



23 news

SUMMER 2009

NEW CORPORATE PLAN

The Launch at Amelia House



also in this issue:

**prison
commission**

**NIACRO meets
the parties**

**safeguarding
law**

**is it putting up
barriers?**

APAC update

**work in the
community**

**women
offenders**

**designing the
strategy**

NEW CORPORATE PLAN LAUNCH

NIACRO's 2009–2012 Corporate Plan was launched in Amelia House on 18 June at a reception for service users, friends, supporters, staff and volunteers. The plan includes our vision and mission statements, a re-statement of our values, and the strategic aims under which we will operate for the next three years.

We've also included a compendium of relevant criminal justice statistics, a list of the key happenings over the past three years, and a review of the tasks and targets we set ourselves between 2006 and 2009. This last threw up some interesting outcomes which are summarised here:

STRATEGIC AIMS:

Working with children and young people who offend

Working with offenders and ex-prisoners

Working with prisoners, their families and children

Influencing policy and practice

Applying resources effectively

REVIEW OF 2006-2009

- One third of the people who took part in the ReachOut programme, and two-thirds of those who completed it, found jobs.
- Of those who completed the programme 21% went on to re-offend – less than half the average re-offending rate.
- We trained over 1100 staff from almost 340 organisations in good practice in employing ex-offenders.
- 100% of the 280+ young people on the Youth Employability programme went on to either employment or training.
- The advice service dealt with over 7000 queries from over 2700 service users.
- Family Links staff dealt with over 5600 referrals and made 2560 home visits.
- Magilligan visitors' centre received over 36,500 adults and almost 9000 children.
- Membership of NIACRO doubled.



Mike Ritchie, Committee for the Administration of Justice, Gareth Johnston, NIO and Paul Doran, Northern Ireland Prison Service

- Volunteers averaged 230 a year; we began holding regular Volunteer Forums so that volunteers could share information and experiences.
- We responded to 71 public policy consultations.
- Turnover went over £3,500,000 for the first time in 2007-2008.
- New projects introduced in the period included APAC, Jobtrack, Information Fairs for employers, Family Links, and the expansion of Caps.
- New groups were set up: an Adult Forum, a women's group, 12-week support groups, a group for parents of children and young people in the JJC, and a focus group for young people.
- We celebrated the 35th anniversary of the organisation's establishment with an award ceremony at Queen's University, a birthday Volunteer Forum, a lunch for employees, the launch of Family Links and a special issue of NIACRO News.
- Ten staff each celebrated over 20 years' service with NIACRO.

KEY ISSUES FOR 2009 – 2012

In their introduction to the plan, Chair Richard Buchanan and Chief Executive Olwen Lyner highlight:

- our work with children at risk of offending,
- resettlement,
- our determination to work in partnership with relevant agencies,
- the need to monitor the impact – more than likely a damaging one – of the “safeguarding” legislation (see page 6),
- the effort we are going to make to promote a balanced and informed debate on the shape of the newly devolved criminal justice system.

efforts to promote a balanced and informed debate on the criminal justice system

PRISON COMMISSION

The process of influencing the shape of a devolved criminal justice system, highlighted in our corporate plan, has already started, of course, with our call in the last issue of NIACRO News for a complete review of the prison system. Since then, we have met representatives of the political parties here to discuss our ideas, with a few simple messages:

- There must be a cohesive and co-operative criminal justice system with all the parts working together.
- A disproportionate amount of money is spent on prisons and, within prisons, on containment; at the expense of diversion, resettlement and rehabilitation. Funding needs to be re-directed to more constructive uses.
- The penal system should be small, efficient and focused appropriately on care and resettlement functions that will contribute to a significant decrease in offending and re-offending. This will reduce the number of people affected by crime and increase public protection.
- All government agencies, not just those in the criminal justice system, have a part to play. We all need to work together to reduce crime and increase community safety.

We are keen to continue the relationships we are developing with all the parties and to discuss any issue around prison reform and the whole range of services for offenders and ex-offenders, prisoners and ex-prisoners, their families and people who are at risk of committing an offence.



