



news

issue 29



Years On!



It seems like only five minutes ago that we produced the special NIACRO News 35th anniversary edition (issue 16, available at www.niacro.co.uk) but it is - believe it or not - five years. So we thought we'd look at the start of each decade since the beginning, and pick a few highlights from each of those years. We

all know the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland, and NIACRO's activities developed and responded to the changing needs of society. Not only did we work with and provide services to offenders and their families, we also made a significant contribution to what was to become known as the "peace process".



Established with help from NACRO, NIACRO opened an office in Donegall Street. Bob Byers was the first Organising Secretary of the organisation. Chairman and moving spirit behind the establishment of NIACRO was Bessie Machonachie. The Finance Committee estimated that NIACRO needed an annual budget of £5000; the original grant-in-aid from Government was £3000 a year for three years. Some early initiatives are still key to our work - one of the very earliest was to recruit and train volunteers, at first to work with probation officers. A visitors' centre was opened in Old Lodge Road, to support visitors to the Crumlin Road prison.



The 1981-82 annual report records a "radical expansion"

of services. Around 125 young people were using Jenny's project in Armagh; happily it was possible to maintain "a reasonable standard of behaviour". Research into the

links between unemployment and offending in 16-18 year olds show that only 10% of the young people interviewed had been in regular employment since leaving school, and only half had any experience at all of work. NIACRO produced a confidential report on intimidation, especially of young offenders. For the first time, the Executive Committee was elected by the membership. We launched four new projects - an adult education centre in Belfast, a market garden in Downpatrick, after school projects in Derry, Antrim and Belfast, and the purchase of a mini-bus.



Throughout the 1990s, NIACRO

worked to influence public policy. We welcomed the Prison Service's 1991 Strategic Plan and in our response to its consultation, entitled "Justice, Safety and Openness", made recommendations for substantial reform of the service. The Action Plan Training programme achieved Regional Training Organisation status; Magilligan Visitors' centre was expanded to include a crèche; and we drafted our first good practice guidelines for employers on employing people with criminal records.



The Northern Ireland Office commissioned the Social Services

Inspectorate to carry out an evaluation of NIACRO. It praised the range of services we provide, our willingness to work throughout Northern Ireland, our ability to network and work in partnership, and our commitment to the use of volunteers. We achieved Investors in People status in the same year. We instituted the Employment Equity Awards for employers who support our goal of fair recruitment of people with convictions, and made a video called "A child's journey" to highlight the problems faced by the children of prisoners.



And now we are working on our 2012-2015

Corporate Plan, drawing on the experience and ideas of users, staff, Executive members, funders and other partners and stakeholders. We'd like to hear from any NIACRO News reader who has views on the next phase of our work. We want to make sure that we continue the steady progress which this review of the last four decades reveals, adapting to the political, economic and social context but always sticking to our basic values and goals.

Summer with CAPS

Fishing, Farming and Fun!

Caps Southern had a hectic summer this year, with our annual summer scheme in full swing! Over a period of six weeks around 20 of our young people took part in exciting activities, such as mountain-biking, kayaking, fishing, wall-climbing, circus skills, a visit to an open farm and much more. Caps has been running the summer scheme since 2008. It brings together children and young people who attend the project for challenging, safe and fun activities. At the same time they're learning valuable social skills such as cooperation, turn-taking and respect, as well as developing their confidence and self-esteem.

The scheme was as popular as ever in 2011 and many of the young people said that it's the most fun they have had all summer. And let's be honest - the Caps staff also had a great time, doing things they might not have had a chance to do before.



"I loved learning how to juggle. I'm going to show my mum when I get home!"

"I just loved the farm!
It's brilliant"

"I caught the biggest fish and my mum is going to cook it for my tea!"

"I always wanted to try out canoeing and now I have"

Being Dad

In the Southern Trust area, some of the fathers of the young people on the Caps programme recently met together to look at what men might gain from a men-only parenting group, how they could be supported and what would encourage other men to join such a group.

The dads who came along were members of the Caps parenting group, which includes mums as well, so they already knew each other and were comfortable together. They were of similar ages, with similar interests, and all were stay-at-home dads. They had a common desire to feel respected by their kids. The men in the group valued their time together. Even though their expectations are

not so different to those of the mums, one commented that, "it's easier to open up" when the women aren't present. Part of the exercise was to encourage men to value the contribution they make to their children's lives and not to dwell on the skills they felt they lacked.

There was good feedback from their partners, who could see real change in the dads' parenting skills, and even personalities.

We combined the discussion with fun sessions with participants' children, as well as taking photos at a venue chosen by the family, which the children particularly enjoyed. They all went home with a framed copy of the photo - a way of symbolising the importance of the father-child relationship.

Giving Parents a Kick Start!

