



18 news

Summer 2007

SAFE AND SOUND

NIACRO has been engaged in crime prevention work for almost all of its lifetime.

Early on, it became clear that the best way to reduce crime was to reduce the numbers of people coming into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place.

We began working with young people in the late 70s, first through meeting with them in schools and youth groups. In 1979, we opened Jenny's Project in Armagh; a

quarter of the young people using it had been to court for welfare or criminal justice reasons, or both, and over a third had been excluded from at least one youth group.



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Over the next few years, we set up after school projects and youth training schemes.

As time passed, and experience was built up, there was an increased emphasis on working in and with communities to tackle anti-social behaviour among their young people. NIACRO's Community Voluntary Action programme supported groups in communities, so long as they had community support, used mainly local volunteers, were non-party-political and non-sectarian, didn't duplicate the work of other organisations, and showed that there was a real need for the support.

Major projects were established in the Galliagh area of Derry/Londonderry, the Colin area of Lisburn and the Ballysillan area of North Belfast. Drawing on good practice in projects we'd visited in England and Wales, NIACRO established a model which worked successfully. Basically, it goes through four stages:

- engaging with the local community (success depends on local groups being on board);
- carrying out a community safety audit (a comprehensive process of identifying the key issues and concerns for local people);
- designing an action plan (based on the audit and, again, consulting with local people to identify the priorities);
- implementing the action plan (setting up a structure which will ensure that the agreed actions actually happen).

“SAFE AND SOUND”

That very brief outline is described in much more detail in “Safe and Sound”, our newly-published description of NIACRO's experience in community safety and community engagement. “Safe and Sound” also describes a whole range of individual projects which NIACRO supported and/or started up. They include home safety, community newsletters, bringing young people together with local services and ways of tackling anti-social behaviour.

Probably the best-known element of the community safety activities is the “Good Morning” projects, daily telephone calls to vulnerable people in an area, checking on their health and general well-being. The original project, in Galliagh, reckoned in 2006 that around 180 groups of people had come to study and learn from them. We carried out research into the Good Morning experience in 2006, which showed that it was an effective way of boosting older people's sense of security. We recommended closer working among the projects to help sustainability.

EVALUATION

An evaluation of the projects we had facilitated in Colin and Ballysillan showed very clearly the differences between communities where there is an established and self-confident infrastructure with which to work, and those where people have been less inclined to work together as a community. Throughout the period of the project, the people of Ballysillan were coping with paramilitary feuding alongside this lack of infrastructure. It was frankly difficult to find concrete, measurable outcomes. However - and the evaluators describe this finding as crucial - the project gave what they termed “a unique insight into the challenges of developing a shared vision and fostering co-operation in communities which have weak community infrastructure and are experiencing significant community tensions”. Their conclusion is that a different model of working is needed in areas like this, and that Community Safety Partnerships, among others, have the opportunity to help people learn how to function as healthy communities.



Meanwhile, in the consultation which led up to the 2000 Criminal Justice Review, NIACRO pointed out that “An organised, self-confident and fully developed community is a pre-requisite for the necessary partnership with statutory agencies which any community safety initiative requires”.

The Criminal Justice Review recommended a community safety strategy and the creation of a Community Safety Unit. These duly came into being, the CSU having the role of developing community safety policy and partnership working, and being responsible for the crime reduction elements of the strategy. NIACRO’s experience was used in the shaping of the strategy. This experience included a close partnership with the Rural Community Network from 1987 to 2003 to make sure that rural areas were not neglected.

CSPS

Community Safety Partnerships were set up in each local council area, pulling in elected representatives, voluntary agencies and other service providers to tackle crime and the fear of crime. NIACRO is a member of seven of the CSPs, sharing in the debates on how to tackle anti-social behaviour, community restorative justice, community engagement and the use of volunteers.

Another development has been the introduction of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy, through which Government proposes to regenerate urban areas. Community safety is beginning to feature in neighbourhood renewal strategies,

working together to make communities safer to live in

and the subject was highlighted by the Social Development Minister, Margaret Ritchie, in the first statement she made after taking office.

MAINSTREAMING

So in some ways NIACRO’s community safety work is a classic example of the NGO sector starting up projects, and piloting ways of working which can then be mainstreamed into wider public policy and practice, where hopefully they have more secure funding. Our role, alongside specific projects and programmes, is to push for all the many agencies involved to work together to make communities feel safer places to live in.

