

niacro

Stop The Silent Sentence

The families of people in prison are too often neglected by the criminal justice system. Whilst their loved ones are in custody, they serve a silent sentence in the community. In this edition of NIACRO News, we look at the case for supporting families through this difficult time and call for greater recognition of the needs of families: it's time to stop the silent sentence.

niacro news

SPRING 2014



Prison Reform

Two years after the Prison Review was published, we look at reform so far and the role of the voluntary and community sector.

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Welcome to the latest edition of **NIACRO News.**

For this spring 2014 issue, we've chosen to focus on a subject that is close to all of our hearts here in NIACRO but is frequently neglected at a higher policy level: the families of people in prison.

While our Family Links project works hard to provide support to all families affected by imprisonment, the sad truth is that until there is statutory recognition of the needs of this group, many families will continue to face this stressful and isolating period alone, causing lasting harm to children, people in prison and their partners, and the wider community. Read on to find out more about our campaign and the reasons why families should be supported. This topic was also discussed at our most recent Justice Series event (see page 10), and many thanks to Dr Linda Moore for her guest column on this issue on page 21.

Regular readers of NIACRO News will notice that we've made some changes to this magazine. As part of the redesign, we're keen to hear the voice of all our readers and print your opinions – so please contact us with your feedback on any of the stories! You'll find our contact details on this page and on the back cover.

**Thanks for reading,
NIACRO**



Any Feedback?

We'd love to hear your views of NIACRO News and the issues discussed in this edition. If you have any comments on the new design, want us to cover a specific issue or would like to write a short piece for the next edition, please contact Julia in our Public Affairs and Communication Team.

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Families of People in Prison: **The Forgotten Group?**

Lots of things come to mind when someone asks you to think of the criminal justice system. Maybe you think of prisons and the people in them. Maybe you think of crime and its victims, or the law and its institutions such as the police, judiciary and legal profession. But most won't think about the people who are left behind to pick up the pieces when a loved one enters custody.

Here in NIACRO, we are deeply concerned at the lack of support for the partners, children and families of people in custody. While our

own project Family Links provides emotional and practical support to people affected by imprisonment, and some other voluntary and community sector organisations also work to support families, the issue is rarely addressed at a policy level. Worryingly, there is no statutory responsibility for this large and growing group, despite a wealth of research demonstrating that supporting the family on the outside during a period of imprisonment leads to better outcomes - not just for the partner and children, but also for the person in prison (see diagram 1).

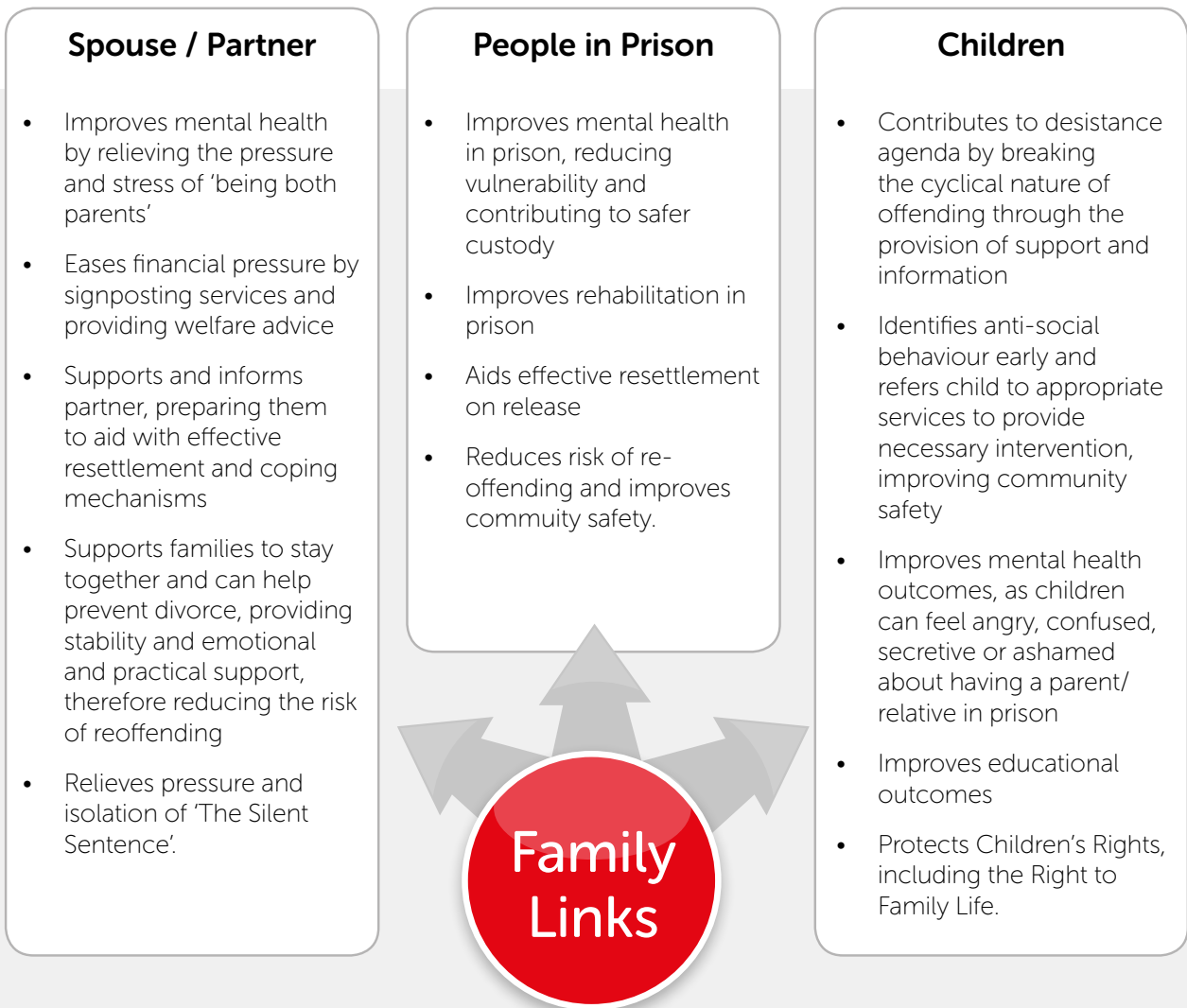


Diagram 1: Family Links benefits the whole family

These families are too often handed a 'silent sentence', effectively treated as guilty by association and left to cope on their own. We don't think that's right, and are campaigning for greater recognition of – and support for – this forgotten group, which will benefit not just the families affected but society in general too (see diagram 2).

Providing support for families affected by imprisonment not only improves the mental health and financial capability of that family, but can also have a positive impact on the mental health of the person in prison and contribute to effective resettlement in the community – greatly reducing the risk of re-offending and helping to create safer communities. Effective support can also help prevent children with a parent in prison from developing offending behaviour and protects their rights, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Reducing Offending

Receiving regular visits from family members increases the likelihood of having a stable home to come back to when someone is released from prison, which can make it easier to find sustainable employment. Stable accommodation and secure employment have been proven to reduce the risk of re-offending and facilitate desistance. Despite this, it's estimated that around 45% of people in prison in the UK lose touch with their families whilst in custody (Glover, 2009).

Children affected by parental imprisonment are statistically more likely to offend during their lifetime. This is particularly true of boys with a father in prison. Research has shown that providing opportunities to maintain good family contact can reduce this risk, as can effective early interventions to explain what's happening during this confusing and disruptive time. It's therefore a smart economic decision to invest in supporting these families: while in the short term this can help prevent re-offending, it can also improve the life chances of children affected by imprisonment.

Improving Mental Health

Concerns about the mental health of our prison population are well documented, not least in the Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (2011), and work is being done to make custody safer. However, the role that quality family contact plays in improving the mental health of people in prison is often underestimated. Many of the Prisoner Ombudsman's Death in Custody reports refer to a lack of family contact, suggesting this could be a contributing factor to the deterioration of their mental health. Investment in facilitating good family links needn't be expensive, but can have meaningful outcomes.

