

LISTEN TO THE PRISONER

Eric Allison, Prisons Correspondent of the Guardian, started his criminal career in 1957 at the age of 11, received his first custodial sentence three years later, and ended it in 2000 after his final, seven-year, spell in prison. He came to talk with NIACRO staff at their planning day in June. This account of his visit includes his presentation, his responses to the many questions we put to him and his impressions of his short time in Belfast.

“I’m not sure why I started offending” Eric says. “My family were very honest people and my brothers never offended. I’m neither proud nor particularly ashamed of my criminal experience; it’s simply the way my life panned out.” However, in 2000 he decided to “take a break” from criminality and just then saw that the Guardian newspaper was looking for someone to report on prison affairs. He applied; more to bend the ear of

the editor about his views on the prison system than thinking he had a realistic chance of getting the job. But he was wrong; he did get the job and has been writing about prisons and other criminal justice subjects in the Guardian and elsewhere ever since. Though he first had to go away and think about whether or not to accept the job offer, realising what a huge change of lifestyle it would involve (and because he was actually “in



Executive Committee member Dorothy Elliott, Eric Allison and Olwen Lyner in conversation at the staff planning day.

negotiation” to join in another potential offence at the time).

When NIACRO asked Eric about the impact of his story on his own family, he told us about feeling that he was providing well enough for them in material ways, and knew his wife was making a stable home for them in his absence. But his daughters “left me in no doubt as to the harm my situation had

also in this issue:

listen to the prisoner
from offender to journalist

evaluations:
PACS and ReachOut

family links:
update

caps expansion
into Belfast

done”: the publicity, the taunting at school. He regrets it, but – and he tried to get this across more than once – when immersed in offending he was “in a cycle which I hardly challenged”. Once you’re labelled as a criminal you become comfortable with it, with “the clothes they’ve given you”.

LISTEN TO THE PRISONER

It seems not impossible that one of the reasons Eric is the sane, determined and passionate person he is today is that from early on in his prison experience he was a battler for the rights of prisoners. “The user voice wasn’t heard at all”, he says, and he spoke of his own experience of trying to influence the system when in prison, up to and including writing to the Home Secretary. And virtually always getting the sense that “the prisoner’s voice could be ignored.” If there is one key message that we picked up from what Eric said, it is: Listen to the experience of the people in prison. He commented that when he was first in prison, there was no communication at all between most prisoners and most staff but that clearly some aspects of the regime had changed for the better (some of the changes happening after, and

influence the system for the better for everybody”. And on the other hand, NIACRO has many examples of people being afraid to make a complaint because they, rightly in all too many cases, fear the response. NIACRO staff can be placed in an invidious position as well, aware of things going wrong but reluctant to make the situation worse for the prisoner. But Eric encouraged us to support people to come forward, to build the evidence for necessary changes.

PRISONERS ARE PEOPLE

Eric described the prisoner councils in some prisons in England and Wales as perhaps an attempt to give prisoners a voice – but “they’re limited in scope and some aren’t very effective”. “The system”, he concludes, “is reluctant to give prisoners any status”. He’s also unhappy with the one-size-fits-all approach to imprisonment. “Prisoners are people who commit crime – they are not a breed of people”. You wouldn’t, in his catchy analogy, give the same tablets to a whole lot of patients with different symptoms: so also offenders are individuals.

He also advocated working closely with any staff who did appear to be open to change, and pointed

people from outside going into the prisons and other criminal justice establishments – something that NIACRO whole-heartedly agrees with. Any closed institution needs that alternative view – that sense that there is a world outside, of which prisoners – and staff - are still a part, and in which they are included.

It’s not just serving prisoners who should be listened to, in Eric’s view. Why aren’t they using ex-prisoners in the inspection and ombudsman functions? Not only have they valuable experience to bring, but if the criminal justice system can’t set the example of being able to incorporate ex-offenders, why should employers outside the system bother?

STATUTORY AND VOLUNTARY

We asked Eric for his views on the relationship between voluntary sector organisations working in the criminal justice system, and statutory agencies. “Of course there has to be a working relationship”, he said. “But the sectors have different agendas and there needs to be independence and some distance. Take your own compassion and your own integrity”, he went on, “and try to persuade people to behave responsibly”. In Eric’s view, “An honest administration/government would say: ‘Yes, we’re funding you and we’ll take your criticism.’”

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

In looking at NIACRO services, Eric was especially impressed with the Caps (Children and Parents Support) project. [There’s more on Caps later in NIACRO News.] “If we get it right with the kids then the

The system is reluctant to give prisoners any status

because of, the Strangeways riot in 1990).

Inevitably, the individual prisoner has to be careful to say what will bring him/her an advantage – parole, a move to a better prison, some privileges – “not what might

out that they too needed support in bringing that change about.

