

amelia house opening

On 21 June, Criminal Justice Minister, David Hanson, officially opened our new offices in Belfast's Amelia Street.

Mr Hanson described the organisation as "a core service provider to offenders and partner agencies alike" and the Minister added, "I am confident that these new premises will help NIACRO go from strength to strength."



Olwen Lyner, CEO and David Hanson, Criminal Justice Minister, at the opening of Amelia House

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Highlighting this criminal justice statutory body

CEO Olwen Lyner writes about the opening and the organisation's hopes and expectations for the future.

“Like many NGOs, it has been our dream to have a purpose-built, centrally-located building which we actually owned, and after 34 years of existence, it has happened. I can't overestimate the impact of the new building. It's bright, modern and in a neutral and very accessible setting. It means that our 44 Belfast-based staff have come together from the four separate locations we had been working



(from left):- Pat Conway and Siobhan O'Dwyer, Directors of Services NIACRO, David Hanson, Olwen Lyner and Alan Caskey, NIACRO Executive Committee



David Hanson, Anne Reid, Annie Owens and Heather Reid



Graham Kelly, Probation Board and Tom McGonigle, Social Services Inspectorate

out of until now, and our clients and partners have a one-stop-shop for training, advice, and meetings.

In our current corporate plan, we describe our work under three main headings – innovation in services; influencing the policy-makers; and working in partnership with other agencies and with communities. All of this interconnects, and now much of it is under one roof in Belfast (and we still have services located in other premises in the North West and Southern region).

This is a time of considerable change in both the criminal justice system and in the role and function of the voluntary sector. NIACRO's services inform our policy work, and in turn our thinking on policy helps us refine and develop our services. So far as Amelia House is concerned, that means we'll be delivering IT and essential skills training here, while

managing our community safety and resettlement projects, as well as our services for children, young people, and the families of offenders. We'll be drawing on that experience of service delivery when government consults us for our views on how the criminal justice system and related services can work most effectively.

thanks

There were many partners and good friends of NIACRO at the opening. I was able to thank a lot of people who have supported and helped the organisation. They include the many statutory agencies with whom we work, as well as colleagues from the voluntary and community sector – and among both these groups are former staff who have moved on to other roles. Of course we also welcomed the funders who made the financial investment in the building possible, including three key funders – the Northern Ireland Office, the Tudor Trust and the Henry Smith Trust. We're grateful to them all.

NIACRO News readers might like to know that on the site of Amelia House there has been a linen mill and a whiskey bottling plant, and we are close to the site of the first House of Corrections built in 1817! I won't try to draw any conclusions from that history. I'll just say that we are going to grasp the opportunity the new offices give us – to focus with increasing determination on reducing the damage that crime does to offenders and communities alike."

niacro and young people

NIACRO's corporate plan for 2003 to 2006 places a good deal of weight on our work with children – both directly with individual young people, and with the children and families of offenders. In this issue of NIACRO News, we highlight our work under the particular strategic aim which reads: "To work in partnership with others to develop and deliver services which reduce offending behaviour by children and young people".

Some facts and figures:

In 2003, 1068 juveniles were proceeded against in the courts, 834 of them being sentenced. (source: NIO, Commentary on NI Crime Statistics 2004)

There were 190 young people under 21 in Hydebank YOC in late September, four of them women. (source: Hydebank)

There are 30 young men and three young women in the 34-place Juvenile Justice Centre at the date of writing this article. (The figure for girls, 10%, is higher than usual.) There were 464 admissions to the JJC in 2004-2005, with most staying less than one week. (source:JJC)

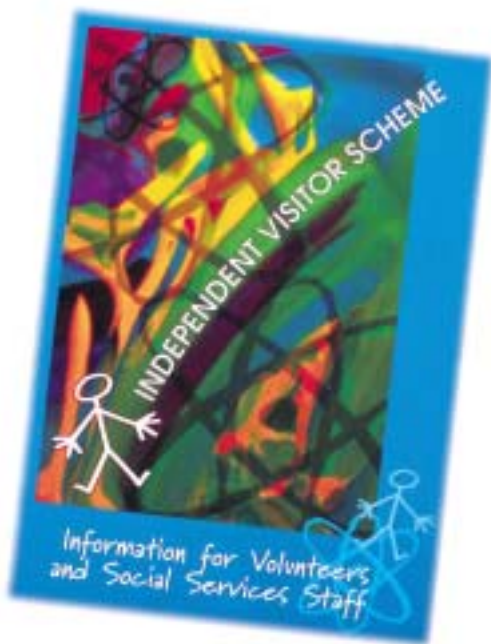
In March 2003, almost 2500 children were being looked after by Health and Social Services Trusts, and 216 left care in the year ending 31 March 2003. (source: DHSSPS, Children Order Statistics 2002 – 2003)

The highest rate of conviction for men is for those aged 19, and for women it's for those aged 22; so it seems that an obvious target group for help should be the mid, and even the early, teens. The various NIACRO initiatives involve children and young people from 10 to 20+.

Our view is that we can best help children to stay away from offending by working with them in their own environments, pooling our skills and resources with other voluntary and statutory agencies.

And so we offer:

The Independent Visitor Scheme, which operates in the Eastern and Southern HSS Board areas to befriend and support young people who are looked after by the Boards and who have little or no contact with a parent or parental figure. NIACRO offers 45 places, and its trained volunteers meet fortnightly with the child/young person. The relationship lasts for at least a year, but it can be continued for longer if that's appropriate.



