain crimes of violence.

The European Commission’s AGIS programme funds transnational projects in the area of criminal justice. Since October 2004 NIACRO has been participating in an AGIS project co-ordinated by London Probation. The other partners are the University of Bremen in Germany; Mid-Dlam Ghad-Dawl, an NGO from Malta; and International Initiatives for Co-operation, a Bulgarian NGO.

The project focuses on race and faith based hate crimes. Its objectives are:

- To define and agree a common understanding of the nature of faith and race crimes motivated by hate.
- To examine responses in the EU (particularly in partner countries).
- To research and develop best practice, including co-operation between NGO’s and law enforcement agencies.
- To encourage best practice into policy.
- To establish a European network to combat and reduce faith and race crimes motivated by hate.

PARENT AND CHILD SUPPORT

“All of a sudden I had everything to do on my own... it’s a real struggle – I feel I just have to get on with it for the sake of the kids – *it’s not their fault.*”

Those are the words of a woman who became a single parent when her partner was imprisoned. One of the ways NIACRO tries to help in this situation is through the PACS project, which has been running since 2004 in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. Its aims are to support prisoners’ families and to work with other agencies to tackle the inter-generational effects of imprisonment – that is, the well-recognised fact that having a parent in prison puts you at extra risk of ending up there yourself.

Like many of our services, PACS is a partnership, with social services, the education welfare service, the Prison and Probation Services, the Prison Fellowship

and Barnardo’s all involved, with funding from the Children’s Fund. The speedy offer of help to new prisoners from our own Family Links in turn helps PACS to intervene at an early stage and offer the most appropriate help to a particular family.

The sort of help that PACS offers could be intensive support for a parent in their home; advice and information on financial problems; working with young people at school to tackle any problems that the family member’s imprisonment may have thrown up; maybe a young person can take advantage of our mentoring scheme.

You can learn more about PACS from Donnie Sweeney, donnie@niacro.co.uk

continues over →

The first stage of this project has been to undertake a scoping exercise to identify the similarities and differences between partner countries in respect of recognition of crimes motivated by hate, the legislative framework which supports prosecution of such offences; and current practice in working with perpetrators and victims of such offences.

A series of learning seminars in the partner countries will take place, using the analysis of this scoping exercise to:

- identify models of good practice which may be transferable to other European cultures;
- identify the political and legislative structures needed to acknowledge and deal with faith and race crimes motivated by hate;
- identify models of supporting and empowering victim groups without the risk of further alienation;
- create a European network of organisations committed to reducing the incidence of faith and race crimes motivated by hate.

By the end of the project, the partner organisations will produce a research study looking at similar issues elsewhere in Europe, and identify effective practice in confronting the problem.

The culmination of this project will be a European conference in London, in June 2006. It will bring together policy makers, practitioners and victim groups to raise the profile of this issue and

propose strategies, policies and practices to deal with it. At the conference, a research report analysing the incidence and issues of these sorts of crime, and reflecting the international perspective, will be launched.

The organisations which have taken part in the project, including NIACRO, are committed to continuing to work on the problem. London Probation has applied for funding to keep the network together to build on what its members have learned from the project so far.

NIACRO will be holding an event on hate crime in the next few months – more information from Pat Conway, pat@niacro.co.uk

Coincidentally, the PSNI launched a campaign on hate crime in February 2006. You can download their posters and leaflet from www.psnipolice.uk



One of the PSNI's hate crime posters

US SUR

During the week of 9-13 January this year, NIACRO asked the people who use our services for their opinions on those services. Nearly all our projects and programmes were involved, and 189 service users completed the questionnaire – our thanks go to all of them for their time and effort. The largest group of respondents were on the Jobtrack programme. Of the 189, 58% were men, 42% women. Over half were parents – this issue of NIACRO News is focussing on family issues in the criminal justice system and in our work, and it's important to us that our services are family-relevant.

So far as their views on NIACRO staff were concerned, 100% said they'd found NIACRO very helpful (78%) or helpful (22%) when they first met, and again 100% found them very friendly or friendly.

On the usefulness and quality of the service, there were also high ratings. Just one person hadn't found the service useful; over 70% found it very useful and just under 30% useful. The quality of service was rated excellent by 50%, very good by 41% and good by 7% (not adding to 100 because of rounding).

