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news

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AGM - WHAT IS PRISON FOR?

Members, staff and friends gathered in Amelia Street on 25 November for NIACRO's 39th AGM. After hearing about the facts and figures of the year 2009 to 2010 from the Chair, Treasurer and CEO, guest speaker Henry McLeish spoke about criminal justice in Scotland.

Henry McLeish became a Labour MP in 1987 and a minister in 1997. He was instrumental in shaping Scotland's devolved parliament and was responsible for law and order including the Prison Service, a subject he was to return to in his role as Chair of the Scottish Prisons Commission. He became First Minister in 2000. Since retiring from elected public office he has continued to contribute to academic and public life.



Henry McLeish makes a point at the 2010 AGM

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This combination of political nous, experience of a devolved government, and expertise in criminal justice and penal matters, made Henry's presentation especially relevant to his audience. He began his presentation with the claim that "in Scotland the progressives are winning" and went on to make the point that it is important to recognise and acknowledge the positive; that "you can have victories".

On the other hand, Henry also acknowledged that in criminal justice we are not dealing with the rational - "Our brains are tuned into emotion,

not evidence." There is clear evidence about the incidence of crime, about who commits crime, and about how resettlement is far more effective than mere containment in harsh conditions. But this is undermined by anger against offenders and a long history of often brutal punishment being seen as the only – and even the proper – response.

Turning the usual view upside down, Henry described rehabilitation and resettlement as "the hard option". Prison, especially for a short sentence, is too often the default response, a useless waste of everyone's time and the taxpayer's money.

Influencing attitudes and policy

Henry classified five groups who influence the criminal justice system - and made the point that none of them was particularly good at accepting the evidence of what works:

- The public and public opinion: an opinion which is often powerfully negative and ill-informed; and which expects prison to bring about social change to an extent which it cannot possibly do.
 - The media: forming and reinforcing that opinion, assuming that the hard line is what their consumers want (though serious research often shows this isn't the case).
 - Politicians: who don't face down the misinformation and knee-jerk reactions; but who are the key group who can bring about change if they are persuaded it can be done.
 - Judges: who are difficult to challenge but who need at least to be engaged in the discourse.
 - Prison bureaucracy and prison officers: the latter group being "tough" but aware that they could make real changes for the better, and often more progressive than a risk-averse service.
- The messages that need constantly brought to the attention of all these groups are familiar to NIACRO's members, friends and supporters, but it was valuable to have Henry spell them out clearly and vividly. Most prisoners come from chaotic and disadvantaged backgrounds, have health and addiction problems, and little education. Prison will not deter them from re-offending.
- So what does it take to make things better? Leadership, courage, optimism and some degree of consensus, in Henry's view. And he *is* optimistic, at least so far as Scotland is concerned, with real hope that new legislation due in 2011 will be progressive. He felt the Scottish Prisons Commission, which was government-appointed, had real influence; "Radical policy from a Commission can be implemented."

Staying optimistic

Henry maintained his optimism through the question and answer session which followed. Asked about his views on privatisation, he warned against assuming that the private sector were somehow better

managers and more cost-effective. While the state sector needed to be highly efficient, the imprisonment of citizens was one of the "absolute areas of public provision" in his view.

There were questions and discussion on how to challenge the populism of politicians and the media (challenge them), how to build alliances (the “degree of consensus” approach), and how to boost support for community sentencing. For the last of these, Henry made a passionate call for shifting resources into creating meaningful activities, properly promoted and implemented, allied to a clear explanation about how they worked and what they were for.

The political view

As well as addressing the AGM, Henry met local political parties at a breakfast meeting the following day. They discussed reducing the prison population, working with women offenders and wider issues of penal reform.

JOBTRACK EVALUATION

2008-2010



Jobtrack, NIACRO’s largest single programme, has recently undergone an external evaluation. This very detailed report analysed the “purpose, process, outputs and outcomes” of the programme between 2008 and 2010. The evaluators, de Witt & Mercer, spoke with NIACRO, the Probation Board, the Prison Service, DEL and employers as well as Jobtrack clients. This article draws on the evaluation report and our own current thinking on Jobtrack. You can read more about our work with employers, an important part of Jobtrack, in the article following this one.

Jobtrack service users

Jobtrack’s key aim is to provide intensive employment-focused support to 600 clients a year - 450 referred by PBNI and the remaining 150 by NIPS. In 2008/2009, Jobtrack dealt with 959 referrals and in the first year of the current funding period, 2009/2010, the figure was 946. This means that over the past two years, the target of 600 clients has been exceeded by almost 60%. Jobtrack deals with approximately 1000 service users each year, in prison and, via PBNI, in the community.

To sum up the client group in 2009/2010 figures:

- 53% were unemployed at assessment and a further 47% economically inactive.
- In terms of qualifications, 79% were at entry level 1 or below, with 34.4% having no qualifications whatsoever.
- 86% were assessed to be at either medium or high levels of risk of reoffending (a higher percentage than in the previous year, following PBNI’s closer focus on this group of offenders).

- 83.4% were single, separated or divorced and thus were unlikely to get much support from family.
- Some had additional problems with accommodation, finance and benefits.

All of these figures clearly show that many service users are at a significant distance from the labour market and experience a range of other problems or disadvantages. By definition they are going to find it harder to stay out of trouble, complete training and educational courses, and ultimately find a job.