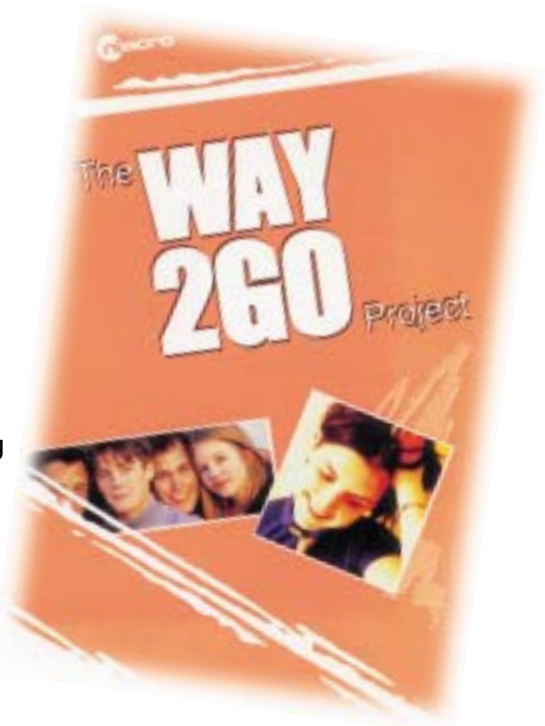
The Independent Representation Project. Volunteers visit the Juvenile Justice Centre and Lakewood secure care centre each week, making themselves available for any young person who wants to raise any problem. This could be something like quality of food (the perennial concern of people living in an institution) or the environment – can the windows be opened far enough to make a stuffy room a bit fresher?; or the chance to take exercise or other recreation.

The Mentoring Project – there's a summary of an independent evaluation of this project later in the newsletter, and the story of two mentees.

The Youth Employability Programme – again, you can read more about this initiative in NIACRO News.

Way2Go is a befriending and support service for 10 young people leaving the care system in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area – they are aged from 16 to 21 (and it can be up to 25 if they are in education). Volunteers are matched to a young person, and meet him/her weekly for a year, to give impartial guidance and support.

Reconnect, described in NIACRO News 11, works with 15-17-year-olds who are excluded from education and at risk of offending, or who have offended. It first gets



though the projects have different aims they have a common ethos

the young people engaged in activities like the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and personal development courses, and then moves on to “reconnect” them with more mainstream education and training.

Though the projects have different aims, are offered in different places and taken up by different groups, they have a common ethos. They are based on respect for the young person and a personal, informal, relationship with them. The relationship,



however, is also purposeful and has the goal of bringing about change for the better. Over and over again, this ethos is highlighted by young people themselves and by the professionals who refer them to NIACRO for help.

We're also involved with statutory initiatives like the DHSSPS-led Children's Services Planning, which you can read more about later.

In all of these activities, we work in partnership with statutory agencies, especially the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency, and the Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts. We also work with key voluntary agencies.

As well as direct services, all of which we routinely evaluate to test how effective they are (some of the evaluations are described later) we use the experience gained through these projects to advise Government on policies which affect young people. Again, you can read summaries of some consultation responses later.

how are we doing?

In delivering on the corporate mission – working to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities - we evaluate all of our projects and initiatives. That way, we can measure and record their success, learn from any challenges the evaluations throw up, and plan our future work. In this issue of NIACRO News we summarise three recent evaluations.

Positive External Evaluation of NIACRO Mentoring Project

The Mentoring Project is aimed at promoting social inclusion and providing support and access to opportunities for marginalised 10/17-year-olds who are offenders or are deemed to be at risk of offending. The project recruits volunteers from the local communities to act as one-to-one mentors for a period of one year. In the last issue of NIACRO News we described how the project works, and celebrated the award of the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation's Approved Provider Standard, independently assessed under such headings as training, volunteer recruitment, and outcomes and evaluation.

Council's Local Strategy Partnership also support the programme).

The evaluation set out:

- To assess the effectiveness of service delivery, evaluating performance in the context of wider policy objectives.
- To assess how efficiently and effectively grant aid has been utilised.
- To examine the adequacy of organisational and project implementation/administration structures and systems.
- To produce evidence based recommendations for improvement in service efficiency and effectiveness.

The youth justice system has recognised the Mentoring Project as a valuable and credible tool in working directly with young people in the community. Referral agents stated that the relationship between the young person and the mentor had brought about positive change, often where other interventions had failed. In fact, without exception referral agents felt that the Mentoring Project both complemented and added value to their own statutory work with young people, and nearly all respondents felt that only a voluntary agency such as NIACRO had the credibility and acceptance (among the young people themselves) to deliver it. The evaluators say, "There is an extraordinary level of support from agencies referring clients to the mentoring programme". One probation officer interviewed for the evaluation stated: "The mentoring project is one of the best initiatives I've ever referred a client to."

The Mentoring Project staff were successful in matching 85% of young people referred to the project with a volunteer mentor. This is a satisfactory base line upon which to build and shape our service delivery towards 100% match rate.

One of the unique qualities about the project is its accessibility to, and acceptance by, the young people who engage in it. Often they are socially excluded, marginalised and disaffected. To operate a successful project with

giving children and young people a coherent and effective quality service within their local communities

The project has recently been evaluated by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland for the main funders, the Big Lottery Fund and the Children's Fund (Derry City

The young people, the volunteers, the project staff, the Youth Offending Services manager and a sample of referral agents participated in the evaluation.

the ability, skills and knowledge to engage, develop and sustain young people in a year long mentoring relationship is a significant achievement. This needs to be

highlighted if the project is to be sustained in future years, and more young people helped by it.