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE?

Although this is gratifying, we realised that people sometimes feel it's not right to express negative views about a service which they recognise is basically there to help. So we asked two open-ended questions, "In what ways could NIACRO staff improve the assistance they give?" There were 72 replies to this question, 60 of them having no improvements to suggest. One said plaintively,

EVERY VEY

“No – maybe if you were allowed to smoke on the bus”!, and of the other nine specific requests, seven included the word “more”. More, that is, of what is already on offer, like more group work with other young people, more contact with the service (especially with the NIACRO staff member), more help at home.

We also asked people for their ideas on how we could improve the service. On the 91 people who answered this question, 56 did not see any room for improvement. Again, the bulk of the suggestions were about the availability of the service – extra bus runs, out of hours access to the advice line, longer and more frequent access to phone contact with prisoners.

This is good to hear, though in a sense it’s also frustrating, and if we were inclined to complacency - which we aren’t - it would knock that tendency on the head. Because we too would like “more”: we’re well aware of the still unmet needs of prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. On the other hand, it also inspires us, as we develop our next three-year corporate plan, to continue to design services which will use what resources we have as effectively as humanly possible.

Finally, one user summed up very simply and straightforwardly what she got from the service. “I would only be able to see my son once a fortnight. With the NIACRO bus and Jenny I get down twice a week, which has helped maintain our relationship over the last six months.”

More on the user survey from Pat Conway, pat@niacro.co.uk



Michele Kavanagh addressing the volunteer forum

VOLUNTEER FORUM

NIACRO held its first Volunteer Forum on Saturday 25 March at Amelia House. It was organised in response to volunteer requests, following the ‘Year of the Volunteer’ event in October 2005. Over 40 volunteers from a wide range of projects throughout Northern Ireland attended.

The packed programme included an awareness session on ‘Understanding Mental Health and Risk’ facilitated by Michele Kavanagh, a clinical psychologist with the Regional Adolescent Mental Health Service.

The session included information on common mental health problems, opportunities to promote resilience, concerns about risk and support systems available to volunteers supporting adults and young people.

One of the aims of the Forum is to provide an opportunity for volunteers to meet with others, share information and become

more involved. So volunteers discussed plans for future forums and shared their views on their role within NIACRO.

NIACRO CEO Olwen Lyner gave a brief presentation on the organisation’s plans for the future and Volunteer Coordinator Vivienne Courtney presented the main findings and recommendations from the recent survey of volunteers – more on this below. After a brief question and answer session, Director of Services Siobhan O’Dwyer closed the event, commending volunteers on their distinct contribution to NIACRO and paying tribute to them for their continued dedication, commitment and hard work.

NIACRO recruits volunteers on an ongoing basis, and we’re particularly pleased to have recruited five new volunteers for the pilot “LinkUP” adult mentoring

continues over →

project. They, and 24 volunteers for the youth mentoring, Independent Visitor and Independent Representation projects, are currently undergoing their training.

So if you have 2-3 hours free each week or fortnight and would be interested to find out more about opportunities available, contact our Volunteer Co-ordinator. vivienne@niacro.co.uk.

Volunteer Satisfaction Survey

Given the range and extent of NIACRO's work, it would simply not have been possible to deliver the same range of quality services without the commitment, dedication and professionalism of

the people who volunteer to work with NIACRO.

Volunteers are sometimes still seen as an inexpensive option, not delivering the same quality of service that paid staff might. We disagree. NIACRO's experience of volunteers suggests that they bring an additional element of commitment, personal integrity and genuine concern for those in society who are experiencing difficulties in their lives and who need additional support and guidance.

We have always valued highly the commitment of our volunteer pool and recognise that the involvement of volunteers does not compromise professionalism or quality of service provision. We strive to offer all the support and training that volunteers need in order to

deliver a high quality service to our clients.

As part of that process, we periodically canvass our volunteers to give them the opportunity to comment on the training and support we offer.

The latest survey was carried out in March 2006 and the main findings are that:

- 96% view NIACRO as a supportive organisation;
- 82% feel they get sufficient supervision;
- 22% feel that additional training would be useful;
- 87% feel NIACRO valued their contribution;
- 86% would recommend volunteering with NIACRO to others.

