

niacro

20 news

Spring 2008

GETTING TOGETHER



Women's group members and mentors

NEW SUPPORT GROUPS FOR SERVICE USERS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

The mutual support and joint learning that a good group can give its members – and indeed the learning that NIACRO gains from open discussion with service users – mean that support groups play an increasingly important part in our work. At another level, our partnerships with other statutory and voluntary/community organisations also bring the opportunity to pool experience and share learning. Here are descriptions of three of our current groups. A fourth, a focus group for young people with a family member in prison, is based in the North West. It ran from January to March and is currently being evaluated – more in the next issue.

also in this issue:

niacro and the psni contacts with the police service

here's what we think latest policy responses

getting together new support groups

volunteer update volunteer forum and new standards

WOMEN'S INTENSIVE SUPPORT PROGRAMME

NIACRO's APAC project has been working with people who need support to resettle in the community after they leave prison. The project also recruits, trains and matches volunteer mentors with adult offenders in the community. At the end of 2007, the Eastern Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Team made some grant funding available for a short-term project to tackle substance misuse with "at risk" and vulnerable adults. In APAC, we had been particularly keen to develop our work with women in the criminal justice system, particularly those leaving custody faced with substance abuse problems which make it difficult for them to build ordinary supportive social relationships. We also know from experience that women offenders are more willing to consider having a volunteer mentor than men.

We wanted to use this opportunity to test out if the women would benefit from the support not only of APAC staff but also a volunteer mentor, and attendance at a regular group session. In particular, we wanted to see if the group could help the volunteer and the participant to get to know each other and make contact between group sessions. Although we had some clear ideas about how the group would work, it was important that participants themselves would



Olwen Lyner, Graham Kelly (PBNi) and Robin Masfield (NIPS) at the launch of the 2005 report on reintegration needs of women prisoners

guide the development of the programme and we would facilitate it.

We recruited and trained up new volunteers and invited the women to become involved just before Christmas 2007. We have had

we have plans to do some work around financial capability and managing debt. The participants create and maintain the group and give it direction, supporting each other and being supported by staff and volunteers. It will be for them

I feel I can be myself

the consistent participation of three very reliable and dedicated volunteers throughout. There are five participants at this stage – not everyone wants to have an individual volunteer – and the group meets weekly. We have tested a range of activities designed to encourage relaxation and discussion, from jewellery making and painting to acupuncture, and

individually to decide if the group has been a positive experience for them and if it has made any difference to their situation; asked for their views informally they said, "You can talk openly to people who've been through the same experiences"; "It gets you out of the house for a chat and you know you'll get a cuppa and food each week"; "I feel I can be myself".

The funding for the pilot project ended in March and we are currently gathering feedback, evaluating the approach, and hopefully we can secure funding to develop it in the future.

If you'd like to know more about the programme, contact Rachel Long rachel@niacro.co.uk



Woodlands, the Juvenile Justice Centre

TIME FOR ME

“Time for Me” is a joint initiative between NIACRO and Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre. It’s a group for parents or carers of young people who are involved in the criminal justice system. We work in partnership to respond to their needs, giving them the chance to try new activities, build confidence and self esteem, receive advice and support and have fun! The aim is that parents and carers can be helped to feel better about themselves and that in turn they feel more able to cope with their young person’s difficult and challenging behaviour.

The importance of the family in tackling offending, in supporting and encouraging change and in reintegrating a young person back into the community can’t be overestimated. The creation of a dedicated family worker at the JJC to focus on encouraging parents to engage in a positive way when their young person came into custody has been beneficial. NIACRO also has a great deal of experience in this area through running visitors’ centres and the Family Links service, as well as already providing the Independent Representation scheme at the JJC.

TIME FOR ME

The Parents Support Group developed in direct response to claims by parents of young people coming into the centre that they felt isolated not only within their community but also often within their own family as a result of something their young person had done. In addition these parents, almost without exception, were coping with multiple stresses such as depression, debt, relationship difficulties and addiction. There was also the overwhelming feeling that they had failed as parents. Yet these were the very people we were expecting to take home and manage young people whose behaviour was difficult and challenging.

Since the JJC's family worker approached NIACRO about developing extra support for parents, the partnership between the Centre and NIACRO has drawn on the skill and resources of both agencies. On a practical level the use of the NIACRO offices in the centre of Belfast offers a neutral venue which is easily accessible and holds no stigma for the parents. The group has also led on many occasions to parents being encouraged to take up other sources of support (counselling services and a number of NIACRO services). The group expanded to include Hydebank Wood YOC; if young people move on to Hydebank their families can still have group support.

AIMS

The group aims to provide a safe space where parents can come together to support each other, gain new skills, be put in touch with appropriate support services and have some time to themselves. It also decreases feelings of isolation, allows them to make new friends, increases self-esteem, disseminates information and provides them with the tools to cope with a variety of situations.