“The prison system has this dinosaur mentality; dynamic staff and governors who want to try something different don’t get on in career terms”. It is vitally important in Eric’s eyes that there are lay

future is taken care of - the future benefits are so huge.” The lack of understanding of what turns a child into a recurrent offender angers him – “One day a judge will say ‘You have had all the chances, now you will have a custodial sentence’ – nonsense, they have had no chances.” He is also trenchant about the care system: “If ever a word was misused, it’s ‘care’ ”: and is angry about the increasing harshness of the treatment of young offenders. He cited with horror a recent suggestion that physical restraint could be used for “non-compliance” – “It’s the business of children to be non-compliant, you’re sewing seeds you know will reap criminality.”

PRISON DOESN'T WORK

We asked Eric, with his many years of experience, knowledge and commenting on the prison system in England and Wales, how he would advise Northern Ireland to move forward. “Don’t be the sighted led by the blind” was his succinct reply. Watch out for and don’t follow trends like the “most depressing development” of more and more full term life sentences and an apparently inexorable rise in the prison population. “The system, especially the prison system, over here [ie in England and Wales] is in a massive hole-and the government seem set on digging deeper”, he says. “With our jails bursting at the seams and re-offending rates continuing to soar, the Ministry of Justice is hell bent on proving that ‘prison works’. It doesn’t. If it did, then America, the ‘land of the free’, which locks up more of its citizens than any other nation on earth, would be the safest country on earth. Is it?”

Politicians, in Eric’s view, do in fact know “what works”, but are too influenced by – frightened of? - the media. “Tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime” wasn’t a bad slogan, and could indeed have been sold to the public as a sensible way forward, but the second part of the equation had been dropped in favour of short-term, crowd-pleasing harshness. “The better we treat prisoners the less crime there will be”, says Eric, and he called on NIACRO to present the politicians with the figures and the evidence in order the better to challenge them. (And so we will; we’re currently putting together a set of short policy briefings on key criminal justice topics, and are increasing our contacts with MLAs and other policy makers.)

A VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

Eric kindly sent us this summary of his impressions of his trip.

My recent visit to Belfast certainly opened my eyes. It was my first time in the city and I wasn’t quite sure what I expected to find. For a large slice of my adult life, it seemed as if Northern Ireland was never out of the news and those images of a war-torn place were, I suppose, uppermost in my mind.

During my talk to NIACRO staff, I mentioned that, as a troublesome prisoner, I was moved around the system quite a lot and, each time I entered a new jail, I immediately got a sense, a ‘feel’, of whether it was a good prison or bad. That intuition followed me out of prison and I have come to rely on it in all sorts of new situations. Belfast ‘felt’ good, from almost the moment I stepped off the plane; it felt warm and vibrant and that impression stayed with me during my short stay.

I heard a lot about the work NIACRO is doing and was particularly impressed by the efforts the organisation puts in to keep families in touch with prisoners. The writer Cervantes said that ‘comparisons are odious’ but it does appear that NIACRO could teach their counterparts in England and Wales a thing or two in this vital area. I was extremely interested in the Caps project. Effective intervention, at an early age, is the absolute key to preventing long term offending.

As a journalist who was a prisoner for many years, I meet a lot of people in the prison ‘business’. Many of them welcome my entry into their world, others are less hospitable; giving me a strong sense they feel I am out of my place in the scheme of things, something of an intruder. Hand on heart, I can say that every single person I met during my time with NIACRO fell firmly in the first category. This was especially so during question and answer sessions. I often say some harsh things about those involved in criminal justice systems and am more than happy to take hard questions in return. I had a few of those in Belfast and it heartened me, because it is those who are really interested in making a change who ask the hardest questions. The plodders, those happy with the status quo, tend to speak in bland anodyne terms; as afraid of rocking the speaker’s boat as they are of upsetting the system that employs them. In that respect, I found Belfast a welcome breath of fresh air.

You can read Eric’s Guardian articles on www.guardian.co.uk

CORPORATE PLAN UPDATE

NIACRO's current corporate plan runs from April 2006 to March 2009; that is, we are now in the final year of the plan. Time therefore to start work on the next plan, the strategic framework for our work. The June staff planning day at which Eric Allison spoke was a key internal jumping-off point for our thinking, and we've also begun consulting with service users (through the young people's group described later, for example) and volunteers (at the June Volunteer Forum). In the autumn we'll be meeting with a user panel drawn from our adult service users, along with consultation meetings with our funders and other stakeholders who have an interest in our work and hope to have a draft plan by the end of the year.

If you'd like to be part of the process by letting us have your views:

- on our work,
- on the values that you think should be underpinning it,
- on the criminal justice context to which we'll be making our contribution from April 2009 to March 2012 (the devolution of criminal justice to the Assembly being probably the most impactful change coming up),

or if you want to be sure to get a copy of the draft plan around the end of the year, contact Jackie Junk (jackie@niacro.co.uk)

CAPS EXPAN

The Child and Parent Support project which so impressed Eric Allison started in 2004 in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area, to give intensive support to children aged 8-11 (now 8-13) who are at risk of offending, and to their families.