PEARSON REPORT

NIACRO's call for prison reform was partly triggered by the death in Maghaberry Prison of Colin Bell. The Government appointed Tony Pearson, a former deputy DG of the prison service in England and Wales, to head a panel carrying out a review following the Prisoner Ombudsman's report into that death. His report was published on 8 June. It makes 38 recommendations, including changes in senior management, and speaks of an "insidious subculture" which allowed unacceptable behaviour on the part of prison officers to go unchallenged. The report calls for "major cultural change...where modelling good behaviour and practice is actively encouraged". It recognises that there had been a heavy emphasis on security during the conflict but that it is time to shift from this, even if the process of change is unsettling and meets with resistance.

NIACRO welcomes especially the fact that Pearson included references to all three prison establishments in his comments, and his recognition of the need for a refocusing on resettlement away from containment. It has been our key campaign for some years, is core to our discussions with the Assembly, and will be a major element in our work during the lifespan of the new corporate plan.

**there had been a heavy emphasis
on security during the conflict ...
it is time to shift from this**

NIACRO USER SURVEYS

Gathering the views of our users is important to us, as they help us to assess and improve our services. One method of doing this is through an annual user survey.

The purpose of the most recent survey is to record the views of anyone who used any of the following NIACRO services between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009:

- Advice
- APAC
- Caps
- Family Links
- Independent Visitor scheme
- Jobtrack
- Transport services
- Visitor centres

This year we have improved the way the survey is carried out and reported. This new survey is being conducted as we go to print and the results will be published in the next issue of NIACRO News.

NISRA VISITORS' CENTRE SURVEY

Towards the end of last year, the NI Statistics and Research Agency carried out a survey of the visitors' centres at the three prison establishments – NIACRO runs the centres at Magilligan and Hydebank, while Quaker Service run the centre at Maghaberry.

There were many positives in the responses; 92% of visitors found that, overall, the facilities and service provided by the centres were good or very good, and just under 80% of respondents were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the visiting arrangements.

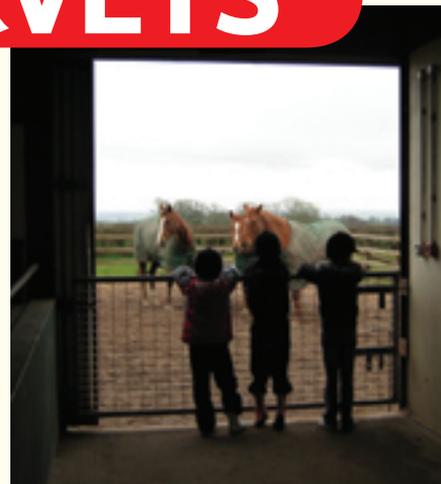
Information was provided promptly (94%) and it was of good quality (79%). The great majority (96%) of visitors rated the general atmosphere in all three centres as "friendly" or "very friendly" and the staff were found to be friendly or very friendly by 98% of respondents. Visitors were less happy with the facilities for children and adolescents.

Almost all (95%) of the visitors who had used child-centred visits said that these were important or very important to them, and of those who had taken part in the "family fun" days, 93% rated them as good or very good.

INDEPENDENT VISITOR SERVICE

We've also been looking at user responses to the Independent Visitor (IV) service, via a group session with young people, and a questionnaire completed by the social workers and foster carers who are responsible for them.

The young people were asked to discuss the sorts of things their IV did for them, what was good about the service and what else they thought the scheme might help them with. They valued simply getting out, doing different activities with their volunteer, and help with problems with the education or the care system. A volunteer may for example attend



Young service users enjoy a day out

an LAC ("looked after children" review meeting).

Significantly, and this is a reaction that has come up in earlier surveys of young people's evaluation of mentoring and volunteer help, they were very conscious of the voluntary, unpaid, nature of the relationship, and that it was non-judgemental: "My IV doesn't criticise me"; "doesn't put me down", "respects me", "my volunteer wants to be there as much as me".

In terms of what else the service might provide, the young people asked for more time to spend on the activities they clearly enjoy.

The foster carers and social workers were also positive about the scheme – 88% "strongly agreed" with the statement "I think the IV scheme is of benefit to the young person (and all the rest of the respondents "agreed"). There was in fact a 100% positive response to almost all the questions put to carers. They also, like the young people, recognised the value of the independence of the volunteers, their non-judgemental approach and the value of one-to-one attention.

SAFEGUARDING OR PUTTING UP BARRIERS?

This year has seen the introduction of Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Prescribed Criteria and Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009, designed to increase the level of protection afforded to children and vulnerable adults. The Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) has been set up to deliver a proposed new vetting and barring scheme. Within Northern Ireland, Access NI will be undertaking the work on behalf of ISA.