The two group sessions took place under Parenting NI's "Kick Start" programme. This aims to support organisations which work with fathers to increase and develop their parenting skills. Parenting NI describes the background to the Kick Start programme as follows:

"We live in a world of confused and mixed messages about fatherhood. On the one hand, we rarely pay much attention to fathers until they are seen as a problem. On the other, we are in the middle of a process of re-discovering the important role that they play in family life.

There is powerful evidence to suggest that involved fathers can help to improve many aspects of their children's lives such as health, well-being, confidence, self-esteem, educational achievement ... and can reduce the chances of their children turning to crime."

Kick Start held a presentation morning in September which gave participants, from both the statutory and voluntary sectors, the opportunity to showcase their work with fathers to others. Caps contributed by providing an



information stand at the event to highlight the project and the work we do with parents.

You can learn more about Kick Start on the Parenting NI website, www.parentingni.org

and of course more about Caps on NIACRO's website www.niacro.co.uk

We're committed to increasing this work with Caps and will be running similar events for fathers and sons in the future.

Celebrating Success - Caps Style!

Caps service users in the Belfast area came together in Amelia House in August to hold their annual awards ceremony. There were 14 families who came along to celebrate the children's completion of the Caps programme. Each child and their family had worked together to complete their individual action plans, which helped them to reduce their

risk of engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour. To help celebrate in style, they enjoyed a circus show and balloon modelling, with a chance for the children to try out the circus skills themselves later in the afternoon. Ian Humphreys, Ulster rugby player, presented achievement awards and we'd like to thank him for coming along; we greatly appreciate it.



Back Row: Garreth Wright, Patricia McFalone, Ian Humphries, Kelly Cochrane. Front Row: Olwen Lyner, Kris Morrison, Katie Brereton.

APAC RIO

Our RIO (Re-Integration of Offenders) pilot project aims to help young people, who are being released from Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre into the community without statutory support, to address their patterns of offending behaviour and reduce their risk of re-offending in the future. RIO aims to provide the link between the resources available in custody and in the community, to support young people on release. RIO's focus is on making those who provide these services work together better to deliver a more effective service for each individual.

RIO, part of our APAC (Assisting People and Communities) programme, is supported by the European Forum for Urban Safety (EFUS). The NI Housing Executive is the lead partner, along with Belfast City Council and NIACRO. We are responsible for hosting and co-ordinating the delivery of the project.

Why is RIO necessary?

The target group for the RIO project is young men aged between 17 and 21 years. This group have multiple needs and pose a high risk of re-

offending, but support and aftercare services for them have been described as patchy and poorly co-ordinated. Typical offences include burglary, taking and driving away, and sexual assault: the types of offences which have a serious impact on victims, and which undermine people's confidence and feelings of safety within their own community. By targeting this very challenging group, RIO aims to break the cycle of re-offending, bring about a better outcome for the young person and their community, and reduce the number of victims in the future.

What has RIO done so far?

As soon as RIO receives a referral, which in some cases has happened just days before the young person's release, the project worker conducts an assessment to see what they need to help them resettle in the community. This may include accommodation; finance; help with drugs, alcohol and mental health problems; and relationships with families, peers and their community. RIO then identifies specialist services that can support the individual either in custody or in the community, and attempts to link the two.

This function of acting as a facilitator between the

individual and the specialist services is the essence of RIO, and critical to its success. Faced with such a vast array of bodies with which they could make contact post-release, it is highly unlikely that these young people would be willing or able to avail of this help independently. They need RIO's support and encouragement.

Service users' mental health and literacy issues, combined with their lack of family or peer support and their sheer sense of confusion, make it much easier to simply return to old behaviours, rather than engage in a long term process of turning their lives around. RIO attempts to steer them in the right direction, and works at a pace that each individual is comfortable with, to demonstrate that with determination and commitment to their individual action plan, they can break the cycle of reoffending.

So what has the impact been?

Of the young people RIO has worked with, virtually all had been through the youth justice system, couldn't read or write, were homeless on release and 75% were under threat in their community and not able to return to it. None had employment that they could return to, and none had any support from statutory

agencies. In spite of these formidable disadvantages, at the time of writing, more than half remain in the community.

The following two stories illustrate the impact of RIO's work on Colin and Simon's lives:

"Colin" was referred to RIO in January 2011, and released in February. He has committed over 130 offences, including burglary, taking a vehicle and driving away and various public order offences. Despite Colin completing most of his action plan successfully -this included securing accommodation, accepting a place on a training course, working with a mentor and getting support for his mother's mental health problems - his underlying drug use remains.

RIO had less than two weeks to build a relationship with Colin before he was released, and worked hard to maintain it when he returned to the community. However, Colin was not able to make use of this support to address his addiction, and subsequently reoffended.

"Simon" was referred to RIO in October 2010, and released in November. He was a repeat offender, whose previous convictions included burglary, drugs offences and taking and driving away. Despite having limited time to meet with him in custody, RIO assessed his priorities on release to be securing accommodation, addressing his drug and alcohol problems and sourcing financial support.