Attendance at the group is completely voluntary and the members drop in and out at their convenience. They may hear about the group from social services, JJC staff, or the YJA's Community Services staff.

SUPPORT FOR GROUP MEMBERS

Group members can access transport, childcare, NIACRO services (particularly benefits and welfare advice), advocacy and support at meetings, support from fellow-members, and training in, for example, drug and alcohol awareness and basic computer skills.

Although the group is open to anyone who fits the referral criteria, the meeting takes place in Amelia House and therefore the members typically come from the Belfast and Greater Belfast area. Parents can also be referred to other groups, for example a NIACRO support

group in Antrim and groups run by community services throughout Northern Ireland.

The two support workers, Jackie Downie the family worker from the JJC and NIACRO's Senior Practitioner IR, Aisling Cartmill, suggest options but the group decides the activities and learning sessions.

The issues that come up at meetings include drug and alcohol misuse, self harm, suicide, sexual orientation, being a carer, community threat, parenting issues, domestic violence, housing, agoraphobia, dealing with police, social services or Probation, and mental health topics such as depression and anxiety. Members can share the real reasons why they find it difficult to attend meetings, engage with social services or undertake family work. They can respond to issues within the JJC and give their views on their own experiences within the centre, which can help improve services.

The group has taken part in other activities including an information session on rights as a parent or carer, how to access other support services, a pampering session, cookery, a self harm awareness session, stress and coping mechanisms, alcohol and drug awareness, art sessions, how to talk about tough issues, creative writing, a theatre visit and meals out.

a safe space where parents can come together to support each other

WHAT THE MEMBERS THINK

There is currently a core group of thirteen members, approximately a third of the families whose young person is currently in the JJC. Below are examples of the benefits they report.

1. An important factor of the group is that they can drop in and out as this allows them to access support when they need. The fact that they're still coming shows their commitment to it.
2. After a "Rights as a parent" session one parent asked a member of the Children's Commissioner's Office to attend a meeting with her. This had a very positive outcome.
3. A couple of the members have said that this is the only time all week that they leave their house and another reports that this is the only time she spends "by myself for myself".
4. The drug awareness session allowed the group to explore in depth the types of drugs their young people were taking, and to share experiences and find out about support networks within their own communities.
5. Members report an increase in confidence and some feel that the peer support from the group gives them more confidence to tackle problems.
6. A visit to the theatre to watch a play on alcoholism started a discussion on members' own experiences with drugs and alcohol abuse and domestic abuse. This was the first time in a theatre for almost all group members and an experience they wish to repeat.
7. A number of members have accessed other NIACRO services including Family Links, benefit advice and Youth Employability, as a result of attending the group.
8. The members can share anxieties about attending meetings etc in the Centre and feel more able to overcome these difficulties.
9. Currently the members are planning to develop a leaflet for parents by parents and developing the necessary skills to do this.

FUTURE PLANS

The group will continue as a support for parents of children and young people in custody. It is hoped that members will join NIACRO's family support volunteers and will be trained to run future support groups and act as advocates and peer support for other parents. The links to other support services both within NIACRO and in the community will continue to be built on. Members will be invited to participate in NIACRO's Families Forum where they will help us to comment on policies and influence services that affect their children and themselves.

Jackie Downey and Aisling Cartmill (if you'd like to know more about the group, contact Aisling, aisling@niacro.co.uk)

Accessing Services For Offenders Forum

NIACRO has long worked in partnership with other NGOs who directly or indirectly help offenders and ex-prisoners resettle and reintegrate successfully into the community. We have now brought together some of these NGOs to pool our experience. The group's expertise includes: housing; benefits, money and debt; health and addiction; family support; and behavioural issues including acceptance within the community.

The members of the group are NIACRO, Advice NI, Council for the Homeless, Dunlewey Substance Advice Centre, Housing Rights Service and the Simon Community.

We will be monitoring what access to services offenders and ex-prisoners have at present, and raising the issues which emerge with the policy-makers. Where we see an opportunity for working in partnership on a particular initiative, we'll do so.

So far as lobbying is concerned, we all as individual organisations will redouble our efforts to make sure the needs and rights of this particular group of service users are brought into the thinking of Government, the Assembly and other public authorities. We believe

we can strengthen that influence by alerting each other to key policies and practices, and tracking the response we receive and the impact we're having.

At our last meeting, among other items of information exchanged, it emerged that there have been some significant steps forward in helping prisoners prepare for resettlement on the housing front. For example, they can be assessed as homeless in preparation for release and anyone serving over four years will be regarded as unintentionally homeless. These changes follow the establishment about 18 months ago of a housing advice service within the prison service, involving NIACRO, the Housing Executive and the Housing Rights Service.

If you'd like to know more about the Forum, contact Sile McLean, sile@niacro.co.uk

Recruiting People with Conflict Related Convictions



The basic principle arising from this report is that any conflict related conviction that pre-dates the Good Friday Agreement (April 1998) should not be taken into account unless it is 'materially relevant' to the employment being sought.