Announcing the new legislation in March, DHSSPS Minister Michael McGimpsey said that around 125,000 more jobs and voluntary positions will become subject to checks. The news release also noted that 600,000 people would need to be registered with the ISA, at a cost of £58 per person. Employers will be able to check applicants' and existing employees' status on line without charge.

The legislation has far-reaching implications which we believe have not been fully explored. (The Scottish Parliament has delayed similar legislation for at least two years so that there can be wide consultation.)

Under the legislation a child is defined as a person who has not attained the age of 18.

A vulnerable adult is defined as someone who is 18 and:

- Is in residential accommodation.
- Is in sheltered housing.
- Receives domiciliary care.
- Receives any form of health care (treatment, therapy, palliative care).
- Is detained in lawful custody.
- Is under the supervision of a Probation Officer.
- Receives a prescribed welfare service.
- Is a Direct Payment recipient.
- Requires assistance in the conduct of his/her own affairs.
- Receives a service or takes part in an activity provided to persons who have age-related needs, any form of disability and/or prescribed physical or mental health problem.

There is no indication that there will be any consideration of an individual's capacity to change and develop; and every fear that the Authority will err on the side of excluding people. A person barred from working with children, for example, may well also be barred from working with vulnerable adults from any of the long list of groups above – even if they are currently doing so without any problems. Many of NIACRO's service users are "under the supervision of a Probation Officer" – does that mean they can no longer benefit from the advice and support of an ex-offender who has walked their road and is the best possible guide out of offending?

The inevitable effect of the new system is once again for ex-offenders looking for employment, which is, as News knows, one of the main routes out of offending

The ISA's remit is to either bar someone from registering or permit them to register. That is, they will say either that a person is barred from working with children and vulnerable adults, or that there is no known reason why they should not. This then places the onus of deciding whether or not to risk employing someone with a conviction back on the employer. With long experience of dealing with employers' anxieties and reluctance to employ ex-offenders, NIACRO can foresee that reluctance increasing. It will become all too easy simply to say "We won't employ people with a conviction – it's too complicated, too risky."

The inevitable effect of the new system is once again to raise the bar for ex-offenders looking for employment, which is, as every reader of NIACRO News knows, one of the main routes out of offending. It may simply impose a further sentence on a vulnerable group, many of whom are desperate for work, either paid or voluntary, and many of whom are already making a useful contribution to society.

NEW PRIVATE SECURITY INDUSTRY LAW

A draft Order in Council, the Private Security Industry Act 2001 (Amendment) (NI) Order 2009 was published in March, to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK in terms of the regulation of the industry. The Assembly has set up an ad hoc Committee to consider the draft legislation. On 8 June a delegation from NIACRO met the Committee, at their invitation, to give our views.

The explanatory note on the proposed draft, and the public notice on the setting up of the ad hoc Committee, pointedly define the purpose of the Order as being to make "minor amendments" to the 2001 Act "which has recently been extended to Northern Ireland". Difficult to make significant improvements to the legislation, then, but NIACRO will keep trying.

For example, the list of offences which will be taken into account is very long and includes many which may have involved a young person at the height of the conflict – disorderly or riotous behaviour, possession of an offensive weapon. Convicted as a young person, never

re-offended since then, are you going to put yourself through the stress and embarrassment of a costly licensing process?

FACING THE CONSEQUENCES

NIACRO is strongly in favour of proper protections for children and vulnerable adults, and of the highest levels of professionalism and integrity in people working with such service users. We also have no argument against efforts to achieve high standards in the private security industry.

But having seen the discrimination routinely experienced by ex-offenders and the discouragement felt by people who don't have much confidence, or hope, when it comes to applying for jobs, we appeal to the legislators and policy-makers to stop and think. The net is being cast so wide, and its mesh is so fine, the danger is that we will directly or indirectly trap people who have a conviction, but who pose no threat to society. People who are at the same time being encouraged and exhorted to turn away from crime and get into employment. Are we building a culture in which the notion of rehabilitation gets lost in a simplistic and exaggerated fear of crime?

As part of our current contacts with local political parties and as the Assembly prepares for the devolution of criminal justice, we will be briefing MLAs and others as to the unintended consequences of ill-thought-out legislation, so that those consequences can be mitigated as far as possible.