We helped him to secure temporary accommodation and a place on the Housing Executive waiting list, after he was forced to move due to intimidation. We ensured he registered with a GP and was assessed by the community mental health team, through which he was referred for help with anger management and addiction issues. And we helped him tackle his literacy and numeracy

What challenges did RIO face?

Remembering that this was a pilot project, it was important for us to analyse the difficulties in operating it, so that they

could be addressed in any subsequent efforts:

- Operational: RIO did not always have sufficient opportunity to engage with offenders prior to release, as sentencing decisions, which take account of time spent on remand, mean that very quick responses are required. This means there may not be enough time to build the trusting relationships required to make participation successful;
- Practical: it took time to identify and build relationships with the right people in each partner agency who were willing and able to provide the types of support and assistance needed, at the appropriate pace for each individual; and
- Structural: it was difficult for the prison's Offender Management Unit staff to engage with the community and build relationships effectively; ways of doing this do not currently exist.

When the costs of a RIO intervention are compared with the average annual cost of nearly £80,000 to keep a prisoner in Hydebank, it is clear that this is potentially a highly efficient and effective service. Funding invested in

preventing these young people from creating further victims will be money well spent.

Working with NIACRO: a housing perspective

We asked Frank Mulhern, the Housing Executive's Community Safety Manager, to write about his work in partnership with NIACRO on the RIO project. Thanks to Frank for taking the time to send us this comment.

"Over the past 10 years the Community Safety Team of the Housing Executive has worked in partnership with NIACRO on a number of initiatives and programmes. As housing officials we would never claim to know all the answers when it comes to the criminal justice system and in particular how to address the often complex needs of those engaging in crime and anti-social behaviour. Given NIACRO's successful track record in working with such client groups, it was inevitable that we would seek to draw on their wide expertise in tackling many of those issues which blight our communities.

A good example of our partnership working has been in the development and delivery of our RIO programme. In 2009 the Housing Executive secured European Commission funding to develop a project to address re-offending amongst young

men. The monies were made available through a community safety funding stream; hence the Housing Executive taking the lead role in what some would argue is primarily a criminal justice matter.

We drew together a working group made up of representatives of the PSNI, Probation Service, Belfast City Council, Hydebank Prison, Department of Justice and NIACRO. The group developed a programme of joined up support services to meet the needs of the young men being released from Hydebank prison. In helping us meet this challenging objective, NIACRO appointed and trained a full time RIO Officer who worked with young prisoners at both pre and post release stage. They also accessed a wide range of statutory, community and voluntary service providers who participated in the programme. We have successfully managed, in a relatively short period of time, to deliver services to 17 ex-prisoners and are now looking at opportunities to mainstream RIO within the criminal justice system."

RIO in Paris

In late October Síle McLean travelled to Paris along with Frank Mulhern and Richard McLernon, Belfast City Council. Representatives from other

European cities also attended - including the Mayor of Le Havre, the Chief of Police from Brasov, the Youth Justice Manager from Göttingen, and civic representatives from Italy. The EFUS project is now in its final stage of evaluation and participants spoke about what has been achieved. A CD-ROM will be made of the presentations and there will be a website with examples of good practice.



Housing Executive



Jobtrack Graduates At Queen's

In September, we held an awards ceremony at Queen's University, Belfast, for some of our trainees on the Jobtrack programme, and a number of employers who had worked with us during the course of the year. We were delighted that the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry MLA, agreed to present the prizes to each successful participant. He paid tribute to the Jobtrack programme and congratulated the trainees on their achievements, saying that, "they have not only improved their skills levels and enhanced their employment opportunities, but are now able to make a positive contribution to the economy and wider society".

The Minister also paid tribute to the employers who support Jobtrack - four of whom received the Employer Equity award. He rightly pointed out that their "commitment to fair practice in employing ex-offenders" is "central to the success of the programme". He noted that he was looking forward to further developing partnerships with organisations like NIACRO to increase opportunities for training, learning and employment.



Pat Conway, Dr. Stephen Farry MLA, Olwen Lyner, Brian McCaughey (PBNi), Heather Reid

Jobtrack graduate Ryan Taylor spoke about his experience of being on the programme.



Claire Humphreys and Ryan Taylor

Ryan's Story

"My name is Ryan Taylor and I was referred by my Probation Officer at the time to NIACRO's Jobtrack programme. When in custody I had plenty of time to think about things - I didn't want my child to grow up the way I did and I knew something in my life needed to change. While in custody I had been thinking about the possibility of finding work in the oil rigs and about how I would be able to do the "Basic Offshore Safety Training" and "MIST" (Minimum Industry Safety Training).

NIACRO agreed to fund this specialist training for me through Falck Nutec [a safety training company].