In spite of this, the outcomes are encouraging.

Successful outcomes

- Of those who left Jobtrack after completing their individual programme, 44% went into employment compared to 10% of those who left the programme early.
- 78% of completers obtained open college network (OCN) Employment Skills qualifications.
- Jobtrack clients achieved over 1000 qualifications including IT, Essential Skills, Forklift, HGV, CSR, Sports Fitness, Gas Installation, Catering, Manual Handling, Nail Technician, and Hair & Beauty.

There are two “branches” of Jobtrack, a pre-release employment support programme in the prisons, and a community-based programme.

Prison Pre-Release Programme

- Over 67% of participants were assessed as medium to high risk.
- 92% completed the programme, in spite of some staffing and operational difficulties.
- Of those who completed the programme, 29% went directly into employment or training.
- Of these, 31% were recruited into the construction industry and 17% got jobs in hospitality and catering.

Jobtrack in the Community

- 85% of programme participants were assessed as medium to high risk.
- Almost one-third (31%) of leavers went directly into employment or training.
- Of these, 26% went into construction, while 9% achieved jobs in store/warehousing and a further 9% pursued a skilled trade.

Jobtrack Women

- Jobtrack has introduced a specialist service working with women in prison and those involved with PBNI, through the Inspire Project.
- Over 30 women have been referred to the project with 60% engaging in personal development or skills-based training.

What the service users think:

“You can join it straightaway. I was in the probation office on Friday and started with Jobtrack the next Tuesday.”

“She really helped me with the social and debt problems I had.”

“It’s different – you feel you can open up to them.”

“Jobtrack can do no more, they’re doing more than we probably deserve.”

“Everyone is 100% behind you.”

Working transnationally

- Transnational exchange and learning is an integral part of the current Jobtrack ESF contract. Jobtrack has made a commitment to support new or emerging projects focussing on employment-led resettlement.
- We are deeply involved in the ExOCOP programme [see page 18].
- We have had several successful exchange visits with a German criminal justice body, the HSI network in Brandenburg. We have focused on:
 - Alternatives to custody.
 - Evaluation methodology.
 - Sharing good practice in employing (ex)offenders.
 - Contributing to policy discussions on transforming justice.
- New relationships are also being developed with Spain, Portugal and Italy.

Priorities for the future:

The evaluators made useful recommendations, some broadly strategic and some more detailed and operational. For the three partners involved in the programme, NIACRO, NIPS and PBNI, the following are the main drivers for future development:

- Jobtrack will explore new forms of employment opportunities and seek to increase the numbers of service users entering education and training in order to meet the demands of a changing economy.
- Jobtrack will work to ensure service users have access to relevant qualifications to meet the needs of the labour market.
- Jobtrack will continue to deliver a flexible model and work with local businesses to identify and establish innovative solutions that will enhance employment opportunities for individuals with a conviction.
- Jobtrack will continue to provide a service that will contribute effectively to a reduction in offending.

ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

Working with employers is vital to the success of Jobtrack and we use three main methods to promote their interest and involvement with service users.

- Training and support for employers in the fair recruitment of people with convictions.
- A confidential advice line and advocacy service for employers, employees and job applicants.
- “Meet the Employer” events. These work to break down barriers between employers and service users.

We trained 897 people from 307 organisations in the two-year period of the evaluation and ran 15 “Meet the Employer” events in the prisons and in the community (see more about these events below).

The employment advice line responded to 1001 calls.

Strategic Employers Forum

Business in the Community works with NIACRO to help us increase the numbers of employers willing to support ex-offenders trying to re-enter the labour market. BITC describes the benefits to the business of becoming involved:

- Access to free training to develop fair and safe recruitment and management practices for people with convictions.
- Opportunity to impact positively on the lives of ex-offenders by helping to improve their employability skills.
- Chance to impact positively on society by helping to reduce re-offending and crime rates.
- Increased understanding of discrimination often faced by ex-offenders seeking work.
- Stereotypes and preconceptions challenged and the opportunity to learn more about the pool of skills available to employers.

- Opportunity to work on both a practical and strategic level with like-minded businesses, leading private sector support in this area.

One arm of our work with employers is the Strategic Employers Forum, where we can tap into support and strategic guidance from interested employers. The Forum is made up of representatives from all business sectors. Members share examples of good practice, address the concerns and interests of employers, raise awareness of the benefits described above, and try to influence policy.

What the employers think (taken from the Jobtrack evaluators’ interviews):

“The services were excellent, realistic and practical, as they need to be, and I never felt abandoned.”

“They are very professional in their dealings with employers and they are also obviously comfortable with clients and vice-versa.”



left to right, Peter McConvey, William Armstrong, PBNI Deputy Director Cheryl Lamont, Gareth Eannetta, at a Belfast meet the employers event

“The advice line is always there for us and provides a very quick and efficient service.”

“The person we hired through Jobtrack is extremely professional, very diligent, excellent timekeeper, gets on extremely well with the entire team and has never let the organisation or its clients down.”

Meet the Employer

A new development of our employer work began in 2008 with the first “Meet the Employer” event. This brought together Jobtrack participants and some of the employers who support our work on employability.