Employment Advice Line



Assists Employers and Job Applicants with disclosure issues

Offers Advocacy Service

Callers can remain anonymous

Disclosure statements can be prepared to assist Applicants

Employers are invited to attend training

EMPLOYMENT WORK HIGHLIGHTED AT LONDON CONFERENCE

Heather Reid and Gareth Eannetta recently delivered a workshop at the 'Practice into Policy' convention in London organised by the Centre for Economic & Social Inclusion.

The convention aimed to showcase emerging good practice in the field of offender employment.

The Convention was made up mainly of workshops where organisations had a chance to present their work in offender employment. NIACRO delivered a workshop entitled 'Employers – developing a strategy'. We described how we have developed a business case to engage with employers and our work with Business in the Community in doing so. The workshop also gave

details on our employer training sessions and our employment advice line. We concluded that offenders should be recognised as a priority group in need of greater legislative protection to break down the barriers they and their families encounter daily. We were delighted that the session was the best attended at the convention with delegates from a wide variety of organisations.

The event attracted some significant speakers including David Lammy, Minister for the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills; Maria Eagle, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, Ministry of Justice; Helen Edwards, Chief Executive of the National Offenders Management Service (who spoke at NIACRO's AGM in 2006). It concluded with Ken Lambert, ESF Division, Joint International Unit who made a live video link with a similar convention occurring simultaneously in Germany.

POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

SIR HUGH ORDE BECAME CHIEF CONSTABLE OF THE POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND IN 2002. A COUPLE OF MONTHS AGO WE INVITED HIM TO AMELIA HOUSE TO TALK ABOUT POLICING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

We began by picking up on an issue that had come up last year when we met with all the political parties on the devolution of criminal justice to the Assembly – the roles and functions of the District Policing Partnerships and the Community Safety Partnerships.

Sir Hugh's view was that splitting the accountability and community safety functions "raised issues" and noted that a multiplicity of groups and sub-groups were operating in this area. He called for "a lot of thoughtful work" leading to a rationalisation of the bodies.

NIACRO raised its concern that if the two bodies were merged, the accountability function of the DPPs – albeit we agree that it can end up as fairly sterile bean-counting – would inevitably swamp the more community-based role of the CSPs. To this Sir Hugh made the point that the PSNI would like to see in Northern Ireland a Crime and Disorder Act like that in Great Britain. Among the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 is the promotion of partnership working to reduce crime and disorder. It places a statutory duty on police and local authorities to develop and implement a strategy to tackle



Chief Constable Sir Hugh Orde with senior staff and Chairman Richard Buchanan at Amelia House

problems in their area. In doing so, the responsible authorities are required to work in partnership with a range of other local public, private, community and voluntary groups and with the community itself.

PARTNERSHIP

This issue of working in partnership came up again later in the discussion; NIACRO's considerable experience of partnership suggests that real efforts have to be made if it's to be sustained, effective and with equal value given to the

contributions of all the partners. We raised the apparent failure of communication between different criminal justice bodies at the time of the murder of Attracta Harron by Thomas Hamilton, and the subsequent work to improve these communications. Sir Hugh noted the change in the policing role in the circumstances of dangerous offenders, including sex offenders. "When I joined the police in 1977", he said, "you arrested someone, put them in front of a court, they went to prison or probation, and that was your responsibility ended."

Now, he pointed out, when a dangerous offender is released, they are often under considerable restrictions which take significant resources, including police resources, to oversee. Though even at that they are not, and cannot be, under the sort of 24-hour surveillance the public seem to believe is the case.

The Chief Constable believes that there are “some hugely impressive partnerships out there”. However, the work is piecemeal, there is a danger of overlap, and the police are always under pressure to be the main organisation to deliver – even where the work is not their “core business”. (This issue was raised again when Superintendent David Boyd, meeting with the Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee on the devolution of criminal justice, suggested that local councils could take the lead in the enforcement of the by-laws around drinking in public.)

One of NIACRO’s most often-repeated messages is that it is irrational and ineffective to spend so much more on detection, prosecution and processing than on resettlement and activities to change people’s behaviour. Sir Hugh set this in the context of the policing budget – “People need cops for protection” – but a lot of his budget does in fact go on diversionary activities at local level. He went on to deplore the amount of money wasted within the criminal justice system through the long delays and complex procedures in the prosecution process. NIACRO is

all too aware of this problem, since many of our clients have said that the most difficult issue for them was the delay and not knowing what was happening. Sir Hugh related this back to the earlier discussion about communications within the system. The different elements, in his view, don’t always see themselves as a continuum or work together effectively, and he welcomed some pilot projects both here and in other parts of the UK to streamline the process.