The young people in the evaluation found the opportunity to talk with someone ‘outside of the system’ one of the most important features about the mentoring relationship: “I talk more to X than I’ve ever talked to anybody”. The informal and voluntary nature of the relationship sets it apart from more formal statutory interventions. The fact the mentors are volunteers adds more credibility to the project; from the onset the young person is encouraged to develop a sense of ownership of the relationship which, as it develops, also helps to promote their sense of personal and social responsibility.

It would be unrealistic to suggest that the mentoring project alone can combat social exclusion and disadvantage among disaffected young people. However, as the evaluation highlights, the project is in a strong position to build on its service provision in collaboration with other key stakeholders in the youth justice system. It is giving children and young people a coherent and effective quality service within their local communities, with trained

willingness to engage with the most “hard to reach” young people

volunteers and with the support, encouragement and access to opportunity which is bringing positive, measurable change in their lives. This evaluation is a step towards the goal of building a sustainable project.

You can get a copy of the evaluation report from the Information Unit.

Youth Employability Programme

We have recently completed an evaluation on the first 18 months

of our Youth Employability Programme.

The programme was based on the experiences gained from NIACRO’s adult employability programme, Jobtrack. The Probation Board identified the need for a similar

listening to all the players involved it’s clear that the programme has some unique qualities

programme of supported employability / training interventions for 16 and 17 year olds, who are in contact with the youth justice system. The NIO funded an initial one-year pilot programme, which began in October 2003. The programme has now been extended until March 2006 with funding from PBNI and NIO.

The evaluation looked at the experiences of 74 referrals from PBNI’s Greater Belfast’s Youth Justice Team, which includes Lisburn and North Down. The evaluation covered the period from October 2003 to March 2005.

Flexible and tailored

The programme is not a rigidly structured service which can be applied to all participants. Its aim

is to offer tailored programmes which meet the needs of individual young people who are referred to it. Every young person goes through an initial assessment process to identify their particular strengths and weaknesses, needs and aspirations. While the programme will differ to some extent for each individual, there are a number of common features – personal development, essential skills, prevocational training and preparation for the world of work. None are expected to make definitive decisions at the outset in

terms of their future career choices but rather are offered a range of opportunities and experiences before they make any long-term career decisions. It is felt that this model of supported intervention to improve or enhance a young

person’s employability could make it less likely that they will re-offend.

Before a young person is referred to the programme, the referral agency carries out an assessment of risk of re-offending. Of those referred 20% were low risk, 31% were medium risk and 49% were high risk. The initial remit of the programme was to receive only those young offenders who were deemed to be low or medium risk. However, with agreement of all of the key stakeholders, it was decided that the high risk clients should be included among the referrals to the programme.

Many of the young people who undertake the programme have no formal educational attainment, little self-esteem, feelings of alienation from society and a sense of hopelessness about securing employment. In addition, issues such as drug and alcohol misuse, family difficulties, communication skills gaps and poor relationships within the broader community, only add to their barriers to employability.

Positive outcomes

Nevertheless, of the 59 young people who have completed the programme, 20% got a job, 27% went into mainstream training (Jobskills Programmes), 3% moved into further education courses and 10% took up other forms of training. In total, that is, there was a positive outcome for 60% of those who took part in the programme.

The referral agency staff who have been involved with the programme since 2003, felt that having the programme run by NIACRO brought a more independent element to the work as it wasn't viewed as part of the formal criminal justice system. They pointed out that benefits such as developing self discipline, getting up in the mornings, regular attendance at courses, interacting with peer and other age groups, focusing on positive activities and thinking about future career prospects were essential to enhancing the employability skills of the clients.

Listening to all the players involved – the young people, their referral agents, training providers – it's clear that the programme has some unique qualities. One is its flexibility and its willingness to engage with the most "hard to reach" young people, another is the co-ordinator's approach to the work and the level of support provided to clients.

The programme is overseen by a Steering Group made up of representatives from the Probation Board, NIO, and NIACRO. Recently the Youth Justice Agency has nominated a representative to the group and we hope to include a representative from DEL in the near future. The Steering Group is now looking at ways of expanding the programme beyond Greater Belfast/North Down to possibly take in the whole of Northern Ireland.

NIACRO services for young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre.

NIACRO has been providing the Independent Representation Project to the Juvenile Justice Centre since 1992. Following the closure of the Lisnevin site NIACRO agreed to increase its services to the Centre through a number of pilots run throughout 2004-2005. We have recently completed an evaluation of the long-standing IR project, and also the new services.

Independent Representation Project

The overarching aim of the IR project is to provide a listening and advocacy role for young people in custody, who form a particularly vulnerable and isolated group. The evaluation drew on the opinions of the young people, volunteers and centre staff involved with the project.

There was some confusion among the young people as to the position of the Independent Representatives, but 81% did know that the IRs are volunteers and 73% did feel comfortable confiding in the IRs.

"When we raise problems, they do try their hardest to sort them out."

80% of young people agreed with this statement.

The volunteers and staff felt that the project was worthwhile for the young people. The volunteers felt they received adequate training and support to fulfil the role. They felt valued by the young people and the staff.

The staff felt that the relationship was a positive one and useful for the young people to have an independent voice.