PRISONER OMBUDSMAN

Brian Coulter
Prisoner
Ombudsman



For the third article in our series on criminal justice institutions, NIACRO News went to meet Brian Coulter, the Prisoner Ombudsman, in his offices high above Belfast on the 22nd floor of Windsor House.

The office of "Prisoner Ombudsman" has been operating for just about a year - NIACRO welcomed the appointment, and sees it as a very progressive move. Brian's role is to consider any complaint made by a prisoner or former prisoner about his or her treatment in prison; there were 325 complaints in the first nine months of the office's existence.

We talked through the process of an individual complaint, which should normally come to the Ombudsman's office only after a complainant has gone through the internal prison complaints procedure (but we'll come back to that later). Brian has a small team of investigators - unlike the

Ombudsman himself, they are all civil servants; they also all have experience in investigation procedures. One of the investigators will meet with the complainant (the occasional complaint is so simple and straightforward that it can be resolved without a personal meeting, but this is rare). That investigator may be able to help sort out the complaint informally, or it may be necessary to carry out a full investigation. At the end of the investigation, the Ombudsman will either decide that the complaint cannot be upheld, or make a recommendation or recommendations to the Prison Service.

MORAL PERSUASION

Such a recommendation is not legally enforceable, but Brian has not had the experience of having his recommendations challenged, or not complied with. "The Prisoner Ombudsman's powers are essentially moral", he says, depending on thorough

investigation, rational argument, and the establishment of professional and good relationships with the Prison Service.

The Ombudsman can't initiate an investigation; it has to arise from an individual complaint. However, Brian said that if common themes emerge, he will pass that on to the Prison Service, possibly with recommendations for action – as he has done in the case of health care issues. In any case, his recommendations following an investigation are more often than not about policy – or lack of policy – or the system and so affect more than just the individual. Prisoners have made complaints about a wide and varying range of topics. They have included things like the preparation and serving of food, the process for recording prisoner complaints and requests, rights around access to personal “electrical cellular entertainment” (like TVs and DVD players) and access to home leave, among a host of others.

On the business of having to go through the internal procedures first: the Prisoner Ombudsman has a direct Freephone number staffed during office hours (with voicemail in the evenings and at weekends). This is an innovation which Brian recommended and which gets three to four calls from prisoners every day. Someone who contacts the office in this way will get advice and information on the complaints process and help to follow it, and on who might be helpful as an advocate, like the Independent Monitoring Board (the former Board of Visitors), or the prison chaplain, etc. If the complaint is considered to be serious, the Ombudsman will send an investigator to talk to the prisoner about his/her concerns.

What about NIACRO as an advocate, as we are planning to develop our advocacy role? Brian would be happy to see this; the process would remain basically the

same as now, but any support and empowerment for the individual prisoner helps the prisoner and also the investigation of his/her complaint.

From NIACRO's experience in working and talking with prisoners, we know that things do go wrong, and sometimes we can work to identify someone – maybe the Governor – who can deal with these situations. But many prisoners don't expect to have “rights”, including the right to complain of their treatment. Many don't want to risk getting on the wrong side of staff or rocking the boat, especially if they're coming near the end of their sentence. Women, and young people in the Young Offenders Centre at Hydebank Wood, are also less likely to complain.

POWERS

Young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre do not have access to the Prisoner Ombudsman (there is a separate complaint procedure). There have been moves towards bringing those in the JJC into his remit, and Brian is in favour of this happening - so is NIACRO - but it is not yet a reality.

the whole complaints system needs to be as clear, simple and accessible as possible for everyone

There is another group of people who are affected by the treatment of prisoners, and that's prisoners' families, the group we feature elsewhere in this NIACRO News. Brian has no power to follow up complaints from families, but has done so in the past if a prisoner makes the complaint about their treatment. As he points out, “Families are also service users” – when they are visiting, for example, or if a prisoner cannot properly articulate his or her complaint. His experience has

been that the Prison Service has accepted the involvement of families in the complaints process, but the investigation of their complaints is not yet formally part of his remit.