Families on the outside often feel the impact of imprisonment on their own mental health: children with a parent in prison suffer mental health problems at up to three times the rate of other children, causing lasting damage and affecting their educational and behavioural outcomes. There is also a strain placed on the health of the partner: many of the mums and dads we work with through Family Links say they find it stressful having to act as both parents while the other is in custody. Many also find themselves facing financial difficulties, with a reduced income while their partner is imprisoned. This stress is often compounded by loneliness, as the perceived stigma of having a partner or family member in prison can lead to isolation from the community.



Diagram 2: The benefits of supporting families during imprisonment are threefold

Protecting Children's Rights

Because there is no statutory responsibility for the families or children of people in prison, there is no record of how many are affected, though the Northern Ireland Prison Service estimates it's about 1,500 children at any given moment. Across the UK, that figure is approximately 160,000 children: that's more than the number of children who experience parental divorce, more than the number in care, and more than the number on the child protection register. Many of the articles in the UNCRC, which the UK signed up to in the early 1990s, can be applied to the children of people in in prison.

For example, article 2 states that no child should be discriminated against because of the status of their parents, and article 9 says that every child has the right to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents. As well as the UNCRC, the European Convention on Human Rights provides the right to family life (article 8).

However, despite commitments to protecting the rights of children, these same rights are too often sacrificed in order to punish the person in prison. We're concerned that family and child-centred visits are seen as a privilege for people in prison, instead of the fundamental right of the child that they are, and are therefore restricted as punishment – to the lasting detriment of the child.

Family Links

For all the reasons outlined in this article and more, NIACRO has been providing support for families affected by imprisonment for more than 27 years. Our Family Links project works with approximately 1,500 families each year, providing holistic support to those affected by imprisonment. It aims to improve their life chances by helping them to support the person in prison, which helps improve their mental health and promote effective resettlement and desistance, as well as diverting children from developing anti-social or offending behaviour.

The team do this by providing emotional support and practical advice to families, from providing information about visiting their family member in prison, money management and accessing benefits, to supporting parents to engage with their children, school and community. Family Links also signpost and make referrals to other services, both within and outside of NIACRO, to make sure the family gets all the support they need, as well as advocating on their behalf when they are struggling to access information or services.

We've been delivering this kind of support to families since 1987 and we see the benefits of it every day in the families we work with. However, it's a project that consistently faces threats to its funding. After 27 years and two human rights conventions, we're still concerned that the families of people in prison are forgotten about by Governments, not just in Northern Ireland but elsewhere too.

Until there is statutory recognition of the vulnerable mental, financial and social situation of families affected by imprisonment, critical resources

and funds will continue to be diverted from the important service Family Links provides and our reach will be at best restricted and, at worst, terminated.

That's why we're campaigning for the Northern Ireland Executive to take notice of this forgotten group and recognise the critical support we – and others like us – provide to families. This 'silent sentence' cannot be allowed to continue.

Did you know...?

- The NI Prison Service (NIPS) estimates that at any moment, 1,500 children in Northern Ireland have a parent in prison. (Moore, Convery and Scraton, 2011)
- More children in the UK are affected by parental imprisonment than parental divorce. The number is also two and a half times higher than the number of children in care and more than six times the number of children on the child protection register. (Families Outside, 2009; SCIE, 2008; Glover, 2009)
- Children of people in prison suffer from mental health problems at up to three times the rate of other children. (Families Outside, 2009)
- NIPS records approximately 120,000 visitors entering prisons each year, of which an estimated 36,000 are children. (Moore, Convery and Scraton, 2011)
- Articles 2, 3, 9, 12, 16 and 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are relevant to the rights, safeguarding and wellbeing of children of people in prison.
- The work of NIACRO's Family Links directly contributes to several Executive commitments, including: reducing the level of serious crime; reforming the prison service; safeguarding vulnerable children; and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

The Prison Review Two Years On

Last October, we held a series of events on the theme of Prison Reform, in partnership with Opportunity Youth, Quaker Service, Prison Fellowship NI and Women's Support Network. The events were organised to mark the two year anniversary of the publication of the Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service. Our focus was on identifying ways in which the prison reform agenda could be strengthened, stimulated or re-invigorated through greater partnership working with organisations who deliver services for people affected by imprisonment.

The events were based on the two pillars of a good prison system outlined in the VSB Foundation's Report of the Once in a Generation workshop, that:

- i.** a good prison system must support and reflect human rights standards and ethical values; and
- ii.** a good prison system must be based on the premise that the prisoners within it can develop and change, and must provide opportunities for them to do so.

The first three events were breakfast seminars, with two chaired by members of the Prison Review Oversight Group and the third by former Prisoner Ombudsman Pauline McCabe, and the last was a larger conference, chaired by well known journalist Tara Mills and opened by the Minister of Justice, David Ford MLA. The

series of events welcomed attendees from a range of statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations, including the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and we were delighted that several MLAs joined us at various points to add to the discussions, including the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry MLA; Junior Ministers Jonathan Bell MLA and Jennifer McCann MLA; the Deputy Chair of the Health





Committee, Jim Wells MLA; and Justice Committee member Rosie McCorley MLA. In addition, the Prisoner Ombudsman, Tom McGonigle and Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, Brendan McGuigan, provided their perspectives on the reform programme, as did Richard Dixon from the Patient Client Council and Liz Colgan of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority.

Over the course of the four events we engaged with 110 participants who added to the diversity of discussions on the needs of young people in the prison system, the delivery of healthcare in prisons and understanding the needs of women and families affected by imprisonment. Some of the key messages emanating from those conversations included calls for greater recognition of the need for:

- a joined up approach to criminal justice and healthcare provision within prisons, as well as the inclusion of a social care strategy;
- flexibility in developing a regime for the 'secure college' at Hydebank Wood, to take account of the differing levels of educational attainment and approaches to learning amongst young people; and
- greater recognition of the particular needs of families and children affected by imprisonment.

You can find a general update on progress in the guest column by Mark Adam, the Strategic Change Manager in the NI Prison Service, on page 22, and we look forward to continuing to influence the prison reform agenda in the future.



Criminal Records, Legislation and its Impact

We were recently asked to submit an article for the Public Interest Litigation Support Project (PILS) Newsletter on criminal records, following a case we were involved in where non-conviction information was displayed on an individual's AccessNI Enhanced Disclosure Certificate. The article, which was published in the Newsletter last year, is reprinted below:

NIACRO is a voluntary organisation working to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. We deliver a range of services to children and young people, adults in the community, and people in prison and their families, all of which aims to reduce the risk of offending and re-offending.

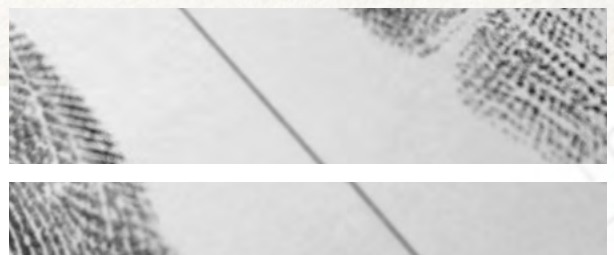
One of the key contributors to reducing that risk is securing employment, which can be particularly difficult for people with convictions. We therefore take a proactive approach by working with employers to reduce the range of barriers that people with convictions often experience. We offer training to employers on recruiting safely and fairly, and provide an employment advice service, which continues to see an increase in demand year on year.

Our advice line staff deal with a range of issues, particularly regarding the rehabilitation of offenders, and the application and impact of associated legislation on applicants, employees and employers.

Approximately 70% of NIACRO advice line calls relate to queries around AccessNI referrals, and we know, from the information we have gathered through this service, that serious issues exist with the criminal record checking process and interpretation of information by Registered Bodies.