We are continually developing the scope and reach of the employer events, which now cover the whole of Northern Ireland. We held eight in 2008/2009 and seven in 2009/2010, including for the first time organising an event in each of the three prisons. Between April and December 2010 there were 11 events. In April 2010 we held the first women-only day, and in Maghaberry prison in June 2010, twenty-four life sentence prisoners attended for the first time – we hope to make these annual events. Employers have been very impressed with the level of participation and motivation of the service users.

Advice and information

The sessions give clients a chance to meet employers face to face and get advice on how to make the most of their job applications and use their job-hunting time most effectively. They can discuss skills and development; benefit from one-to-one advice from people

involved in the recruitment process; find out what employers expect on an application form; and discuss how and when to disclose their conviction.

Up to 60 clients are now coming along to each session. They meet employers from construction, hospitality, retail, call centres, IT, industrial cleaning etc – we’re attracting more employers all the time. And service users can meet with, and learn about training opportunities from, statutory and voluntary providers including DEL.

We have received very positive feedback on this initiative. Service users have told us they appreciate the approach and attitude of

employers who “treat us as equals”, and the time employers take to explain their recruitment policies and the skills they are looking for. Employers say they that meeting people with real potential and commitment, determined to find employment, challenges their own prejudices and anxieties. Undoubtedly this work does break down barriers.

Jobtrack is grateful to all the employers who support the initiative.

If you’d like to know more about Jobtrack, as employer, professional or potential client, contact Heather Reid, heather@niacro.co.uk

Vetting and barring update

In the last issue of NIACRO News, we noted that the Government had undertaken to “review the criminal records and vetting and barring regime and scale it back to common sense levels”. The terms of reference of this review were published in October in two parts – a “remodelling” of the vetting and barring scheme, and a “review”, in two phases, of criminal records. The review covers only England and Wales, and at the time of going to print we await news of what the position in Northern Ireland will be.

However, we felt it important to feed in to the review, and sent our comments to the Home Office in November. In it, we called again for a complete overhaul of the rehabilitation of offenders legislation and pointed out how confused and uneasy employers are about the safeguarding regulations.

Specifically, we are calling for four key improvements:

- Clearer definitions (of “regulated activity”, “vulnerable adult”, and what offences automatically lead to barring from employment).
- Registration requirements (including links to other legislation, right of appeal etc).
- Accountability (employers should be openly accountable for the choices they make).
- Decision-making – in our view the most important area for change; it needs to be much more transparent and subject to challenge and appeal. We believe that the way in which decisions are made on a person’s right to take up a particular job should be enshrined in law, so that it can be scrutinised in Parliament.

EQUALITY COMMISSION RECOGNITION

Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

NIACRO has worked for some time with the Equality Commission to promote equality of opportunity for ex-offenders in the labour market. We were pleased that the Commission's September 2010 publication "Employment inequalities in an economic downturn" included ex-offenders alongside the groups which are protected against discrimination by law. The research team which produced the report said that ex-offenders "have been included in this research as the authors felt that they represent a vulnerable group in the labour market". While noting that there is a

lack of research on the impact of the recession on this group, the researchers did highlight that for people in a disadvantaged position in the labour market, including ex-offenders, "the economic downturn may exacerbate their position by moving them further back in the 'employment queue'".

Extending anti-discrimination law to include our service users is our ultimate goal, but for now the Commission's recognition of the situation of ex-offenders sends out an important message.

EMPLOYERS & IMPRISONMENT

The CBI in Northern Ireland published an interesting document in September 2010, "Time for action Northern Ireland – delivering public services in a time of austerity". What the employers' organisation describe as a "radical blueprint" includes a call for the Executive to make cutting the re-offending rate "a top priority".

Well, yes. However, the CBI analysis leaves something to be desired. As an example of how to reduce re-offending it offered a London-based employability programme which ended in 2004; what a pity the CBI didn't approach us to talk about Jobtrack. Norway is – as so often in the context of public services – offered as a rehabilitation role model, ignoring the wholly different cultural and social systems in Scandinavia.

We agree that devolution and the introduction of the Justice Bill present an opportunity to identify local solutions to meet local needs. We're far from sure that the most important aspect of "the Magilligan redevelopment" is that it is "a key opportunity to involve the private sector, both in terms of reducing

costs and improving outcomes". We agree that the sentencing framework could be reviewed to identify the best options for dealing with minor crimes, but the terminology is strangely imprecise. The CBI describes resettlement schemes as a "new method" for dealing with crime, and distinguishes between such schemes and "rehabilitation programmes". There is no mention of restorative justice as a well-established and cost effective method of dealing with minor crime.

Most significantly of all, there is no mention of how employers – including CBI members - could contribute towards a reduction in re-offending by carrying out the fair recruitment practices on which NIACRO delivers training and advice. Employers only figure in this section as people who might benefit from "the introduction of competition to the marketplace to enable the private sector to offer its services".

However, NIACRO welcomes the effort by an important employers' organisation to make concrete suggestions about dealing with the cost of imprisonment. We would be happy to discuss our experience, and work with the CBI on how they and we can achieve our goals.

YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY AWARDS



At the first Youth Employability programme awards ceremony, Ryan Caskey and Taylor McIlveen receive their awards from Dave Weir and Olwen Lyner.

JUSTICE DEVOLVED

The profile of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland's Assembly rose dramatically in the course of 2010. We had the first Assembly question time for the new Minister; weekly meetings of the Justice Committee; an update on the intergovernmental agreement in criminal justice co-operation; a debate on knife crime; and the announcement of reviews of access to justice (legal aid provision), youth justice and prisons (see below). In particular, much was made of the historic nature of the introduction of the first Justice Bill for 40 years, on 18 October.