To improve the service, young people will be given information on admission to the Centre to ensure that they are aware of the IR role.

NIACRO is delighted to work in partnership with the JJC and others to offer increased opportunities to the young people and their families, to make positive choices for the future.

The Pilot Services

family centred visiting

Goal: To help parents rebuild fractured relationships with the young person in custody and to enhance their parenting role.

Evaluation: 85% of young people in the JJC receive regular visits. However, almost 46% felt that visits within the JJC could be improved in terms of privacy, the times of visits, and access to transport.

One family member who received support from NIACRO to visit her son said, "I'm just glad there is a service like this provided as I don't think I'd be able to cope with just one visit a week. With the visits being on Wednesdays and Sundays, it divides the week up better so by the time I get home

from a visit it's only a couple of days till I see him again and I've got the phone calls in between the visits."

The recent inspection of the JJC by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate for Northern Ireland also highlighted the importance of the services provided by NIACRO. "It is, therefore, good to learn of the additional role agreed with NIACRO for their assistance in encouraging enhanced family visiting, which will be beneficial. NIACRO already has valuable experience in promoting child-centred visits in prisons."

We will continue to highlight the necessity of improved visiting arrangements to the JJC.

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mentoring

Goal: To match a young person with a mentor while they are in custody and for the mentor to visit them, build their relationship and continue that mentoring relationship when they return to the community.

Evaluation: Five young people were matched with mentors in the JJC. This proved more difficult than expected as the majority of young people in the Centre are on remand. This means there are no definite time scales and many of the young people are unsure of where they will go when they leave.

The volunteers matched with young people in the centre felt that it was a worthwhile experience. However, they were unhappy that a member of staff was always in close proximity and they would have liked some sort of activity which they could share with the mentee.

Again, centre staff are positive about the contribution mentors make to the young people's time in the Centre and the continuity they add post-release.

We hope to offer mentoring to all young people who have received a sentence, and will work with the Centre to improve the range of activities that are offered to young people and their mentors.

information services

Goal: To develop an information pack for families of young people within the JJC.

Evaluation: An information leaflet will soon be available to all families ensuring that they are aware of the policies and procedures of the JJC and the services provided by NIACRO to support them.

Making It Their World

POLICY-MAKING'S IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

NIACRO responded to over 50 public consultations in 2004-2005, and is rapidly heading towards a similar total in the current year. In line with our theme of work with young people in this issue, NIACRO News summarises our responses to two significant consultations this year.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE ORDER

NIACRO, in its response to the consultation on the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, concentrated on the aspects which affect children and young people. One of these is the proposal to allow the Secretary of State to extend the list of bodies which can apply for an anti-social behaviour order, the controversial ASBO. Alongside detailed comments on specific aspects of the consultation, NIACRO repeated its general concerns about ASBOs.

NIACRO, along with partners in the youth justice system, has had grave concerns about the introduction of ASBOs all along. There's no doubt that they are politically "crowd-pleasing" – the public, exasperated by what they see as a decline in young people's behaviour, were likely to approve the idea of anti-social behaviour being stopped in its tracks.

But will it work? There has been little or no research into whether or not ASBOs change people's behaviour for the better. It is depressing to read that the Home Affairs Committee recently concluded that "naming and shaming" is essential to enforce an ASBO. Instead, it reinforces

people's anxieties and stigmatises the young person. At worst, it may even become a badge of honour.

So NIACRO does not believe that ASBOs are an effective way of dealing with anti-social behaviour. And, frustratingly, there are other initiatives which take a totally different approach and are far more likely to change anti-social behaviour – like our own mentoring scheme, "diversionary" projects, restorative justice, working with families. Support and the reinforcement of positive behaviour have a track record of success. ASBOs don't.

You can get a copy of our response to the consultation, and of an article in an earlier NIACRO News where we spelled out our objections to ASBOs in more detail, from the Information Unit.

CHILDREN'S STRATEGY

"Making it R Wrld 2", the government's draft strategy for children, went out to consultation at the turn of the year. Latest word from OFMDFM is that the final strategy will be out in November, with a summary of consultation responses on the Department's website any time now.

Here are the main points NIACRO raised in our response.

When is a young person not a young person? There are many *definitions* – we welcomed the strategy’s choice of 18. One result of this would be that people under this age should not be held in prisons designed for adults but in juvenile justice facilities.

On *child protection*, we called for proper resourcing of advocacy services, i.e., services in which young people can make their point with confidence and trust, knowing they’ll be not only listened to but heard. Some good initiatives have had to come to an end with the end of the Children’s Funds. So far as *vetting* is concerned, a criminal record in itself should not automatically exclude an adult from working with children.

There is a particular problem for *children who are directly or indirectly affected by the threat of attacks from within their community*. It’s easy to see the impact this can have on a child’s health, education, and emotional well-being. Our experience is that these situations are dealt with as one-off crises (which indeed they are for the child concerned). What is needed is a consistent response, adequately resourced, involving all the agencies concerned, which doesn’t further stigmatise and distress the children.

The consultation document talked about “*a child centred whole system approach*” which is a bit of a mouthful, but you can see what they’re getting at. This is presumably what the new Children’s Minister will lead on; the co-ordination of services across government. In which case, it might be interesting to be a fly on the wall when those who are spearheading initiatives to keep children out of the criminal justice system and/or work effectively with them when they are in it, sit down to discuss the strategy with those who are imposing ASBOs.