The key issues that have emerged relate to the disclosure of conviction and non-conviction information by AccessNI and/or PSNI, as well as the way in which such information is handled and used by prospective employers and training providers, with potentially discriminatory impacts on applicants and employees.

We have, therefore, worked to develop a range of support mechanisms for complainants. We offer support to people seeking legal assistance to challenge employers and training providers where there is clear evidence of discriminatory or poor practice.



Numerous cases have progressed to Judicial Review (JR) and the two main grounds upon which they have been upheld are:

- a failure by the Registered Body (i.e. employer, college, or licensing body applying for the check) to comply with the AccessNI Code of Practice. This has involved the inappropriate consideration by the Registered Body of conviction and non-conviction information on AccessNI Enhanced Disclosure Checks; and
- a breach of the applicant's right to a private and family life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This has involved the disclosure of non-conviction information on AccessNI Enhanced Disclosure Certificates by PSNI, and decisions have been successfully challenged on the basis of procedural unfairness.

In recent years, we had noticed an increase in cases involving the details of non-conviction information being disclosed inappropriately on Enhanced Disclosure Checks by the PSNI. Whilst there were attempts to defend these actions, on the grounds that such information "might be relevant" to the job, we did not believe there was any legislative or procedural basis for such disclosures, and as a result had engaged in numerous challenges.

We welcome the recent shift in practice, which now requires the PSNI to write to the applicant, inviting them to make representation as to why the information should not be disclosed. However, we remain concerned by the evidence we have gathered, through our advice service, that applicants are experiencing varying degrees of success in their arguments against disclosure, and that the PSNI's approach is, in fact, quite inconsistent.

To that end, we recently applied on behalf of an applicant for a Judicial Review of a decision made by the PSNI, who had not only disclosed non-conviction information on an Enhanced Disclosure check, but also refused to cite the source of that information to enable the applicant to respond appropriately. That application would not have been possible without the support of the PILS project, who agreed to support and fund our application. The case settled before being heard and the respondent agreed to quash the enhanced criminal record certificate.

In all but one of the cases we have progressed for legal assistance there has been a positive outcome, either in obtaining leave to take Judicial Review proceedings, or in obtaining an out of court financial settlement.

While the majority of claimants have obtained positive outcomes, claimants have been disappointed to learn that the scope of their successes have been limited, insofar as the JR ruling only corrects that immediate case and does not prevent similar inappropriate disclosures in the future, either for that applicant or others. Unless and until a ruling is made to amend the entire procedure, we may be faced with a situation whereby claimants must pursue JR proceedings each time they apply for a new position.

However legal redress can only happen if the Registered Body is a Public Authority or publicly funded. This is disappointing as our advice line demonstrates a much higher volume of calls from applicants applying to the private health care sector who do not fall within these criteria.

Labour market information suggests that there is a substantial demand for staff amongst private health care providers. However, we know that discrimination on the basis of conviction, and indeed non-conviction information on AccessNI disclosures, remains rife by those employers. Such cases could not be progressed for legal JR support as they did not meet the criteria, i.e. that the private sector cannot be judicially reviewed.

It is worth noting that there have been some significant changes in England and Wales regarding the rehabilitation legislation and Criminal Record checks and we would call for similar changes to the NI regime.

In the meantime we will continue to support people and advocate on their behalf where there is clear evidence of discrimination and breaches of legislation or human rights.



Lucy Gampell and Donnie Sweeney with Naomi and Emma from Family Links

Justice Series Update

Our popular Justice Series events continue to attract attention from policy makers, legislators and the voluntary and community sector. Throughout 2013-14, NIACRO has built on the success of the previous Justice Series seminars by inviting a series of experts to discuss major issues surrounding justice and its role in a modern society. Our key message is that justice is not just about police, courts and prisons: it's about health, education, employment and others working together to make our communities safer.

Since the last edition of **NIACRO News**, we've held two successful lunchtime seminars on issues we strongly believe need more attention from our Government: criminal records, and the needs of

children affected by parental imprisonment.

The first of the two events, sponsored by Alban Maginness MLA, was held in December and saw guest speaker Christopher Stacey, Director of Services at Unlock, deliver a candid presentation entitled 'Criminal Records and Employment: Learning Lessons?'

During his presentation, Christopher stressed the need to give people with convictions "the hope and confidence to change", rather than "languishing on benefits". He spoke of the negative impact that unemployment – or even underemployment – can have on people after they leave prison, and how employment can help prevent re-offending.

Christopher also outlined the benefits for business in using proportionate and relevant criminal record checks to ensure they get the best person for the job: with a relatively high level of convictions in the UK, it makes good business sense to recognise the potential in this largely untapped pool. However, he acknowledged that employers need better access to impartial advice when recruiting. While he paid tribute to NIACRO's own advice line, run by our Working with Conviction team, he suggested that Access NI needs to give more support and guidance to employers, rather than "dumping" an overload of information on them, which can be intimidating and confusing to some.

Another – often overlooked – impact of criminal records

is the effect it can have on the wider family. For example, if someone in the family home is convicted of a crime, this can affect the ability of that family to get home or car insurance. Christopher said he wasn't sure if any research has been done with regards to criminal records, employment and familial impact, but suggested there is an inevitable economic impact on the family and children of people with criminal records.

The 'silent sentence' given to the families of people with convictions – particularly those in prison – is an issue NIACRO is passionate about and was the topic of our most recent Justice Series event. Entitled 'Children Affected by Parental Imprisonment: Needs, Solutions and Rights – the Evidence from across Europe', this seminar was held at the beginning of March and featured Lucy Gampell OBE, president of Children of Prisoners Europe (COPE), as guest speaker. Her presentation drew on children's direct experiences and highlighted findings from two recent European studies exploring the impact of parental imprisonment on children.

Following opening statements from our Chief Executive Olwen Lyner and Sammy Douglas MLA, who pointed out that "very often, it's the family who does time", Lucy focused on the human rights infringements faced by the children of people in prison, including the right to family life. She also illustrated the psychological impacts faced by children, including the oft-misunderstood separation anxiety and the feeling of guilt or even of being "unworthy of love".

While Lucy acknowledged there will always be limitations to programmes in prisons, she suggested that "security is used as a very easy reason for not doing anything" and that improvements in modern technology could allow for better two-way conversation between people in prison and their families on the outside.

During her speech, Lucy paid tribute to the good work done by NIACRO's Family Links project. However, she stressed how there is still much to be done to protect the rights of children who are affected by parental imprisonment, both in Northern Ireland and across Europe.



Christopher Stacey, Richard Good DOJ, Anne from Jobtrack, and NIACRO director Pat Conway



Lucy Gampell



Christopher Stacey

Our next Justice Series seminar will be held in early May. If you would like to be kept up to date with our programme, or would like more information about our ongoing public affairs campaigns, please contact our Public Affairs and Communications Manager Mairaid McMahon by emailing mairaid@niacro.co.uk or call 028 9032 0157.

Assembly Update

Our Public Affairs team keeps a close eye on what goes on at the Northern Ireland Assembly. Here are some of the key recent policy developments most relevant to our work:

Mental Capacity Bill

- This Bill will introduce a single statutory framework governing all decision-making on the care and treatment of a physical or mental illness or the personal welfare (including financial matters) of a person aged 16 or over who lacks capacity to make specific decisions for themselves.
- A joint consultation between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) is expected to be published in spring 2014, which will contain proposals on the civil and criminal provisions of the Bill. This legislation will not apply to children and young people aged 15 and under. It is proposed that provision for that age group will be addressed in a review of the Children's Order during the next Assembly mandate. Until then, the consultation will propose amendments to the current Mental Health Order through the new draft Bill, to put in place additional protections for children and young people.
- The Mental Capacity Bill is scheduled to be introduced to the Assembly in early 2015.