In Amelia Street I achieved the OCN in Developing Skills to Gain Employment. I was supported to build a CV and given help around how to disclose my convictions to an employer. After this course NIACRO arranged the week's training in Aberdeen - I was able to arrange the flights over and was able to stay with family I had in Aberdeen - family I had never met before.

Now I have successfully completed the qualification I have submitted my CV to Sub Sea 7 (an oil rig firm) and the closing date for application is 29th September and I have been in regular contact with them and received positive feedback and I hope it will just be a matter of time that I will get a job on the oil rigs..."

Criminal Records Update

In each of the last seven issues of NIACRO News we have covered the many and varied problems caused by changes in public protection legislation over the recent years. These changes were designed to protect children and vulnerable adults; it's unclear whether they have in fact done so, but it is certain that they have added hugely to the bureaucracy of recruiting employees, job applicants, trainees and volunteers. It's equally certain that they have damaged the prospects, already difficult, of NIACRO's ex-offender service users getting into, or back into, the labour market.

Mason review

The UK Government recently attempted to tackle some of the bureaucracy by asking Sunita Mason to "consider the relationship between criminal record checking and public protection" in England and Wales. She was subsequently asked by the Minister of Justice to look at how Northern Ireland might utilise the revised Vetting and Barring scheme which she produced, and improve the use of criminal record information for employment vetting purposes here.

Mrs Mason's report was published in August. She said she believed that "in many instances the use of criminal records checking for employment purposes has gone too far" and proposed several changes to the current system here. We were delighted that many of these echoed our recommendations, as she called for the following changes:

- Penalties and sanctions against those registered bodies [eg employers, training organisations and organisations which use volunteers] who knowingly continue to seek enhanced checks for roles for which they are not entitled to do so. [NIACRO provided very many examples of this];
- Access NI to be resourced to provide a comprehensive service and detailed guidance, to be a one-stop-shop for the process and more customer-facing to those seeking assistance;
- An independent representations process so that police decisions can be reviewed;
- The threshold for the release of information [from the police to Access NI for enhanced checks] should be strengthened

and a code of practice be introduced;

- The police should no longer be able to disclose information to employers which is not also available to employees/applicants;
- Non-conviction information (eg police cautions, informed warnings, youth diversion disposals) about young people should only be disclosed if the offence is recent; and
- Convictions which are both old and minor should be filtered from checks [although we welcome this recommendation, "old" and "minor" will need to be defined].

One of the most widely welcomed recommendations is that checks should be "portable", ie that it shouldn't be necessary to have a check for every job and volunteer activity an individual undertakes. However, there may be unintended consequences from this change. Employers receiving this information are required to follow Access NI's Code of Practice; but Access NI may not know who the second and subsequent recipients of the information are, and so may not be able to monitor them.

NIACRO's experience of criminal records

In the foreword to her report, Mrs Mason says she was "heartened" to learn that many organisations "use sophisticated risk-assessment tools to determine whether or not to employ someone with a criminal record. That is to say, they did not simply refuse employment on the basis that the check showed up a conviction". Our advice line, sadly, presents a very different picture - many, many examples of employers and others doing precisely this. In fact, many appear to be using the process as a crude de-selection tool.

"Disproportionate, unreasonable and unfair"

One sector which seems to be particularly willing to use the process in this way is further education, which is ironic, given that the old technical colleges have a long history of being welcoming, flexible and innovative branches of education.

In a recent case in the North West, a student who had been refused a work placement after receiving an unlawful disclosure from Access NI has won her judicial review, on which we provided advice to her solicitors.

High Court judge Mr Justice Treacy expressed deep concern at the "grave error" made by the PSNI when it wrongly revealed in an enhanced disclosure that a student dental nurse had been given a "restorative youth caution" six years ago, when she was aged just seventeen. The judge noted the "many advantages" of a restorative caution for young people, including "the knowledge that they won't have a record and that it won't generally be disclosed to third parties", and stated that these advantages were "conspicuously removed as a result of the most unfortunate and extremely grave error."

The PSNI, having recognised that it had made a mistake, informed the college and sent a replacement enhanced disclosure without any reference to the caution. Again quoting Mr Justice Treacy's

trenchant judgement, "the PSNI...for all I know, may have hoped that the respondent College would see sense and make sure that this young girl's education, reputation and future employment would not be needlessly damaged." However, the College had instead used the unauthorised disclosure to deny the student a work placement. This the judge described as having been done "in an unfair manner...not justified...and disproportionate, unreasonable and unfair."

We welcome the outcome of this case as a recognition of the difficulties and unnecessary discrimination faced by individuals trying to access training and employment opportunities.

NIACRO has met with officials from the Department of Employment and Learning to discuss this sort of problem, and they accept that it is an issue that needs tackled. They hope to work with the colleges on a balanced approach to public protection requirements. And of course, NIACRO is very willing to help through our training programme and direct advice line.