The programme was developed through the Southern Area Children's Services Planning, a partnership of agencies who work together to plan support services for children in this situation. It aims to reduce the risk factors which might lead to children offending or behaving in an anti-social way, and build up the elements which may protect them. Obviously, parents play a key role in this – negative or positive. As the project has gone on, more emphasis has been placed on working with them to recognise just how important they are in their child's life, and to help them develop the parenting skills that will in turn support the children to – for example – enjoy school and deal with problems they may be facing there.

An external evaluation of Caps in 2006, and an internal follow-up in 2007, showed measurable and significant improvements in the lives of the children who were involved, and these improvements

increased over time. For example, in 2006 there had been a 50% improvement in children's attendance; in 2007 that had gone up to 80%. Children's performance at school went up by 75% in 2006 and 83% in 2007. One primary school principal used words like "brilliant...amazing" about the change in a child who was previously at serious risk of being expelled. It was gratifying to win the CJSNI's Criminal Justice Award for "Outstanding contribution to tackling youth crime" in June 2007.

In issue 18 of NIACRO News in summer 2007, we described Caps and the evaluations to date, and included the comment: "The statutory services recognise that it's [Caps is] successful; whether or not that translates into adequate funding to keep it going and roll it out to more families remains to be seen". To our great delight, towards the end of 2007 NIACRO secured the tender for a Caps programme in the Belfast Trust

DS INTO BELFAST

The new Belfast Caps team, l to r Patricia McFalone, Kelly Cochrane, Martin Price and Sam Clarke

area, to be run along similar lines to the existing programme and funded by the DHSSPS and the Youth Justice Agency. It started work at the end of May 2008 and will take referrals from the youth justice, childcare and education sectors.

If you'd like to know more about the Caps project, contact capsbelfast@niacro.co.uk



Are you interested in volunteering with families in need of support?

NIACRO has recently developed new volunteer roles to meet the needs of families and complement the services already provided by staff through Caps and Family Links.

The first is a befriending role where volunteers will meet regularly with either a parent/family member of a child (8-13 years - who is at risk of offending), or an adult family member of a prisoner/young person in custody.

Family members can feel isolated or distanced from their family or community due to their situation. The aim of the befriending role is to encourage and support the family member to identify ways of moving forward.

The befriender will support the family member with tasks and activities as agreed with their supervisor. This might include helping them to access a course, or support with attending meetings or appointments. It may also involve simply going for a walk or a coffee and having a chat about how things are going.

The second role involves offering practical support through providing much needed transport for children and their families to and from Caps meetings and to and from prison or Juvenile Justice Centre visits.

Transport assistance is needed mostly during the daytime and can be weekly/fortnightly or occasional one-off journeys for a few hours, depending on your availability. We are keen to involve volunteers throughout Northern Ireland to offer transport to families living in rural areas or unable to access public transport to attend meetings or visits.

We offer relevant training, guidance and out of pocket expenses to prepare and support Caps and Family Links volunteers.

**If you are interested in either of these roles please contact Vivienne
Tel 028 90320157 (ext 230) or email vivienne@niacro.co.uk
for further information.**



Attentive listeners at the June Volunteer Forum

YOUNG PEOPLE GIVE THEIR VIEWS

Following a Family Day at Belfast Zoo last year, we asked some of the young people who came along if they'd be interested in taking part in a focus group to test out our ideas about a Young People's Forum.

We know that the experience of having a family member in prison can be very difficult for a young person. So we want to hear their views on that experience to help us design services that will help them, and to reflect their views to the policy-makers, and of course to support them as individuals in

this situation. The small group of girls aged between 13 and 15, met five times after a lot of preparation and reassurance from staff – not surprisingly; young people aren't used to being consulted much about any aspect of their lives, let alone this very sensitive one of having a relative in prison.

MAIN FINDINGS

The young people valued the group as they felt it gave them an opportunity to discuss issues that they had not discussed openly before, with others who had been through similar situations and in a non-judgmental and safe environment.

The financial impact of imprisonment on children and families is huge and the young people in this group were keenly aware of the financial difficulties their families were experiencing. The costs of new clothes, for example: only clothes that can be tumble-dried, and certain styles and colours have been permitted in Hydebank Young Offenders Centre up to now (but see Family Links Update for the positive impact an effective support group can have!).

We need to show them they aren't forgotten

The costs of travel, refreshments, parcels, and cash were well known to them and something they worried about.

The level of stigma that the young people feel has a huge emotional and practical impact on them and affects how they interact with other people and situations. The group helped them to deal with some of their feelings of stigma and to feel better about the state of affairs by being with other young people who had similar feelings and experiences. They gained strength from each other and the facilitators.

LOW EXPECTATIONS

The children and siblings of prisoners have low expectations of services and unfortunately those low expectations are often the reality as they experience it. The group gave numerous examples of negative and oppressive attitudes and behaviour from staff; this greatly intensifies the trauma of seeing a relative in prison. The young people themselves made some recommendations about how visits and contact generally can be improved to reduce the emotional trauma. NIPS have invested a great deal in visitor centres, transport, child and family centred visits and the NIPS Family Strategy. Family members, they feel, are customers who should be treated as such, and all prison staff need to be sensitive about the impact of imprisonment on children and families if that investment is not to be continually undermined.