Fines and Enforcement Bill

- This Bill will establish a new Fine Collection and Enforcement Service which will have a range of powers to collect and enforce fines, including attachment from earnings and deductions from benefits.
- It is scheduled for introduction in October 2014, with the aim of achieving Royal Assent by summer 2015. The consultation process began in March 2014.

Welfare Reform Bill

- This Bill makes provision for Northern Ireland, corresponding to the Welfare Reform Act 2012. It is part of the ongoing process of welfare reform and modernisation of the benefits system. The major proposal for reform

is the introduction of a new benefit, to be known as Universal Credit, which will replace existing in and out of work benefits. The Bill also makes provision for another new benefit, Personal Independence Payment, which will replace the existing Disability Living Allowance.

- The Bill completed the Committee stage of the legislative process on the 14th February 2013 but has failed to get political support to move on to the Consideration Stage.
- The Minister for Social Development has secured some flexibility from the UK Government on how Universal Credit would be paid in Northern Ireland. The Minister set up an Oversight Board which is chaired by the DSD Permanent Secretary with members from a cross section of voluntary and community sector organisations. The Board will produce a report on the criteria for payment flexibilities in Universal Credit.

Review of Criminal Records Regime

Following the consultation on the second report of Sunita Mason's proposals on the Review of Criminal Records Regime in Northern Ireland, the recommendations to be taken forward by the Department of Justice include:

- the establishment of a statutory based filtering scheme for AccessNI checks to filter convictions that are both old and minor, and disposals such as cautions;
- a criminal record will be retained for 100 years from birth and after 100 years it will be archived for future research purposes; and
- an individual's criminal record will be defined as all recordable criminal offences in respect of which an individual has been convicted of or has received a caution, an informed warning or a diversionary youth conference (Minister Ford has accepted this recommendation in principle, but the DOJ intend to look at that again following a review of recordable and non-recordable offences in light of the consultation feedback).

Prison Reform Programme

On the 21st October 2013, the Minister of Justice David Ford MLA marked the second anniversary of the publication of the Review of the NI Prison Service by making a statement to the Assembly on the prison reform programme. In his update, he said that nine recommendations have been signed off as complete by the Prison Reform Oversight Group, and he anticipated that a further nine would be signed off at their December meeting. In his statement, he outlined the key areas of work that have been completed and those areas to be completed in the next 18 months. For more news about the ongoing prison reform programme, turn to pages 6 and 22.

Key Developments in the Criminal Justice System

- A new directory of services has been developed that will provide people in prison with details of the support services available to them.
- Interim contracts for the provision of learning and skills in Northern Ireland's prisons have been awarded to Belfast Metropolitan College, the North West Regional College, the Prison Arts Foundation and Dairy Farm Training and People 1st Ltd.
- The Minister of Justice has committed to the development of a separate women's prison, however this will take some time to complete. To address the needs of women in prison in the short term, there will be a four staged approach: the first stage is the development of Ash House, which will deliver an enriched regime, freer movement and greater access to services; the second will be the development of the 'Inspire' concept in Alderwood House; the third phase will see residential units being developed; and the final stage will be the development of a new women's prison.
- Charity Commission for Northern Ireland: Interim reporting requirements for registered charities
- Department for Employment and Learning (DEL): Northern Ireland 2014-2020 ESF Investment for Growth and Jobs Programme
- DEL: Review of Youth training – Call for Submissions
- Department of Justice (DOJ): NI Law Commission Report on Bail in Criminal Proceedings
- DOJ: Corporate Plan Consultation 2014 – 2017
- DOJ: Custodial Arrangements for Children in Northern Ireland
- DOJ: Review of the Legal Aid for Crown Court Proceedings Costs Rules NI
- DOJ: Speeding up Justice - Time Limits in the Youth Court

Consultation Responses:

Between October 2013 and February 2014, NIACRO responded to 17 consultations. These include:

To view all of NIACRO's consultation responses, please visit www.niacro.co.uk.

Transforming Criminal Justice:

Meeting With New Finance Minister

NIACRO Chief Executive Olwen Lyner was recently asked to participate in a meeting between voluntary and community sector representatives and the newly appointed Minister for Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton MLA, to discuss the reform of public service delivery. During the meeting, which took place at NICVA in November, Olwen delivered a presentation on transforming criminal justice, focussing in particular on the economic case for funding effective early interventions and how NIACRO and others can deliver efficient and effective services to some of the most marginalised people in Northern Ireland.

Olwen's presentation outlined how there is a clear benefit to investing in preventing offending behaviour, as it reduces the need for more expensive (and too often ineffective) measures later on. This can also be done by integrating rehabilitation and resettlement into the ethos of our prison system; providing lower cost and more effective community based alternatives to custody, which are proven to be more rehabilitative; and by driving better value out of investment in prisons by ensuring services are properly co-ordinated on release to reduce the risk of re-offending.

She urged the Minister to focus on smarter investments to deliver better value for money and better outcomes for people, with particular reference to investing in the children of people in prison and in people who are leaving prison, having served their sentence. Olwen also called on the Department of Finance and Personnel to connect other Departments to improve partnership working in the delivery of Executive-led strategies, such as the Reducing Offending Framework and Community Safety Strategy, and also to encourage partnership with the voluntary and community sector, specifically through the intelligent commissioning of services.

We were encouraged by the Minister's positive response and willingness to engage with the sector in his role. We look forward to developing our links with the Minister and his Department as we work together to improve outcomes.

Putting a Piece of Childhood Magic Back into Christmas

In December, 42 young people and volunteers from our Independent Visitor (IV) Scheme descended on the Grand Opera House for our annual trip to see the pantomime, which got everyone in the mood for Christmas!

You're never too old for this event - one that has become a very popular tradition in the calendar for the young people on the IV Scheme, with some travelling from as far as Ballymena and Cookstown to join us. The Scheme offers a befriending and independent support service to young people who are 'looked after' by the Trusts and have little or no contact with a parent or parental figure, and this annual trip to the pantomime is an opportunity for all the young people and volunteers to have an evening out together.

Before the pantomime, everyone gathered in our Amelia House office for a bite to eat, as well as to mark our achievement in receiving the Investing in Volunteers Award and to thank the volunteers for their dedication throughout the last year.

The pantomime was Sleeping Beauty and, as usual, it didn't disappoint, with plenty of atmosphere, laughs, singing and audience participation (mostly 'boos!') as May McFettridge and co-stars kept everyone entertained throughout the evening.

A huge thanks goes to all who help organise and take part in our group activities and make them such a success, and best wishes to all our volunteers for the year ahead from everyone at NIACRO.