Justice Bill

The next stage of the Justice Bill was step-by-step scrutiny by the Justice Committee. The Committee called for written evidence on the Bill. Our response to that consultation was, as ever, based on our almost 40 years' experience of working with and for offenders. Our general comments included a welcome for locally-based legislation, and a recommendation not to rush the process.

A few specific responses:

The offender levy – we agree with the concept of a levy, insofar as it is a tool for an offender to address their offending behaviour and make appropriate reparation, and believe the proceeds should go to victims' services. We recommended that the process include explaining the point of the levy to offenders so that they understood it was about taking responsibility for their crime. We urged the Department of Justice to publish an annual report detailing the spend of the levy.

The proposed merger of Community Safety Partnerships and District Policing Partnerships into “Policing and Community Safety Partnerships” – we have real problems with this proposal (see NIACRO News 26 where we described our doubts in some detail). At first glance, it might seem sensible. Both organisations cover local government areas, both are designed to connect with local communities, both are funded by the DoJ, both were set up under initiatives deriving from the peace process.

But the proposed name really says it all – policing comes first. And the structure reinforces this. Each partnership must have a policing committee, but not a community safety committee. The membership has a built-in majority of political representatives and a few “designated organisations”, split between statutory and voluntary organisations.

How will the Justice Bill help to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities?

The DPPs are essentially about police accountability and monitoring. The CSPs have a far wider remit, proactive rather than reactive, and potentially able to promote and support imaginative and innovative ways of improving community living. NIACRO has recommended in the past that CSPs be incorporated into the community planning structure proposed under RPA, but that regrettably seems to have receded into the distant future. So, even if the fact of merger is a done deal, the failure of the present proposals to design a structure with real community involvement, recognising that community safety is a great deal more than policing, is pretty depressing.

Alternatives to prison – we welcome the effort to find effective alternatives and to introduce restorative and rehabilitative conditions. We believe the Bill should

include proper alternatives. That is, a person should be diverted into a service before they receive a fine or a conditional caution. In this way, we could assist a vulnerable group of people and perhaps reduce the numbers going into the criminal justice system. We attached to our response a fuller briefing on alternatives to prison which is on the website.

CEO presentation

Olwen Lyner’s presentation at the Agendani conference “Examining the Justice Bill” in October was headed “How will the Justice Bill help to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities?” She stressed that all NIACRO’s work is geared to helping offenders stop offending, and that we test any new initiatives or legislation against this requirement.

Justice Committee reception

Services Directors Dave Weir and Pat Conway represented NIACRO at the Assembly’s Justice Committee reception in the Long Gallery on 29 November 2010. The Committee offered a number of organisations the opportunity to meet with members in round table discussions. This was a less formal process than that of giving evidence to a committee. Dave and Pat met Carál Ní Chuilín, Lord Browne, Sir Reg Empey, Raymond McCartney and Conal McDevitt. They presented NIACRO’s views on aspects of the Justice Bill, particularly the offender levy, alternatives to prosecution, fine default and fixed penalty notices. They also took the opportunity to discuss both the Prison Review and the Youth Justice Review.

Evidence to Justice Committee

Pat Conway and Dave Weir also attended the Justice Committee on 9 December to give oral evidence on the Committee’s consideration of the Justice Bill. In particular, the Committee wanted to hear about our views on the offender levy and alternatives to prosecution.

The evidence can be read on the Committee’s pages on the Assembly website.

Youth Justice Review

David Ford announced a review of youth justice on 1 November 2010. He quoted the Hillsborough

Agreement's undertaking to: "Review...how children and young people are processed at all stages of the criminal justice system, including detention, to ensure compliance with international obligations and best practice". The review's terms of reference cover: "existing processes, partnerships, interventions, structures and strategic linkages; legislation relating to the various statutory interventions; the balance of emphasis among prevention, effective intervention and reintegration and the associated systemic and cross-cutting issues; good practice in Northern Ireland and beyond; and information sharing and management arrangements between agencies and the measurement of outcomes".

So far, so comprehensive. Shortly before the announcement of the review panel's membership, NIACRO wrote to the Minister of Justice stressing the need for the review to be entirely independent and include members with expertise in the international standards which cover young people's rights and needs in the criminal justice system. We had real concerns about the make-up of the review panel as first announced. Services Director Dave Weir along with representatives of Include Youth and the Children's Law Centre attended the Justice Committee on 4 November, to bring these issues to the attention of the Committee. The Committee agreed to write to the Minister supporting our views on the make-up of the panel.

Our concerns have been reduced following a change to the panel's membership at the end of November. The Minister in his reply to our letter sought to reassure us that the panel will be open-minded ("there are no sacred cows and no areas that have been declared off-limits").

The DoJ news release states that the panel will be supported by a "reference group" made up of "academics, senior policy makers and experienced practitioners from areas such as children's rights, social policy, criminology, youth justice, prison studies and criminal justice inspection" and we await the details of this group with interest.

Olwen Lyner and Dave Weir met the new Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Agency, Paula Jack in

October. They discussed the services NIACRO offers to the YJA's client group.