NIACRO News had a couple of other questions about the extent of the Ombudsman's powers. For example, should his office be able to examine complaints about other criminal justice bodies? Brian pointed out that in England, his opposite number is in fact the “Prisons and Probation” Ombudsman. His view is that any body which delivers a service to prisoners should be able to have its complaints independently investigated. That would include NGOs like NIACRO, health services (especially as health care in prison is being taken over by the health organisations), education services, and even private service-providers like escort services.

Some of these are already subject to the Parliamentary Ombudsman, but Brian's view is that to bring them all under the one institution would “make sense and be more coherent – if the intention behind the Prisoner Ombudsman is to deal

with the stresses of prison life, the whole complaints system needs to be as clear, simple and accessible as possible for everyone”.

VALUES

A fairly obvious question was around the feelings of the Prison Service as a whole, and individual staff in particular, about the new complaints procedure and the role of the Ombudsman's office. Brian described complaints as “a useful

continues over →

tool for feedback and improving the service”. “No-one”, he said, “could quarrel with any of the Prison Service’s values – the question is, are they being lived up to?” When NIACRO News ventured that it depended on the individual, Brian made the point that really this should not be the case. The point of having “lived-up-to” corporate values and strong systems is so that an individual could not, and would not wish to, undermine them.

The Prisoner Ombudsman can recommend amounts of compensation (in NIACRO News’ view, they are fairly small), and he

can also recommend that a prisoner receive an apology. The latter he knows raises real issues for staff, and is used sparingly. However, he feels it “can be enormously beneficial for both sides”.

Since September 2005, the Prisoner Ombudsman has had the duty to investigate all deaths in prison custody. Three were underway at the time of our meeting. There are fewer deaths in custody here than in Great Britain, but of course any death is a matter of concern and needs to be thoroughly investigated. Each report will be published, though any information deemed to raise security issues for staff will not be

made public. Brian is particularly keen to give families the fullest possible information and believes that the amount of information they get will be unprecedented.

Communications issues are important – people need to know about their right to complain - and every prisoner gets an individual copy of the Ombudsman’s quarterly newsletter “Inside Issues”. The two issues published to date include accounts of over 20 investigations, along with information on how the office goes about its work, and are on the Ombudsman’s website. Brian has also made it his business to meet with local prisoner representative groups and families.

You can find out more about the Prisoner Ombudsman and download the newsletter from www.niprisonerombudsman.gov.uk The Freephone number is 0800 783 6317.

Good Morning Northern Ireland



Some Good Morning Ballysillan clients out for the day

In 2003, after a community safety study trip to Glasgow, NIACRO and the Galliagh Community Development Group introduced the first “Good Morning” project to Northern Ireland. The project is a free telephone support and alert service for older and other vulnerable people in the community.

Each service user is called daily to check on their health and general well-being while being given information about local events, services etc. The project is designed primarily to allow people to feel safer in their homes and address the social isolation felt by many. If the call isn’t answered, nominated “contacts” are called to identify why the caller is not

responding. If they can’t find a satisfactory explanation, and with the agreement of the client, they contact the emergency services with a request that they check on the client to ascertain if they are well and safe.

The Community Safety Unit recently commissioned NIACRO to conduct research into the future sustainability of these projects.

The report, aimed at existing projects, key stakeholders and potential funders, will provide a framework for a co-ordinated, strategic and adequately resourced long-term approach to the future development of the projects in Northern Ireland. Here are some of its findings.

Bigger and better

Since the launch of “Good Morning Galliagh”, the popularity of the projects has grown significantly; the Galliagh project estimate that they have had around 180 study visits from community groups throughout Ireland. There are currently 12 projects operating throughout Northern Ireland, with at least three more planned for the coming months. In total, around 1200 people, 99% of them over 50, benefit from the projects and three of the projects have waiting lists.

Not only is there a growing number of projects, they are expanding their services to include such things as home safety checks,

liaison with health and social services, and direct services like grass cutting and hairdressing. They may also refer to other services like restorative justice programmes or CAB.

In 2005, three of the projects – Strabane, Ballysillan and Lagan Village— were evaluated. The evaluations showed a very considerable impact in reducing the fear of crime, in improving quality of life, and in reducing a sense of isolation. To quote some of the service users, “Someone is always making sure that you are alive and well. It puts my mind at ease.” “They are very nice people and they couldn’t do enough for you. I’ve been down in the dumps a lot recently and I’m bad with my nerves and I find the company great. In fact, I’d be lost without it.” Project staff said that this person keeps the voice recordings from the calls to play back when she is lonely. “I’m 75 years old, and when you get to this age, you can feel that nobody gives two hoots about you. The staff are young and that’s really nice, to think that young people do care and it gives you a different view on young ones.”