There are other examples of problems in the community which NIACRO has tackled in an innovative way. Base 2 was started in 1990, to help people under threat – or who fear they are under threat - from paramilitary and other sources. It’s a delicate process involving crisis intervention, verifying the nature of the threat, and mediation; and NIACRO has been challenged over it. But users of the service, both the individuals under threat and the other public services involved, concluded in a 2005 independent evaluation that Base 2 is unique, that it is necessary, and that it is trusted by all concerned.

The experience of Base 2 highlighted the need to help people resettle in the community and avoid further conflict. In 2000, CRIP (the Community Reintegration Project) was piloted. It extended Base 2’s crisis intervention service into a longer term case management approach, bringing together other relevant services. This was further extended within the NI drug and alcohol strategy by offering support to people whose drug abuse had led to offending and the breakdown of relationships within the community.

Always on the lookout for ways of developing and improving services, NIACRO has continued to expand the Base 2 process. In 2005, we set up APAC (Assisting People and Communities) to offer longer term support for people to integrate successfully into their communities. Most recently, we have contracted with Belfast City Council’s Community Safety Partnership to work with up to 40 people a year under the APAC programme across the city.

You can download a pdf copy of “Safe and Sound” from the website, or if you’d like a paper copy contact Donnie Sweeney (Donnie@niacro.co.uk). You can also get a copy of the Good Morning research from Donnie.

CHALLENGES FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE

CJSNI (the Criminal Justice System Northern Ireland) held a conference “Criminal justice facing devolution” on 4 June. Following our own exploration of the political parties’ views on this topic earlier in the year (see NIACRO News issue 17), we were delighted that CEO Olwen Lyner had the opportunity to speak at the conference and take part in a panel Q & A session.

Olwen framed her presentation around the challenges:

- Sharing the purpose – are all the actors agreed on the purpose of the system? Do we want to catch and process offenders, or to rehabilitate them, or is it a mix of both?
- The use of resources – only about 10% of the system’s costs go on helping people change their behaviour.
- Engaging other government departments - many departments are involved, including housing, education and training, benefits agencies. The new Executive needs to bring them together, and they all need to engage with the voluntary and community sector, to create the total package that will reduce crime, offending and re-offending.
- Engaging other voluntary and community agencies – the 2000 Criminal Justice review had a handful of recommendations about promoting and embracing the contribution of third sector and other lay agencies. These recommendations haven’t all been fully implemented, and they need to be if all the collective experience is to be harnessed.
- Facing up to sectarianism – a challenge that still requires attention and which shouldn’t be lost in any focus on the other, newer, community relations problems like racism.
- Saying no to inappropriate initiatives – let’s not just slavishly follow GB initiatives. After 30 years of the brutalising treatment of people whose behaviour was seen as anti-social in their communities, do we really think ASBOs are going to help?
- The media – which is as much an opportunity as a challenge. We need to provide them with consistent, accurate, facts and figures, including the realities of the criminal justice system and how it spends its money.

Olwen wound up by saying, “There is a real need to engage those currently managing the system; those in agencies who don’t yet see what their contribution could be; those who now and in the future will have more powers to make decisions about the shape of the justice system. And we must engage the public – not shying away from debate even when that will be uncomfortable but recognising that our fear of crime as a community far outstrips our actual experience of crime. Moreover, we need to convince people that the majority of crime committed is not serious crime, and that serious crime where it does happen can be dealt with fairly, speedily and effectively. So my final challenge is to acknowledge that our collective experience includes good initiatives, good developments and good partnerships on which we must build all the time. We are a small region and if we face up to the challenges we have the capacity to deliver an appropriate criminal justice service.”

Mentoring Rocks

To celebrate Volunteers' Week 2007, NIACRO held one of its regular Volunteer Forums on Saturday 2 June. These events give volunteers the opportunity to tell us how they feel about the role they play, and give staff a chance to thank the group collectively for their hard work and dedication. Staff and volunteers also discuss changes, improvements or additions to the training and support NIACRO offers its volunteers. Over 200 people are currently spending around 10,000 hours of their free time each year as adult and youth mentors, Independent Visitors, Independent Representatives, advocates and volunteer drivers. They deliver a tremendous service across Northern Ireland.

At each Forum, volunteers take part in a concentrated training session as well as sharing their experiences and opinions more generally. This time, they looked at "Talking about Tough Issues" – in particular, drug and alcohol misuse, and sexual health. Mentoring Development Worker Michelle Ring, and Independent Representative Co-ordinator Aisling Cartmill facilitated this session, aimed at helping volunteers talk openly with service users about topics that are risky but relevant to their problems.

Getting down to work at the Volunteer Forum.