Mickey B Takes Centre Stage

"Mickey B", written and acted by serving prisoners at Maghaberry, is an award winning adaptation of the Shakespearian tragedy Macbeth, filmed by the Educational Shakespeare Company (ESC). ESC is a Belfast-based non-governmental organisation which aims to use film and film-making to document life stories and show its potential to bring about change and personal growth. The film won the Roger Graef Award for Outstanding Achievement in Film at the 2008 Koestler Awards, though it has only recently been released for public view. It's thought to be the first feature film conceived and shot with serving prisoners in a high security prison.

A group of Jobtrack service users and NIACRO staff attended a screening of 'Mickey B.' in Glengormley's Mill Theatre in September. One of the group, Jonny, has written this article for NIACRO News on behalf of them all.

"Between 150 and 200 people came to see this rare public showing of Mickey B. The audience was made up of people involved in the criminal



justice system and related organisations, as well as ex-prisoners and other interested members of the general public.

Parallel lives

In this version of Macbeth the hero is not a Scottish chieftain, but a prison-gang lieutenant called Mickey B who is wrongly led to believe he is destined to rule the gang. The darkened prison setting provided a fitting backdrop to Shakespeare's story of power, ambition, betrayal and murder. The parallels between Macbeth, a good man who chose the wrong path in life, and the lives of the prisoners, were not lost on the audience. The NIACRO members were particularly impressed by the

professionalism of the cast, most of whom were long-term and life-sentenced prisoners. Of particular note was the powerful performance of the prisoner who played Lady-Boy (Lady Macbeth), whose conniving ambitions set Mickey B on the road to murderous self-destruction.

On a more practical level the making of Mickey B was shown to have aided in the personal development of many of the prisoners involved. In post-production video interviews the cast members invariably reported improved self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills as a result of their participation in the making of the film. These are transferable skills that are necessary to live a worthwhile

existence when these men are eventually released back into the community, where they must face the societal stigma and severely limited life-chances that come with being an ex-con. This highlights importance of drama in prison and the capacity of the creative process to rehabilitate and bring about positive change to prisoners' lives.

The film was followed by a debate on the question 'can serving prisoners act as role models to young offenders?' The debate, presented live on Radio Ulster by Marie-Louise Muir, attracted contributions from Dr Monica McWilliams (Human Rights Commission) and Professor Phil Scraton (Queen's) among others.

The film provided a good evening's entertainment for those of us from NIACRO - in fact, everyone in the audience seemed to enjoy it. It was great to see the film as I had heard a lot about it and have worked with many people who over the years have either been involved in it or were in prison when it was being done, it was a great night and we all enjoyed it. Not least the pizzas, although I had to listen to Sean and Frankie complain about what they liked and didn't like even though they ate enough of it."

Adult User Forum

The Adult User Forum met in September with 22 service users taking part in a very busy afternoon. The main focus of the meeting was to discuss and seek views on the current DOJ consultation on fine default, which would then form the basis of our response.

Following a brief input on the key points of the consultation, the Forum broke into small groups to consider some of the questions. After some lively discussion, people in each of the groups gave feedback, which in turn generated further debate. A number of very interesting points were raised including the importance of developing alternative mechanisms of paying fines (perhaps using PayPoint) and the need for alternatives to fines and/or community service, as well as for early advice in the courts about how to manage fines once they are imposed.

Forum members then met with and discussed views and experiences on health with the Patient Client Council and PWC consultants carrying out a user feedback audit on the

Jobtrack programme. We were delighted so many people stayed and took part for the whole afternoon.

It was particularly pleasing to see a group of service users from Armagh coming to the session and given the very positive interaction that took place among the group we hope to see this develop in the future.

Still to come...

Youth Justice Review

One of the earliest initiatives taken by the Justice Minister, David Ford MLA, was to commission a review of the youth justice system. The independent review team's report was published at the end of September, with 31 recommendations, and the Minister made a statement to the Assembly. He has put the report out for consultation and we'll come back to this important consultation in the next issue of NIACRO News.

Willkommen to our German friends!

Since we first made contact with the German resettlement network HSI in 2008, we have exchanged many visits and ideas. We were delighted to welcome ten colleagues to Belfast on a three-day intensive study visit in September. Shortly after their arrival the group was given a guided tour of Belfast City Hall and spent some time seeing the sights of the city and relaxing before the real work began.

On their first morning the group was given a strategic overview of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland with input from Christine Hunter (PBNI), Paul Bullick (NIPS) and Pat Conway (NIACRO). Our HSI partners then gave an overview of the German justice system and probation service culminating in a lively question and answer session with all the participants. The afternoon session was very interactive and explored good practice in the areas of prison working out schemes, community sentences, management of serious offenders and youth provision.

Next day, it was off to the North West for some of the group while the others remained in Belfast. Both groups were then involved in a round table discussion with employers who work with NIACRO and with people with convictions. The German visitors were very impressed with our connections with employers and took a lot of learning away from this session.

