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news

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Employment Protects!

Two months ago, John McErlane (not his real name), an ex-offender, was working as a security man – a job he had held for the last five years. Now, however, through no fault of his own he is on the dole.

No, John wasn't a victim of the recession. He and many like him were victims of the Security Industry Authority who refused to grant them SIA licences because of their previous convictions.

The private security industry legislation was introduced in 2001 to raise standards and skills in the industry and to promote and disseminate best practice. Like the more recent legislation on safeguarding vulnerable groups, the objectives are laudable: who, for example,

would question the need to provide better protection for the most vulnerable groups in our society? However, both are examples of legislation which might be well-intentioned in concept, but seriously flawed in application. Because apart from their other failings – and there are many – both areas of legislation heap more obstacles in the path of ex-offenders who are seeking employment and the employers who want to recruit them.

The evidential link between employment and successful resettlement (Employment Led Resettlement – ELR) is unequivocal and has informed NIACRO's work in this area since our inception. Quite simply, research shows that people with convictions who get into – and stay in - jobs are significantly less likely to engage in criminal behaviour than those who don't. Fact! So

also in this issue:

employment protects
removing the barriers

mental health services
problems and solutions

a silent sentence
families of prisoners speak out

Current legislation is a barrier to integration

why is Government turning a blind eye to the ELR consequences of legislation such as that outlined above and not doing more to help ex-offenders into employment?

We believe the case for taking action is justified on a number of fronts. First, it seems only right in these straitened times that the economic argument should take priority: it would represent a sound investment. In 2007 the Taxpayers' Alliance estimated that recorded crime in England, Wales and Northern Ireland cost nearly £15 billion.

There is also an equality and human rights case to be made. The protections afforded by human rights legislation should be extended to those with a criminal record. NIACRO has previously called for the inclusion of this group of citizens:

- in the proposed Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland;
- in anti-discrimination legislation covering employment, education and training and access to goods and services;
- in the groups covered by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act which requires public authorities to promote equality of opportunity.

Rehabilitation of Offenders legislation

So what, specifically, do we want Government to do? It could start with the basics, by addressing the legislation that was designed to facilitate the rehabilitation of offenders. We support Lord Dholakia's call, in his recent private member's bill, for a review of the rehabilitation of offenders legislation. The Rehabilitation of Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 introduced the concept of "spent" convictions. However, the legislation always had the effect of providing protections only to those who had served prison sentences of less than two and a half years and there were many exceptions in the legislation. Indeed the Rehabilitation of Offenders

(Exceptions) Order (Northern Ireland) has been amended five times since its introduction in 1979: 1987, 2001, 2003 and June and October 2009. These amendments permit employers to ask about spent convictions for specific ("Excepted") posts. In 2006, the NIO consulted on amendments to the Order, although the amended Order was not implemented until June 2009 (there was no formal consultation before the October 2009 amendment).

In the published summary to the 2006 consultation the NIO noted that "one respondent" [NIACRO], had made a number of representations to the NIO and had corresponded on rehabilitation legislation more generally in the past. The NIO picked up on the following points raised by NIACRO:

- Current legislation is a barrier to integration of ex-offenders; and extending legislation will allow employers to use an excepted offence as a bar to employment.
- Revised legislation should require employers to demonstrate why an individual with a conviction is considered unsuitable for a position; this should be made known to the applicant; and there should be a mechanism for redress and sanctions against bodies that fail to cooperate.

In answer to the first, the NIO said, "The government's view is that rehabilitation legislation is not a barrier to integration but is in fact designed to facilitate that process...In addition, it is important to recall that the requirement to declare a conviction in 'excepted' circumstances does not automatically debar an individual from gaining employment. When declared, it is for the employer to take on board the relevance of the conviction to the post or service in question - employment can still be offered."

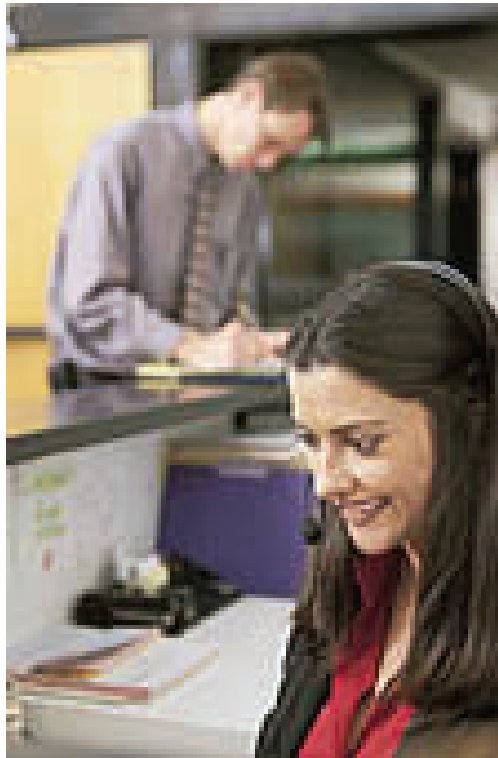
The process did not reflect the reality that employers, for the most part, use the Exceptions legislation to debar those with convictions. This is evidenced time and again in the training sessions we provide for employers.