Prisons review

The Justice Minister announced another review, this one of Northern Ireland's prisons, in June 2010. The Criminal Justice Review led to major reform but largely bypassed the Prison Service. Following the early release of politically motivated prisoners, the closure of the Maze Prison and over forty reports on the operation of the service – many of them with serious criticisms, up to and including the CJINI report on corporate governance published in December 2010 - only now has a review been started.

If prisons are supposed to reform and rehabilitate – are they successful in doing so?

However, it wasn't the sort of review that NIACRO had been calling for (NIACRO News 22). It's not the root and branch examination which is needed and it doesn't appear to capture the role of the other actors in this particular play – the other parts of the criminal justice system, the Assembly, other government departments, the third sector, the media and the general public. Again, to date there has been a focus on the operation of prisons. This fails to consider the role and function of prisons and what in fact they are for. If they are supposed to reform and rehabilitate - are they successful in doing so?

Notwithstanding our reservations, we are of course committed to do all we can to make the review process as productive as possible. Members of the review

team – its leader Anne Owers and former PSNI Deputy Chief Constable Paul Leighton - visited NIACRO on 19 November 2010. They met senior management for a presentation on our work and our views on the review, and then spent some time with Adult Forum members who are NIACRO clients on various programmes and projects.

This turned out to be a very powerful and very open session, with a great respect developing between the visitors and the service users. The ex-offenders described their experiences from committal to discharge. They accepted that they went to prison as a punishment for a crime committed, and were happy to identify individual staff who had been supportive and helpful.

The Adult Forum also painted a picture of the huge impact life in prison has on life after release, for good or more often for ill. On the whole, their experience was of few efforts being made to help them prepare for release, of overt and covert undermining of their dignity and their attempts to access training and education, and of inefficiency and inhumanity from start to finish.

The Forum had also met recently with UNLOCK, an ex-offenders voluntary organisation. One member of the Forum posted his thoughts on the prison review team's visit on the UNLOCK member forum. "It was nice to actually get your points across, and see notes taken...The meeting was very positive for all attending." he said, as well as noting all the points raised and thanking NIACRO staff for "making it possible."

Consultation

There has also been a formal consultation on the prison review. In our response, we made the points described above, stressing that we need, before anything else, to establish first principles. Our full response is on the website.

One way of summarising what we think should happen in the prisons is to quote the list of demands Pat Conway presented at a Commission for the Administration of Justice event in September 2010: "Human rights and the administration of justice: implications for devolution".

- Root and branch, not piecemeal, reform.
- Human rights culture embedded in the penal system.
- Political ownership of a culture of resettlement.
- Address issues "upstream" and "downstream" of the criminal justice system.
- Ownership of, and contribution to, penal reform by DoJ and other departments – primarily health, education, employment and housing.
- Redistribution of existing resources from security and containment to care and resettlement.
- Encouraging and promoting citizenship with prisoners, not reducing it.
- Listening to the voice of the prisoner – prisoners' councils.
- Prisoner needs rather than agency needs.
- Effective management.
- Effective staff training.
- High value placed on staff working on resettlement and rehabilitation.
- Harmonisation of cultures across the prison estate.
- Secondments and staff exchanges.
- Addressing institutionalisation – among both staff and prisoners.
- Challenge, transparency and accountability between DoJ and prison management.
- Resettlement practice recognised as contributing to public protection.
- Permeability – strengthening the relationship between prison and host communities.
- Focus on reducing re-offending.
- Reduce the prison population.

The Prison Review team wrote on 1 December to the people and organisations they had met. In the letter, Anne Owers informs us that the Team had agreed with the Minister to revise its original brief, and to produce an interim report in the New Year, "which sets out what we consider to be the components of the problem in and for the prison system and what we think are the components of a solution...a broad-brush document which we will wish to discuss and consult on further."



Anne Owers and Paul Leighton of the Prison Review team with Family Links staff and Adult Forum members

We heartily welcome this, especially in light of the very worrying report of the Prisoner Ombudsman on the death in custody of John Deery. In this, Pauline McCabe referred to her recommendations in previous reports on deaths in custody and regretted that although those recommendations had been accepted “these important issues are emerging again”.

Women offenders

The fourth in NIACRO’s Justice Series, our seminars at the Assembly for MLAs, party officials and other stakeholders, considered the issue of women prisoners.

Guest speaker was Professor Pat Carlen, Visiting Professor at the Universities of Kent and Westminster, Editor-in-Chief of the British Journal of Criminology and co-founder of the campaigning group Women in Prison. Professor Carlen is a world-renowned expert on women in the criminal justice system.

Discussion at the event covered the need for ring-fenced funding for women offenders, accommodation, mental health needs, and how the community can best support this vulnerable group.

Very many fewer women than men offend – there are around 50 women in prison in Northern Ireland at any one time, compared to around 1450 men. They often offend for different reasons. Women who come into contact with the law are often victims of abuse, are in poor health, and live in

difficult economic circumstances. If sentenced to a term in prison, they go to a unit within Hydebank Young Offenders Centre, though this is far from satisfactory. Northern Ireland now has a strategy for women offenders and those at risk of offending, launched in October 2010. NIACRO’s position is that far more use should be made of non-custodial sentencing. Services like the PBNI’s Inspire project in Belfast is aimed at women coming out of the criminal justice system, and NIACRO is closely involved with it – the project should be offered to many more women offenders.