US STUDENT VISITOR

Brianna McIntosh is a student from the USA who spent some time with us recently. She observed several of our projects, and NIACRO News asked her to give us her impressions.

"I was a little apprehensive to be placed at NIACRO. I had never heard of an organisation that helped offenders, let alone their families, to such a degree. I am convinced that the amount of good that results from the dedicated people supporting the offenders and their families needs to be adapted else where, especially back home in the U.S.

I love that NIACRO truly believes in rehabilitation and sees offenders as people who deserve a second chance.

I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to experience this organisation from the inside out and it has definitely left a positive impact on me that I will carry throughout my criminal justice career."

**to raise the bar
every reader of NIACRO**

RESETTLEMENT PRACTICE NORTH-SOUTH EXCHANGE

During the last round of EQUAL funding from the EU (2005-07) NIACRO and the NI Prison Service developed links with several projects in the Republic of Ireland connected to Cork and Castlerea prisons, and we visited Cork in March 2007.

Last spring, the project partners spent several days in Northern Ireland looking at the work of NIACRO and meeting the agencies working on resettlement in Magilligan Prison.

NIACRO and NIPS were recently invited on a return visit to Castlerea prison, Loughan House prison and the Roscommon Partnership, a local NGO working on problems of social exclusion and poverty. The Partnership is developing community based services for prisoners and their families.

With the focus of the trip being resettlement and employment, staff from Family Links, Jobtrack and the welfare advice service took part, as well as representatives from the NIPS Resettlement teams in Maghaberry, Magilligan and Hydebanks Wood. Here Claire Humphreys, Senior Practitioner with Jobtrack, describes the visit:

The first port of call was Loughan House - a low security open detention centre headed by Governor Martin Reilly, in Blacklion, County Cavan. It has 85 inmates. Chief Pat Kavanagh welcomed the group and gave us a full tour of the prison, its educational department, workshops and the visiting facilities.

Unusually, these are open seven days a week and do not require an appointment unlike our prison establishments in Northern Ireland.

CASTLEREA PRISON

Day 2 began with a visit to Castlerea Prison. It is a closed, medium security prison for males aged 17 years and over, and the committal prison for remand and sentenced prisoners in Connaught. It also takes committals from counties Cavan, Donegal and Longford.

We were welcomed to the Resource / Visitors Centre by Linda Sice of the Roscommon Partnership. This centre offers a welcoming environment for visitors, provides a counselling service for families and runs workshops for mothers and children on subjects such as healthy eating and hygiene.

the children's room at Castlerea

“YOU'RE EQUAL”

Tommy Brogan, also from the Roscommon Partnership, talked about their EQUAL mentoring programme, “You're Equal” which has now been mainstreamed through BiTC and the Probation Service into the Linkage Programme. The focus for this programme is housing, training and employment. We got a great insight to how “You're Equal” offers prisoners support and opportunity around training and employment both while in custody and on release.

Castlerea Prison showcased some very impressive workshops which are self-sufficient; any profit is fed back into the workshop, in particular a concrete cast workshop making garden furniture etc. A fully operational recycling plant employs 10 prisoners and the recycled materials are sold to local industry.



AND S

The NI Prison Service delegates were particularly interested in looking at this.

A self employment development worker was employed to organise “Start your own Business” (SYOB) courses. Prisoners were involved from the outset in designing the programme and exercising as much control as possible over its content. It had a very positive evaluation report with excellent feedback from all participants.

HELP WITH MENTAL HEALTH

Linda and Tommy also presented information on the Jigsaw initiative. This is a new programme for young people up to the age of 25 with mental health problems, including young people in custody. It looks at how existing services can be made more accessible. We hope to share the experience of NIACRO’s pilot mental health project under APAC (see APAC article on page 12).

We also met with Probation, education, counselling services and the chaplain from the Irish Prison Service.

We’d like to thank all our hosts for their welcome. Working together through the North/South arrangements has given us a unique opportunity to share learning and ideas and to help us improve our existing services.

FAMILY LINKS NEW GROUP

It isn’t easy to have a relative in prison ...

...something that NIACRO has recognised from the start with a “Wives and Families Centre” being opened in Belfast in 1972, and the Magilligan Visitors Centre coming into being in 1975. Responding to the needs of families, especially the children of offenders, has grown over the years. A key date is 1987, when the Prison Link programme began, running to 2006. Over a long period like this, a project has to adapt; for example, to the change to the size and make-up of the prison population brought about by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. NIACRO and its main collaborator and funder, the Probation Board, reviewed Prison Link in 2005, and a new partnership, Family Links, evolved from that review.