Responding to the second point, the NIO said, “The government's view is that this proposal extends far beyond the scope of the current consultation which was focused simply on a desire to update the list of exception professions. The revisions sought by the respondent would require a fundamental change to core rehabilitation law - and potentially also employment law - that might in themselves require separate consultation. They would also represent a significant deviation from current rehabilitation legislation across the UK and a consistent approach across jurisdictions has been central to our policy to date. The suggestion has however been noted and can be considered at the appropriate time.”

Perhaps the ‘appropriate time’ – for a root and branch review of rehabilitation legislation and other legislation that increases barriers to employment – is now?

New and extra barriers

Any review of rehabilitation legislation would also have to take account of other legislation - legislation designed to enhance public protection - that constitutes a barrier to integration such as the Private Security Industry Act and the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Order. In the case of the former, the swingeing powers



of the Security Industry Authority are having the effect of forcing people who have had an exemplary employment record out of their jobs because they don't satisfy the conditions for obtaining an SIA licence.

The safeguarding vulnerable groups legislation is fraught with problems, not only those aspects that undermine reintegration. It is an outcome of the Bichard Inquiry which, following the murders of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells by Ian Huntley (a school caretaker) looked at how employers recruit people to work with children and vulnerable adults. It queried the reliability of the way in which

employers check the background of job applicants. It also asked whether employers should be responsible for deciding if a job applicant can be safely employed.

The Inquiry's recommendations led to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, which established a single agency to vet all individuals who want to work or volunteer with vulnerable people. This was followed by the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, the initial phase of which became operational on 12 October 2009. It will ultimately introduce tighter statutory controls to determine who is “suitable” – to quote the Act - to work with children and vulnerable adults in Northern Ireland, England and Wales. It is worth noting here that the Scottish Parliament has recognised the need for full consideration of the implications of the proposals before legislating.

The time for a root and branch review of rehabilitation legislation is now



Already the new provisions are causing consternation in Northern Ireland. Employers have expressed concern that the legislation is confusing and overly complicated. This lack of understanding will almost certainly allow more employers to practice de facto discrimination against ex-offenders. We are already receiving calls like these on our advice line. There are also concerns that no measures will

be put in place to gauge the extent to which the new provisions are achieving their purpose of providing increased protection. Other areas in which the legislation is either vague or deficient include:

- The question of how domestic violence incidents would be collated /assessed.
- Absence of a uniformly effective process for obtaining or sharing information on foreign nationals.
- The implications of categorising people under statutory supervision by Probation as “Vulnerable Adults”.
- Implications for children whose offences may later make them subject to the full scrutiny of the Vetting and Barring Scheme being operated by the ISA.

Questions have also been raised about whether the SVG legislation was subject to appropriate scrutiny. Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, all public policy should be screened for its possible impact on members of one of any of nine groups (though these do not include people with a conviction). If a possible adverse

impact is likely, then a full Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) should be carried out and if a negative impact on a group is identified, the policy should be reviewed. Both the SIA regulations and the SVG legislation were screened but only the SIA regulations were subject to an EQIA. In that case, the NIO identified no adverse impact. In the case of the SVG legislation, the DHSSPS carried out a screening exercise which concluded that a full EQIA was not required. However, NIACRO can see potential adverse impacts on men, on their partners and families (ie “people with dependents”) and on people holding particular political opinions.

What is to be done?

So how do we mitigate the worst effects of this legislation pending the comprehensive review we propose? At the very least, three urgent steps need to be taken:

- There is a need for clarity for employers with regard to SVG and the Vetting and Barring scheme and the respective roles of Access NI and the ISA.
- The Access NI Code of Practice should be revised to require employers and/or Registered Bodies to comply with the stated principle of fair consideration of individuals with convictions. This needs to be supported by legislation that provides for redress.
- A well-resourced, accessible advice and support service for employers and members of the public needs to be put in place. In addition to providing advice on the legislation and the procedures, such a service would also support individuals through the representation process.