NIACRO raised the issue of the legacy of the conflict on policing and the confidence building which is needed if the entire community is to subscribe to and co-operate with a model of policing. The Chief Constable was categorical. “We police uniformly across the divide... [and] we are getting more calls from areas which historically we wouldn’t have... the big change in those communities seems to me to be confidence building around individual stories of good policing.” He cited domestic abuse as an example of the sort of situation that can lead to an improved view of the police. He also believes that “the good stories outweigh the bad stories” and that it was “bottom up pressure” from local communities which persuaded Sinn Fein to engage with the policing process.

DIVERSITY

We asked Sir Hugh to comment on the degree to which the PSNI is tackling the problem of sectarianism compared with the perhaps more relatively “safe” areas of diversity.

Sir Hugh outlined the training programmes and policy statements within which the PSNI tackles the problem. On training, he spoke of helping new officers “come to terms with [the fact that] the world in which they are going to police is completely unique”. “We cannot solve sectarianism, let’s be clear about that, we will police it as best we can, we will deal with the criminal offences that fall out of it”, he said.

Sir Hugh challenged the unfortunate and often-quoted claim that Belfast is “the race hate capital of Europe” as being “the craziest allegation I think I have heard since I have been here”, and pointed to examples of successful race initiatives. He also described effective work on homophobia, for example in L’Derry. Another area which causes the public real anxiety is drugs, and here again Sir Hugh was keen to put the scale of the problem in perspective – “Of course we do [have a drugs problem] but nothing on the scale that would cause the concern that it does in London.”

DEALING WITH THE PAST

Another part of the legacy issue is the work of the Historical Enquiries Team of which the Chief Constable said that the purpose was primarily to engage with the families on what had happened in the past. “It’s victim focussed”, he said, “It’s unique in the world to my knowledge.” He challenged the coherence and value of the many enquiries, re-opened inquests, re-examinations by the Police Ombudsman, all running alongside the work of the HET. In Sir Hugh’s view “We need a more holistic approach to how we deal with the

People need cops for protection

past” and he expressed the fear that if not, “policing in the future will be damaged by events in the past.” (In NIACRO’s view, the converse is even truer – that not dealing satisfactorily with the past would also be damaging). The Chief Constable also held that it is “a crazy way to go about the business just to focus on state killing, when the overwhelming majority of people here happened to be killed by terrorists...not by collusion.” (Again, NIACRO would make the point that a significant number of people carrying out non-state killings went through the courts.)

EMPLOYMENT

This led to a question from NIACRO about the recruitment of ex-offenders into the PSNI, which got an unambiguous answer from the Chief Constable – “it’s very simple. Anyone with a serious criminal conviction, regardless of motive, is excluded and I am not changing that.” However, he added that he is happy to listen to the views of anyone “who wants to make a difference to policing” whatever their background. NIACRO also urged the PSNI to publicise information on the localities, defined by postcode, from which recruits came. This could be a valuable confidence-building measure by demonstrating a change in recruitment patterns; not only in terms of community background but also in terms of class.

Leading on from direct recruitment to procurement, NIACRO made the point that ex-offenders need access to the widest possible number of potential employers. It’s unfair that some are completely excluded

from consideration if an employer is tendering for a public service contract. Sir Hugh agreed that there was a distinction between direct employment and supplying the organisation but that the necessary vetting process would stay in place. Our suggestion is that the PSNI could contribute to the resettlement process by actively targeting companies which are taking positive action to employ ex-offenders.

Every police service is asked about its clear-up rates, and NIACRO accordingly put the question to Sir Hugh. The answer for Northern Ireland is that there is a high clear-up rate for violent and more serious crime, but the rate for less serious offences is bad compared to other parts of the UK. For the Chief Constable, this is for a mix of reasons. One is perhaps a historical reluctance still to turn to the police either for help or to give information. Another is differences between the way the police service can act in different jurisdictions - for example fixed penalty tickets are a relatively painless way for a police service to raise its clear-up rate, but not available in Northern Ireland. In this context, Sir Hugh made the point that “people who have a poor quality of life also have a disproportionately high rate of being a victim of crime”.

The Chief Constable had, not long before we met with him, intimated that he did not think the PSNI should or would be routinely unarmed. When we asked why this should not be an aim, his view was that it has been considered, that it is reviewed every six months, that some of his officers think it is

possible and that there “may be a time when that moves on” - but that at present [there had been two attacks on PSNI officers just before we met Sir Hugh] “it is the wrong time to do it”.

DEVOLVING CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Our final question to the Chief Constable was on his view of the impact of the devolution of criminal justice to the Assembly. Sir Hugh had a clear view of where he would stand in a new structure. “I think it could happen tomorrow. From a personal point of view, my relationship is with the Policing Board and that’s how I would see it staying. I have an arms length relationship with the Minister which works very well; I don’t see why that can’t be translated to the Executive tomorrow.” He thinks, “there needs to be clarity on the role of the Policing Board and the Ministry and there needs to be some clear thinking on how it all works. The key will be money. What it does do is give responsibility for policing to the local administration.”