Prisoners’ right to vote

There was a flurry of mostly negative and self-righteous comment when the European Court of Human Rights ruled in November 2010 that the UK’s ban on sentenced prisoners voting in general elections was unlawful. NIACRO welcomes the change.

Our position has always been that going to prison and being deprived of one’s liberty is the punishment. Once there, the priority is to increase prisoners’ sense of responsibility and citizenship to prepare them for a better life after prison. Voting is a core activity in a democracy, and many democratic states bemoan the fact that their citizens are less and less inclined to vote. So taking part in this democratic duty is one more step towards resettlement and rehabilitation, and should be actively encouraged by prison authorities.



LOVE THE BUS



Prisoners visited by a partner or family member have a 25% lower re-offending rate than those whose families do not support them. But if you don't have a car it's not easy to get to prisons which by definition are unlikely to be close to centres of population well served by public transport. NIACRO's Family Links service offers a transport service, funded by the NI Prison Service, to make visiting possible.

Our minibus covers Belfast to Maghaberry, Derry to Magilligan, Derry / "Rural North" to Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood, and Belfast to Magilligan.

Volunteer drivers bring people from the southern parts of Northern Ireland to all three prisons. From 2006 to 2010, the service transported 15,404 people, and volunteers made 322 journeys to and from prisons and detention centres across Northern Ireland. In 2009/2010 we carried almost 4,000 passengers.

We aim to provide an empathetic and responsive service to people who are already feeling stressed by the position they find themselves in.

We carried out a user satisfaction survey in September 2010 to check how well the service answered our users' needs.

If it wasn't for the service, I wouldn't get there

More than half the passengers use the service every week. 75% said that if it weren't for the service, they wouldn't be able to visit their friend or relative -

"I am grateful to be able to use transport, otherwise I would not be able to visit my son." "If it wasn't for the service, I wouldn't get there." "Without this service, I would not be able to visit my son." "This is my only way to visit my brother." "If it wasn't for the NIACRO bus, I wouldn't be able to go." "This bus provides the service I need as public transport is not able to." "Very pleased. Thank you. Love the bus and very happy with driver. Very nice people."

Sometimes families have little alternative. Other forms of transport are "nowhere near as convenient as the transport laid on. I can't imagine how I would get to Hydebank without the bus" "...too expensive and a complete hassle."

The service users had some suggestions for improving the service –

- Greater promotion of the service through the website and a leaflet in court as well as through the visitors' centres.
- Make the booking process a bit easier and more accessible.
- Greater promotion of the volunteer driver service.
- And a general wish that the service could be expanded.



EVALUATION

Caps, NIACRO's early intervention programme for 8 – 13-year-olds, has been running since 2004, first in the Southern area and since 2007 in Belfast. Internal and external evaluations during that period showed positive outcomes for the children and families taking part in the project. Drawing on the positive results from Caps, the Early Intervention Programme funded by the DHSSPS was established in 2008 to help children coming into contact with the criminal justice system. This integrated strategy working with 8-13-year-olds at risk of offending now provides a service across Northern Ireland; other agencies involved in the strategy include Extern and Action for Children.

An evaluation of the whole early intervention programme has recently been completed. The detailed monitoring returns kept by each of the projects paint a picture of challenge and difficulty in the children's lives. "A great number" had difficulties in school; over a quarter were on the Child Protection Register; almost a quarter had some level of ADHD



Caps participants on a trip to a community fire station.

behaviour; around two-fifths were known to police when they started on the programme. Outcomes for the majority of children completing the programme are extremely positive; this has been validated by the independent evaluators who met with all of the stakeholders including the young people, parents and referral agencies.

Value for money

The evaluators found that the average cost of the service was £4, 610 – dramatically less than the cost of the care or custody towards which the child appeared to be heading before the programme intervened. The evaluators make the point, however, that even this positive financial/economic result is less important than the personal benefit to the child and their family.

Why does it work?

The evaluators asked the children, their parents, and referral agents what they felt about the programme, and all praised the work of the staff – agreeing that "their commitment and approach were the main reasons for their successful engagement with the families". The range of skills and experience of staff also means that the young people can be helped in the most effective way.

Another important success factor was that the programme supports not just the child but their parents and in some cases other members of the family. Many of the people interviewed felt that involving the child only would not have had "an impact of the same quality and strength".

their commitment and approach were the main reasons for their successful engagement with the families

Taking an all-round approach to the situation also increased the programme's effectiveness – assessing the individual's needs and putting together a plan of action which everyone involved buys into.

Into the future

The evaluators concluded that the programme included all of the elements needed to make it effective. They made a few specific operational recommendations, and

recommended more broadly that “not only should the Programme be sustained but also...it should be further developed with support from” a range of Government departments including care, justice and education. NIACRO is certainly looking forward to developing our work with children at risk and giving them, and their families, the support they need and deserve.

You can get more information on Caps, and the evaluators' report, on our website.



HATE CRIME PROJECT

OFFICIAL LAUNCH

Justice Minister David Ford formally launched the Challenge Hate Crime project in December. The project is pretty clearly described by its name. It has two interdependent strands. One challenges people convicted of hate crimes to look at their attitudes and behaviour, and take part in a support programme aimed at making it less likely they'll re-offend. The ultimate goal is to have an effective model of working with

the people who carry out hate crimes. The other element of the project is a research strand, investigating the nature and extent of hate crime in Northern Ireland. It seeks to inform and influence those within and beyond the criminal justice system, including our politicians.