VOICE BOX TACKLES AGE DISCRIMINATION

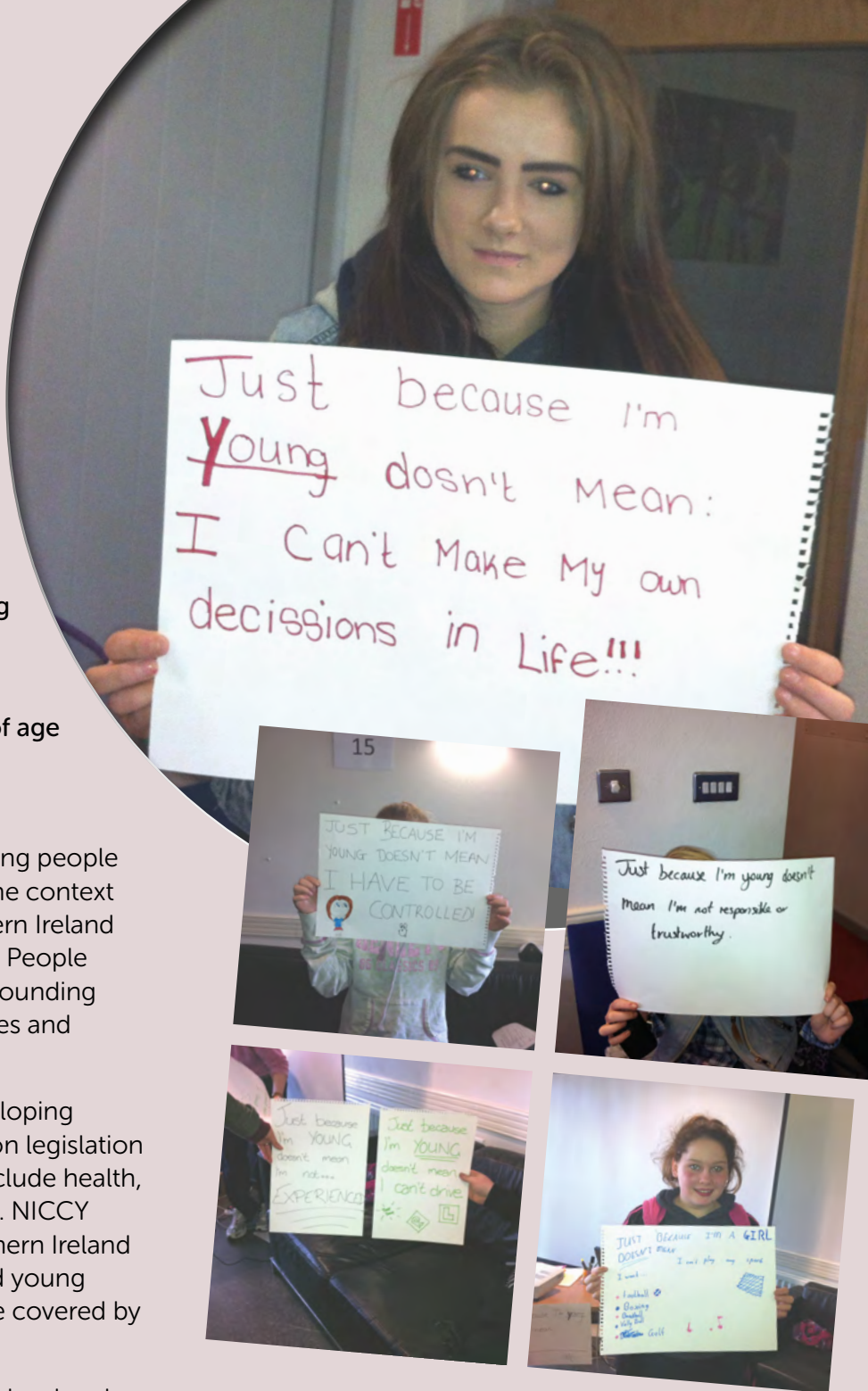
An excited group of young people, volunteers and staff from NIACRO's Independent Visitor (IV) and MOVE projects set out last November to the Mourne Mountains for the latest meeting of NIACRO's youth forum 'Voice Box'. The forum headed into the mountains not just to tackle raging rivers in an afternoon of bouldering at Greenhill YMCA, but perhaps even more importantly to tackle the issue of age discrimination against young people.

The purpose of the day was to get young people thinking about age discrimination, in the context of a campaign being run by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) about discrimination laws surrounding young people accessing goods, facilities and services (GFS).

The Northern Ireland Executive is developing proposals to improve age discrimination legislation so that it covers GFS – which might include health, financial, leisure and transport services. NICCY and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) are concerned that children and young people under the age of 18 may not be covered by the proposed changes to the law.

The voices of our young people stated loud and clear that they didn't agree with their rights not being recognised by Government in the proposed changes to legislation. The young people shared their experiences of discrimination when trying to access goods, facilities and services, with examples including not being allowed into shops because they were wearing their school uniform.

They suggested positive changes that could be made, including holding regular Youth Forums so the opinions of young people can be shared with decision makers, awareness raising amongst shop owners to promote equal access for young people, and working with cinemas so that they consistently apply the legal age restrictions on film screenings to protect children and young people.



AGM 2013 niacro

NIACRO's 42nd AGM was held at our Amelia Street office in November, with former Police and Crime Commissioner candidate Bob Ashford delivering a compelling seminar on his Wipe the Slate Clean campaign and why criminal records shouldn't be a sentence for life.

Chief Executive Olwen Lyner and NIACRO Chairman Sid McDowell also addressed the audience on developments over the past year, with Olwen giving an overview of the contents of the annual report. After the report and accounts were agreed, Bob spoke passionately about his campaign to 'wipe the slate clean' for people who offended in their youth, sharing his own story of getting a juvenile conviction in 1966 and the negative impact this had on him in later life. A question and answer session with the audience showed there is a real interest in this issue, and we were delighted to see such positive engagement from stakeholders.

To find out more about Bob's Wipe the Slate Clean campaign, please turn to page 24 to read our special feature on this issue.

IIV and IIP Award Success

We are delighted to announce that NIACRO has been successful in retaining both the Investing in Volunteers (IIV) Award and the Investors in People (IIP) Silver Award.

IIV is a UK Quality Standard for organisations involving volunteers. NIACRO was assessed against a range of best practice standards and proved to excel in all aspects of working with its volunteers. Fiona Nichol, the IIV Assessor, commented that "the enthusiasm of volunteers and staff was commendable". She highlighted several examples of good practice which demonstrate NIACRO's commitment to volunteering and praised how well the organisation is doing in the area of volunteer management.

The IIP Standard is the benchmark of good people management practice and, after being re-assessed last year, NIACRO has proven its commitment to staff by retaining the Silver award. The assessor, Tom Kenny, found that we had now met 157 of the 196 competences required by IIP; he commented that this was a significant achievement of which we should rightly be proud.

Congratulations to everyone and thank you to all volunteers and staff who contributed to the assessment process!

If you're interested in finding out more about volunteer opportunities, please visit www.niacro.co.uk or contact vivienne@niacro.co.uk.

New NIACRO Southern Area Office Opens in Portadown

Just over a year after opening our new North West office, we officially opened our new Southern Area office in Portadown in December. The opening ceremony included an address from the Deputy Mayor of Craigavon, Councillor Colin McCusker, as well as short speeches from NIACRO Chief Executive Olwen Lyner and Vice Chair Brendan Fulton. Attendees included local employers and community groups, as well as representatives from a range of statutory and voluntary organisations.



Welcoming guests to the new Carleton Street offices, NIACRO Chief Executive Olwen Lyner said: "We're delighted to open our new office here in Portadown today, which marks the consolidation of all our services in the Southern Trust area. NIACRO has a long history of working across Northern Ireland to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities, and we're so encouraged to have received such great support from the Portadown community and local employers.

"Our aim is to develop and strengthen these links in the area through the delivery of our services and help make the surrounding communities safer."

While NIACRO staff have been working in the Carleton Street office since last April, this event marked the official opening of what is now the base of all NIACRO services in the Southern Trust area - including Craigavon, Newry and Mourne, Banbridge, Armagh and Dungannon council areas. Combined with our projects based in our Belfast and Derry/Londonderry offices, this Southern area base will help us to deliver much-needed services to more people and communities across Northern Ireland.

Celebrating Success at QUB

In January, we celebrated the achievements of our Jobtrack and Choose2Change service users in relation to education, training and employment – as well as the great support we receive from employers – with a certificate presentation event at Queen’s University, Belfast.

Our ‘Celebrating Success’ event saw a fantastic turnout of participants, staff and employers, as well as a range of key stakeholders from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Criminal Justice System, who had the opportunity to talk to staff and service users to learn more about the various strands of work.

The event was presented by NIACRO CEO Olwen Lyner, with guest speakers including Heather Cousins (Deputy Secretary, DEL) and Hugh Hamill (Deputy Director, PBNI). Service user input was very important to the event with two participants, Karen and Mel, sharing their Jobtrack experiences and others presenting a list of ‘Key Asks’ to the audience.