Conclusion

Legislation aimed at contributing to the resettlement of offenders and laws aimed at protecting the public need not have diametrically opposed objectives. Indeed, their objectives should be complementary. Employment led resettlement is the most effective means of reducing re-offending and therefore reducing crime; and it is from crime that we are primarily aiming to protect the public. It is a shame, therefore, that the absence of joined-up thinking and a strategic overview has resulted in conflicting outcomes. Perhaps Government will recognise that one of the most effective ways of tackling crime is by helping ex-offenders into employment and will carry out the review we propose. If they do, we stand ready to provide whatever help and support we can.

JOBTRACK UPDATE



JOBTRACK ANNUAL REPORT



Kerryann Menary from NI Water talks to Jobtrack clients at a recent Employment Advice Clinic in Amelia House

Our main employability programme worked with 750 unemployed adult offenders in 2008/09, over 78% of them assessed as at medium or high risk of re-offending. The highest level of education for 71% of Jobtrack clients when they entered the programme was Level 1.

Of the 224 offenders who completed the programme last year, over 60% went into training or employment. Even of the 381 who left the programme early, 17% achieved the same outcome. Almost 400 participants obtained over 474 separate qualifications, an amazing achievement for people who are mostly long-term unemployed, who start from a low level of educational attainment, and for whom the term “socially excluded” might have been coined.

This is year two of the current three-year Jobtrack programme. The economic crisis has already been with us for two years and only adds to the existing high barriers which offenders face. It is to the credit of staff and clients alike that Jobtrack is continuing to make such a positive difference.

MY RIVER OF DREAMS

This poem was written by Jobtrack trainee Roisin Benson. Roisin was referred to Jobtrack through the Prisoner Development Unit where she also attended a creative writing class. Roisin has come a long way, her confidence is growing slowly. She attended the ECDL course with the other women who come to NIACRO for women-only training on Thursdays, and is also working hard to address the issues around her convictions and disclosure.

Although it is not possible at this stage for Roisin to work full or part-time, this is her ultimate goal. She has now moved on and is planning to start an Access Course, and is also volunteering for the Northern Ireland Hospice. She is very proud of reaching the goals that once seemed unreachable.

My River of Dreams

As I walk along, I think to myself of happy roads.

I know the roads are rough, but I prefer to think of myself sailing along.

Warm suns beating down on my face making me feel alive,

Other times I am on stormy waters, I have to use my paddle vigorously,

Sometimes I lose my paddle and I use my hands to beat on the waters with all my might!

Sometimes I sink, I feel I'm about to drown

But suddenly the waters calm, I can float along at ease.

I am no Titanic, I am my own Vessel of limitations and strength,

On my River of Dreams.

JOBTRACK STUDY VISIT TO HSI BRANDENBURG

Transnational exchange and learning is an integral part of the current Jobtrack ESF contract. In this context, nine staff from the German resettlement network HSI visited Belfast in December 2008 (NIACRO News 22). Both NIACRO and HSI found this meeting very useful, and Jobtrack was invited on a return visit. Along with colleagues from NIPS and the Probation Service, four NIACRO staff went to Germany in September.



We were particularly interested in HSI's innovative models and approaches to custody for fine defaulters and young persistent offenders. In turn, HSI wanted to explore further NIACRO's experiences of working with employers and the challenges of linking offenders to suitable opportunities. And both organisations wanted to discuss effective models for evaluating the work.

HSI is made up of 19 partners throughout the Federal State of Brandenburg in the former East Germany. Our visit centred on the towns of Cottbus and Potsdam. It was very interesting to hear and learn of our partners' experiences of growing up in a divided society and the challenges they have faced both personally and professionally through 20 years of the unification process. It is clear that services in former East Germany are playing "catch up" in terms of social and economic investment – unemployment is high and the structure of society is changing as young people leave to find work in other countries. Former local community industries (particularly in more rural areas) have disappeared, resulting in new labour market requirements.

Systems in transition

The criminal justice system is also still in transition and we had an excellent opportunity to discuss the challenges this brings from both the German and Northern Ireland perspectives. Inevitably, while acknowledging that progress has been made, there was agreement that much has still to be done to ensure fair and just systems that had public confidence.

The packed four-day visit included visits to Cottbus prison and the Ministry of Justice, a seminar in Potsdam on justice systems in transition, two press conferences, and intensive discussions on resettlement, statutory/voluntary partnership, good practice in evaluation and the impact of the current economic crisis.