VOLUNTEERING IN PRACTICE

To illustrate the volunteering experience, Michelle Ring interviewed one of our volunteer mentors. First, she sets the scene:

The Youth Mentoring Project aims to promote social inclusion and support marginalised children and young people, by recruiting and training volunteers from the local community to act as mentors. To date NIACRO has provided one to one mentoring services to approximately 500 young people throughout Northern Ireland. Every young person or 'mentee' has an ongoing relationship with a volunteer mentor, who in turn is supported by a NIACRO Mentoring Development Worker. The mentoring programme has achieved Approved Provider status through the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation and it won the CJSNI award for Outstanding Contribution to Working with Children and Young People in 2006. It's recognised as a leader in its field in Northern Ireland.

As the Youth Mentoring Development Worker for the Northern Health and Social Services Board, (now the Northern Health and Social Care Trust) I am always interested to speak to the volunteers and young people I work with to find out what motivated them to become

involved with the project and what success they have experienced within their mentoring relationships. Prior to the Forum I spoke to volunteer mentor Julie McCandless and the young person she mentors, Clara. Both have been involved with NIACRO for some time and have achieved great success within their relationship. Julie was happy to share her experiences in the spirit of Volunteer Week.

Julie has been a volunteer youth mentor with NIACRO since 2004. She has used her outgoing personality to form and maintain positive relationships with young people and encouraged and supported them to strive for and achieve life changing goals. In addition, Julie has been an active and creative voice in the development of the Northern Board Mentoring Project and is one of the nicest people I've ever met.

A MENTOR'S VIEW

MR: Julie, you have been a valuable member of my team for close to three years now, what first interested you in volunteering with young people?

JM: I was at university at the time and wanted to get some hands on experience. I wanted to apply what I had learnt to practice.

MR: Do you intend to use your experiences and learning with NIACRO in your future employment?

JM: Yes, the work is very relevant to what I want to do in the future and I intend to stay on with NIACRO for another year yet.

MR: For the last six months you have been matched with Clara; you have been meeting on a weekly basis and managed to build a strong relationship. What do you enjoy about meeting with Clara?

JM: Clara and I get on very well. We have a laugh together. We go out to the cinema or get something to eat and have a good girly chat. Our communication regarding any problems Clara is having is good. We discuss them to get a clear perspective. I really enjoy the chats and the activities.

MR: Myself, I have seen Clara develop greatly since first meeting her. I have seen her become more confident, independent and so much more focused. What changes, if any, have you seen in Clara?

JM: I have noticed a dramatic change in Clara since I first met her. She has calmed down a lot and she isn't as aggressive towards others as she once was. My relationship with Clara has developed very well. I think Clara trusts and respects you (Michelle) and me. I get the impression that we contribute to a small number of people that Clara feels she can talk to.

MR: Part of the mentoring process is to help the young person to identify and reach success in three goals. The goals can be anything that the young person wants to achieve for themselves. What sort of goals had Clara set that you were supporting her to reach?

JM: One of Clara's goals was to figure out a weekly living budget and stick to a savings plan with a view to saving enough money to buy a dress for her upcoming school formal. We agreed that I would support and encourage her and if she was successful in saving the money, we would get her hair and nails done for the night, as a reward. By March Clara had saved enough money for the deposit and by April she was off to her formal in a beautiful dress she had worked hard for.

Julie and Clara.



MR: What changes have you seen in yourself as a result of your contact with Clara and your engagement with NIACRO?

JM: I have noticed that the way I communicate with people has dramatically changed. I think I used to see everything as black or white and had maybe let that influence my opinions of others. Now I see situations differently and can understand different responses to situations.

I have had the chance to develop both personally and professionally. Through NIACRO I've completed several training sessions such as self harm awareness, child protection, communication, issues facing young people, drug awareness, victim awareness and the criminal justice system. I've gained valuable experience that will benefit me in my future career.

MR: Do you feel as if you have been challenged in your role?

JM: Yes, it has challenged me by making me aware of my own failings so that I can address them. I also try to think about how I communicated with Clara as this is an important aspect when working with young people. As well, during this relationship and others, I have been faced with some very difficult issues, issues that have been hard for me to understand and even harder to address with the young person. It does force you to look at your own values and at times, really opens your mind.

MR: What do you think about the NIACRO Youth Mentoring Project?

Volunteers Mary Bonner, Anne Kelly and Rose Symington.



JM: It was rewarding as Clara really appreciated being taken away for the evening and doing an activity that she enjoyed. We are able to talk about many things affecting her life and it's very gratifying to see her progress so far. However, it would be nice to see the longer term effects of it; you build a relationship with a mentee, then your time ends and you are unsure as to how they are getting on once you have finished contact. Overall, I do think it is very good.