A total of 65 participants received certificates of achievement in a range of areas, including: IT; catering; essential skills; welding; fitness instruction; OCN developing skills to gain employment; forklift licences; CSR and various high speed training. In addition, 10 employers received certificates in recognition of their support to the programme, with a further three employers receiving Equity Awards and two Equity awards were re-accredited.

We have had excellent feedback on the event from our partner agencies, guests and service users themselves – many of whom very much appreciated the opportunity to go to Queen’s University to receive their well-deserved awards.

A huge congratulations goes to all the participants and employers who were recognised at the event, and thank you to everyone who made the day a success!



Key excerpts from Olwen’s speech:

- In the two and a half years since our last Celebrating Success event, just over 1,900 people have been referred to the project, and on any given day the project works with about 600 people.
- 59% of those that completed the programme went on to employment, training or education; this figure drops to 12% for those who left the project early.
- Since our last Celebrating Success event, we have been involved in a successful pilot of the Department for Employment and Learning’s LEMIS Programme, focussing on those who had

been in custody: of the 15 who started, 8 found full time work – a rate of 53%. We would welcome the opportunity to test other main stream programmes in this way. Indeed, our work in this pilot was featured as an example of cross departmental working at the Department of Justice’s launch of the safer society strategy.

- We have worked with Further Education Colleges (particularly with Belfast Met) to increase access to courses and our figures for those moving on to courses in this sector are now rising steadily.
- We have developed our model of peer education – bringing experience from

the prison-based toe-to-toe programme to focus on literacy and numeracy. In the short time since this had been fully operational, results for students have soared.

- Our helpline for individuals with a record - often members of the general public whose conviction was some time ago - and for employers recruiting staff experienced a 100% increase in its annual calls received since the last celebration event - a consequence of more recruitment processes requiring criminal record disclosure.

A day in the life of....

Jennifer

Senior Practitioner in Family Links




Read more about the Family Links project on pages 3 – 5.



niacro



Family
Links



Do you have a friend or
relative in prison?
Do you need help or advice?

Contact Family Links at NIACRO:

Tel: 028 9032 0157
Email: niacro@niacro.co.uk
Website: www.niacro.co.uk

Update from the Forum for Families of People in Prison

In our last issue, we featured an article written by a member of the new Forum for Families of People in Prison. The article outlined how the Forum had been set up to seek improvements in the support provided to people in prison and their families on a policy level. Here, a member of the Forum provides an update of how the group has developed in its first few months:

"The Forum continues to meet regularly in NIACRO's Belfast office. We discuss the issues and problems affecting family members, dealing with the many difficulties of having a family member in any of Northern Ireland's prisons. The loss of a family member from normal daily life is usually devastating to those left behind and this is compounded by our inability to play a role in their welfare and safety.

The misleading, sensational, inaccurate and unhelpful reports from most sections of the media are disappointing and further marginalise us.

We meet with many of the other groups and agencies which offer us support and we are planning to sit down and discuss with interested organisations or groups how the way the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) works impacts on families.

We recognise the positive actions of individual prison officers and the introduction of some family friendly procedures and activities. But we need to have a voice to work in partnership with the Prison Service to improve the help and support that it and other Government agencies should be providing. Remember: a good home environment is a key factor in rehabilitation, yet the fact is that NIPS do little to help family units stay together.

It is only through voicing our experiences that an understanding can be reached. Too often when a family member makes a suggestion or request, the response from the Prison is 'no'. If an explanation is given, it generally falls into one of two categories: either it is a security issue, or granting that request will open the floodgates. Neither explanation makes sense when it is examined in most specific cases. It is a simple default position and prison managers need to move away from tick box decisions, to doing what is right and fair.



Prisoner Ombudsman Tom McGonigle (centre) joined the Forum for its first meeting last year.

Any family member can give very specific examples about what has been happening in our prisons but there is no collective voice as yet, and therefore no coherent challenge to out-dated policies and procedures. How many critical reports on NIPS must there be from the Prisoner Ombudsman or Criminal Justice Inspection NI before change occurs? How often will the Justice Minister or Director General 'welcome' critical reports?

Why not take action in the short and medium term when it is justified?

For example, why are there so few family events? The partner of a person in prison who has no children aged under 18 is able to visit their partner at the usual weekly visits plus one Christmas Carol Service per year. That's it! Hardly helping families maintain relationships. Why are people with long sentences not helped to learn a trade from the outset of their imprisonment rather than in the last stages?

We want to maintain our relationships and we should have a say in how this can be improved.

We welcome any family members or representatives of other groups to our meetings. Please contact NIACRO for more information on our next meeting."

For more information about the Forum for Families of People in Prison, please contact **Donnie Sweeney at NIACRO** on 028 9032 0157 or email donnie@niacro.co.uk

Guest Columns



In each edition of NIACRO News, we'll feature guest columns on key issues. Here, Dr Linda Moore from the University of Ulster talks about the families of people in prison, while Mark Adam of the Northern Ireland Prison Service provides an overview of prison reform in Northern Ireland.

Dr Linda Moore

'Ordinary families facing extraordinary challenges': the families of people in prison

Prisoners' families have been described as 'ordinary families facing extraordinary challenges' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation). In our research interviews, my colleagues Una Convery, Phil Scraton and I heard of heart-breaking experiences, but were always inspired by the courage and dignity shown by families in very difficult circumstances. Families spoke of finance, housing and employment problems, difficulties in knowing what to tell children, as well as how they missed and worried about their relative in prison. They often felt stigmatised, presumed 'guilty by association'. Friends and neighbours were often supportive but some families were exposed to threats and violence within their local communities. Keeping in contact through visits and telephone calls is costly and physically and emotionally draining, and the high-security atmosphere in our prisons may intimidate. Organisations such as NIACRO, Quaker Service and Barnardo's can make a significant difference to the visiting experience and to families' ability to sustain relationships throughout a prison sentence. Family support groups provide a welcoming environment where problems can be shared without fear of judgement.

Accurate figures are difficult to obtain but in the United Kingdom over 160,000 children are affected each year by having a parent in prison and in Northern Ireland annually around 1,500 children visit family members in prison. These children are more likely than their peers to experience poverty, mental health and educational difficulties. Children with a mother in prison often lose their family home, living with relatives or in care. It is often forgotten that imprisonment impacts on whole families including grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and friends.

Research from different countries confirms that prisoners with strong family ties are much more likely to have a successful experience after release, and are at less risk of self harm or suicide so it makes practical sense to provide support for families. Yet services remain inadequate. Moreover, families should not be viewed merely as a 'desistance tool' but are entitled to respect as rights-holders. Positive initiatives in Northern Ireland include child-centred visits, provision of family support officers, parenting programmes and recently the development of a 'family-focussed' unit in Maghaberry Prison. However, our research indicated that the over-riding emphasis within the prison system on security and control tended to interfere with good practice, for example sometimes child-centred visits

were cancelled due to alleged 'staff shortages'. The extended visits facility for mothers in Hydebank Wood remains closed following complaints from young men about a lack of equivalent service for them. Unfortunately, the Prison Review Team report (2011) said little about family services, leaving families marginalised during the change process.

Some families, supported by voluntary organisations, have organised a Forum for the Families of People in Prison, in the hope of contributing to reforms in prison policies and practices and family members are welcome to get involved. Families, including children, have first hand understanding of the problems, and are best placed to make positive suggestions for change.

For more information on the Forum for Families of People in Prison, see the feature and contact details for Donnie on the opposite page.

Dr Linda Moore is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy at the University of Ulster. Linda's research with Dr Una Convery and Professor Phil Scraton on the families of people in prison is available here: http://www.familiesoutside.org.uk/content/uploads/2011/05/children_260411_page.pdf

Mark Adam

'I am a strong believer that true change will not be delivered until we have real partnership across all sectors'

Reforming the prison system in Northern Ireland is complex and challenging. Since June 2012 I have been responsible for driving through the changes envisaged by Dame Anne Owers and her team.