David Ford described hate crime as “insidious” and spoke of its potential “terrible consequences”. The Minister went on to say, “I welcome this project as

a positive and proactive piece of work and a good example of partnership working.”

The project’s research manager Monica Fitzpatrick, who is seconded to NIACRO from the Prison Service, made the important point that “hate crime hurts more”. Although it is a small percentage of the overall crime figures, she said at the launch, “We know that it can leave scars that are slow to heal for individual

Max Murray, Director of Operations at the Prison Service, spoke of NIPS’ “long and productive working relationship” with NIACRO and looked forward to the development of a model which reduces re-offending and addresses the issues raised by hate crime.

There have already been several seminars designed to get people thinking rationally and constructively about how to deal with hate crime. They have

I welcome this project as a positive and proactive piece of work and a good example of partnership working

victims, for those close to the victim, for those who align themselves with the victim: and indeed whole communities often feel the effect of one single incident of hate crime.”

Voluntary-statutory partnership

Representatives of the two partner organisations in the project, NIACRO and the NI Prison Service, also spoke at the launch. NIACRO’s Olwen Lyner highlighted our aspiration that the project will lead to a safer society, through effectively challenging a form of crime that cannot be tolerated.

included relevant statutory and voluntary/community bodies both within and outside the criminal justice sector. Participants in the seminars have been given information on the background, the figures and the impact of hate crime. They were also asked to consider the project’s relevance to their own work with a view to contributing to its aims and outcomes in future.

We were pleased that the launch received good straightforward coverage in the media, as this is part of the goal of increasing public awareness of hate crime and how it can be challenged.



Max Murray, NIPS, Olwen Lyner and Justice Minister David Ford



WELFARE CHANGES

Since coming to power in May 2010 the coalition Government has claimed it will introduce “welfare that works”. Department of Work and Pensions Secretary Ian Duncan Smith has announced sweeping reforms to target “an antiquated welfare system which has become a complicated and inflexible mess”. While much media attention focused on the cuts to welfare spending announced in the June budget, the Government emphasises it will continue to support the vulnerable and those who are unable to work.

The Coalition contends that despite an unparalleled period of sustained economic growth over 16 years - during which four million jobs were created – four and a half million people remained on out of work benefits. Of these, one and a half million were unemployed for nine of the past ten years. The Coalition says it intends to make work pay by removing the fears associated with moving in and out of work and by targeting those who can work but refuse to.

Under new proposals long term benefit recipients will be placed on four week mandatory placements of 30 hours a week doing jobs such as clearing litter and gardening. Refusal to attend will result in benefit being stopped for at least three months.

The idea of benefit sanctions is not a new one. Benefit sanctions for non-compliance with Jobseeker’s Directions have been in place since 1996 with sanctions of up to 26 weeks applicable. However, in previous programmes, such as New Deal, the focus for many individuals became how to avoid benefit sanctions rather than how to move into employment.

There is also a history of government support for those who have been long term unemployed with a range of training opportunities under New Deal and now Pathways to Work and Steps to Work. Meaningful support in the form of work shadowing, work placements, training and volunteering to build up skills is useful and has always been welcome.

NIACRO knows that helping people with criminal records to become work ready by tailoring education and training to individuals’ needs and matching this

an antiquated welfare system which has become a complicated and inflexible mess

to labour market demands takes time. And it often results in our service users maintaining benefits while participating in programmes. Currently there is not enough capacity in training programmes and colleges to deal with increasing numbers of unemployed people. Individuals with convictions are therefore moving further down the “pecking order”, being seen as very difficult or problematic, and places cannot be found for them. This will only be exacerbated in the longer term.

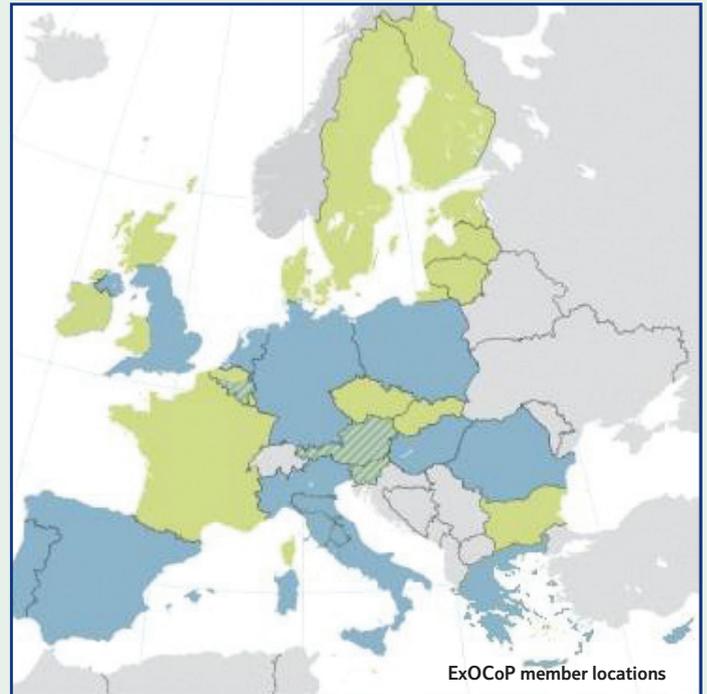
If the Government is sincere in its efforts to motivate the long term unemployed off benefits and into employment, measures which further stigmatise and alienate this group are not the solution.