One of the innovative services provided by Family Links has been its support groups – the full range of these is listed in the review of the last corporate plan on page 2. Family Links could see a need for families of sex offenders to have their own group; the subject of sex offending is probably the most difficult for family members themselves to face up to and come to terms with, let alone sharing this with others who aren’t going through that experience. So the group brings emotional support,

and the feeling of relief that there are other people around who are struggling with the same problems. Project staff can give out important information, on sex offender treatment programmes for example, and the group can discuss why someone might commit a sex offence, and how they can cope with the inevitable stigma once the news gets out.

Some comments that group members have made to staff:

“It’s very helpful, we’re all in the same boat and there’s no judging”;

“I’m enjoying the group though I find some weeks very difficult, it brings everything back that happened, I just relive it all”;

“The information is great and I’ve made friends. Some topics can be difficult, but we can have things explained.”

VOLUNTEERING WITH NIACRO

NIACRO has over 140 volunteers involved in a wide variety of projects. Those who are currently active are involved in a wide variety of projects supporting offenders, their families, young people at risk and the wider community. Volunteers are an integral part of the organisation, giving around 11,000 hours each year to our work. They bring experience, skills and diversity which complement the work of our paid staff in delivering essential services to the community. We value the unique and distinct contribution volunteers make.

INVESTING IN VOLUNTEERS

Investing in Volunteers (IiV) is the UK quality standard for organisations which involve volunteers in their work. It's designed to help organisations review and improve the ways in which they work with volunteers and to demonstrate their commitment to volunteering.

NIACRO has registered with IiV and is working with the Northern Ireland managing body, the Volunteer Development Agency, to set our volunteering practices against the IiV's challenging standard. This has ten indicators:

- Commitment to the involvement of volunteers and a recognition of the benefits to both volunteers and the organisation.
- The commitment of appropriate resources to working with volunteers.
- An openness to involving volunteers who reflect the diversity of the local community.
- The development of appropriate roles for volunteers.
- The protection of volunteers from any physical, financial or emotional harm.
- The use of fair, efficient and consistent recruitment procedures.
- A consistent and equitable approach to references and official checks.
- Clear induction procedures.
- Awareness by everybody in the organisation of the value of volunteers' contribution.
- Account taken of the varying support needs of volunteers.

We have completed the initial assessment process – which sets our practice against these indicators - and await IiV's final assessment decision.

WHAT OUR VOLUNTEERS THINK

Our latest volunteer survey shows that 95% of volunteers believe that they are valued by NIACRO and 93% of them would recommend volunteering with NIACRO to a friend.

WHERE OUR VOLUNTEERS HELP

Volunteer opportunities in NIACRO at present cover the following programmes:

INDEPENDENT VISITOR (IV)

Main purpose: To provide a befriending service, support and encouragement to children/young people in care who have infrequent or poor contact with their family.

INDEPENDENT REPRESENTATIVE (IR)

Main purpose: To represent the views of young people in Secure Care Units.

APAC ADULT MENTOR

Main purpose: To meet and act as a mentor to a participant who may have been involved in anti-social behaviour, or an ex-prisoner or ex-offender, and offer support with reintegration in their community.

FAMILY LINKS BEFRIENDER

Main purpose: To meet and befriend an adult family member of a prisoner or young person in custody, who may feel isolated or distanced from their family or community.

CHILD AND PARENT SUPPORT (Caps) BEFRIENDER

Main purpose: To meet and befriend a parent or other family member of a child vulnerable to offending behaviour who may benefit from support.

TRANSPORT ASSISTANT

Main purpose: To provide transport for families and/or children to and from prison or Juvenile Justice Centre visits (Family Links), also for children (8-13 yrs) and their families to and from Caps meetings.

Would you like to become a NIACRO volunteer? If you're interested or would like to know more, please contact Volunteer Co-ordinator Vivienne Courtney on 028 9032 0157 (ext. 230) or email her at vivienne@niacro.co.uk

Incidentally, on 3 June the European Commission announced that 2011 would be the "European Year of Volunteering" and we look forward to playing our part in the year's events as celebrated in Northern Ireland.