The young people stressed that the contact with their loved one in custody was as important for them as it is for the prisoner. They needed to see the prisoner, check they were OK, show them that they thought of them and that they weren't forgotten, encourage them to be positive. The young people and their families depend on contact to help them cope with their own emotions and feelings. Therefore, regardless of the prisoner's behaviour, visits and contact with family members need to be maintained and supported and not used as part of prison discipline, to be withdrawn as a sanction or allowed as a privilege.

There is a dearth of research which fully investigates the causal links between having a parent or sibling who is an offender and child offending, but the need for services to reduce the negative impact on children of parental or sibling offending is clear.

NIACRO hopes and plans to set up groups for children and young people across Northern Ireland. They will be open groups available to children and young people as and when they need them. We also want to give young people within the groups the training and support which would prepare them to take on a facilitation role within the groups as time goes on, and/or to become members of the NIACRO Young People's Forum which will input to NIACRO's, and the statutory services', policy-making.

NIACRO would like to thank the young women who made this pilot group possible and who contributed so constructively.



In the last issue of NIACRO News we described a January 2008 meeting in Amelia House between PSNI Youth Diversion officers and NIACRO staff. At that time we'd agreed to meet again to take the discussions further, and this photo shows a group at that second meeting just before the summer.

FAMILY LINKS

UPDATE

Family Links is now in its third year. The project continues to grow and develop and respond to the needs of the families of prisoners throughout Northern Ireland. It responds to all referrals with an information pack and a telephone phone call or letter within twenty four hours.

Family Links offers a universal service to all families throughout Northern Ireland. The project workers in the different areas work with families and friends of prisoners on a short term or long term basis. The families dictate both the amount and the type of support required.

As well as working with individual families, we have run support groups in the Northern and Western Health Trust areas, in Newtownabbey and in Belfast. The type of group varied according to the different needs identified by the families. A pilot support group for families of young people in Hydebank Young Offenders Centre now includes families of the women prisoners in Hydebank. It has evolved to a group that also acts in an advisory capacity to Hydebank Wood Prison and YOC, and among the changes it has been responsible for are the recent changes in the clothing that can be brought into the prison (clothes no longer need to be washable at 30 degrees, and they can be tumble dried at the owner's risk). The group were also consulted on prison visiting, which means that all prisoners on the site



Getting their views across, some of the service users who came along to the focus group

can from September receive visits that last for a minimum of one hour, regardless of regime. We'd like to commend Governor Austin Treacy for his willingness to respond to the families' recommendations.

GETTING TOGETHER

June was a very busy month for Family Links. A Family Day at Antrim Forum enabled a number of families to get together and enjoy a day out. A great day was had by all despite the fact that the weather was not the greatest. An impromptu change in the plans – moving indoors for an extra game of bowling and taking advantage of the Forum's Jungle Gym - saved the day.

Five families who had a family member serving long sentences welcomed the opportunity to attend a three-day conference in Leeds. The main focus of the conference was to identify the issues that most

families find particularly difficult when visiting and keeping up contact with loved ones in prison. The conference had an added bonus for the families in that it allowed them time away from home to meet other families in the same position as themselves, in a comfortable venue where they could relax.

Nationwide, one of Family Links' funders, facilitated a focus group of sixteen families to gather the views of the project's users. The feedback was very positive from all the families; comments included "I'd no-one to turn to... Don't know how I have managed without them at first.... First impressions are really important; they had a good phone manner...."

The focus group also provided us with valuable information on gaps in services; for example more support groups are necessary. This is timely information since Family Links has recently recruited three new members of staff, two of whom are group workers.

don't know how I have managed without them

PARENT AND CHILD SUPPORT

The PACS project began in 2004 in the Northern Health and Social Services area. Its aims were to support prisoners' families and work with others to tackle the inter-generational effects of imprisonment – in other words, the well-recognised fact that having a parent in prison puts you at extra risk of ending up there yourself.

An external evaluation of PACS has just been published, carried out at NIACRO's request to check that the service has not only achieved its aims and brought real benefit to its users, but that it has done so effectively and efficiently. Evaluator Jan Wright outlined the evidence of the harm done to families when a parent is in prison – research ranging from 1965 to 2007 coming up with similar accounts of serious financial pressures, problems at school, and family relationships breaking down. It's also clear that a prisoner who keeps up good family links is less likely to re-offend, a fact that everyone seems to recognise but which doesn't get translated into either policy or practice to the extent that might make an actual difference.