Can Good Morning survive?

However, many of the projects are currently facing financial difficulties. They all depend on short-term funding from a patchwork of sources. Only one is currently secure beyond this financial year, thanks to a Lottery grant – other Lottery-funded projects are near the end of their funding and see little or no chance of further funding from this source. Of those funded by the health and social services, nearly all comes from slippage. Seven of the twelve projects may have to close because of funding difficulties.

The report suggests that the best chance of security and sustainability for the projects lies in negotiating mainstream funding, probably from a range of statutory sources, and involving service level agreements.

It’s also going to be necessary for the groups to network, to set consistent objectives and standards, and to streamline delivery. Concrete recommendations include:

- The employment of a full-time regional development worker.
- Formal constituting of Good Morning projects.
- A steering group of member groups and other stakeholders

to plan for the future and co-ordinate the work.

- Developing agreed models of practice and procedures.
- Standardising of computer software.

None of this challenges the local community focus which is such an important element in the Good Morning service. It is an outworking of simple good will felt by members of a community for other people in that community, and that’s very precious. Now it needs to be underpinned by good practice and sustainable funding. You can get a copy of the research report from David O’Donnell at NIACRO (david@niacro.co.uk)

RECOGNITION FOR CROSS-BORDER PROJECT

NIACRO was chosen as one of 50 organisations and individuals honoured at a Celebration of Cross-Border Achievement on 3 March. The event was hosted by Daily Ireland and supported by the Special EU Programmes Body, Bank of Ireland and gasta.com.



Tommy Genockey, Educational Trust Development worker; Olwen Lyner, Fiona McLaughlin and Heather Reid from NIACRO; Mary Beggan, FAS social inclusion manager; Lisa Cuthbert PACE Director

It was the work of the Educational Trust in particular which brought NIACRO to the event. As we described in the last issue of NIACRO News, the Trust is a North/South initiative which helps ex-offenders and ex-prisoners in Ireland to access education and training. The original aim was to support politically motivated prisoners to complete academic qualifications when they left prison. This was later extended to cover vocational training as well. The client group now includes all offenders and ex-prisoners and their families, and the coverage includes the whole of Ireland.

NIACRO was a founder member of the Trust, established in 1995; Trustees now include representatives from ex-prisoner groups, statutory agencies, prison authorities and educational institutions, North and South. NIACRO Chief Executive Olwen Lyner jointly chairs the Educational Trust with Lisa Cuthbert of the Dublin-based NGO, PACE.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

The Northern Ireland Office consulted (between December 2005 and March 2006) on draft guidelines for community-based restorative justice (crj) schemes. This approach to dealing with lower-level crime was proposed in the 2000 Criminal Justice review. This said, “We believe that community restorative justice schemes can have a role to play in dealing with the types of low-level crime that most commonly concerns local communities.” (Recommendation 168) The Review then recommended several requirements for schemes, including how they dealt with referrals, accreditation, inspection and relationship to the “mainstream” criminal justice system.

The Justice Oversight Commissioner, in his January 2006 report on the implementation of the Review, outlined the progress to date on this recommendation, including discussions between the existing schemes and the NIO, on possible guidelines. The Commissioner went on to say, “The present momentum should not be lost.”

NIACRO contributed to the start of the restorative justice process in Northern Ireland, and for that reason was able to make a significant and meaningful response to the consultation. This is a summary of our response, starting with setting the scene.

Background

During the 1970/80s the phenomenon of punishment beatings and shootings showed the level of damage which the ongoing conflict was inflicting on the social fabric of Northern Ireland. Essentially, in most cases Republican and Loyalist paramilitary groups intervened when individuals were reported as acting lawlessly in the community.

This was happening without significant or appropriate intervention by government and statutory, voluntary or community organisations.