When we asked whether or not a local administration might bring a more punitive approach to criminal justice, Sir Hugh’s view was that it brings the decision-making into sharper focus and it raises the awareness of people in government about what is going on in reality, whereas at the minute it is very easy to say “it’s not up to us”.

NIACRO welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the policing and criminal justice debate with the Chief Constable, and look forward to developing our connections with the PSNI in the future.

STRENGTHENING OUR LINKS WITH THE PSNI

In January we welcomed 29 PSNI staff to Amelia House - mainly Youth Diversion Officers from all over Northern Ireland and representatives from Police Community Safety teams.

The purpose of the day was to introduce Youth Diversion Officers to the range of services NIACRO provides for young people at risk of offending and their families. The event was also an opportunity for staff from NIACRO and PSNI to get to know each other – particularly those working in the same geographical area – and take time to explore how we can work together in the future.

NIACRO staff shared information on a range of our services, including Family Links, Child and Parent Support (Caps), Assisting People and Communities (APAC), Youth Mentoring, the Independent Visitors scheme for young people in the care system, and our work in secure residential settings. This information session concluded with a presentation on the Youth Employability programme and

hopefully left our visitors with a better understanding of how these services can help young people.

Six different geographical groups took some time out together to discuss the issue of youth offending in their particular patch and look at some of the connections between them. Each group agreed at least one action which could improve how PSNI and NIACRO work together in that area, such as supplying information about NIACRO projects, arranging further meetings to share knowledge, and exploring ways of ensuring that our services can be utilised by the Youth Diversion Fora.

We look forward to meeting up again in around six months to take our discussions a little further, to see what impact the event has had on the ground, and to continue to build strong operational links with other people who like us are seeking to divert young people away from crime.

THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2007

Public consultation on the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 ran from November 2007 to January 2008. The draft Order dealt with a range of sentencing issues. It grew out of a complex set of other policy consultations and developments including the Criminal Justice System Review of 2000 and the previous Criminal Justice Order of 1996, added to public concerns around the management of dangerous and sex offenders, drinking offences and road traffic issues.

NIACRO's response to the consultation included the following topics.

- Risk aversion – we were concerned that the proposed legislation could result in people being kept in prison because of what they might do rather than what crimes they have actually committed. Our long-standing view, grounded in our experience of working with offenders and prisoners, remains that only serious and dangerous offenders should be in prison.
- However good the sentencing policy is in principle – for both custodial sentences and community sentences – its effectiveness depends on the efficient

use of the available resources. This was recognised not just by NIACRO but also by many of the organisations which responded to the consultation. Spending the money now, on imaginative and effective resettlement programmes, will save it in the future when more prisoners make a successful move back into their communities.

- It is not just criminal justice resources which are involved; other public policy such as dealing with poverty, providing proper accommodation, supporting families, all need to be engaged in the resettlement process without which the revolving door will continue to turn.
- We found a fair bit to welcome in the draft:
 - Community sentencing “Supervised Activity Orders” for fine defaulters, and we see this as an important test of the legislation – will it in fact lead to fewer inappropriate custodial sentences and how soon will we see a real change in the pattern of sentencing?
 - More effective supervision of certain ex-prisoners in the community.
 - The role of the new Parole Commissioners, while recognising that they will have a heavy workload and calling for them to get adequate resources to do their work effectively and without delays in the system.
- We had mixed feelings about the provisions dealing with youth justice. We welcomed the new powers to allow 17-year-olds to be accommodated in the Juvenile Justice Centre instead of Hydebank Young Offenders Centre. However, this is on the basis that they may go to the JJC if no “suitable accommodation” is available in a young offenders centre. We have always held that young people of 17 should as a matter of course be sent to the JJC rather than Hydebank. The role, ethos and services of the two levels of custody are totally different and the JJC is the appropriate place for this younger age group.
- We stressed the need for proper resources and systems to make sure that prisoners receive the different offender management programmes which

they need. These must include where necessary the basic skills which a prisoner may have to learn before undertaking more demanding programmes.

THE CJO AT THE ASSEMBLY

NIACRO, in the persons of CEO Olwen Lyner and Director of Services Pat Conway, gave evidence to the Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the consultative draft. (An ad hoc committee is a means whereby the Assembly can consider issues which are outside its legislative remit, in this case because criminal justice matters are not yet devolved. A committee of this sort is one-off and time limited). In a considered and thoughtful session, Olwen and Pat were given the opportunity to elaborate upon the briefing they had sent to the Committee in advance, and respond to questions from members of all parties. Others who gave evidence to the Committee were the Probation Board, PSNI, Prison Service, Criminal Justice Inspection NI, the Life Sentence Review Commissioners, the Human Rights Commission, the NIO, DSD and DOE.