VISITORS FROM TURKEY

Our Director of Services for Families and Children, David Weir, took part in hosting a study visit by representatives of the Turkish criminal justice system in May. He describes the visit below:

Turkey is keen to join the European Union and to do so has to ensure that its services are in line with EU legislation and practice. Part of the process is that the Turkish Probation Service has twinned with Probation in UK and other EU services. They asked the Probation Board and the Youth Justice Agency to contribute to the programme, specifically in relation to aspects of work with juveniles and with victims. Consequently I went to Turkey in March 2009 to the launch of the programme along with colleagues from Austria.

There were 12 people from Turkish justice system here, six with PBNi and six with me. “My” six were two judges, a psychologist, a sociologist, and two managers. I showed them round the three service Directorates of the YJA – the Youth Conference service, the Juvenile Justice Centre at Woodlands, and two projects in the Community Services Directorate (Ballymena and Bangor, where they looked particularly at drugs and alcohol and at police diversion). They also visited the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to hear about interagency work and early intervention (thanks to Anne Hardy

of the Northern Trust and Michael Heaney from the YJA) and they met His Worship Judge Conner at the Youth Court.

THE NGO CONTRIBUTION

The visitors spent a day with the voluntary sector - visiting a Challenge for Youth Project on Black Mountain, meeting staff from the NIACRO Youth Employability Project and joining Olwen Lyner for a discussion on the role of the voluntary sector in criminal justice. There is no tradition of involving NGOs in this work in Turkey, where historically they have looked to family to support offenders. However, the visitors believe that this structure is breaking down and they anticipate a greater role for the voluntary sector in the future. They were very interested in Olwen’s description of our work

and our approach to criminal justice matters, and ready to learn what can be achieved by organisations like NIACRO.

They also visited the Giants Causeway, Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge, St George’s Market and the Dundonald Ice Bowl!

The group was really appreciative of the hospitality and the opportunity to see some of the sights of Northern Ireland. They were not uncritical of aspects of our youth justice system and posed some interesting questions on issues that we take for granted. Hosting an international study tour is always an interesting challenge – to provide a clear and jargon-free explanation of our system is part of it, but also being receptive to questions that open up a re-examination of issues that we take for granted.



Dave Weir third from left, back row, with the Turkish visitors in Ballymena

APAC UPDATE

APAC is NIACRO's community-based project which aims to reduce anti-social behaviour and help people to deal with problems which may have led to difficulties with neighbours and the community. APAC also offers help to people who have committed offences or have been in prison and are trying to resettle in the community.

APAC has been in operation since October 2005 and is a "Supporting People" project. It receives referrals from Housing Executive Area Community Safety Officers across Northern Ireland, usually where an Acceptable Behaviour Contract has also been agreed between the tenant or their child and the Housing Executive, and the person is willing to have APAC support. An ABC is a voluntary written agreement between a person who has been involved in anti-social behaviour and the Housing Executive.

HOW IT WORKS

An APAC project worker meets with the person, discusses the reasons for the difficulties and carries out

an assessment to help plan a way forward. S/he will offer ongoing support and practical assistance to achieve this, meeting perhaps two or three times a week initially.

A person might be supported to attend addiction or health services, re-establish contact with family members; be introduced to new ways of spending their time, in leisure centres, with training services and they might start meeting regularly with one of NIACRO's volunteer mentors. They may need information and help with financial problems and take advantage of NIACRO's advice service. They will also work on improving relationships with neighbours in the community.

A women's group was set up in 2008, aimed in particular at women leaving custody who had substance misuse problems (described in more detail in NIACRO News 20). The members of the initial group have spoken of how they valued it: "You can talk openly to people who've been through the same experiences". Members also cut down on alcohol and other drugs.

In a recent evaluation of 22 cases which had been completed, 72% ended successfully: that is, either there were no further complaints at all (10), or they were much reduced (2, both of whom had serious alcohol problems) or were part of complex neighbourhood disputes and re-housing was seen as the best solution to the problem.

APAC has also worked with young people (under 25) referred by the Belfast Community Safety Partnership, where getting involved with individuals and their families is part of a wider response to the problem of anti-social behaviour throughout the city. In 2008, Banbridge Council also arranged for a number of APAC places to be made available for the Community Safety Partnership.