We met with young people on the "Crash-Kurs" programme, designed to help individuals accept responsibility for their own behaviour and for making choices to change. We were particularly struck by the engagement of the young people - all of whom are offenders and some of whom were on remand at the time - in the discussion, and their willingness to tell their own stories and share their experiences despite the language barriers and the need to work through interpreters. Apparently, they are now lobbying to come to Northern Ireland on an exchange visit of their own!

The NIACRO, NIPS and PBNI visitors were impressed by the excellent planning that had gone into their trip. Both Jobtrack and HSI are committed to keeping up the links and continuing to benefit from the very positive working partnership which has been established.

YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY

Youth Employability works with young offenders referred from PBNI.

In 2008/09 referral numbers increased by 34%. Well over half (58%) of leavers progressed into education, training and employment. Of those leaving the programme, 8% went into custody for outstanding offences, a 2% decrease on the previous year.

WHY THE DEATH PENALTY IS NEVER THE ANSWER

Last November, the DUP MP and MLA Gregory Campbell stated that murderers have sacrificed their right to life, arguing that polls regularly show a majority in the UK favour the death penalty for crimes such as premeditated murder.

He made the statement while addressing a Westminster debate on the role of the UK in campaigning against capital punishment, adding: ‘There are times when the death penalty, operated within a robust legal framework, is an appropriate form of punishment.’

His views were given some support by the former President of the High Court in the Republic, Mr Justice Richard Johnson who said, during an interview with the Irish Times, also in November 2009: “The Government should look at it. Then if the people want it, they should have it.” Mr Johnson believes the death penalty has acted as a deterrent in the past, arguing that crimes such as murder are no longer shocking and “people have far less respect for each other than they used to.”

capital punishment has never been shown to be a more effective deterrent than other, more humane, forms of punishment

Punishment

Punishment comes in many forms. The deprivation of liberty through imprisonment is considered a major punishment in most countries and one which brings a chance for rehabilitation. Death caused by the state allows no such chance. The death penalty is a violation of the right to life and a backwards step for any civilised society.

Further, even with the most robust of legal frameworks, miscarriages of justice will always occur. Bad enough if you end up spending 20 years behind bars for a crime that you did not commit; worse if you forfeit your life. We have only to consider the number of cases where this has been the situation, including that of Timothy Evans, whose wrongful conviction and

subsequent death was one of triggers for the abolition of capital punishment in the UK.

Moreover, evidence from bodies such as the United Nations shows that, contrary to Mr Justice Johnson’s assertion, capital punishment has never been shown to be a more effective deterrent than other, more humane, forms of punishment.

Resettlement

Mr Campbell argues that sometimes life imprisonment is not enough. He suggests that a person guilty of committing murder could break out and commit it again. To NIACRO, this is not a reason to re-introduce the death penalty, but in fact, proof of the need to invest in effective resettlement practices. A person who undergoes proper rehabilitation and has a path for their future beyond prison walls, is a person more likely to integrate successfully back into the community and also one less likely to reoffend.

If Mr Campbell and Mr Justice Johnson had their way, there would be more cases like Timothy Evans, with more suffering and no evidence of falling crime figures. More importantly, an inhumane and abhorrent practice could potentially be re-introduced as ‘lawful executions.’ This can never be allowed to happen.

Mental Health Se

Services Director Pat Conway was invited to speak to the Progressive Unionist Party's annual conference about mental health and criminal justice. This is what he said.

Thank you for the opportunity of allowing me to talk to you about offending and its relationship with mental health issues.

This topic is particularly important in the context of the incoming devolution of criminal justice. Devolution gives us the opportunity to effect change and not to continue with bad practice or - at worst - transfer meltdown. It is also important to understand that devolution of itself does not necessarily mean that the opportunity to have a progressive criminal justice system will be taken.

In the immediate aftermath of devolution of criminal justice in Scotland the numbers of those going into prison increased significantly. This wasn't because crime had increased significantly or indeed proportionately. Rather it was a demonstration at local level that a local ministry could be "tough on crime". It is only now that the penny has dropped and the report published by the Scottish Prison Commission last year has sought, among other things, to reduce the prison population by over 2,000.

Facing the facts

Here are some facts that should inform our discussion. In any one year approximately 6,000 people pass through Northern Ireland's three prisons. Approximately 50,000 offences are dealt with by the court system. So a significant number of people gain criminal records.