As for the effect on a child's behaviour, a 2005 study concludes: "separation because of parental imprisonment was a strong predictor of anti social and delinquent outcomes for boys through the life-course...separation because of parental imprisonment conferred more risks on boys than separation for other reasons."¹

PACS staff are under no illusions about the degree of effort it takes to make a difference to families in

this situation. Many parents find simply coping day to day difficult; many have health problems, including mental ill health, and it's hard for them to get up the energy and motivation to take up new activities like parenting classes, or to support their children to make changes in their lives.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Not surprisingly then, much of the time staff spend with service users – in their homes or on the phone – goes to build trusting relationships so that they can give both practical help (for example with transport or contacting sources of financial help) and what we might call emotional support to help families cope with the upheaval in their lives.

The evaluator interviewed several service users and also was present as an observer at the June 2007 focus group meeting of user families, carried out for one of Family Links' funders, the Nationwide Foundation and described in "Family Links Update". She also got feedback from the other agencies with which PACS works, both voluntary and statutory.

If there is one common theme running through all this feedback, it's a sense of the commitment, persistence and support of staff. A few extracts from the interviews with users: "The best thing about NIACRO is that they've no agenda – they just want to help, plain and simple...she didn't get the best reception at first I'm afraid but she stuck at it and over time I realised that I could trust her and she really was interested in me and did care how I was coping... you feel like you can be yourself... I don't have to keep up a pretence with her – I can have a bad day and that's OK, she understands that bad days are part of the process".

The statutory and voluntary partners were clear that PACS work added value to what they were doing: "I really felt I had a part in making a difference for that family, but it was a team effort and we all had a part to play...it couldn't have happened if we hadn't worked together."

The evaluator's recommendations included endorsing the proposal to integrate PACS into the Family Links programme; more user surveys; especial consideration for the families of sexual offenders; and refining the database which records our work with families.

PACS has now been fully integrated into Family Links, and the way of working which it has proved to be effective is now being used across Northern Ireland. If you'd like to know more about PACS or Family Links, contact Donnie Sweeney, donnie@niacro.co.uk

¹ Murray, J and Farrington, DP. Parental imprisonment: effects on boys' antisocial behaviour and delinquency through the life course. Cambridge: Institute of Criminology, 2005

CHANGING PLACES

Much of the work NIACRO carries out with individuals stays private to the staff and individual concerned. However, staff felt that the stories of two recent Jobtrack participants deserved to be highlighted and we thank them for letting us print these accounts in NIACRO News.

David is a 40-year-old who left prison in April this year after serving three years and three months of a six and a half year sentence. His offending behaviour has mostly been around motoring offences, anti-social behaviour and drink-related crime. He describes how music has transformed his life.

While I was on remand in Maghaberry Prison I had to find something worthwhile to keep my mind occupied so I took basic guitar lessons and have never looked back.

It was difficult to learn the guitar at first but I stuck at it, practised for hours every day until it became second nature to me, I was able to pick out and strum a couple of songs but nothing major.

When I was transferred to Magilligan Prison, I was disappointed to learn that there was no guitar tuition or classes within the prison, I had to progress on my own so I started writing out songs from a CD and using what I had already learned. I then put chords from the guitar to the words; eventually I made up a couple of songbooks complete with chords and lyrics. With no help available from anyone else, this was my way of trying to further my guitar skills. I then thought that if I could arrange chords for other people's songs, what was there to stop me writing my own words and adding music to them?

Creating my own words and music soon became an addiction. This wasn't a bad thing because it also was a very satisfying way of easing the thoughts of being in prison. It was good therapy because I could release my feelings by putting them into writing, but most importantly it became my hobby.

I wouldn't sit down and say, "Right I'm going to write a song" – it doesn't work like that. More often than not I'd wake up in the middle of the night with an idea and just start writing. It's usually about something that happened to you or something somebody had said, but you always have to use your imagination and add a bit on to make it more interesting or to allow other people to relate to it.

MORE THAN A HOBBY

After a year and a half I had written over six full albums and started asking myself what I wanted to do with them. It was obvious it had become more than just a hobby and that I would carry on with it after serving my time in prison. While attending a session in the PDU [Prisoner Development Unit] with NIACRO, I explained to them what I had already achieved and told them I would like to try and further my abilities when I leave prison, possibly working in the music industry. NIACRO were very understanding about what I had already done and were keen to help me try and achieve my ambitions. They got in touch with a music producer called Richard Abbott who is also a professional songwriter and musician. He has worked in the music business in both London and Northern Ireland for a good

number of years. He had told me about IMRO (the Irish Music Rights Organisation) and he wants me to become a registered member. He has also set up NIRMS (the NI Music Rights Society) which he is head of. In other words, he's a good man to know in the business.

When he first came to see me in Magilligan I didn't really know what to expect. I thought he would just look at some of my songs and tell me if they were good or bad, but I couldn't have been more wrong. He sat down with NIACRO and myself and explained to us who he was, what he had done and what he could do for me. We went through some of my songs and he was impressed by the standard and what I'd done on my own in such a short time. We discussed future possibilities and what he could help me with. Before the session was over we had written a new song between us! When he left he gave me some very interesting books about the music industry and what it could do for me – and what I could do for it.