We are now entering the final year of the programme and while we are making good progress, there is still a great deal of work to be done. That is a normal part of any change programme with many of the recommendations realised at the end. I am determined to deliver the changes and I am confident we will do so.

At the core of everything we are doing to change the prison system is the safety of the wider community in Northern Ireland. By working with prisoners to address their offending behaviour we are helping to reduce their risk of re-offending when they return to the community. Of course that is not just achieved through the work of the Prison Service – it is achieved when we all work in a coordinated way.



I am a strong believer that true change will not be delivered until we have real partnership across all sectors. The prison system in Northern Ireland has a proud record of working with statutory and voluntary organisations. That must continue and must be built upon.

In many ways we are only starting on our journey. The change programme is the catalyst for

changing the way we manage and treat offenders in Northern Ireland. We have the opportunity to be at the forefront of resettlement and true partnership is key to that vision.

It is also equally important that we keep you informed with regards to progress – whether that is against the 40 recommendations of the Owers Report or with the innovative programmes that are being developed, often in partnership; in our prisons.

Together we are making a difference and I am confident we will deliver the radical transformation of the prison system.

Mark Adam is the Strategic Change Manager in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

SERVICE USER VOICES

As well as updating our readers on organisational and policy development, NIACRO News will hand space over to our service users in every issue to share their stories. In this edition, we hear how Lisa has cracked the showbiz industry, and Eva shares her experience of working with NIACRO.

Eva's Story

"I remember waking up one morning. The sun was shining on my garden, the birds were singing, and my wonderful husband smiled at me. But I just wanted to close my eyes to block it all out. Because all I could feel was emptiness, and all I could see was darkness. All I could think about was what I had done. How I had hurt the people who loved me. How I had let down people who had trusted me. I couldn't move on. I couldn't get past it. I couldn't even get out of bed, let alone talk about my feelings.

But what I didn't know then was that I had severe clinical depression. And what I couldn't see at that time was that the mistakes I had made were whilst I was in the grips of addiction. I did things that I shouldn't have done – I'm not pretending I haven't made mistakes – but I now realise that in those dark days I was not only hurting many people around me, but also myself. And the hardest thing wasn't what the judge had said to me, or what the media wrote about me, but actually trying to forgive myself.

When I got up this morning, looked at myself in the mirror and was able to smile back at my reflection, I realised that today is another day I'm grateful for. I cherish life now, and I'm even able to make wee plans and set myself goals for each week. But I couldn't have done any of that without the gentle encouragement and support of Patricia from NIACRO and Rayna from the Women's Centre.

Without them, I would never have been able to participate in the SCIPE (Self Care Inspires Personal Empowerment) project. SCIPE was a lifeline for me, and without Patricia's endless patience and help to build up my confidence I wouldn't have been able to grab hold of it. She and Rayna were the first two people, for such a long time, who had looked at me as a person – not another statistic.

SCIPE helped me put the colour back into my life. And now when I look out at the rain and see puddles in my path, I don't let them put me off. I dip my toe in and find out whether I can manage in my bare feet, whether I need my wellies or even my waders. And then I splash on through. Because I've got the confidence to know that no matter what, I've always got the love of my family and the support of my friends, and I have finally forgiven myself."

Lisa's Story

Lisa was referred to the Jobtrack project in January 2012 by her Probation Officer. Having left work 12 years previously to bring up her daughter, Lisa had lost confidence in herself and her abilities and was glad of the support the programme offered when life dealt her a curve ball or two.

Working with her Jobtrack employment officer, Jeanine, she identified things to do that she loves and has a passion for, including party planning, design, theatre and all things creative. Jeanine has now spent a year working hard with Lisa to spur her on, sourcing training in the creative fields and - most importantly - helping her to believe in herself again.

While looking for opportunities for work experience, Jeanine contacted the Ulster Theatre Company (UTC) to enquire about the possibility of them taking on a volunteer for their next production. UTC had never done this before but as luck would have it, the owner/director accepted and met with Jeanine and Lisa. After a much anticipated wait, Lisa began a tough and demanding six-week voluntary placement as Assistant Stage Manager on the pantomime, Aladdin, presented in The Market Place Theatre Armagh.

Despite some nerves to begin with, Lisa soon came into her own and became invaluable to the company. With ideas and skills galore, Lisa started to realise that she is indeed talented enough to pursue just about anything she wants to. Not content with just stage management, Lisa also offered to work on costumes and props, working long hours with the team to make all 35 shows a success!

UTC's owner/director was so impressed that he wants to hire – yes, hire! – Lisa back for the pantomime in 2014. As well as this great news, a London based set designer who worked on the production of Aladdin gave Lisa a glowing reference and recommended her to a theatre in Cheshire for their summer 2014 production. Lisa will join the team at the Clonter Opera Theatre in Cheshire as Assistant Stage Manager for six weeks – and with any luck after that, the world will be her oyster.

Lisa is in touch with Jeanine regularly and they will continue to work together to build on her skills. She told us "I couldn't have come through the last year without Jobtrack", and Jeanine and the rest of the team at NIACRO are delighted to have helped her – we wish her all the best in Cheshire!



Wipe the Slate Clean

Lots of issues relating to criminal justice can be divisive. In each edition of NIACRO News, we plan to look at one of these and present our view, inviting readers to write to us with their views too.

This time, we're looking at the suggestion that young people convicted of a crime should have the opportunity to have their 'slate' wiped clean, so they can start adult life without a criminal record.

While this idea has been put forward in Northern Ireland by the Youth Justice Review and by other organisations working in this sector, our AGM speaker Bob Ashford has devoted himself to leading the Wipe the Slate Clean campaign across the UK.

The following opinion piece from Bob Ashford was published in the Belfast Telegraph in November 2013, while Bob was in Belfast for our 42nd AGM.

Why a criminal record should not become a life sentence

Cast your mind back to when you were 10 years old. Do you remember sitting down and rationally evaluating all of the potential impacts of every critical decision that might change the course of your life? I doubt it. I know I didn't. And when I was 13 I made a mistake. And I was caught for it (it was trespassing on a railway with an offensive weapon – an air rifle that a 'friend', who ran when he spotted the police approaching, had been holding). I was told to sign an admission form and I was fined 2 pounds and 10 shillings. In 1966. 47 years ago.

A good bit older and wiser, in 2012 I put myself forward for the role of Police and Crime Commissioner for Avon and Somerset. Having spent over 40 years working as a social worker, starting my career in Derry then heading youth offending services and becoming Director of Strategy at the Youth Justice Board, the mistakes I made as a 13 year old couldn't have been further from my mind. But, despite the fact I was never convicted of any other offence, it was those mistakes that rendered me ineligible to even apply for the post of Police and Crime Commissioner. And when I began to realise the extent to which childhood convictions were impacting on peoples' lives, I knew I had to do something.

I'm now running the Wipe the Slate Clean campaign, which lobbies for a change to legislation to ensure that convictions received as a minor are wiped from criminal records in later life. In Northern Ireland, I know NIACRO will continue to lobby for similar measures, as recommended in the Youth Justice Review and the Review of the Criminal Records Regime, to give young people a fresh start when they turn 18. Because judges don't issue life sentences for minor offences committed by minors, and we shouldn't allow their records to haunt them for life.

Wipe the Slate Clean: Our View:

Everybody makes mistakes. Children probably make more mistakes than most. But should they be punished for the rest of their lives for them? Of course not! Wiping the slate clean at the age of 18 would allow young people to start afresh, with their lessons learnt and the world their oyster.

People who receive criminal records often find they pay for their crime long after their sentence has finished. In the case of young people in Northern Ireland, this can mean punishing people for something they did when they were as young as 10. They can face barriers in accessing education, securing employment, buying insurance or even travelling as they move through their teens into young adulthood. In short, we refuse to let people move on, instead holding them accountable for childhood misdemeanours forever.