In the afternoon there were visits to all three prisons. The visitors were impressed by the facilities available in each of the establishments.

This is what we think

One of the important jobs of an organisation such as NIACRO is to take part in the making of public policy, drawing on our experience and that of our service users. We regularly respond to a variety of consultations that government departments circulate. Here is a brief summary of some recent consultation responses which we've sent to government departments.

Implementation of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (DOJ)

It's no secret that NIACRO has reservations about the merger

of the Community Safety Partnerships and District Policing Partnerships into the new Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs). It seems to us very likely that the DPPs' agenda, of police accountability and monitoring, will overwhelm the CSPs' more creative and community-based remit. However, the decision to combine the partnerships has been made, and we want to contribute to their development.

The policy document presented by the Department of Justice (DOJ) does not address our concerns, and is not clear enough about how the new

system will work in practice. We're recommending a more detailed explanation of the relationship between the PCSPs and the councils' Policing Committees, as well as with the Policing Board and other organisations designated to be members of the partnerships. There is no indication that the role of the CSPs will be adequately incorporated into their work. There is no guarantee that organisations which are outside the criminal justice system, but have a key role to play in promoting community safety, will be involved. We believe that more work is needed to strengthen these partnerships, and will continue to work to influence their membership and terms of reference.

On the final day there was a visit to the Forthspring Inter Community Centre which is used as a location for community service provision. The group met probation staff and saw the type of work carried out. They were interested in Forthspring's unique location, being the only community building that straddles an interface in Belfast. The HSI visitors all felt very positive about the study visit and commented on the quality and the spirit of NIACRO's work.



Homelessness Strategy 2011 - 2016 (NIHE)

NIACRO supported the basic principles of the Homelessness Strategy and the work that has gone into it. Underlying all these measures should be a greater recognition that people are different, many have complex needs, and the goal should be earlier intervention to prevent homelessness.

We made some recommendations as to how the current strategy could be improved. We called for a commitment to a high level of practical assistance such as help with filling in forms, making phone calls, etc. We recommended that

it should be a priority to deal with homelessness cases as quickly as possible; that the assessment of need should take full account of the whole range of needs and that all relevant agencies should be involved in tackling the problem; and that private landlords should have guidance and support. We are concerned that being categorised as "ineligible" should not be the end of the line: such people may be among the most vulnerable and so most in need of practical support and being referred to other services. We will continue to work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) as this Strategy is rolled out.

Fixed Penalties consultation (DOE)

We welcomed the issuing of guidance by the Department of the Environment (DOE) on this form of penalty which can be imposed by councils: with 26 councils, there is a high possibility that they might interpret the legislation in different ways. We noted that clear guidance supporting consistent application is necessary, and that penalties must only be issued if there are robust and reliable grounds to do so.

We reiterated that the decision to issue a fixed penalty should only be taken when other forms of intervention have been exhausted - the sort of work we do under the APAC

programme, for example, or restorative justice approaches. Fines may be appropriate, but all the issues around fines need to be borne in mind – some people simply can't pay, and we need alternative ways of paying back to the community. We hope that the DOE will take these matters on board when developing their response to this consultation.

Review of passported benefits (DSD for the Social Security Advisory Committee)

Passported benefits are those to which someone is automatically entitled because they are in receipt of other benefits. Our view is that they can encourage people to move from benefits into full or part-time jobs.

The main concern for our service users is whether or not they will be able to afford their housing costs. Unusually for a policy consultation, this one asked whether or not these benefits “affect people's quality of life”; and we believe they do. For our service users, one clear and obvious example is the Assisted Prison Visits scheme. Without access to this scheme, there would clearly be a detrimental impact not only on the prisoners' quality of life, but also on the members of their family.

So far as the proposed Universal Credit system is concerned, our recommendation is for a system which is simple and cost-effective to administer, where payments are made accurately and in a timely manner. But we see real dangers in trying to create a “one-size-fits-all” benefit. The consultation bluntly asks for ideas on how to simplify the benefit system “at no extra cost”. Our view is that the simplification should happen at the application stage – one portal for applying for all passported benefits at the time of applying for Universal Credit – which would make the system much easier to manage and navigate.

Still to come...

Prison Review

On 24 October, the Justice Minister, David Ford MLA, made a statement to the Assembly on the Prison Review Team's report. Our immediate response was to call for the executive to show leadership in implementing the fundamental recommendations made by the team – more on this in the next issue.



Families Link Up At Corrymeela

Around 50 people from the Family Links project, including mums, dads, kids and staff, spent a week at Corrymeela in July. For some, it was their first family holiday. They played, talked and relaxed in this welcoming place. They tried face and glass painting, went to the beach, had a shopping expedition; and they discussed equality issues with refugees and asylum seekers who were at Corrymeela at the same time.