In the late 1980s an interagency group (INTERACT) working in North/West Belfast secured private funding to tackle the problem. NIACRO (in the absence of any interest from other organisations) agreed to host and subsequently manage what became known as the Base 2 programme. Central to our commitment to this programme was the principle of non-violence and the need for humanitarian responses to crime and offending.

As the experience of Base 2 developed it became clear that in addition to the crisis response, NIACRO needed to develop linked services to address the needs of those under threat. These included help with benefits, accommodation, employment and training, health matters and addressing offending behaviour. In addition, relationships between the individuals and their local communities needed to be rebuilt,

as many of those exiled did not have the social or economic skills needed to survive in other settings.

In related developments, community groups and activists in some of the areas that were experiencing the highest levels of threats, beatings and shootings were examining how to challenge and change these ways of responding to behaviour which communities found unacceptable. They were also trying to empower communities to engage constructively with those who were offending against them.

The emerging focus on restorative justice in the wider criminal justice environment aroused interest in both statutory and voluntary sector organisations. In the statutory sector the Criminal Justice Review gave life to the Youth Conferencing Service and in the future there is likely to be a similar service for adults. In the Republican and Loyalist groups, activists who had publicly stated their opposition to the carrying out of beatings, shootings and threats began to consider how to develop a model that fitted their communities and it was from this process that Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Alternatives Northern Ireland emerged.

NIACRO supported the early discussion process and helped, as we were asked, in the initial phase of development, funding and sitting on the Boards of Management of both organisations.

What community-based programmes can do

It was our view then, and it still is, that the community based restorative justice groups can help communities transcend the violence of the paramilitary organisations and the inadequate responses of the statutory sector.

The condemnation of acts of inhumanity is inadequate if not backed up by a response which has some impact. NIACRO's sponsorship and management of Base 2 have been criticised by many. However, we have supported thousands of people who have identified themselves as being under threat, and who without that support might have been subject to beatings, shootings and/or other threats.

The public debate on restorative justice groups focuses on the *existence* of the schemes rather than their *effectiveness*. Because of this, we welcome the fact that the groups have agreed to inspection, as recommended in the Criminal Justice Review: this means they can show what effect they are having.

A central political and public concern is the fact that the community based restorative justice groups sometimes employ staff and engage volunteers who are ex-prisoners and come from Republican and Loyalist backgrounds. This has been acknowledged openly as being a feature of these groups. Many ex-prisoners with such backgrounds have played a very significant role in political and community life in Northern Ireland. That they should do so in crj programmes is unremarkable but remains a problem for those who are challenged by the concept of individuals/groups embracing change and engaging in new ways of working.

NIACRO is supportive of the groups though our engagement with them has significantly reduced over the years. This support is provided on the basis that the groups are seeking to influence Republican and Loyalist constituencies and that their activities are rooted in

internationally recognised human rights standards and principles of non-violence.

In NIACRO's view, effective community based restorative justice groups are concerned with mediation – they are not a policing service. They deal with the victims' concerns for a response from within their community. They need to be recognised as making a contribution to the broader criminal justice system. Such a location provides the opportunity for genuinely collaborative as opposed to competitive relationships which can contribute to building public confidence at community level.

NIACRO welcomed many of the individual guidelines proposed by the Government, including: the basic definition used; locating schemes within human rights legislation and the UN's "Basic Principles on the use of Restorative Justice Programmes in Criminal Matters"; the need for open and transparent protocols for implementing the schemes; training for schemes' staff; inspection procedures, etc.

Summary of NIACRO's observations

- The schemes should be seen as a contribution to building the public's confidence to deal with low level crime imaginatively and creatively in their local neighbourhood.
- Adequately resourced schemes which maintain human rights principles give disempowered and abandoned communities the opportunity to reconnect and re-establish relationships that work for them and answer their needs.
- It would be helpful to examine how community based models in other countries "talk" to state sponsored systems where levels

of trust are in the process of being established and developed.