Preventing offending: there is good preventative work going on, mostly on a project or trial basis, in Northern Ireland. Much of it has been evaluated and where effective it should be maintained, extended and publicised.

Parents and children: it should be made easy for a child to keep in contact with a parent in prison. The Prison Service has developed a visiting programme which has made this somewhat easier, but it needs to be consistent if children are not to be disappointed.

The draft strategy rightly tackles the problem of *poverty*. Most of NIACRO’s adult clients live on benefit, and so therefore do their children. Anti-poverty initiatives



need to be assessed to ensure that this particular group of service users are treated sensitively and flexibly.

A MINISTER FOR NORTHERN IRELAND'S CHILDREN

Any attempt to co-ordinate policy and services for children and young people across the 11 government departments and the whole range of youth-related agencies is certainly welcome. And in reality all 11 departments are involved, even if some seem more relevant than others, for under the Northern Ireland Act’s section 75 duties, they should all be testing their policies and services to see if they promote equality for young people.

However, the Minister himself, in a Belfast Telegraph article on 18 August, made the point that “Every week, I find something new I am responsible for”. Like all the Direct Rule Ministers, Jeff Rooker has to keep a lot of plates

On 10 August, Secretary of State Peter Hain announced that Jeff Rooker would be Northern Ireland’s first minister for children. The Secretary of State described the new minister as having “a key leadership role” in driving forward the 10-year strategy for children, due in the autumn. Lord Rooker himself said he’d be setting up a Ministerial and Young People’s sub-committee (it’s not quite clear why “sub” or “sub” of what!) and a Children and Young People’s Forum.

spinning; how much time will he be able to give to children?

As this NIACRO News feature shows, crime, crime prevention and the criminal justice system impacts hugely on Northern Ireland’s young people. We have written to the Minister to welcome his appointment, and look forward to sharing with him – initially at a roundtable he is hosting in November - our experience and views on behalf of this particular group of citizens.

introducing children services planning

NIACRO has been involved in Children Services Planning since the four Health and Social Services Boards adopted it as a mechanism for planning and co-ordinating services. We were hopeful that the new Children and Young People's Committees in each Board, with senior representatives from the statutory and voluntary sectors who have responsibility for services for children, would lead to better planning and therefore better services.

Joined up planning

Indeed, one of our major concerns has always been that the children and young people with whom we work, as at risk of offending or as young offenders, are often the same children with whom other agencies are or have been working. It seemed to us that we needed a forum where better information sharing and integrated services could be discussed and put in place so that children and young people were receiving the best services as early as possible in their lives. This approach would have meant that the universal education, health, early years and youth service provision for children would be better able to meet the needs of the vast majority of children and families. Specialist services could therefore be targeted more effectively at those at greatest risk of exclusion.

It would be fair to say that we have at times been disappointed that integrated services have not been achieved. We have also felt frustrated at the lack of "buy in" from agencies. We understand that there are competing demands on agencies that sometimes conflict with the overall aim of

Children Services Planning but it's worth putting the time and effort in now to get the process right. Despite the frustrations, NIACRO has continued to play a role on the four subgroups "Children in Conflict with the Law" and to actively support colleagues from all agencies in trying to make the vision a reality.

a regional approach

On a more positive note, we are particularly pleased that this year all four Children and Young People's Committees are signing up to a regional chapter in their new plans. This is a welcome step forward and will improve effective targeting and service delivery across Northern Ireland. The importance of sharing information, good practice models and innovations in service delivery cannot be over-emphasised, and the coming together of all four committees will help to achieve their aims. We endorse the themes the committees have adopted and are particularly pleased to see the emphasis on family support as recognition of the need to enhance families' coping skills to meet the needs of the "whole child".

NIACRO will continue to play an active role within the Children Services Planning process across Northern Ireland and will work with all agencies to achieve better services for all children and young people. In the long term, the aim of reducing offending and re-offending by children and young people will only be met by giving quality mainstream services to all families and high quality specialist

Thank you to a young author, currently in custody, for letting us print this poem which she sent to her mentor in August.

Little Things in Life

Too often we don't realise
What we have until it's gone.
Too often we want to say,
"I'm sorry, I was wrong".

Sometimes it seems we hurt the one
We hold dearest in our hearts
And we allow the foolish things
To tear our lives apart.

So be sure that you let people know
How much they mean to you.
Take time and say the words
Before your time is through.

Be sure that you appreciate
Everything you've got.
Be thankful for the little things
In life, that mean a lot.



Bill Lockhart, Chief Executive

YOUTH JUSTICE AGENCY

Much of NIACRO's work is carried out in partnership with key criminal justice statutory bodies. We will be highlighting some of them in the next few issues of NIACRO News.

In this issue, we feature the Youth Justice Agency.

The Youth Justice Agency was established in April 2003, consolidating in one organisation the responsibility for children who offend in Northern Ireland. NIACRO works with the Youth Justice Agency on many fronts – the Agency funds part of our Independent Representation work, buys places in the mentoring programme, and refers young people to the Youth Employability Programme.

NIACRO News talked to the Agency's Chief Executive Bill Lockhart about its role, and about the myths and realities of young people and crime here.

Bill explained that the Agency's origins can be traced back as far as the 1995 Children Order and the 1998 Criminal Justice (Children) Order; both marking significant changes in the way the state proposed to relate to children in general, and children who offend in particular. In March 2000, the report of the Criminal Justice Review recommended the setting up of the Agency, and, via the Justice Act of 2002, this duly came to pass in 2003.