While the group was on the north coast, they discussed their experience of having a family member in prison, and of the Family Links service. Colleagues from the University of Ulster, who are researching the impact of family members' imprisonment on children,



joined in this discussion. Staff reported that people found it very valuable to be able to speak frankly and openly about what life was like for them, and what sort of support they wanted and needed. They said: “The fear was gone when I started working with NIACRO” and “Just to have someone to talk to without judging you was priceless”.

And it’s not just the adults who benefit from being with others in the same position – one mother reported: “My daughter came up to me today and said, ‘Can I tell that my Daddy is in jail?’ because [another child] had said that her Daddy was in jail. She feels comfortable here I think because normally it’s a big secret at school and that.”

We’d like to thank the staff at Corrymeela for their friendly support and the sense of fun they brought to our time with them.

Responding to Hate Crime in the USA

Earlier in the year, Services Director Pat Conway and Dr Neil Jarman, Director of the Institute for Conflict Research and research expert to our Challenge Hate Crime project, visited the USA to learn more about how that country deals with hate crime. They met police, NGOs, researchers and prison officials in Boston, Philadelphia and Montgomery. Pat has noted the highlights of the visit for NIACRO News.

Understanding hate crime

There is a growing recognition in the US of the links between juvenile crime and hate crime. A way of classifying hate crime offences has been developed from this, ie whether the offence is linked to thrill seeking, a perceived defence

of an area, as a retaliation etc.

One of the key questions considered is whether the perpetrator was acting as an individual or as part of a group; the answer will in part determine the nature of the response and form of intervention.

Legislation

Laws exist at state and federal level. Around five states do not have hate crime laws, while federal hate crime legislation comes under the heading of civil rights violations. The 1964 Federal Civil Rights Law covered race, religion, colour and national origin, the 1969 Federal Hate Crimes Law covered a range of acts of violence towards the person and property, while the 2009 Matthew Sheppard Act expanded federal hate crime law to include crimes motivated by a victim’s actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.



The Boston Experience: Recording Hate Crime

All states have different systems for responding to hate crime and there is no standard means or form of gathering data on it. There is clear evidence of serious under-reporting and inaccurate reporting of this sort of crime. The FBI which gathers nationwide data has figures of 7,500 hate crimes a year for a population of 310 million people.

Even at a local level, Boston PD, with its dedicated hate crimes unit, recorded only 279 hate crimes across all hate categories in 2008 in an area with a population of 600,000. One reason for this is likely to be an important difference between the USA and Northern Ireland. Here it is the victim who identifies whether or not the crime has been aggravated by hate; in the US it is the police who make this judgement without necessarily taking the victim's view into account. The people we spoke to recognise that there is a need for better training among law enforcement officers to get increased recognition of the problem, of how to respond to hate crimes and how to process them as such.

Responding to hate crime

Hate crime initially focused on white actions on black. In the

1980s there was recognition that black gang violence towards white people was also a hate crime, and although there was a fear that black men would be over-targeted as perpetrators of hate crime that did not happen. Most hate crimes are perpetrated by white offenders, but young black people are far more likely to be incarcerated.

Individuals are often reluctant to report hate crimes because of their immigration status, language issues, because they are 'not out' or because of mistrust of the police. As a result the police encourage third party reporting through community groups.

In Boston the police have a special unit, the Civil Rights Unit, to deal with hate crime and all hate crimes are sent to the CRU for investigation. It was initially set up in the civil rights era to deal with problems associated with bussing. All officers in the unit receive specialist training. The unit works with the Boston Regional Intelligence Unit to review crime reports to assess any possible hate crimes. The unit also tries to increase awareness of hate crime among police officers. Staff meet regularly with the District Attorney, Secret Service and FBI, and undertake outreach with communities and organisations to build relationships.

Having a specialist unit is seen by some as a valuable concentration of resources, and sends a message both to communities and to other police officers that the issue is being taken seriously. However, by others the CRU is seen as 'over-zealous'.

Prosecuting Hate Crime

In 2007-08 the CRU in Boston recorded 279 hate crimes, but only 34 resulted in prosecution and no-one was sent to prison for a hate crime offence. Most prosecutions fail because either the victims or witnesses fail to attend court. The Boston Police Department send their cases to the District Attorney for consideration of prosecution, but complain about a lack of specialisation with the DA's office and a case may be passed around a number of prosecutors during its process through the CJS.

The police believe it is important for prosecutors and police to work together and understand each other's perspectives.

Imprisonment

Gangs have a high level of influence in some institutions, particularly those housing long sentence prisoners. They have less influence in local prisons dealing with lower level offences.

The prison system is very segregated and dominated by

white racist and black gangs, which, coupled with the lack of rehabilitation programmes, raises questions about the use of penalty enhancements for hate crime – people sent to prison for relatively minor offences may be drawn into highly segregated and violent social networks.