RESETTLEMENT EUROPE-STYLE

The EU-wide ExOCOP project aims to build up a really effective, tried-and-tested, body of knowledge and experience on all aspects of rehabilitation. We've given updates on the project in NIACRO News 25 and 26. NIACRO was encouraged by DEL to act as the NI representative on ExOCOP and this has given staff from Jobtrack, the Probation Board and the Prison Service a unique opportunity to keep up to date with good practice in resettlement through the European Union. Most importantly, we have been able to showcase our own best practice in employment-led resettlement, and discover that it can more than hold its own in comparison with other countries.

At present, the project participants from 13 EU Member States are working systematically through an ambitious programme of 18 workshops and five seminars, which will complete in late 2011.

NIACRO hosted an expert workshop on engaging employers in Belfast in May 2010. This was one of a group of three linked workshops, along with one in Berlin on prison work and one in Bologna on networking. The participants in those workshops came together in Rome in November 2010 to pool their ideas, with Olwen Lyner undertaking the role of seminar leader. NIACRO produced a background paper before the event to help participants prepare for it and to begin to formulate the recommendations which will go forward to the final conference. This paper's format will be used as a template for the rest of the seminars in the programme.



Although, inevitably, an event like this covers some well-trodden paths, the NIACRO team felt that there were some encouraging signs. There are good things happening in networking among NGOs, in getting institutions outside the criminal justice system to undertake their responsibilities for resettlement, and in imaginative forms of work in prisons. As a mark of Northern Ireland's commitment to this partnership working, representatives of DEL and the Department of Justice attended the seminar.

Participants recognise that each country has its own funding, labour market and legal context, to say nothing of different cultural attitudes to prison and resettlement, and that these will have to be taken into account when they are campaigning for better practice in their own Member States. But the focus is on identifying common themes and common examples of methods and initiatives which work well – it's these that should be built on and used more widely.

Recommendations

The seminar agreed six recommendations:

Legislation

- (a) Anti-discrimination legislation to protect ex-prisoners at regional, national and European level, ideally through the extension of the anti-discrimination Directives to include ex-offenders.
- (b) Legislation to engage employers. This could include subsidies to employers who recruit those traditionally at a distance from the labour market.

Promoting the employment of ex-offenders short of legal enforcement

Evidence showing the benefits of ex-offenders having employment should be widely publicised, including through enlisting ex-offenders themselves to carry out this publicity.

Taking the external environment into account

- (a) Prison services should be obliged to continually monitor and review their reintegration strategies and practices in relation to prison-based work, work experience and training, to ensure these answer the needs of the regional labour market and the local market for goods and services.
- (b) Networking with employers and employers' organisations should be based on an understanding of the priorities and needs of the employers, including using "champions".

Supporting self-employment

Agencies that support business start-up and self-employment should be engaged to help break down barriers faced by ex-offenders, including financial barriers.

All relevant actors working together effectively

- (a) Public sector partners should make determined efforts to bring relevant services - housing, welfare benefits, health, and programmes to tackle

unemployment - into the discussion about the reintegration of offenders. We should encourage these services to understand their duty to ex-offenders as well as reducing their fears and prejudices.

- (b) All collaborative/co-operative work should be governed by legislation, protocols, agreements and/or memos of understanding between the parties, and overseen by one lead individual or organisation.

Convincing evidence on which to base policy and practice.

A comprehensive audit of existing legislation, regulations, and good practice should be carried out across the EU. This must include the results of evaluations of these interventions, to identify which are effective in improving reintegration and reducing re-offending.

Women Offenders

In another strand of ExOCOP, Jean O'Neil, PBNI Area manager for the INSPIRE Women's Probation project, and NIACRO's Síle McLean made a presentation to a workshop on women offenders, held in a snowy Berlin in December. The workshop was also attended by representatives from Germany, Slovenia, Hungary, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Síle and Jean presented the model of the Women's Community Support Project which works through women's centres in the community to address the needs and build the confidence of women to consider training and employment as a possibility. Other presentations focussed on the kinds of training opportunities available for women in custody, but the forum called for an examination of the needs of all women who offend and of how to reduce the likelihood of their going to prison for less serious offences.



As with the Rome seminar, the agreed findings of the workshop will be fed in to ExOCO P's final conference at the end of 2011.

NIACRO, NIPS and PBNI staff also participated in 2010 in other ExOCO P workshops and seminars, on assessment and sentence planning, aftercare and resettlement, and education, training and employment.



Olwen Lyner and Anne Reid with Edel Johnson of the Department of Justice at the Rome seminar.



Dave Weir (left) and Jeff Maxwell (right) with visitors Sandra Neil and Steward Garwood from the Jamaican Criminal Justice Inspectorate. The inspectors were on a two day tour in NI as part of a wider visit to criminal justice services in UK. As part of their visit to Belfast they met NI

Criminal Justice Inspectors, PBNI, Community Restorative Justice Ireland and NI Alternatives, and visited an Extern hostel.

While with NIACRO they took a particular interest in our work in prisons, with families of prisoners and in resettlement. They were keen to hear about the role of

the business sector in supporting employment opportunities, and the role of volunteers in supporting vulnerable young people. One idea that they intend to take back to Jamaica is the value of consultation with service providers in their role as commentators on policy development.