Before NIACRO set up our meeting, I was only a dreamer living in hope. Now that dream is a reality and my first steps have been taken. I've been given the chance which you think will never happen to you.

Thanks to NIACRO and Richard Abbott, not only can I write songs but also now I'm in the position to record them in a proper studio with a backing band. I also have the opportunity to progress in my guitar skills and to learn new musical instruments if I want. Who's to say where it will end?

Not bad for something that started as a few guitar lessons in prison!

congratulations!

Pictured is Mickey Martindale who recently was awarded a First Class honours degree in Psychology from the University of Ulster.

Mickey was referred to NIACRO's Jobtrack programme in June 2003 when he expressed a desire to return to education. He enrolled on an access course at Coleraine College and began his part-time studies in September of that year.

He completed these studies gaining, as well as his Foundation Studies Diploma, the college's Rolo Award for outstanding commitment and achievement.

In spite of dealing with long-term alcoholism (which has been the cause of most of his considerable number of convictions) Mickey then started a psychology degree

in September 2005. He not only achieved a first class honours degree but also gained the highest overall marks in his subject.

NIACRO applauds Mickey for his dedication not only in achieving his own goals and overcoming his own personal problems but also because of the much-appreciated support he gave his fellow students. At his graduation, it was clear that students and faculty alike hold him in high regard.

During the five years of study Jobtrack has supported Mickey both emotionally and practically with course materials, travel expenses etc.

Mickey says: "I would never have got so far had it not been for that first phone call made for me. It's



been tough going at times but I feel a real sense of achievement now and I'm very proud of myself. I really appreciate the help I got from NIACRO over the years."

His Jobtrack Employment Officer, Jean Fleming, adds: "I feel that Mickey is a shining example of what anyone can achieve with some support and encouragement. He has been an inspiration to those around him that anything is possible with a little vision and motivation."

REACHOUT EVALUATION

NIACRO's ReachOut employability programme ran from mid-2005 to mid-2007, taking over from the 2002 – 2005 Personal Progression System project – both were funded by the EU EQUAL funding programme. NIACRO routinely commissions evaluations of its major projects in order to learn from them and consider how that learning can help us design effective projects for the future. An external evaluation of ReachOut has just been produced. It sets

the project in the wider context of the importance of employment in reducing re-offending, and the barriers to employment that ex-offenders face; describes how ReachOut worked in practice; measures its impact, and makes recommendations for future work on helping offenders increase their employability.

The evaluation concluded that ReachOut had been "successful in addressing the barriers faced



by offenders and improving their employability". Of the 398 participants in the programme, 229 (57%) completed it, and 135 moved into work (ie one third of those who took part and two thirds of those who completed). In addition, 40 participants moved on to further education.

Forty-five percent of those who did not complete the programme went on to re-offend – this is the average re-offending rate. Of those

who did complete, however, the re-offending rate was 21%, less than half the average. We will be tracking re-offending rates among completers in the longer term and continuing to compare it with the average rate.

A unique element of ReachOut is the element of working with employers to try to make the labour market more accepting of people who have had contact with the criminal justice system, and NIACRO's work in this area was shared with transnational partners from Latvia and the Republic of Ireland. The evaluation recognised that this is an uphill task, that the programme had successfully contacted employers through training and the advice service and

that NIACRO needed to continue to chip away at the undoubted resistance to employing ex-offenders in its employability work in the future.

HAPPY WITH THE PROGRAMME

The evaluators found that "all of those consulted were happy with how ReachOut was provided". These included participants, who indicated "a very high level of satisfaction"; and statutory partners who indicated that the programme had added value to their own work. Particularly encouraging was the evaluators' assessment that "At policy level ReachOut can justifiably claim responsibility for promoting employability as a significant factor

within the criminal justice and employment sectors".

Recommendations of the evaluation included extra emphasis on campaigning for change to legislation and on dovetailing the work with employers' and the labour market's needs; targeting particular employment sectors and employers for intensive work to change attitudes and practices; and refining databases and research to clearly demonstrate the value of the work.

The staff in ReachOut have now moved into the Jobtrack programme, and the experience and knowledge gained in ReachOut have similarly been incorporated into Jobtrack.

ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY

NIACRO has just published a comprehensive survey of the literature on crime, employment and employability. It was produced for us by Professor Kieran McEvoy of Queen's University, who is also a member of NIACRO Executive and a former Information Officer with the organisation.

Helping ex-offenders access the job market has been part of NIACRO's work from the very start; we have worked to increase people's employability. The ReachOut evaluation, described above, is one example of that, and it also includes another element of the work, liaising with, training and encouraging employers to give ex-offenders a fair chance. We've also pressed for better legislation on the rights of ex-offenders.

There is overwhelming evidence that having a decent job is key to keeping people out of the criminal

justice system. This publication gathers together much of that evidence, listing 140 books and articles, from the UK, Ireland, the USA, Australia and the EU, on the topic. They also include research into and accounts of good practice both within and outside prisons, the legal context, how family and community links affect employability and are affected by it, and much more.