How big a step was it for youth justice? – “huge” in Bill's view. There has been a real shift of emphasis towards keeping children out of custody except in the most serious cases, and then for as short a time as possible, along with intensive and innovative programmes for tackling the behaviour that can lead a young person into the criminal justice system in the first place.

The Agency organises its work under three main pillars – community services, the Youth Conference Service, and custodial provision. Two and a half years isn't long to bring about measurable change – less than that for the Youth Conference Service, which manages the “restorative justice” element of the work, and which accepted 431 referrals in 2004. This is about 80% of the young people who come before the courts or the Prosecution Service in the areas where Youth Conferencing is available. Over 400 “conferences” have been completed, and an external evaluation of the service will be completed this winter, and will be published.

An Omnibus Survey, which included questions on public awareness of the Agency, was disappointing. Only 10% of people interviewed recognised the Agency's name; even fewer in less well-off neighbourhoods. There is an awareness-raising job to be done. However, Bill was encouraged that 80% said they were in agreement with the restorative/preventative/rehabilitative approach to youth crime.

What's to be done?

The standard "common sense" question on juvenile justice, often put to NIACRO, is, "Aren't we going soft on bad behaviour?" We know very well that this is not the case, but there is growing public unease at what is seen as a decline in standards of behaviour; in Northern Ireland there is the extra dimension of political conflict; young women are seen as catching up with young men in anti-social activities... "Punishment" is a word more popular in the general population than in the criminal justice system. Getting tough seems to receive the popular vote, up to and including calling on paramilitaries to deliver their version of justice. So NIACRO News put the same question to Bill.

His response is immediate – the restorative justice model, designed to keep children and young people out of custody, has 100% support from those victims of crime who have put it to the test.

All those interviewed for the interim evaluation of the Youth Conference Service said that they would recommend the process to anyone in a similar situation to their own. This also addresses the other routine "common sense" question – "What about the victims?" So does the fact that 60% of victims of crime here, who are offered the option of meeting the perpetrator, take the offer up – well above New Zealand, sometimes regarded as the birthplace of restorative justice, at 41%, or England, where only 13% choose to get involved.

But Bill is clear on the need to keep a focus on the victim of crime – "There should be a stronger victim orientation", he says, and sees the opportunity for the victim's voice to be heard as an important way to help them come to terms with the experience. He also points out the value to the young offender of seeing and hearing the real distress that they may have caused.

It's not a secret that NIACRO has serious reservations about ASBOs, and so it probably

came as no surprise to Bill that he should be asked for his opinion on them. "There is a place for ASBOs as part of a continuum", was the diplomatic reply, along with a quotation from Justice Minister David Hanson that they should be used as a last resort. "They need to be very carefully formulated, and involve the relevant agencies", thinks Bill, and he advocates some of the alternative processes available before the stage of an ASBO is reached.

Complex needs

And the young people who find themselves dealing with the Agency, how would Bill describe them? "There are high levels of trauma in the children we deal with", he says, and they often come from "families with very complex needs". In Bill's observation, most parents are more than willing to accept support, even if some give up from despair, exhaustion or just lack of emotional and other resources. Many young people – a third – come direct to the Agency from the care system. Again, we found ourselves talking about the balance between caring for vulnerable people, and recognising that what they have done is not acceptable to their society. "Holding someone responsible for their behaviour is in fact treating them with respect", Bill points out.

No statutory agency works in isolation, and Bill is very conscious of the many links which need to be made with statutory and voluntary bodies. Asked about the appointment of a Minister for Children, he welcomed the idea of a champion at ministerial level, and the "potential structure" for integrating the very many structures and services currently working for children. He "holds the voluntary sector in great regard; they make a vital contribution", and also looks to it for much of the preventative work which hopefully will keep young people away from the statutory system altogether. Though maintaining that people don't see engagement with the statutory services – like the Agency's own community initiatives – as stigmatising, he recognises that the voluntary sector can be more flexible and perhaps closer to the community, building "qualitatively different relationships" with people and communities. NIACRO would go along with that assessment, and looks forward to working constructively with the Agency in the future.

You can get detailed information on the work of the Youth Justice Agency on its website: youthjusticeagency.cyni.gov.uk Email: info@yjani.gov.uk

On the Receiving End

My name is Geraldine and I am 20 years old.

When I was 15 I was in a Childrens' Home in Belfast and was convinced I didn't have a friend in the whole world. I hated the staff in the home, as well as all social workers. Nobody ever listened to me and I frequently got so frustrated I had outbursts of violence. I ran away all the time and was always 'self harming'.

I had fallen in with a bad crowd (some of whom were joyriding) and was sniffing, and smoking blow.

One day my Key Worker told me about the Independent Visitors Scheme and asked if I was interested. I said I might be – as anything was better than the way I was.

I met my Independent Visitor at the home one afternoon and she seemed okay, so we agreed to go out the following week. I was a bit nervous but I soon relaxed as I realised she wanted to do whatever I wanted to do – and that was a first!

We went for a burger and a chat and found we had a lot of interests in common – even though she was a lot older than me. Our relationship grew and I really looked forward to our outings – especially as I got to choose. We did lots of things together, we went to the cinema, had barbecues, went bowling, had walks in forest parks and had meals in restaurants. But it was more than the outings, my Independent Visitor **LISTENED** to me and accepted me and gave me encouragement to talk calmly with the staff in the home - instead of erupting into violence.