The easy counterargument to this campaign is to cite the rare cases of terrible offences carried out by children. Nobody is suggesting that wiping the slate clean should be automatic; like anything in the criminal justice sector, each case should be assessed carefully to consider the risks, including the impact on any victims. Likewise, a 17 year old who receives a two-year custodial sentence would not have their sentence halved by default: the policy would be applied carefully, logically and proportionately.

The Youth Justice Review and the Review of the Criminal Records Regime both endorsed the idea of wiping the slate clean at 18. With a commendable investment in early intervention and youth diversion, it's time for Northern Ireland to reassess this draconian decision to label children for life.



Bob Ashford spoke about the Wipe the Slate Clean campaign at the NIACRO AGM last year.

Your View:

What do you think: should we wipe the slate clean for young people with a criminal record? Write to us and let us know at pact@niacro.co.uk or find our postal address on the back cover.

FROM BELFAST TO CAMBODIA

Building Houses in Phnom Penh

Two NIACRO staff members recently visited Cambodia as part of a team carrying out charity work with Habitat for Humanity. Habitat is a worldwide Christian housing ministry which seeks to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness from the world, and to make decent shelter a matter of conscience and action. The two NIACRO employees, Ellie and Jeanine, were part of a team made up of people from all over the world who spent more than a week in the capital city Phnom Penh building houses for families who lost their homes and source of income when the Steung Meanchey landfill was closed. Here, Ellie shares her experience:



Jobtrack's Jeanine helping to build houses in Cambodia

Last November, Jeanine and I met up with six others from Northern Ireland in Dublin airport to start the experience of a lifetime. Twenty-four hours and three flights later, we arrived in Cambodia with the rest of the international 150-strong team who would be taking part in the Mekong Big Build project, with the aim of building 12 houses in just one week. After being welcomed with dinner and traditional entertainment, we all took to our beds to get some rest for the challenge that lay ahead.

I had initially been apprehensive about the build and going to Cambodia, but had been encouraged by Jeanine who had taken part in several builds before. Jeanine led our team of eight from Northern Ireland – though this quickly grew, with Diane from Australia joining our team, as well as two volunteers from the Republic of Ireland and a further two from Nepal.

The first morning was a real eye-opener, with the team at one point having to get off the bus on the way to the building site to fill in the deep potholes in the road. When we got to the site where we would be working for the next week, school children – many in their bare feet – clapped and sang for us and

presented us with lotus flowers in what was a really touching display.

Having arrived late on site due to traffic (and potholes!), we got straight to work. We did everything from passing bricks to moving soil and cement, painting windows, digging foundations and carrying buckets of water. The heat was intense: we were working in temperatures of around 40 degrees Celsius, and had to constantly drink water and apply a cold, wet towel as there was a real risk of dehydration.

The work was hard-going at times, but we could see the benefit it would bring which really drove us on. The homes we were building were for families who had previously lived on the Steung Meanchey dumpsite, and many had made their living as rubbish pickers there. The site was closed down recently, displacing thousands of families. The Mekong Big Build was the start of a much bigger construction process that will re-house many of those vulnerable families. On one day, we were given a tour of the dumpsite, where some people are still living; it was very difficult and emotional, and made all our hard work worth it.

The people in general, particularly those that looked after us, were so welcoming and warm, despite the crippling poverty that many of them are affected by. Throughout our time working on the site, food was provided by the catering students at the school built at the dumpsite.

Cambodia is fascinating, and so different to home: whole families would travel on one motorbike, though that wasn't the end of it – we also saw chickens, a door frame and a set of step ladders all on a bike too! The food was great, though we decided against trying some of the local delicacies, which included insects, worms and deep fried tarantula.

The village is only part-finished now and work will continue to create more homes for the families who need them; we worked on the first of nine blocks, which will house 300 people in total. At the end of our team's build, we presented the houses to the families in a closing ceremony, where everyone sang and there was a fantastic atmosphere. Overall, it was an incredible experience for both of us and definitely made us grateful for all that we have.



Community Interventions Exhibition

In December, Claire from Caps and Fiona from MOVE attended the first Annual Community Interventions Exhibition at Stranmillis University College. The event was an opportunity for local organisations to showcase their work to address disadvantage and family adversity.

Fiona and Claire took the chance to engage with Stranmillis staff and students and explain how the Caps and MOVE projects help to improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

VISITORS FROM BELARUS

On the 3rd – 6th March 2014, NIACRO hosted a delegation from Belarus which included representatives from the Red Cross and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The focus of their visit was to find out about best practice in the resettlement and reintegration of people who had offended back into the community.

During their stay, the five visitors received presentations from NIACRO project staff about the various aspects of our work. They then spoke to some of our service users about their experiences of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland and heard what support was in place for people re-entering the community.

The group also met with Lucy Gampell, President of COPE, ahead of her appearance at our Justice Series event, before visiting Maghaberry Prison, where Deputy Governor Austin Treacy spoke to them about the regime there.



Their short trip to Northern Ireland was concluded with a roundtable discussion with representatives from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Youth Justice Agency and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

We were delighted to host the delegation and share our experience with them, and we appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the criminal justice system in Belarus. We look forward to engaging with more European colleagues in this way in the future!



Jobtrack staff and service users are pictured at the Crumlin Road Gaol for the recording of the radio play 'Built to Contain'

'BUILT TO CONTAIN' OFFERS SKILLS TRAINING FOR JOBTRACK PARTICIPANTS

NIACRO, in conjunction with the Prison Arts Foundation, recently participated in CORNERS - a new European funded intercultural arts project which aims to create a series of commissioned radio plays.

The plays will focus on the skills, experiences and inputs of people who have been in prison and will be supported by professional artists. The project will also develop an accompanying oral archive of service user voices and produce a three-

dimensional facility in each participating jurisdiction that will provide the public with a narrated multi-sensory experience of prison life.

Kicking off in Northern Ireland before being rolled out across Europe, NIACRO hosted the intensive three-week project last November. Several Jobtrack service users volunteered to help with the project and were able to develop their own skills in the related areas of writing, production, technical support and performing.

The play, entitled Built to Contain, premiered in Northern Ireland earlier this year: it was recorded in the former Crumlin Road Gaol and then broadcast on RTE Radio.

This was a very unique and exciting project for all those involved. We are delighted to see service users taking this opportunity and we look forward to hearing how it develops across Europe.

All the Jobtrack service users involved in 'Built to Contain' had no previous experience. One service user shared his experience with us:

"Initially I wondered just what I had let myself in for when I said yes to Mairead (from Jobtrack) to do a radio play. After having been out of prison for a while the thought of dragging it up from the depths of a locked away memory seemed to me to be a form of torture.

The initial sessions with the rest of the guys went well but some parts were very dark and left us brooding somewhat and very sensitive. This sharing of pain brought us closer and engendered deep respect for each other. The trust in the group at the end of those sessions leading up to the first drafts and read-throughs was absolute.

Once we had the play ready to go after various tweaks, the day of the recording at Crumlin Road Gaol was something we all were looking forward to. Going down into the untouched wing to record was a powerful trip back into memory. It was made real and you could see the way it affected each of us.

A long, cold day went past very fast and by the end there was a sadness that the experience was over. The play was liberating. It helped bring closure for some of us to a painful episode in our lives. This time at the end of the day the doors didn't close... they swung open and we went back to our lives again, ready to move on."



ANY FEEDBACK?

We'd love to hear your views of NIACRO News and the issues discussed in this edition. If you have any comments on the new design, want us to cover a specific issue or would like to write a short piece for the next edition, please contact Julia in our Public Affairs and Communication Team by emailing pact@niacro.co.uk or write to us at Amelia House, 4 Amelia Street, Belfast, BT2 7GS.

Don't forget you can also stay in touch with us on the NIACRO Facebook page and on Twitter @niacro_.

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