You can download a copy of the report from the website or order a copy free of charge from niacro@niacro.co.uk or call 028 9032 0157





Three of NIACRO's managers have now completed the MSc in Voluntary Sector Management awarded by the City University's Cass Business School. Tony Martin, Service Manager for youth offending and youth justice and Donnie Sweeney, Service Manager for community and family services have joined trailblazer Heather Reid, Service Manager for offenders in the community, who gained her MSc in 2006.

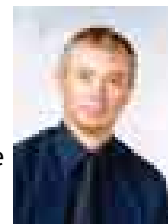
As part of the 18-month part-time course, each of the managers had to produce a dissertation on a topic of relevance to their work. Our three colleagues chose the following subjects.

DOING TIME – ON THE OUTSIDE: A STRATEGY TO RAISE THE PROFILE OF THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN OF PRISONERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Surprisingly, the number of children of prisoners isn't recorded, even though it is recognised that they face big problems and are more likely than their peers to offend in the future. Statutory authorities are often unaware that a child they are in contact with has a parent in prison. Visits to prisoners, including the effective "child-centred" one-to-one meetings between parent and child, are too often treated as privileges; think how

a child anticipating a visit to dad must feel if it's cancelled with little or no notice. Yet many prisoners' families, including their children, work hard to keep in touch under the most difficult of circumstances. And they are doing the rest of us a favour – prisoners who keep up family relationships are less likely to re-offend when they return to their communities. Donnie's recommendations included a call for co-operation among the agencies who

work with children of prisoners (to ensure better communication and signposting of services), training on the problems the children face, designated staff members in schools, better data on how many children are in this situation and research into the long term implications it has for them.



SOCIAL POLICY INFLUENCING HOW NIACRO CAN OPTIMISE ITS IMPACT ON POLICY

NIACRO has always taken seriously its role in influencing the policy and practices of the public authorities whose work affects prisoners, offenders, victims and their families. So we welcomed the increased amount of consultation which public bodies have undertaken since the introduction of s75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which requires them to consult widely on

new or changed policies including consulting with NGOs. However, like many voluntary and community organisations, NIACRO was faced with a flood of consultation documents which meant that we had to review the way in which we would respond to them. Heather proposed an impact assessment approach as a method of measuring

our effectiveness in this work, along with the setting of priorities for policy-influencing, and balancing formal written responses with other methods of influencing through our regular and one-off contacts with policy-makers.



THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION FOR VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS WITH HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE FUNDING STREAMS

The RPA has occupied the attention of the public service for some six years (at least). Its outworkings will clearly have a huge impact on the role of the voluntary and community sector. The focus of this research was the changes in the health and social services, which fund many effective NGO activities (to the tune of £30 million). The sector has welcomed reference in

the RPA documentation to the role it can play, both in service delivery and in helping to shape local services and articulate local needs. But there is also nervousness and a feeling of uncertainty. Among his conclusions, Tony called for clarification of the function of the proposed commissioning agencies, increasing efforts to keep the NGO sector (both single issue

organisations and the representative groups) engaged and informed, and transparent planning and expenditure. He also proposes a development fund targeting support for piloting new and innovative ideas, and made a number of suggestions around planning.



DESIGNATED PRACTICE LEARNING PROVIDER SCHEME

In September 2007 NIACRO was approved by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) as a Designated Practice Learning Provider. DPLP status forms part of the NISCC Standards for Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work. This enabled us to host a social work student for the first time in 10 years. This opportunity to contribute to social work training and education in Northern Ireland is a significant milestone for NIACRO.



Lord Carlile of Berriew (second left) is a Liberal Democrat peer with a wealth of experience in criminal justice matters, President of the Howard League for Penal Reform and with a longstanding association with nacro. We were delighted to welcome him to Amelia House for a short visit in May.

Denise Mac Dermott, Senior Practitioner for Mentoring, was approved for a place on the Northern Ireland Practice Teacher Training Programme, and took up the role of practice teacher when the student arrived in January 2008. Our student, Ciaran O Doherty, arrived on 14 January for his 85-day placement under the watchful eye of a slightly nervous practice teacher in training! Ciaran was an excellent student, successfully completing one-to-one work, family work, a resettlement project in Magilligan Prison and a very successful group work programme exploring service provision with children of prisoners (see “Young People give their Views”).

Ciaran successfully passed his Practice Learning Opportunity and had a tense wait to obtain his academic results in mid June (they were very positive!). Denise will have to wait a little longer for her results from the University of Ulster and Northern Ireland Post Qualifying (NIPQ). The whole experience has been a very positive one for both student and practice teacher, and Denise is preparing herself for the next student in January 2009. NIACRO would like to take this opportunity to thank Ciaran for his commitment and enthusiasm, and especially NISCC who have supported NIACRO throughout the whole practice learning process.