It is estimated that over 60% of our prison population have a personality disorder, compared to approximately 6% in the general population. There is a longstanding debate within psychiatry as to whether personality disorder is a mental illness. However it is a fact that people with mental health problems are overly represented in the prison population. Lord Bradley's review of the issue, published this year, showed that:

- In England and Wales it is reckoned that 8% of prisoners suffer from schizophrenia and delusion disorder. The percentage for the general population is 0.5%.
- For neurotic disorders such as depression the figure for prisoners is 45%, against 13.8% of the general population.
- For drug dependencies the figures are 45% of those in prison with a drug dependency compared to 5.2% of the general population.
- It is estimated that 30% of prisoners have a dependency on alcohol compared to 11.5% of the general population.
- There are also issues of co-morbidity - some people may experience, for example, a combination of mental health and addiction issues.

it is a fact that people with mental health problems are overly represented in the prison population

Services in Prison

There is no reason to suppose that the figures for Northern Ireland are better and indeed they may be significantly worse. There is therefore validity in the perception that prisons are used as a dumping ground for those with a mental illness.

Let us go back to basics. The UN High Commission for Human Rights makes the following points which should provide us with the basis for forensic services.

- Prisoners and all detained persons have the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.
- Decisions about a prisoner's health should be taken only on medical grounds by medically qualified people.
- Sick prisoners who cannot be treated in the prison, such as prisoners with mental illness, should be transferred to a civilian hospital or to a specialised prison hospital.
- Services for psychiatric diagnosis and, if appropriate, treatment shall be available at every prison.

The Bamford Review and NIACRO's response

NIACRO is aware that offenders most in need of quality psychiatric services are far less able to access them compared to citizens outside the criminal justice system.

When the Bamford review of mental health and learning disability was established in 2006, a sub group focused on forensic services, ie mental health and learning disability services delivered within the criminal justice system.

NIACRO welcomed the sub group report's call to "address the wide range of problems specific to each individual with the aim of helping him or her integrate into society". We also welcomed the proposal that the DHSSPS in partnership with NIPS should develop a prison environment that actively promotes mental health and well being.

Some mental health problems can be attributed to poor accommodation, lack of adequate finance, lack of welcoming social networks, and difficulties in accessing training and employment opportunities as well as mental health programmes that address individual problems. In our view, therefore, there should have been greater emphasis in the report on diverting people who had mental health problems from the criminal justice system. If this was done, particularly at the point of arrest, prosecution and sentencing, fewer people would end up with an inappropriate criminal record or prison sentence.

During the consultation around Bamford, NIACRO pressed for consideration to be given to the effects of institutionalisation not only on individuals with mental health and learning disability issues but also on the institutions that are seeking to deliver care to these individuals. We argued that particular attention should be paid to devising ways of combating institutionalisation and ultimately providing the highest standards.

The Bamford report sought to improve access to mainstream psychiatric/forensic services. There is an implicit assumption that these mainstream services are of an acceptable quality. However, it is clear from the rest of the report that this is not the case.

Our submissions to the Bamford review pointed out that these shortcomings are exacerbated in prison. The question has to be asked: how are therapeutic interventions to be delivered within a closed institution

whose primary purpose is to deprive people of their liberty as a punishment? This fundamental question has not been adequately addressed by either psychiatric services or penal services.

Improving offenders' mental health

A health and criminal justice conference was held in September 2008, developed jointly by the Health Promotion Agency, the Prison Service and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and with input from, among others, NIACRO. Various observations were made:

Managing mental illness:

- Extraordinary effort by ordinary staff can make a difference.
- Effective therapeutic interventions can reduce self harm, improve prisoners' well being and help individuals learn to manage their difficulties more effectively.

Meeting the needs of mentally disordered and personality disordered offenders in the community:

- There are current deficits in both mental health legislation and the provision of services in Northern Ireland which have resulted in people with personality disorder being considerably disadvantaged compared to other jurisdictions within and beyond the UK.
- A comprehensive treatment and management strategy is required and its absence is liable to increase the risk of harm to the public from such individuals.

Mental health promotion training with criminal justice staff:

- Need to reduce the medicalisation of low level mental distress.
- Prison staff are often approached by prisoners and/or know when something is "wrong" with a prisoner but not what to do about it.

But here's the depressing bit. Many of the recommendations for developments are planned to be enacted over the next *ten to fifteen* years. Such

lack of urgency, particularly given current financial circumstances, is likely to result in inaction. The services are indeed likely to get worse.

Forensic services could help by being clearer about what it is they actually do, articulate success and be subject to measurement within a "What Works" framework. Other interventionists are being asked the same and these demands are likely to intensify as resources contract. Forensic services should also give more information and be more challenging about their role within the criminal justice system.

What is required?