I have calmed down a lot in the past four years and am no longer violent, or feel the need to 'self harm'. I don't sniff or smoke anything. I choose my friends more wisely these days too, and am engaged to my boyfriend who I have been with for two years. I share a house with another girl who was in the childrens' home with me and we get on well, but I will be moving into a flat with my fiancé in the very near future.

I still meet with my Independent Visitor and am very close to her and

IV Scheme

FUN DAYS

The Independent Visitor Scheme held activity fun days for volunteers and young people on 13 and 20 August. We took the young people over 13 and their volunteers go-karting on the first day, while the under-12s went to Laser Quest the following Saturday.

With a mini grand prix event at Ultimate Karting the young people were more than willing to let their competitive streaks come through and raced around the track like true professionals! The same could not be said for Lisa and Sinead, the project workers, who struggled with taking corners and who were heard requesting karts with wing mirrors.

Well done to the volunteer who won the event and to the two young men who were placed second and third. Thanks to everyone for taking part with such enthusiasm; it was a very enjoyable day out.

The following weekend saw the younger people of the scheme getting suited up with their laser packs and taking to the floor like troopers. The Blue team and The

Red team battled it out up and down ramps and behind pillars trying to rack up as many points as possible. There was Lara Croft, Superman and Skywalker to name but a few of the team players and everyone really enjoyed it. There was a good mix of both volunteers and young people who got along very well together making the day another success!

As the Independent Visitor Scheme continues to enjoy success, we are always looking for more ways to grow and develop and these activity days were the first of their kind within this project. They were so successful that we're going to run them again and they gave both the volunteers and young people that sense of being part of something fun and worthwhile. As the project workers it was great to see so many availing of the opportunity of the day out and gave us the confidence to go for it again in the future.

Our thanks to everyone who took part - we look forward to the next time!

am very grateful to the Independent Visitors Scheme for helping me to get control of my life.

13-year-old Mentee Tells His Story

Before I started with my volunteer going out each week, I was getting into a lot of trouble at school and around my area. There was nothing to do. With my mentor we go out and try different activities, he talks to me and he listens to what I want to say. I thought this would be like meeting a social worker every week but with my mentor he is my friend. I'm glad I gave the mentoring a chance.

I like having a friend to talk to. I talk more to him than I've ever talked to anyone. I always turn up cos I know he is a volunteer and doesn't get paid to have to be with me. He likes my

company and we have a good laugh. Sometimes he helps me with my homework.

We've spent a lot of time fishing and we both completed a course on fly fishing with the Loughs Agency. I got a certificate and my photo taken with the others. I would like to do more courses and maybe teach other young ones like me how to fish.

If I was a salesman for the project I would say to the young people, give it a go, you have a choice to get involved and I've never been given many choices before that I had a say in what I wanted. It's a brilliant chance to try new activities and make a good friend who is easy to get on with. Mentoring makes sense.

continues over →

Being a Volunteer

I had volunteered before with another organisation and really enjoyed it. I had heard about NIACRO through a friend and looked at all the projects. I thought I would be better suited going in and talking to a group of young people instead of a one to one.

It is something I wanted to do for my own personal achievement, I wanted to be able to give something back to society and to help young people make their situation better for themselves.

I was worried about how the young people would react to 'strangers' and was also worried that they would be a lot more violent and aggressive. This was overcome by being myself and building up a rapport with the young people so I could get to know them properly.

NIACRO was very supportive. The training challenged some of my perceptions of the young people. We also went to see the centre before hand and talk to some of the staff, this meant I felt comfortable the first visit as I knew where to go. Also being part of a pair and initially going in with an IR who has been there for a while helps as they know the people and can support you.

I enjoy getting to meet new young people from different backgrounds every week as well as getting to build up a rapport with the young people and them actually seeking me out to talk to.

I feel the scheme benefits the young people as it gives them an independent voice and someone neutral to talk to if they are frustrated about anything. It also gives them a chance to see a different face and feel valued that there are people who are concerned about them and their opinions.

I have definitely seen changes in the young people during my time with them – they are friendly when we come in and the majority look pleased to see us when we arrive. There have also been some improvements in some of the things they have asked for.

Being a volunteer has been a worthwhile experience for me and has given me the personal satisfaction of doing something to help others. Although I did not get into volunteering for specific experience it would be useful if I decide on a career change.

YOUNG PEOPLE USING NIACRO SERVICES



(from left):- Billy Eagleson (Mentor Development Worker), Naomhin (Mentor), Alex (Mentee), Martina Tally (Youth Conference Co-ordinator)

Alex is 16 years old, and in February of this year he took part in a Youth Conference. As part of the action plan formulated at the conference Alex agreed to engage with a NIACRO mentor for a period of at least six months.

Alex was introduced to Naomhin, his mentor, in March. They quickly developed a good rapport and a strong relationship based on honesty and trust. Naomhin challenged Alex's views on offending and his outlook on his life and future in general.

Another part of Alex's action plan was to paint a mural in a local playgroup. Although he had a strong interest in art, Alex had no experience of having ever faced or completed a challenge this large before. He completed all the other parts of the plan, and this was the only one outstanding. With Naomhin's help however he set to

work. Alex and Naomhin worked hard at the mural over the summer. Such was the dedication to the task that they worked on it together every day for a week in August in order to ensure that it was completed when the playgroup started again in September - playgroup staff are thrilled how it has turned out.

During his time with Naomhin, Alex has also gained a part-time job and is starting a course in brick-laying in September.