It is our view that the Committee and how it conducted itself was a useful model for MLAs to follow in reaching consensus on important matters. This view was reinforced by some of the Committee members when they contributed to the 28 January debate in the full Assembly on the report of the Committee. At this debate there was, again, an impressively serious discussion on the Order.

THE DRAFT ORDER GOES TO PARLIAMENT

Justice Minister Paul Goggins laid a revised draft of the Order before Parliament on 3 March. It included some changes from the consultation draft and in the view of the NIO “the Order has been improved as a result of the contributions we received” (there were 54 written responses). We will be looking closely at these changes to see where we feel they are in fact improvements, and where we will have to keep up our efforts to make the system more resettlement-oriented and hence more effective.

The transcript of 9 January session of the Ad Hoc Committee, along with other papers of the Committee, can be found at www.niassembly.gov.uk - click on Committees at the top of the home page. You can read the report of the Assembly debate at the Official Report section of the website.



Concentrating on the speaker at the Volunteer Forum

We are always keen to hear from anyone interested in volunteering. You might want to mentor a young person, or support a young person in care or a foster placement, help adults coming out of prison to resettle in their communities, or help with transport and support for families of prisoners. If you have 2-3 hours free each week or fortnight and would be interested to find out more about the opportunities available, contact our Volunteer Co-ordinator, vivienne@niacro.co.uk

CHRISTMAS VOLUNTEER FORUM 2007

This year's Christmas Volunteer Forum was held in December 2007 at Amelia House and was attended by volunteers from different projects throughout Northern Ireland.

The Forum was organised to provide an opportunity for volunteers to meet with others, share information and become more aware of the various services that their participants might avail of through NIACRO. It began with an update on organisational plans by CEO Olwen Lyner. Staff of NIACRO services described their work, including Family Links, Base 2, resettlement services and our Youth Employability scheme.

We ended at lunchtime with a trip to Robinson's Bistro for Christmas lunch enjoyed by all.

We are currently planning for the next Volunteer Forum to be held in June this year; we will be in contact with all our volunteers nearer the time with more details.

Investing in volunteers

Investing in Volunteers is the new UK quality standard for organisations which involve volunteers in their work. Ever keen to enhance and improve the ways in which we work with our volunteers, NIACRO has registered to achieve this standard.

The standard is made up of 10 indicators and 55 practices which we must demonstrate in order to achieve the quality mark. 'Investing in Volunteers' has been designed to improve volunteer management and we hope will publicly demonstrate and promote NIACRO's commitment to volunteering.

These are some of the comments made by our volunteers in a recent satisfaction survey:

"It's very rewarding and you have excellent training and support"

"I have gained and enhanced many skills"

"It's a great opportunity to help the young people meet their goals"

HERE'S WHAT WE THINK!

From time to time we give the readers of NIACRO News a round-up of our responses to the consultations on public policy which are so much a part of the policy-making life of Northern Ireland. Here are some from the turn of the year up to now. You can download the full responses from our website, www.niacro.co.uk

Draft Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2007

In NIACRO's 35 plus years of existence, we have worked with people who have committed a whole range of offences, and our services have been available regardless of the offence. However, we recognise the particular difficulties of working with individuals who have carried out a sexual offence. So we have made every effort to work with the relevant statutory agencies to develop programmes which combine effective support for the individuals and their families with assessing the risks they may pose, and managing that risk for the benefit of the community.

NIACRO accepts the need for strict sentences for serious offences. But we also recognise that there is a spectrum of offending, and in line with our basic principles we continue to call for treatment and diversionary activities for the less serious offences, particularly for young people.

In our response to the draft Order, we focussed especially on the sensitive issues around consent, consensual sexual activity between young people, and offences against children. We felt that the draft Order included important protections for children from abuse by people in a "position of trust" and within the family, but also that it should be aligned with the POCVA legislation in order to include all jobs which give adults access to children and vulnerable adults – which the draft did not do. We also felt that there needed to be a clearer definition of what constituted a family relationship in an age when families may be quite complex structures.

On prostitution, NIACRO strongly supported the updating of legislation which protects women working as prostitutes, and penalises those who solicit, who "kerb-crawl" and who control prostitutes for gain.

As with the draft Criminal Justice Order, the Assembly set up an ad hoc committee to consider the draft Sexual Offences Order. Again, we felt this was a good model for the Assembly to follow. It has to be said that in this case we were less comfortable with the tack taken by many members of the committee on the issue of reducing the age of consent; the final report of the Committee to the Assembly (which was agreed by the Assembly on 4 February and sent to the Secretary of State) includes the statement that the majority of the committee were opposed to this clause.



PROGRAMME *for* GOVERNMENT

NIACRO has always commented on previous Programmes for Government. Among other reasons, it is an opportunity to make the essential point that even if the criminal justice system isn't devolved, it doesn't exist in isolation from the social policies which affect prisoners, ex-prisoners, offenders in the community, and their families. Custody costs the state – the taxpayer, if you like - an eye-watering amount, leaving aside the social costs. The more we can do to keep offenders and people with a criminal record out of prison by, for instance, ensuring they have decent accommodation and that they and their families can access benefits, health care and educational/training support, the better it will be for the community as a whole.