- Diversionary activities led by mental health needs.
- Factoring in of mental health issues at arrest, prosecution and sentencing processes.
- Consistent assessment processes.
- Rapid "follow in" to prisons of eg medical notes.
- High quality services particularly within closed institutions.
- Connected, rapid follow through from prison to the community.
- Appropriate community services connected with individuals within 72 hours of release.
- High quality mainstream services in the community.
- Greater awareness of the role of mental health services within the criminal justice system.
- A shift in resources, from front line criminal justice activities (arrest, prosecution, sentencing) to diversionary activities that address mental health issues and provide support for those emerging from custody.

All this requires confidence and clear articulation by mental health service providers. It also requires support from other elements within the criminal justice system. In NIACRO's view, this is the approach we need to take if we want to reduce crime, offending behaviour, recidivism and ultimately the number of people who become victims of crime.



CAPS

Nine young people and their families completed their programme of work recently and we held a celebration event to recognise all the hard work and commitment they had put in. Actor and director Dan Gordon (who among other things directed the astonishing production of “Observe the Sons of Ulster” at Hydebank) presented certificates and medals, the community circus entertained us, and a good night was had by all.

Services Director Dave Weir (left) gave a presentation on Caps at a conference on early intervention for the prevention of offending, designed to review the outworking of the funding made available to NIACRO, Extern and Action for Children by the DHSSPS and NIO.

POLICY CONSULTATION

As readers will have gathered, we have been putting a good deal of work into analysing and challenging the new safeguarding legislation (see Employment Protects! on page one). Alongside this, however, there has been the usual stream of public policy consultations. You can check our responses to some of them on the website: the DSD’s “Join in, get involved” on a new volunteering strategy; amendments to prison rules from the Prison Service; and the Charity Commission’s consultation on public benefit.



Housing (Amendment) Bill 2009

A delegation from NIACRO led by Pat Conway gave evidence to the Assembly’s DSD Committee on the Committee’s consultation on the Housing (Amendment) Bill. In our accompanying written submission, we highlighted:

- Our own services, including the Advice Service to prisoners and offenders in the community, APAC and Base 2.
- Our support for a homelessness strategy; in which it is particularly important that agencies, including Government departments, work together under NIHE’s leadership to connect the relevant services.
- The need for specific support for young people, women and people with mental health problems or personality disorders.
- Our support for a right of review for homelessness decisions, but with a longer lead time.

In discussion, Committee members took NIACRO’s point that many departments outside the criminal justice system, including housing, have a part to play in resettlement. They asked for specific research sources to show the impact of homelessness on re-offending and have been sent these. In answer to a challenge on why ex-offenders “should automatically be entitled to go on to the housing list”, Pat Conway made the simple point that everybody has the right to be housed and that “a judge does not sentence somebody to prison and add homelessness to the punishment”.

In its final report, the Committee accepted a NIACRO recommendation that tenants

should have 28 days to seek a review of homelessness decisions, in order to allow them time to access support services. The Committee also reviewed progress achieved through improved inter-agency protocols, as part of their consideration of the Including the Homeless strategy. Members also expressed concern for young people, women and people with mental health problems or personality disorders who are involved in the criminal justice system.

NIACRO is pleased the Committee took our views seriously and their report shows they sought clarification from the Department to ensure policies and systems to assist those with a conviction are in place and will continue to be delivered within the proposed legislative changes.

A SILENT SENTENCE: FAMILIES OF PRISONERS SPEAK OUT



The UK's prison population has risen by 30% over the past 10 years, and more families are faced with the trauma, stigma and financial challenges accompanying a close relative's arrest and sentence than anywhere in Europe. In Northern Ireland, the prison population has risen to over 1,500 - a 67% increase from 2002.

NIACRO News readers know that the impact of the arrest and sentencing of a parent on children can be severe. Children of prisoners are three times more likely to suffer mental health problems and risk anti-social behaviour than their peers. In the UK, 160,000 children a year have a parent taken into custody; more than experience the divorce of a parent. Now, a set of powerful short documentaries, voiced by real family members telling their own moving stories, gives a vivid insight into their lives and experiences.

Entitled 'Families on Trial,' the documentaries illustrate five experiences of families who have suffered the imprisonment of a loved one and how they struggled to cope. Two of the five are families from Northern Ireland.

Where to turn

NIACRO CEO Olwen Lyner said: "We believe families suffer a 'silent sentence' when a loved one enters the prison system. If a child, spouse or parent dies, there are many services and supports available to assist the family in the grieving process. However, if a relative goes to prison, there is very little official support.