Alex can be rightly proud of the progress he has made since his Youth Conference as can Naomhin of the support she has given him. It is perhaps testament to this that Alex feels he no longer needs a mentor and wants Naomhin to give her time to helping another young person who has found themselves in a similar situation to himself.

CELEBRATES YEAR OF THE VOLUNTEER 2005

NIACRO's Chief Executive Olwen Lyner met last month with the Director General of the Prison Service, Robin Masefield. On the agenda at this regular half-yearly meeting was the current consultation on women prisoners, the location of the proposed third prison, and the extended role of the Prisoner Ombudsman.

In June, NIACRO met the newly appointed Prisoner Ombudsman Brian Coulter, to discuss his role and the issues we raised in our response to the consultation on the new prisoner complaints system (you can get a copy of the response from the Information Unit).

New prison for Northern Ireland

The idea of replacing Magilligan Prison has been on the cards for some time, and got some media coverage last month. This has obvious implications for NIACRO; we have had the opportunity to discuss the implications with the Prison Service in the past, and will do so again as the debate about the location and scale of any new prison develops. We know from the families who use our service in Magilligan that its isolated situation is a real problem.

Though our own visitors' centre offers a warm welcome and an excellent service, it's in poor accommodation. For however long Magilligan is in operation, we are hoping to access something better for the people who make the journey to keep in touch with prisoners there.

Last year Chancellor Gordon Brown declared 2005 as the 'Year of the Volunteer'. The vision of the 'Year' is to create awareness of, increase the opportunities for, and encourage more people to get involved in, volunteering.

The 'Year of the Volunteer' covers the entire UK and is being co-ordinated in Northern Ireland by the Volunteer Development Agency, in partnership with Volunteer Bureaux (NI), the BBC, the Department for Social Development and Northern Bank.

As the 'Year' draws to a close, NIACRO recognised the dedication, commitment and contribution of its 180 volunteers by holding a Celebration Event on Saturday 1 October. (The 'Year' themed October to celebrate volunteers who work with young people.)

Volunteers are vital to the work of NIACRO, particularly in supporting children and young people in need. They bring experience, skills and diversity to complement our paid staff in delivering essential services to the community. We value the unique and distinct contribution our volunteers make on a daily basis and wanted to recognise and thank them for their valuable participation.

The Celebration Event took place at our new Amelia Street premises and gave volunteers and staff the opportunity to come together and celebrate the partnership which exists between them. As an organisation we promote high standards of service provision, and our volunteers make a significant contribution to those standards.

The first part of the event concentrated on seeking volunteers' views on guiding the future work of NIACRO. We also

focussed on the young people we engage with, their thoughts on our volunteer projects and volunteers' views and experiences.

Sandra Adair, Assistant Director at the Volunteer Development Agency, spoke about the significance of the 'Year' and presented the National Mentoring Award, a kite mark awarded by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, in recognition of NIACRO's quality standards of service provision. The afternoon finished with a wine reception, photographs and then it was on to a local restaurant for an evening meal.

Our volunteers contribute approximately 10,000 hours each year to our work. We would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the staff, management and Executive Committee, to thank every volunteer for their continued dedication, enthusiasm and support, in this, 'The Year of the Volunteer' 2005.

NIACRO recruits volunteers on an ongoing basis so if you have 2-3 hours free each week or fortnight and would be interested to find out more about opportunities available, contact our Volunteer Co-ordinator. vivienne@niacro.co.uk.

MEMBERSHIP

NIACRO is a membership organisation, governed by an Executive Committee elected from among its members. We are keen to welcome new members who have an interest in our work.

As a member, you will:

- Make an important contribution to NIACRO's policies and services through nominating members to the Executive Committee and voting in elections for the Executive;
- Receive NIACRO News at least three times a year;
- Receive our new publications and leaflets;
- Have priority booking for NIACRO events.

If you'd like to become a member, contact Jackie Junk on 028 9032 0517 ext 215.

NIACRO news

NIACRO News is our way of letting you know what we are doing, thinking and planning, and of bringing important criminal justice issues to your attention. We welcome feedback on any article, or on the content and style of the newsletter as a whole.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

NIACRO's 34th AGM will be held at

Amelia House

on 24 November 2005

2.30pm to 4.30pm

The guest speaker will be:

Dr Shadd Maruna

Reader in the School of Law at Queen's University.

Dr Maruna is an expert in resettlement and rehabilitation, and will be speaking on positive influences on changing behaviour.

All welcome – please let Jackie Junk know you are coming on 028 9032 0157 ext 215 or jackie@niacro.co.uk

staff arrivals and leavers

In the last six months or so, we've welcomed seven new colleagues to NIACRO – good wishes to them as they come aboard.

They are:

- **Sandra Birnie**, Childcare Worker with the Youth Offenders Centre.
- **Phyllis Hunter, Louise McIvor** and **Sylvia Watt**, Training Officers on Essential Skills in the Jobtrack programme. Phyllis is based in Belfast, Louise in the North West and Sylvia in the Rural South area.
- **Angie Mogey**, Receptionist in Amelia House.
- **Michelle Ring** and **Kelly Anne Stewart**, Project Workers. Michelle is working on developing opportunities for job placements and Kelly Anne on our planned new programme on mentoring for adults.

Leaving NIACRO with our good wishes for the future are

Laurent Kartheiser and **Eddie McDaid** from our Derry/Londonderry office, and **Roisin Regan** who worked on the Way2Go project.



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