MR: Julie, can you tell the readers how you feel about the relationship you had with me (Michelle), as your Volunteer Supervisor?

JM: Both Clara and I got on with Michelle. She's very approachable and was always there for quick guidance and a chat. We are both very fond of her.

MR: So what you are saying is I have superior skills as a worker and endless quantities of charm and intellect?

JM: Ha ha.... [and she left it at that!]

MR: OK...overall, what would you like to say about your relationship with Clara?

JM: It's sad now that our time on the project together is coming to an end as I have grown fond of Clara. But I am pleased to see how far she has come and now that she is moving on to better things, I am so proud of her and everything we have achieved together.

MR: Julie, thank you very much. You should be very proud of the difference you have made to Clara's confidence and life. I very much enjoy working with and knowing you; you have great enthusiasm, motivation and are a real asset to the project and to NIACRO. I would like to express my honest and immense gratitude for all your work and effort. You are a real star. Thank you.

CAPS IS GREAT BECAUSE IT'S FUN AND HELPFUL

The Child and Parent Support project (Caps) started in 2004 as a pilot initiative in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (then the Southern Health and Social Services Board). The project exists to support families whose children aged between eight and eleven are at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour.

A January 2006 external evaluation of Caps was based on 11 families completing the programme at that time and found high success rates on a range of factors. We have updated the evaluation to include almost 50 families, and there has been an even better outcome on several of these factors. For example, in 2006 the child's risk of offending had gone down in 91% of cases; now that is 100%. There'd been 50% improvement in children's school attendance – that's gone up to 80%. And children's performance at school has improved by 83% compared to 75%.

The project's way of working has developed over time, with more work with parents both individually and in groups. It works because it is intensive and because it takes on board the whole range of difficulties the children and their parents have to deal with. The statutory services recognise that it's successful; whether or not that translates into adequate funding to keep it going, and roll it out to more families, remains to be seen.

One family's story can illustrate how Caps tries to help. When NIACRO first met them, all the children were on the Child Protection Register,

the two younger in care. All had been offending; the oldest had several suspensions from school; the youngest was at risk – in primary school! - of being expelled. It's not surprising therefore that there was a long history of social services involvement. Maybe it's not surprising either that the parents were resisting what they saw as interference in their lives.

But they did agree to take part. Over the next eight weeks, at times which suited the family:

- Key workers talked every week with all the children about how and why they were in care, what was going on in school and how to deal with problems there.
- The two key workers also worked weekly with the parents on their parenting role and skills, and plans for bringing the children back home.
- The youngest child received extra help with school work.
- That child and parents took part in the "Just Right State" group.
- The mother took part in the "Cook it" programme.

DID IT WORK?

And the outcome? All the children have been at home for over a year, they have come off the Child Protection Register, there have been no offending incidents, the youngest child is progressing well at school and the oldest is having fewer problems there. The youngest's school principal uses words like "brilliant", "wonderful", "amazing" about the change. One child says, "I have learnt lots of things at Caps like keeping myself safe, how to be angry in a good way, and that no one else controls my behaviour – just me." Another simply says, "Caps is great because it's fun and helpful." The parents say, "You have done a marvellous job...It's dead on." And the professionals speak of "very positive outcomes for the children"... "the time intensive commitment of the Caps workers has been invaluable in all cases."

CJSNI AWARD

We were delighted to learn at the end of June that Caps had won the award for "Outstanding contribution to tackling youth crime" in the CJSNI's Criminal Justice Awards.



Michael Hayes, Shirley Wells, Martina McCooney, Sinead Devine with Criminal Justice Minister Maria Eagle.

COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



For the latest in our series of interviews with senior figures working in fields relevant to NIACRO and to our service users, we met with the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Patricia Lewsley, to talk about her work and especially the points where it interfaces with our own concerns. Patricia took up her post in January 2007.

NICCY was established in 2003, and is currently carrying out its first, 2005 – 2008, corporate plan (and now working on the 2008 – 2011 plan). That plan is based on a research and consultation process carried out in 2004. The process was in many ways innovative in Northern Ireland terms, not least in its emphasis on talking with children and young people themselves. This included some in the criminal justice system. Patricia emphasised how comprehensive an exercise it had been, and we went on to talk about the ongoing process of consultation. This includes the work of the Participation Team, whose outreach service aims to promote NICCY's work, raise awareness of children's rights and show children and young people how they can get involved in the making of policy which affects them. There is also a 42-person Youth Panel, and a Children's Ethics Committee, who are consulted on research and other policy developments. It's very much a key issue for NICCY that children and young people have the capacity to be able to contribute in a meaningful way. Participation Team staff have also worked with

the PSNI to set up pilot advisory groups of young people and Patricia is keen that such groups should include young people in contact with the criminal justice system.