You can talk openly to people who've been through the same experiences



RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

NIACRO has recently established a new post of mental health project worker within APAC. It's designed to help young adult offenders in the community who have mental health problems, support their families and reduce the likelihood of their re-offending. The project will be working in co-operation with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (who have had responsibility for prison health since 2008), probation and prison services. We also aim to develop strong links with other NGOs, particularly in the mental health sector.

Another development in the APAC programme is the current recruitment of a staff member to work with women alongside the Probation Board as part of their "Inspire" project. The project worker will help women in the project to connect with a range of resources in the community – in particular the women's centres which provide services for women in local areas. NIACRO will also be working with the Women's Support Network and the Probation Board to improve how we respond to the needs of women who offend and how we provide services relevant to the new strategy being developed for this work.

NEW ACCOMMODATION PROTOCOL

NIACRO has also been working with the Housing Executive on an important new agreement between seven statutory and voluntary organisations, which was signed in May. Led by the Housing Executive, the "protocol for the management of the accommodation and related support needs of people in custody in Northern Ireland" spells out the arrangements for co-operation among the agencies involved. A key element is the bringing together of criminal justice agencies – the Prison and Probation Services – with a large non-criminal-justice service, the Housing Executive. This is something NIACRO has long campaigned for not only in housing but in the whole range of public services and we applaud the Housing Executive for its support and engagement.

The protocol clarifies the participating agencies' roles and responsibilities and aims to provide a better service for the end users - people entering and leaving custody, including people on remand - through genuine co-operation. It will bring about better communications and help identify and fill any gaps in service. The Housing Rights Service and NIACRO will take the lead in the advice-giving part of the work and NIACRO will be closely involved in other aspects such as support for families and work with people who face difficulties within their community.

a better service for the end users

Certain offences – sex offending, offences against children and vulnerable adults, and (from October 2009 and April 2011 respectively) domestic violence and hate crime - are not included within the protocol. These offenders' accommodation and support needs will be dealt with through the new Public Protection Arrangements for Northern Ireland.

The Housing Executive will monitor the effectiveness of the protocol, which will be reviewed after it has been in operation for a year.

WOMEN OFFENDERS STRATEGY

The NIO has been consulting on a draft strategy for the management of women offenders in Northern Ireland. The consultation document contained some facts and figures to put the subject in context:

Not many women find themselves in prison – although there was a high of 60 in September 2008, around 50 has been more usual in the last couple of years. In 2007, women made up around 3% of the average prison population in Northern Ireland, fewer than in other parts of the UK and much of the wider European Union. Women are more likely than men to be placed on remand (on average over five years, 42% of women compared to 35% of men). The largest group of offences is the rather unhelpful “Other” category (which includes public disorder, blackmail and breach of court orders); where single offences are recorded, assault and theft head the list at 19% each. Probation Service research shows that most women under their supervision present a low risk of harm to the public and most are at low or medium risk of re-offending.

NIACRO provides a Welfare Advice Service to Ash House and helps prisoners with debt problems. During 2008/09, we dealt with 62 women in custody in relation to 190 issues. Our Jobtrack programme also offers support, and some women took part in a personal development ‘Transitions’ programme. We operate a weekly job club for women in the community, and offer job placement opportunities as well as access to a range of training courses. We currently have seven women in training and three in work placements.

The current consultation set a number of questions on: alternatives to prosecution and custody, diverting women from offending; practical issues like accommodation, education and training, health and addiction issues, and finance. There was an opportunity to comment on measures to support relationships with children and other family members,

domestic violence, women who have been or are in the sex industry, and how to help women think about their offending behaviour. The need for gender-specific research, community supervision, and management in custody was also raised.

The consultation includes the question, “What are your views on the need for a purpose-built women’s prison?” This raises so many issues, which have been around for so long – issues about where women in custody should be accommodated, whether they should be in custody at all, the balance between containment and rehabilitation – that we will return to it in more detail in a later issue of NIACRO News.

Finally, we would like to quote part of the foreword to the consultation, signed by Justice Minister Paul Goggins. Noting the low numbers of women in prison here, he adds, “Indeed, the small numbers belie the point that too many women still end up in prison, when a wealth of research and experience shows that what is needed is a range of more creative and constructive alternatives. The problems underlying women’s offending are often complex.

Issues such as poverty, homelessness, mental illness, abuse, domestic violence, and addictions have been shown to be prime motivators for a woman’s involvement in crime. If we are to reduce offending, it is vital that we develop ways of supporting women to address these multiple needs outside of the custodial sanction, where possible.”