The Programme for Government was notable for its emphasis on economic development, and that is particularly important for a region moving out of conflict. But it needs to include a strong push to include people who have found it difficult to access the labour market, and NIACRO's work in increasing offenders' employability has shown us that there are still legislative, structural and attitudinal barriers. So we were sorry not to see specific reference to a target which would reach out to the hard-to-reach, and a pledge to provide informal, basic, welcoming access to training, starting with the most basic of skills, for people whose experience of the education system has not been happy or productive.

Similarly, we have looked at the elements of the PFG which deal with children and families, housing, health, social services and education through the eyes of our service users. Our response spelled out how those public services were answering their needs, backed up with statistics which paint the picture accurately and factually.

THE PROBATION BOARD'S CORPORATE PLAN 2008 – 2010

NIACRO has worked with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland from the start. Over the years, we have collaborated on work with prisoners' families and their children, and supporting people on probation to increase their employability.

We did feel that the previous corporate plan had a broader vision and greater detail on what the PBNI would actually aim to achieve in the period covered. Some of our comments on the draft corporate plan were therefore around looking for that detail – on links with relevant statutory and non-statutory agencies, on how the Board will engage with the public

and the media once criminal justice is devolved, on how it will engage with minority ethnic groups in the context of a likely rise in hate crime etc.

NIACRO values its relationship with the PBNI, including the financial support it has given us. We believe it is a model of how statutory bodies and NGOs can work together to

enrich the criminal justice system. We are aware that the outworking of the new Criminal Justice Order will place significant new demands on the Board and support its extended role under the new legislation. Such new arrangements should provide opportunities to build on the experience and resources of organisations with missions and value systems which complement the work of the PBNI. As one of those organisations NIACRO looks forward to working with the Board both in developing innovative services to meet the new situation and maintaining working arrangements in areas which are already mutually beneficial.

Department for Employment and Learning consultation on the careers service

The work of DEL is critical for NIACRO's service users. Many of the young people on our Youth Employability programme, for example, have had unhappy experiences of education and training and do not find it easy to see why they should re-engage. The programme has developed very positive and productive relationships with careers staff in the Greater Belfast area, and this has been effective for both sides of the relationship.

So far as the consultation goes, we were happy to endorse a number of the proposals it contained; developing the Careers Service website; providing a range of levels of intervention by the service, tailored to the needs of the client; extending the service to assist adults; developing common standards which all providers – schools, training organisations, colleges, community organisations and universities – could work to; improving the physical surroundings where advice is offered; staff development.

Of particular significance to us were the issues of developing a forum of CEIAG (Careers education, information advice and guidance) delivery partners,

and the undertaking to give priority to reaching “young people and adults vulnerable to social exclusion”. In the case of the former, we are very familiar with the added value that partnership can bring, and we recognise that the careers service can and will benefit from the expertise of organisations working in specialisms like substance abuse, homelessness and mental health problems as well as our own work with offenders. In the case of working with people “vulnerable to social exclusion”; this is practically a definition of our client group and we warmly welcome the priority given to developing a more informed and sympathetic approach to addressing social need.

DEL CONFERENCE FOR STAKEHOLDERS

As an alternative method of consultation, NIACRO were invited to DEL's December 07 conference for stakeholders to inform their Corporate Plan 2008 – 2011.

A wide range of organisations representing a broad range of services attended the two-day event. There were representatives from universities, colleges, those working with disadvantaged groups (Mencap, Orchardville, EGSA, People's College) and employers.

The "Future Search" process, increasingly popular with public service organisations in developing their planning, is informal, with a lot of small group discussion, demanding a high level of participation from everyone. It proved to be very popular and productive and a lot of work was covered and discussed. Because the groups continually changed, a mixture of people and ideas informed the debate, some having to take into consideration areas that they may not have encountered before.

The topics covered included: trends affecting employment and learning; how trends affect what we do; desired future scenarios; discovering common ground.

At the end of the event everyone seemed to be pleased with the amount of involvement that had taken place and were impressed by the range of people contributing. We are all looking forward to discovering how much this will influence actual programme development in the future.

LIFE SENTENCE REVIEW

NIACRO has recently taken part in a training "symposium" held by the Life Sentence Review Commissioners. It was designed to give attendees the opportunity to follow a hypothetical case study, to observe individuals acting in their respective roles and to comment on and question what was happening at each of the stages.

The aim of the day was "to ensure that all who are involved fully understand the linkages and interdependencies of providing for multi-agency and multidisciplinary involvement in the life sentence review process".