Another source of information for NICCY is the complaints which it receives – 601 in 2006-2007. Many are from children and young people themselves, others from parents and professionals. Patricia gave some examples of problems that had been brought to the Legal and Complaints Team:

- The relatives of children of a mother in prison had undertaken to care for them – but these extra responsibilities had led to their getting into debt.
- A mother who having come off drugs was struggling to get her child out of care and back to living with her after a period when the child had been with six different foster placements.
- Two children and their foster parents who wanted to continue their placement together in the face of the local Trust wanting to move the children to another placement.



NIACRO asked about advocacy and what role the Commissioner saw for advocacy both in NICCY's own work and in the many other organisations with an interest in children's rights. Although NICCY is ready and willing to help complainants directly, and refer them on to other resources if that's the best course of action, Patricia is keen that advocacy services also be developed and feels there is a lack of such services; NICCY is currently researching this topic. Patricia sees two benefits in particular to the child of working through an advocate; they have support to get their message across, and the situation can be tackled, and hopefully resolved, at an earlier stage.

NICCY'S PRIORITIES

The corporate plan includes among its 15 priorities, “Children and crime”, “Child protection”, and “Children and young people and risk-taking behaviour”. Patricia shared some examples of the issues which NICCY has worked on under these headings:

- Like NIACRO, NICCY is in favour of dealing with offending behaviour by children and young people by diversionary and non-custodial methods, rather than a custodial approach. Patricia spoke approvingly of several diversionary initiatives including some begun by the PSNI. Again like NIACRO, she deplored the inconsistency in provision of these sorts of service, and how difficult it was for service providers to get sustainable funding. She suggested education and community safety resources should be made available.
- In meetings with the PSNI and Policing Board NICCY has raised concerns around plastic bullets, Tasers, and the use of informants. NICCY has also been to see the Chief Constable about the use of juvenile informants and Patricia noted that that the organisation is “not very happy at the outcome of this discussion”. And of course NICCY challenged vigorously, though in the event unsuccessfully, the introduction of ASBOs in Northern Ireland, pursuing a judicial review of the process by which the NIO had introduced them.
- NICCY has been closely involved with policy-making on the vetting of people who work with children, and protection of children from

sex offenders who might be a threat to them. The organisation is particularly conscious of the difficulties posed when sex offenders cross borders – not just within Ireland but further afield – and cannot be pursued, or indeed vetted, effectively.

UNCRC

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child underpins of all NICCY’s work. Patricia described it as the organisation’s “guiding principle” and at the heart of the impact assessment tool, which is used to analyse government policy or proposed policy against a benchmark of children’s rights. Indeed, in August last year, the Commissioner made a statement after media coverage of the taking of a DNA sample from a child saying that she believed the holding of DNA from people under 18 who had not been convicted of a crime may breach the Convention.

Like all member states of the UN, the UK has to report regularly to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, and the Government is currently putting its report together for a 2008 delivery date. The four UK Commissioners report together (separately from the Government report), but have the opportunity to include subjects which are particularly relevant to each country as well; Patricia gave the example of juvenile informants being of more relevance to Northern Ireland, while the DNA retention was of concern to all four countries. She was also looking forward to the opportunity to meet with the UN’s rapporteurs who would take evidence in person.

WORKING TOGETHER

Like most if not all statutory agencies, NICCY is part of a network of local, national and international bodies with the same or related responsibilities, and NIACRO asked Patricia to spell out how those relationships work. In terms of children-centred agencies, NICCY is part of the British and Irish Network of Ombudsmen and Children’s Commissioners and the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children.

In Northern Ireland, NICCY either has or is developing Memoranda of Understanding with the NI Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission for NI, the NI Ombudsman, the Police Ombudsman and the Criminal Justice Inspectorate. “Our roles are defined”, says Patricia, “But that doesn’t stop us working collectively.” Regular meetings give the opportunity for the different bodies to find out what each is doing and see if there is an opportunity to work together on things, or to identify topics that may be coming up for several of the agencies. NIACRO was interested to hear that Patricia is planning to set up a wider stakeholder “reference group” to share experience and skills and avoid duplication, and to inform NICCY’s own business planning, later in 2007.

NIACRO also asked about links with the work of government departments; an issue for us is always that departments who could in practice make a valuable contribution to helping children and young people stay away from offending behaviour, don’t always

recognise that fact. More, the 10-year children's strategy, though a great improvement on anything that went before, is disappointing when it comes to the action plan designed to implement the strategy.