"The stigma and loneliness also impacts on every member of the family, especially children. Research suggests 65% of boys with a convicted parent go on to offend."

Alan Hooker from Prisoners' Families and Friends Service (PFFS), whose organisation co-ordinated and produced the project, said:

"The films on the Families on Trial website show how different families struggle to cope with the effects of arrest and imprisonment. Despite the fact that the problems are well documented, there is no single statutory body providing support. Families often have no idea where to turn to for help and advice."

A prisoner who has a strong family unit to return to is less likely to re-offend. Prisoners visited by a partner or family member have a 25% lower re-offending rate than those whose families do not support them.

The Northern Ireland families involved in this project have all used the Family Links service. 'Families on Trial' was funded by the Nationwide Foundation (which also took the initiative in putting the contributing organisations in touch) and is a collaboration between PFFS and five other voluntary agencies including NIACRO.

You just try and hold on

"I woke up one morning to two police officers at the front door, saying that (my son) had tried to commit suicide in jail, this was before his sentence, this was when he very first went in. A year and two months later he got bail, and I had to adapt my home again for him coming home and prepare young children for the fact that the police

could call at any time to check that he was in his bed. The impact it had on the house... you can't really put it into words." Mother from Northern Ireland

"(My wife) was given bail conditions that basically prevented her from leaving the house... it dragged on for two and a half years, it was a nightmare. I feel like the kids and I were punished every bit as much... you're completely under scrutiny at all times, you just try and hold on to what's left of your life." Husband from Northern Ireland

"When he went into jail we weren't a proper family, it felt like I didn't have a brother... because missing someone, it feels like a broken piece, you just feel hurt inside." Sister from England

"It does get easier, but there are still days that you cry – the youngest one said to me one night, 'You think you're the only one that cries, but I lost my brother too...' and I started to think, my God we're silent victims, serving a harder sentence than what they are inside". Mother from Northern Ireland

UTV took up the subject of prisoners' families in their UTV Live Tonight on 28 October, interviewing Family Service Manager Donnie Sweeney. Donnie described the Family Links service, highlighting the stigma and isolations suffered by the families – especially the children - "who aren't guilty of any offence". He also took the opportunity to point out that

reducing re-offending by definition reduces the number of victims of crime.

If you'd like to know more about the making of the DVD contact Corrina Langelaan at NIACRO on 028 9032 0157 ext 294 or corrina@niacro.co.uk

The films are freely available on <http://www.niacro.co.uk/our-services/working-with-prisoners-their-families-and-children/projects/25/families-on-trial/> and <http://familiesontrial.org> which also hosts information about the issue. Prisoners' Families and Friends Service can be accessed at www.prisonersfamiliesandfriends.org.uk

NIACRO SUPPORTS SAFER BELFAST PLAN

The Belfast Community Safety Partnership has launched their plan for a Safer Belfast up to 2011. As a member of the group's Strategic Tier, NIACRO Chief Executive Olwen Lyner was asked to address the launch.

Describing how she came to join the partnership and the importance NIACRO places on the group, Olwen said:

"I represent two interests for the partnership. NIACRO's services and our work with offenders are crucial when considering how to deal with ex-offenders in the community in a responsible way. We also have a strong history of supporting neighbourhood relations and we deal with issues of community safety and community buy-in.

"When I joined the partnership, we focussed heavily on policing targets; however we noticed the fear of crime figures kept rising, despite crime figures falling.

Central to crime reduction

"I believe we have now increased our level of community engagement. Community safety and well-being are not add-ons to the crime reduction agenda –



they are its central planks. The Community Safety Partnership has long agreed these areas must be explored properly and a number of activities have flowed from this.

“We have been working with local committees and community groups to make sure our work is appropriate. The partnership has also developed thematic groups, which were established to deliver

on the Safer Belfast Plan and I am pleased so many groups got involved in the process.

“Community safety needs to be genuinely delivered from the bottom up to better inform our planning and I am pleased the draft strategy, alongside this plan, places importance on the issue of neighbourhoods and their well-being.”

Safer Belfast includes an action plan which will focus on four key areas –

- Tackling anti-social behaviour.
- Reducing alcohol fuelled violent crime.
- Dealing with hate crime.
- Helping Belfast feel safer.

PRISON STAFF ACCREDITED TO BENEFIT PRISONERS



Awards ceremony at Magilligan

Nine prison officers from all three prison establishments have been presented with certificates in Magilligan after passing a two day course explaining the benefits available to inmates and their families.