- The schemes' location in the community is unique, as is their ability to engage local people in their delivery. Lay engagement of this type would be considered a prize in many jurisdictions.
- A feature of the schemes is their ability to rapidly (without reduction of individual human rights) respond in particular cases. This helps both the victim and the offender. The reduction in delay, compared to the formal system, closes the gap between the offence and the subsequent accountability to the victim.
- The concept and practice of voluntarism attached to the schemes should be acknowledged and promoted positively.
- The protocols as outlined may have the effect of speeding up the process whereby young people in particular may end up serving more severe sentences.
- The issue of finger printing/DNA tests for nuisance crime appears excessive.
- NIACRO is very concerned at the proposal that a third party assumes a direct role in the selection and/or vetting of staff and volunteers for an NGO. This would undermine independence and governance.
- The protocols in their current form will add to the barriers experienced by ex-offenders and ex-prisoners who are seeking to enhance their employability. (What is suggested has the potential to undermine the recently launched Prison Service led Resettlement Strategy as well as other current efforts to protect ex-prisoners from employment discrimination).

THINKING ABOUT PRISON

Regular listeners to Good Morning Ulster may have been interested in a rather different approach taken to the Thought for the Day slot during one week in April. Dan Gordon is a writer, broadcaster and director and he's kindly allowed us to reprint the first of his "Thoughts".

I've just been in jail – and not before time I hear you say. No, actually I have – I'm working on a project with young offenders – I'm going to direct a play. It's a real eye opener. I had no idea what it was going to be like and I have got to tell you; despite what seems to be a humane and progressive regime it's not a nice place. Also I'm terrified of becoming some kind of woolly liberal – or even worse as described by a prison officer in my first week – *some kinda tree hugger*.

What also bothers me is I've liked the people I've met so far. I don't know who they are or what they've done and really I don't want to. And I'm

certainly not a victim so I don't feel I have any right to judge – but when I meet them and talk to them I've liked them... all of them. It's very confusing – they don't have horns or tails or try to steal my watch, they just want to break the routine for a few minutes with talk.

One of the first things I noticed was that when in prison – if there is no rule saying you *can* do something then you *can't* do it. The world seems turned on its head, routine is everything – locked doors and gates are everywhere and with them ironically comes little privacy. The stability of the group is all important – the individual is ... well, somewhat limited in his options.

I have a friend – an educator and an all round good guy – who's worked a lot with prisoners and he says very wise things. Like, "People are sent to prison *as* punishment not *for* punishment." I am beginning to see what he means.

Loss of freedom is a tragedy" – and I don't kid myself, these aren't choirboys. But when we talk – when the masks come off, I'm shocked by my ignorance and their ordinariness. Every day we interact on a human level – I know nothing other than what they tell me about how they feel about themselves and the worlds they know. It's a huge step believe me for someone like me coming from the hang 'em high and don't be afraid to keep the poker to hand if you hear a noise at night school of limited tolerance. I'm learning every day that people and life are a lot more complicated than I thought.

The Governor, the man who runs the show is actually a really cool guy – well I would say that – he let me in. He talks of resettlement and reintegration, of victim's issues and human rights; he deals with tragedy every day. He brought me into his office last Tuesday and explained that in many, but not all, of the cases he deals with, that there but for the grace of God ... well, you know the rest.

THE CORPORATE PLAN — UP AND RUNNING

In the last issue of NIACRO News, we described the process by which we were putting together the corporate plan which will guide our work from now until 2009. We're grateful to all the stakeholders, staff, volunteers and indeed everyone who gave their views on what NIACRO can and should be doing, and how best to achieve our goals.

That process is now complete, and copies of the new corporate plan were given to the friends and colleagues who came along to the awards ceremony and anniversary launch on 25 April. As in the

previous plan, we've set out our vision and mission alongside the criminal justice, social and political context in which we work. In their introduction to the plan, Chairman Richard Buchanan and CEO Olwen Lyner stress that it reflects the culture of the organisation and that staff and volunteers put particular effort into reviewing and revising our values, really thinking through what underpins our services and policies.

We've also included a table of the objectives we set ourselves for 2003 to 2006, and reported briefly on how close we got to achieving

them (the tally was: 25 out of 28 objectives completed; two partly completed; one not completed).

The key objectives this time round are:

- Working in communities.
- Working with children and young people who offend.
- Working with offenders and ex-prisoners.
- Working with prisoners, their families and children.
- Influencing policy and practice.
- Applying resources effectively.

Under each objective we give the rationale for including it, our core strategic aim, and the outcomes we want to achieve.

You can download the corporate plan from the website, or use the Contact us section to request a paper copy.