In reply, NICCY told us about their report on expenditure on children's services, (due to be published before this issue of NIACRO News comes out) which will inform its

dealings with the Assembly on the range of services. Patricia wants parents and young people to be a priority in the Comprehensive Spending Review and has pressed that point in a meeting with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister which took place the day after NIACRO News met with her. At that meeting the Commissioner raised the issue of a cross-departmental Ministerial sub-group

led by OFMDFM's Junior Ministers, which, she said in a statement, "I hope will act to make sure that all Government departments are acting to promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children."

You can find out more about NICCY on its website, www.niccy.org

Being a Jobtrack Trainee

In the last issue of NIACRO News, we described the training we can offer to Jobtrack trainees. Here one trainee, Robert, describes his experience of being on the programme.

"I have been involved in the Jobtrack programme for the past few years; first as a trainee simply looking to gain a qualification in IT. As an ex-prisoner it was difficult for me to mix with others as my self-esteem and self-confidence were rock bottom but with the help of my tutor Mairead and NIACRO I slowly began to regain my esteem and confidence as well as

being able to associate with others. I managed to pass my C.L.A.I.T award and when the new ECDL award was offered I started this as it seemed a good qualification to gain a job. Just before I had finished

my ECDL award a few weeks later Mairead asked me if I would like to help with the training of some of her trainees: this was quite possibly the very day I started to actually feel like I was a normal person and not just someone out of prison. The trust, support and confidence that I was shown helped me greatly to turn from being someone with no hope or future to someone who can see a future and has the ambition to some day have a future. At the moment I am a qualified ECDL tutor helping Mairead to train other people who feel the same way I

used to feel. In doing so hopefully I can give them the light at the end of the tunnel I was searching for before I met Mairead and involved myself with Jobtrack."



We opened new premises in Railway Street in June to house our Jobtrack programme in Armagh.

Armagh Opening



Back row l to r: PBNI staff Louise Hazlett, Gillian Montgomery, Paula Nelson, Stephen Hamilton. Front row, NIACRO Training Officers Sylvia Watt and Declan McKee with CEO Olwen Lyner.



Trainee Janine Edwards concentrates on the screen.

Influencing the Policy Makers

There has been a flurry of responses to important consultations since the last issue of NIACRO News. Here are summaries of some of them – you can get the full responses on the website.

EU STRUCTURAL FUNDS COMPETITIVENESS AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES

We welcomed the Department of Finance and Personnel's basic principles of reducing the numbers of economically inactive people, and improving the skills and qualifications of people both in and out of work. But we pointed out that people with a criminal record are still more likely to be dependent on benefits and to be unemployed over the long term. Our response drew on our experience of managing European programmes which focus on employment, and this has shown that you can't just separate out the employment

policies impacting on our users – from funding to families, victims to voting

element and leave it at that. People have money problems, problems with accommodation, training and education, with their health – especially mental health, drugs and alcohol – and isolation from their families and communities. We’ve also learned that employers and potential employers need support if the workplace is to become more welcoming to offenders and ex-prisoners.

This complex combination of issues demands a coordinated response from the many Government departments and agencies involved. The consultation document’s proposition that there should be cross-cutting themes in the programmes, is therefore one we support and is, in the context of the resettlement strategy, absolutely essential.

We welcomed a move in the document to a social capital model, which can measure and value “softer” outcomes. We also offered the experience of our EQUAL project, which is developing, with partners from other Member States of the EU, a matrix which will try to identify how to pull together and make effective the contributions to crime reduction of many separate Departments.

NI SEX OFFENDER STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE (NISOSMC) REVIEW OF THE PROVISION OF TEMPORARY AND PERMANENT ACCOMMODATION

As contentious as this topic is, the state has to take decisions about where many sex offenders are to live, and so it was important that NIACRO made its contribution to this debate. Basically, we wanted to stress again the point that sex offenders are not one homogenous group. Just as the risks they pose range from high to low, so their freedom to live where they want, and the degree of supervision they get, should vary and be decided on the basis of the individual’s circumstances.

The serious lack of accommodation of every type also has to be tackled; the fact is that the NIHE does not have accommodation for single people in non-residential areas; and that private rented accommodation is too expensive unless there is some sort of control on rents. The housing associations which do have appropriate facilities need to be fully supported and involved in the decisions.