Developed by NIACRO with support from Advice NI and Open College Network NI, the ‘Benefits and Tax Credits in the Criminal Justice System’ course examines the effect imprisonment has on benefit entitlement, the impact on families and what can be done to support resettlement. It is accredited by the Open College Network.

Speaking at the event, course co-ordinator Barry McMullan of NIACRO thanked the organisation and Advice NI for their input and praised the efforts of the participants.

“The staff really applied themselves throughout the two days”, he said. “The work was entirely new to them and it was a big learning curve for them but they met the challenge, worked hard and deserve the recognition they earned through their efforts.”

Streamlining the info

One participant on the course said: “Instead of three or four departments running around trying

to get the same information, we will be able to answer inmates’ queries and put their minds at ease.”

During the course participants developed knowledge and understanding of:

- The basis for welfare provision.
- The voluntary sector’s role in the criminal justice system.
- Basic entry criteria for entitlement to social security benefits and tax credits.
- The impact of imprisonment on benefits and tax credits.
- The implications for benefits of going into work or training.
- The effect imprisonment has on families.

STAFFING NEWS



WE WELCOME:

Jackie McMaster,
Employment Officer, Joblink

Eileen Havern,
Employment Officer, Women

Sandra Birnie,
Childcare Worker, Hydebank

Magdalena Chudzikiewicz,
Project Worker, Money & Debt

AND SAY GOODBYE TO:

Gerry O'Donnell
who has been one of our
minibus drivers for 19 years

Garrett Gorman,
Project Worker with Base 2

Sarah Conor,
Childcare Worker at
Hydebank.



STAFF CONFERENCE

The biennial out-of-office event took place in early October, with around 80 staff getting together to discuss user participation, working in partnership, and the key messages we want to get across.

SHADOW SECRETARY OF STATE VISITS NIACRO

NIACRO recently hosted a short visit by Owen Patterson, MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Joined by Basil McCrea, UUP MLA, Mr Paterson met staff, clients and volunteers from a range of our projects, including our Child and Parent Support programme (Caps), Family Links and Jobtrack.

Speaking of the event, Olwen Lyner, NIACRO Chief Executive said: “We were pleased Mr Paterson took time out of his busy schedule to visit our Amelia St headquarters and meet so many of our staff, volunteers and clients.

“Our unique role as a voluntary organisation in the criminal justice system means we seek to influence



Owen Patterson in conversation with Jobtrack's Gareth Eanetta

policy and practice at all levels. Part of this work is to meet with and highlight our work to political representatives, in order to maintain and develop working relationships across the political sphere.

“We hope our visitors gained a good understanding of the issues faced by our clients and the work we do to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities.”



Olwen Lyner and Briega Cadd with Lord Hylton as he receives a "long service" gift from NIACRO

AGM: FAREWELL TO THE PRESIDENT

Lord Hylton (Raymond to many of us) became NIACRO's President in 1988, at a time when the organisation was much engaged with the need to transfer prisoners from prisons in England and Wales. Speaking at a dinner attended by many friends and former colleagues, CEO Olwen Lyner described him as a tireless champion of the rights of prisoners. She thanked him for his unfailing interest in and support for NIACRO's work and concerns over the years, including asking pertinent questions in the House of Lords.

EARLY INTERVENTION

Bill Whyte, the keynote speaker at our AGM in November, 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.

Bill emphasised the importance of early intervention in preventing offending by young people, presenting as it does "the greatest opportunities, challenges, and risks for practitioners and young people". The opportunities lie in providing services that invest in families, the challenges lie in targeting services appropriately and the risks lie in confirming children in their perception of themselves as offenders.

Bill argued that effective family support should be universal and cautioned against identifying vulnerable children as potential offenders. Many children suffer disadvantage, but not all become offenders – the need is for effective support services that do not

diminish the family's role, do not confirm the child as an offender, and do not forget that the child is, first and foremost, a child!

Nevertheless, some young people do have the cards stacked high against them – coming from disruptive and disrupted families and experiencing social and educational difficulties. It is tempting to label such children. Many professionals will recognise the sensation of "knowing", usually in retrospect, that a child was likely to get into trouble. The problem is that a child is as likely to be a victim as a perpetrator, and in any case predictions can be, and often are, wrong.

So what can we do? ASBOs are not the answer.



Bill Whyte speaking at the AGM

Bill proposed another way, a way which requires more imagination and an understanding that children develop and grow. The career of most children who offend is well understood, and in most cases offending diminishes naturally – interventions should do nothing to reduce this trend.

What works is integration of services, supporting and investing in the family, the community, the school, and providing intensive support for the child in all these arenas.