Participants were each allocated to a team for the day, made up of representatives from the LSRC, the Probation Board, the Prison Service, the LSU/NIO, and voluntary sector organisations including NIACRO, Extern, Dunlewey, Thompson House and Edward St hostel. The scene was set by contributions from the Commissioners, the Prison Service and the Probation Board – each highlighting the implications of the new Criminal Justice Order which puts the MASRAM

arrangements on a statutory footing and which introduces new indeterminate sentences which will be reviewed by the Commission.

A panel was made up largely of practitioners who have considerable experience in dealing with LSRC cases. The teams were invited to consider a case study and the scenario unfolded in stages throughout the day. Team members, representing the various disciplines, could then discuss and comment on what actions should be taken and by whom. The panel were invited to give their perspective and answer questions from the floor.

The approach has much to commend it terms of opening up discussion between disciplines - particularly those that rarely interact directly.

What was clear was that we each need to be willing to learn from the practice of others and avoid making any assumptions about what others do or think we do. Let's hope there will be opportunity for future similar events.

STAFF AND EXECUTIVE

Good wishes to the following colleagues who have left NIACRO since the last issue of NIACRO News: Gemma Compton, mentoring; Brian Cunningham, Jobtrack; Richard Johnston,

Jobtrack; Ursula Nelson, Family Links; Paul Webb, Information.

Welcome to two new members of our Executive Committee, Christine McLaughlin and Turlough Gorman.

EXPERIENCE OF CRIME

One of the regular bulletins of findings from the Northern Ireland Crime Survey was published in January. It covered people's experience of crime in 2006/2007 (the NICS carried out the first survey in 1994/5, and it has been continuous since the start of 2005). These figures differ from the PSNI's statistics of crime reported to the police, but are seen as complementary to them.

THE SUMMARY FINDINGS WERE:

14.2% of all households and their adult occupants were victims of at least one crime during the 12 months prior to interview. This represents a statistically significant decrease of 3.1 percentage points on the equivalent rate for NICS 2005 (17.3%).

A key factor in the reduction in overall prevalence rates since NICS 2005 has been the statistically significant reduction in the rate of vandalism, from 6.9% in 2005 to 4.0% in 2006/07. Within this category, the victimisation rate for vehicle vandalism decreased from 4.9% to 2.7% for vehicle-owners, while 'other' vandalism also fell from 3.4% to 2.0%.

Most other NICS crime categories have not shown statistically significant changes between NICS 2005 and 2006/07. For instance, the 2006/07 prevalence rates for burglary and violent crime were 1.9% and 2.9% respectively, compared with 1.8% and 3.1% in NICS 2005. However, it is likely that these categories have levelled off following large decreases between NICS 2003/04 and 2005.

The risk of becoming a victim of any NICS crime in 2006/07 (14.2%) was significantly lower than in NICS 1998 when the overall prevalence rate peaked at 23.0%. Much of this reduction was brought about by a decrease in the risk of vehicle-related theft, which fell by six percentage points (vehicle-owners only), from 8.7% in 1998 to 2.7% in 2006/07.

Findings from NICS 2006/07 and the British Crime Survey 2006/07 show that the risk of becoming a victim of crime remains lower in Northern Ireland (14.2%) than in England and Wales (24.4%). While the prevalence rate in Northern Ireland has fallen since the last survey (17.3% in NICS 2005), it has risen in England and Wales (from 23.5% in BCS 2005/06), thus widening the gap between the jurisdictions to over ten percentage points.

There were an estimated 184,000 incidents of crime during NICS 2006/07, down almost a fifth (18%) on NICS 2005 (225,000) and almost two-fifths (38%) lower than NICS 2003/04 (295,000). Between the two most recent surveys, the greatest reduction (27%) occurred in the number of

household crimes, from 139,000 to 102,000.

Half (50%) of all NICS 2006/07 crimes that are comparable with recorded crime were reported to the police, compared with 40% in 2005 and 45% in 2003/04. Burglary (69%) and vehicle-related theft (55%) had the highest reporting rates, reflecting the seriousness of the incidents and the associated likelihood of insurance claims. The most common reason for not reporting a crime, cited by 43% of victims, was 'police could not have done anything'.

Among the more likely NICS 2006/07 households to be victims of vandalism were those: living in areas perceived to have a high level of anti-social behaviour (8.7%); where the respondent had a nationality other than British / Irish / Northern Irish (6.1%); containing single adults with children (5.9%); with an annual income of £50,000 or more (5.9%); living in Belfast (5.7%); and with a household reference person aged 25-34 (5.5%).

Findings from NICS 2006/07 show that young men aged 16-24 (14.6%) were more at risk of violent crime than any other demographic group examined, and over three times more likely to be victims than their female counterparts (4.4%). Other groups with high rates included: young people (aged 16-24, 9.8%; 16-29, 8.5%); single adults with children (8.6%); single people (6.9%); people living in areas having a high level of anti-social behaviour (5.7%); those living in private rented accommodation (5.5%); and people who visit the pub at least one evening per week (5.3%).