HIDDEN CRIMES, SECRET PAIN: A PROPOSED REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR ADDRESSING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

NIACRO welcomed many of the points in this NIO consultation, especially in its recognition of the seriousness of the problem and its assertion that this is a public health matter. The public’s fear and misunderstanding of the realities of sexual violence are a big barrier to dealing with it, and we therefore suggested that a major campaign taken up by government, like those on drink driving and domestic violence, would be one way to educate the public. It could pull in existing organisations – including NIACRO – with experience in health promotion, work with victims, work with offenders and including special attention to educating children and young people.

In discussing the role of Government, we drew on our interviews in January with the political parties (NIACRO News issue 17) which included a question about sex offences. All the parties recognised that this is one of the most difficult subjects for the individual politician, or the party, to respond to in a balanced way. Ultimately, most acknowledged that they could not come up with a complete solution, and the new Executive will need a lot of support and information in order to agree what should be done.

Better legislation is one necessary piece of the jigsaw. In our response to last autumn’s consultation on reforming the law on sexual offences, we put forward the general principle that there is a need for stricter sentences for

serious crimes against the person, but that more diversionary or treatment models, including the restorative justice approach, should be used for less serious offences and particularly for young people.

Other priorities as NIACRO sees them include:

- Better coordination between agencies working with offenders and victims.
- Services provided equally in all parts of Northern Ireland.
- Support to both victim and perpetrator after release.
- A speeding up of the legal process.
- Proper accommodation for offenders.
- Training on sexual violence being given to health, criminal justice, and education and youth service workers.

PROPOSALS FOR THE JUVENILE JUSTICE CENTRE RULES AND THE JJC ORDER (SUPERVISION) RULES

There are elements in the proposed legislation which NIACRO welcomes. It is good to see reference to:

- Children and families being treated fairly and encouraged and enabled to contribute to decisions which affect them (an approach which NIACRO emphasised in discussions with the NIO as the legislation was being drafted).
- The importance of maintaining relationships between a child and their family, and on support for children in education, training and employment.

- Consultation and partnership working between statutory and voluntary agencies.

There are other ways in which we think the service to children could be improved, either spelled out in the legislation and/or implemented through the policies and procedures which stem from it. For example, we believe that children should have greater access to independent advocates, and those whose first language isn't English should have access to an interpreter when they need one. We welcomed the reference to visits, while regretting that the new JJC does not have a visitors' centre or facilities for visits tailored for adolescents, parents and younger siblings.

However, NIACRO is concerned that the best interests of the child are not mentioned in the preamble to the legislation or indeed within the aims of the JJC. The UK Government has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN has in the past raised this issue with the Government. We would like it to be spelled out very plainly that the approach - the ethos - will be primarily one of care for the child.

FAMILIES MATTER: SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

NIACRO welcomed the Government's commitment in this DHSSPS document to improving the life chances of children and young people and the relating of this document to the Government's 10-year strategy. We made the point that although many services for children are universal, many of the families with whom we

work do not in practice use these services, whether from fear, from not knowing they exist, or from not being aware that they have the right to access them. They need encouragement and positive action to do so, and there are indeed tried and tested ways of doing this – many being offered by the voluntary and community sector. So the full implementation of Positive Steps, the Government's undertakings on voluntary and community sector support, would go a long way to achieving the take-up of services by the people who really need them.

VOTING RIGHTS

Voting rights of convicted prisoners detained within the United Kingdom

This consultation came from the Westminster Department of Constitutional Affairs. NIACRO takes the view that when a person is given a custodial sentence, the sentence is deprivation of liberty. In practice, it also results in breakdown of personal relationships, financial problems, loss of education, training and employment opportunities, and even damaged physical and mental health.

An important part of NIACRO's work is around helping people integrate back into the community when they leave prison; the more they can maintain the ordinary experiences of being a citizen, the easier that is going to be. A key element of citizenship is the right to vote, and politicians spend a fair bit of time exhorting us to do so. A prisoner who is interested enough in how the country is governed to want to vote, is demonstrating a level of engagement with society that we should be encouraging.

DELIVERING A BETTER SERVICE TO VICTIMS AND WITNESSES OF CRIME

We welcomed the NIO's commitment to giving victims and witnesses better access to information on the criminal justice system. We suggested that this be extended so that voluntary and community organisations not directly involved with the system but who might well have victims and witnesses among their users (organisations working with elderly people, for example) could also be better informed of how it works.

We were surprised that the section on "Listening to Victims", or indeed the document in general, did not refer to the community restorative justice schemes which have been under discussion, and consulted upon, for several years. They are surely an important element, potentially at least, of "a better service" to victims.