This recognition of the “problems underlying women’s offending” is very welcome, and we hope it will be equally clear in the final strategy.

NIACRO'S RESPONSE CALLED FOR:

- Initiatives to divert women away from offending and from custody which pay attention to the particular needs of women offenders – including mental health problems, abuse, financial problems made worse by having the responsibility for children. Diversion must include help and support with these problems.
- Lower tariff penalties as alternatives to fines and non-custodial measures for dealing with fine default.
- A “bail scheme” for women who come before the courts – a disproportionate number of women are remanded in custody because there is no suitable alternative in the community.
- A range of safe and suitable accommodation - the consultation document refers only to hostel provision, but this may not be the best option for some women, and should not be the only option.
- On education and training, NIACRO makes seven concrete recommendations including the value of pre-vocational and personal development training, and tapping into existing initiatives offered by the women's NGO sector.
- Other voluntary and community sectors can and do help women offenders – advice and domestic violence, for example, and services like NIACRO's own APAC programme – but they need proper resources to answer women's needs. To an extent the consultation document recognises this, in asking about how best to engage with external organisations and the community in offering services for women offenders. We stress in our response that it is essential to listen to the women themselves, and to pilot new gender-specific initiatives.
- Health care needs to be streamlined so that all branches of the health care system can be easily accessed and can work in harmony to answer the wide range of physical and mental/emotional health problems women offenders experience.
- Criteria for the Assisted Prison Visits scheme need to be widened to include, for example, children in care who are not currently funded to visit their mothers, or children who are in the care of an estranged partner.

art PROJECT

Congratulations to the people who undertook the Visual Arts programme hosted by the Derry Playhouse. Six young people aged between 10 and 17, and six volunteer mentors completed the programme. An exhibition of their art work was displayed at the VOID Gallery in March, and the photo shows the artists with deputy mayor Maurice Devenny.

Later, the group headed off to Todd's Leap for an activity day to celebrate their success.



STAFF NEWS



David Weir is the newly appointed Director of Services - Children and Families. He is a social worker by background and has worked primarily in the youth justice sector - in Whitefield, with the Juvenile Justice Board and latterly with the Youth Justice Agency where he was Director of community services. He also has previous experience in both housing and education.

He takes a particular interest in the prevention of offending and has contributed to the development of the YJA-led "Strategy for the Prevention of Offending by Children in Northern Ireland".

Dave is actively involved in national and international youth justice. He is a member of the National Association for Youth Justice

and of the organising committee for the Five Nations Youth Justice Biannual Conference. He has been involved in youth issues exchange visits with New York State, China and Israel, and is currently contributing to the development of the youth justice system in Turkey (see the item on the Turkish visitors elsewhere in NIACRO News).

Outside work his interests include photography, collecting old woodworking tools, collecting Hornby trains, increasing the attractiveness of his garden to wildlife and messing about with Apples (the computers, not the fruit). On occasional Saturdays he can be seen getting the bride to church on time in a white 1929 Austin Burnham. He is married with three grown-up children.



Corrina Langelaan has joined NIACRO as Communications Manager. She studied history and politics in university and has worked in public affairs, public relations and media liaison.

She was formerly a Senior Public Relations Officer with the PSNI, leading on campaigns to tackle issues surrounding underage drinking and anti-social behaviour.

Prior to this, Corrina worked as External Relations Manager for the Royal Mail

Group. She has also spent time in London, working as a lobbyist for the Federation of Small Businesses and British Chambers of Commerce.

Originally from Melbourne, Corrina is a typical Australian, taking any opportunity to strap on a backpack and explore the world. She has travelled extensively throughout Western and Eastern Europe and has also made a few memorable trips to Africa and the United States.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY:

We welcome Kitty Maher, Emma Milligan and Darren Strawbridge to the Youth Employability team. We are prioritising the needs of young people who offend repeatedly, in support of a joint initiative by the criminal justice agencies to focus on this group. The programme is now available in Newry, Craigavon and Armagh, with a base in Banbridge.

STOP PRESS

NIACRO's AGM will be on 26 November 2009. We are delighted that Professor Bill Whyte has agreed to be our speaker. He is Professor of Social Work Studies in Criminal and Youth Justice, and Director of the Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre, at the University of Edinburgh.