Interventions

We heard about a variety of projects, mainly forms of intervention and prevention with young people.

Sport in Society: The programme employs sportspeople to act as ambassadors in communities and schools to divert people away from violence and crime. The schools programmes also focus on bullying which has been identified as a precursor to involvement in hate crime.

No Place to Hate: a community based programme led by local government to make hate crime an issue for all. The aim is to mobilise neighbourhoods to respond to hate crimes, and includes training for police and individuals in responding to hate crimes. <http://www.noplaceforhate.org/>

Not in Our Town: A community-based response to hate crime across the USA and taken up widely in schools. <http://www.niot.org/front>

Southern Poverty Law Centre: Takes court action to sue racist and white power groups on behalf of victims in civil courts,

which have a lower standard of evidence. Aims to destroy hate groups by taking their assets for the benefit of victims.

The Anti-Defamation League recognises the importance of legislation but argues for school-based interventions such as training of teachers and peer training programmes with students. However there is a great inconsistency among schools in responding to the problem. Recently anti-bullying legislation has been introduced and schools have been very responsive to it.

Alternative to Violence Programme: One of the few prison-based programmes, designed to help inmates learn new skills and attitudes that lead to fulfilling and crime-free lives. It is not targeted specifically on hate crime.

Conclusion

The visit confirmed our view that there is a lack of precision and of good practice around hate crime – our contacts were interested and impressed by the Challenge Hate Crime model of intervention and we found nothing which compared with it among our visits. I'd like to thank all the people who met with us and discussed their views and experiences candidly and with commitment. We'll be keeping up the links and hope to work with some of the researchers in the future.

Update on Challenge Hate Crime

Meanwhile, back at the ranch... the Challenge Hate Crime project is progressing well and we piloted the first 'Challenge to Change' programme in October in Hydebank. A team of therapists and mediators has been recruited to deliver this training under the management of our partners Mediation NI and Carecall. The programme will be the first of its kind here in specifically working with young offenders to deal with the underlying issues which lead them to commit offences based on hostility.

Six strands of hate crime are monitored: religion/faith, sectarian, homophobic, transphobic, disability and race. The programme works with these young people while in custody and continues to support them as they return to the community. This work will be supported by a 'Community Support Bank', a group of voluntary and community organisations who have offered to support the project. Organisations such as NICEM, the Rainbow Project, Forthspring, Epic, Coiste, Disability Action, the Belfast Islamic Centre and many others are signed up to work with the team to steer these young people away from poor influences and offending behaviour.

NIACRO's Annual General Meeting – Focussing on Mental Health

Following the recent recognition by the Minister of Health that “90% of prisoners have a diagnosable mental health problem, substance misuse problem, or both”, we thought that this year’s AGM would focus on mental health and the justice system. This alarming statistic isn’t often quoted by the hard-line, punishment-orientated commentators who seem so often to take the lead in the debate on how to deal with crime and those who commit it. But if it isn’t taken into full account, there will be no hope of reducing crime and ensuring offenders are rehabilitated.

At this year’s AGM, our 40th, we will be joined by Dr Graham Durcan, from the Centre for Mental Health. Dr Durcan works at the Centre for Mental Health in London on criminal justice issues including work with prisons, secure care services, policing, diversion and other parts of the criminal justice system.

This event is timely not only because of the size of the problem, but because of current moves to introduce a Mental Capacity (Health, Welfare and Finance) Bill in the Assembly. This legislation is already at the drafting stage by the DHSSPS; the DOJ is also working on it.

However, the two Departments are not, apparently, pooling their efforts, working together or anticipating one single piece of legislation to cover people in the community, in prison, and in the interim stage of going through the criminal justice system short of prison.

We felt this was so important that we got in touch with the Assembly’s Health Committee who had the Bill on the agenda of their meeting on 5 October. Several members cited NIACRO’s briefing note and agreed with us on the importance of the needs of people in the criminal justice system to be incorporated in the Bill.

To increase awareness of the issues, we will also be featuring this at the launch of our Justice Series seminars in Parliament Buildings. We’ll be telling you more about both of these events in the next edition of NIACRO News.

Staff moves

Two long-standing members of staff left us this summer. Eithne McClean and Arlene McFerran contributed 24 and 23 years respectively to the administrative work which underpins any organisation, and we thank them warmly for that contribution.

Other leavers were Sam Clarke, Project Worker Youth Employability; Michael Kelly, Driver; Fiona Kelly, RIO Project Worker; Rebecca Reid, Base 2 Project Worker, and Emerald Neville, Armagh Receptionist/Administrator. Our thanks go to all of them.

We welcome Eileen Findlay and Jackie Mullan, Project Workers at Magilligan visitors’ centre; Tracy Okoro, Administrator / Receptionist; Fiona Jamison, Administrator / Receptionist; Kerry Maria, Base 2 Project Worker.

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