The consultation document lists funding given to (voluntary and community) organisations to provide services in this area, to the tune of around £1.80M a year. This represents less than 1% of the overall criminal justice budget, and there is plenty of scope for building support for good services (and the document quite properly deals also with standards) into the proposed strategy.

NI AFFAIRS COMMITTEE: INQUIRY INTO THE NORTHERN IRELAND PRISON SERVICE

NIACRO has welcomed the news that the NI Affairs Committee is to carry out an inquiry into (to quote its terms of reference).

" the operation of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, in particular to examine whether the existing prison estate is adequate and appropriate for the secure accommodation of Northern Ireland's prisoners, and whether the Prison Service appropriately meets the health and education and training needs of prisoners. The Committee will also examine such other issues as may arise in the course of the inquiry."

We sent the Committee the considerable volume of policy comment we've made over the last few years, and made some other points at this stage:

- In the context of the proposed/ planned devolution of criminal justice matters we can and should have a root and branch review of prison and its function.
- It's important that the inquiry bears in mind just what the implications of a prison sentence are – loss of liberty of course, but also loss of the chance of employment, training and education opportunities, loss of normal social and personal relationships. And the danger of acquiring behaviours that will only make things worse for the prisoner and the community, either in prison or when s/he is released.
- NIACRO is – obviously – keen that the contribution of the voluntary and community sector in prison care and resettlement is recognised and the opportunities for us to contribute are increased.

CEO Olwen Lyner and Director of Services Pat Conway gave evidence to the Committee on 13 June. They outlined what we feel are the main problems with the current situation – the lack of capital investment, the high cost per prisoner place and the fact that care and resettlement get so much less funding than security and containment.

The MPs wanted to hear NIACRO's views on, among other topics, the use of non-custodial sentences; sentencing policy for women, and their accommodation in custody; the location of Magilligan Prison and educational and training opportunities in Maghaberry; and the transfer of health care from the prison service to the DHSSPS. They also wanted to hear about how prisoners got to hear about NIACRO's services, and NIACRO's relationships with the NI Prison Service and the Prison Officers' Association.

The inquiry will go on until the autumn, and the Committee hopes to report to Parliament before Christmas.

CONCLUSION

Across all the areas where we take the time to input, we are well aware that the consultation phase is the last phase. We seek to be engaged in the most relevant before this stage. For example, the Youth Justice Agency provided us with the chance to input to the development of child protection policies and the JJC Rules at an early stage, exactly the sort of opportunity we are happy to take and where we feel we can make the greatest contribution.

Staff Comings and Goings

Two Research and Information Officers have joined the NIACRO staff team.

Kerry Mc Mullan, an International Business graduate of the University of Ulster, has worked for the past three and a half years in local enterprise development in Limavady, conducting market research, training and mentoring new and existing businesses. She lives just outside Ballymoney.

Paul Webb worked as a Science, Design and Technology Technician for an Education Board before joining NIACRO. This job involved setting up experiments across the three Natural Sciences taught in schools and assisting children and teachers to perform those experiments. He also worked in the IT industry, writing user guides for products ranging from software for the general public to hardware for electronic engineers. He lives on a farm between Dungiven and Limavady with wife Majella and children Conor and Alex.

As many voluntary and community organisations will recognise, different funders have different requirements, and different statistical packages can do different things. A project may change over time, and different records will need to be kept to reflect this. Moreover, those of us who aren't statisticians

have a naïve belief that the computer can read our minds and give us exactly the tables and charts which will illuminate the success or failure of the project. So it's timely to take a fresh look at the design and analysis of the data we need for the most effective measurement and evaluation of our work. Our two new Research and Information Officers have thrown themselves with energy into an overhaul of the dozen or so databases which hold the records of the many projects for which NIACRO is responsible. The goal is not only to refine

individual databases, but make it easier to communicate and make comparisons between them.

Two long-serving staff members have recently left NIACRO. Fiona McLaughlin worked with us for over 15 years, first in the Action Plan Training programme in Larne, then with Jobtrack and most recently with the Educational Trust.

David O'Donnell joined NIACRO in 1993, contributing to the development of the Educational Trust, moving to the Crime Prevention Unit and then Jobtrack, latterly in a research and information role.

Caitlin Reid has also left NIACRO, having worked in the Parent and Child Support project and Family Links.

We thank all the staff who've left us and wish them well for the future.



POPS DINNER

Staff of the Magilligan Visitors Centre celebrate the award of the "Crystal Heart" awarded by the Partners of Prisoners and Families organisation. Back row, l to r: Ann Donaghy, Samantha Williams, Bernadette McGuigan, Maureen Mullan. Front row, Anne McNicholl, Olwen Lyner.