CORRECTION

In the article “Accessing Services for Offenders Forum” in our last edition, we outlined some of the positive changes in dealing with housing issues for prisoners. We should have said that anyone serving four years or more would be considered to have a priority need for accommodation under the Housing (NI) Order 1988, not “be considered unintentionally homeless.” These changes follow the establishment of a housing advice service in the prisons involving partnership working between the Prison Service, the Housing Executive, Housing Rights, NIACRO and other agencies involved in resettlement.

STAFF NEWS

We ended our staff planning day in June with a celebration of 10 staff members each of whom has worked in NIACRO for over 20 years. Jackie Junk, Eithne McClean, Joyce McDowell, Clare McGonagle, Arlene McFerran, Declan McKee, Maureen Mullan, Tony Martin, and Anne Simpson have between them contributed a magnificent 200 years' worth of effort and commitment to the organisation. Add in Chief Executive Olwen Lyner and it goes up to 230! We note with interest that four of the long-servers, contributing over 120 of those service years, are based in L'Derry and Magilligan – is it something in the air? Also that three of the 10 had started under the 1980s ACE scheme, which didn't always get a good press at the time but undoubtedly served as a jumping-off point for many employees in the voluntary and community sector.

Each individual had a tale to tell – of cramped premises, bomb damage, nerve-wracking interviews; and also of fun, of team spirit and most of all of the rewards that come from knowing you are making a difference. And, as Tony said in reflecting on his 24 years, of working in an organisation that has “stayed true to the values for the long haul”.

We welcome Graham McMichael, Data and Research Officer and Sam Clarke, Project Worker with CAPS Belfast.

CEO Olwen Lyner has joined two important fora to represent the criminal justice sector.

The first is an NIO initiative, the Criminal Justice Policy Issues group; it will be led by NICVA and is designed to bring together NGOs with an interest in criminal justice matters. The second is the joint Government/voluntary and community sector forum, which provides a mechanism for the two sectors to discuss matters of concern to both, including policy matters. At the last meeting of the forum, members discussed



Director of Services Pat Conway makes a presentation to one of the long-serving members of staff, Clare McGonagle.

the difference of opinion between Government and the voluntary sector on the implementation of Positive Steps (the Government's 2005 response to a task force report on resourcing the voluntary sector), the impact on the NGO sector of departmental efficiency savings, and a call for an update of the Compact, the existing agreement on relationships between Government and the sector.



GOODBYE SIOBHAN

Director of Services Siobhan O' Dwyer came to NIACRO in 2003 and has made an enormous contribution to our work especially with young people. Her energy, skill and commitment will be a big loss to us, and we wish her well in her new post as Director of the Dublin-based Youth Advocacy Programme Ireland. In farewell to NIACRO News readers, Siobhan says, “It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work at NIACRO for the past four and a half years. I can honestly say it is one of the best places I have ever worked, due to the commitment, ethos and good humour of everyone involved. The respect and kindness shown to all the people who use NIACRO services remind me every day that we are all human and we all need support and help at some stage in our lives. I wish everyone well and am sure that NIACRO will continue to provide great services and be a great place to work.”



Police Ombudsman Al Hutchinson visited NIACRO in August to hear more about our work and share ideas about the matters that concern us both.

CHANGES AT THE TOP

There have been three important new appointments in criminal justice recently.

- Brian McCaughey took up post as Director of Probation at the Probation Board for Northern Ireland on 1 August.
- 1 September was the starting date for the new Prisoner Ombudsman, Pauline McCabe.
- Michael Maguire who follows Kit Chivers as Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice Inspection NI also took up his new job on 1 September.

Given that Police Ombudsman Al Hutchinson was appointed in November 2007, this means that within a year four of the most significant posts in criminal justice have seen changes at the top.

NIACRO wishes all four of the people involved well in their new roles.

CONTRIBUTING TO PUBLIC POLICY

Review of the Civic Forum

NIACRO has always supported the idea of the Civic Forum, and staff served on the previous Forum during its short lifespan of 12 meetings between October 2000 and October 2002. We believe that there is still a role for a body which gives civil society a way of bringing its knowledge and expertise to the governance of Northern Ireland. This is in spite of concerns about the structure, operation and resourcing of the previous Civic Forum, where many NGOs put in a lot of time and resources without funding to back this up.

In our reply to the consultation on the review of the Civic Forum, we said that:

- It should not be a lobbying body.
- It cannot replace the consultation process for public policies which is now well-established.
- Member organisations need some level of funding to cover the human and other resources they would want to give to membership.
- Its role and functions must be clearly spelled out, and its relations with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Executive and the Assembly.
- A social partnership approach along the lines of the National Economic and Social Council in the Republic of Ireland could be a good model to follow.

AGM

This year's AGM will be held in Amelia House on 20 November, with a theme of "Devolved criminal justice: the potential" looking at key opportunities and challenges for the local administration when devolution occurs. To ensure that you get an invitation contact Jackie Junk (jackie@niacro.co.uk)