NIACRO Response to the Northern Ireland Prison Service

Strengthening Family Relationships

2019-2024

16 April 2019
NIACRO Response to NIPS Strengthening Family Relations 2019-2024

Opening Comments

NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to comment on NIPS’ Strengthening Family Relations 2019-2024 Consultation Document. We commend the intent behind the document and much of the content; it demonstrates a commitment by NIPS to better understand and respond to the needs of people in their care and their family members.

Our response combines the observations of our staff with those of family members who came together on two occasions specifically to contribute to this document. We brought 13 families (including 26 children) together at Streamvale Farm on a Sunday afternoon in March and a further 10 families together for feedback events in April at NIACRO’s Belfast and Portadown offices.

We recognise that Strengthening Family Relations is not a ‘Strategy’ detailing practical and deliverable priorities at this time, but as a feasibility exercise for future policy goals. That said, we would welcome further insight into the Prison Service’s considered view about the implementation and action plans for certain themes. For example, how NIPS foresees certain priorities with respect to building and strengthening family relationships being taken forward practically. The priorities we feel are particularly pertinent are listed below and each are considered within the response:

i. Family involvement in Safer Custody and other health matters and links to health providers
ii. Ongoing development of induction, visits and particularly child centred visits to benefit families with specialist circumstances
iii. Meeting the needs of adult family members in addition to children specifically parents of younger prisoners and the gender-specific needs of women
iv. NIPS’ vision for the role of Family Officers, visits staff and externally provided visitor supports and materials/pack sent in the context of Strengthening Family Relations
v. Support for positive resettlement planning and post release reintegration
1. Introduction

General Comments

i. NIACRO welcomes the adoption a broad definition of ‘family’. This resonates with our experiences of supporting people who are and have been in prison; many different people benefit from and contribute to the lives of people in prison who may not be part of their traditional nuclear family.

ii. Whilst the introduction refers to the important role that families can play in supporting people in prison in relation to their mental health, the document as a whole is predicated on principle that this support is relevant and important to every aspect of life, not only mental health.

iii. The document rightly highlights that some family relationships can be harmful and this places a requirement on the Prison Service to be sensitive to these circumstances. In a 2017 report, the Prison Reform Trust (PRT)\(^1\) makes an important observation that we would urge the Prison Service to take into consideration in this regard:

“A key difference between women and men in prison is that family relationships tend to be a protective factor for men, whilst for women, relationships are more often a risk factor.”

The findings of research undertaken by NIACRO staff members Geraldine McGuigan and Ruth Walker published in 2019\(^2\) corroborate with PRT and other extensive research; that domestic abuse can be a contributory factor to many women’s offending. If the partners responsible for domestic abuse are the family members to whom women are relating whilst in prison, maintaining these connections will not help desistance from future offending, nor will it support women to settle safely post release.

iv. Within the context of a renewed focus on the needs of the family, it is still important to recognise that all that is done to support a person in prison: to deal with the root causes of offending; to build skills, confidence, etc. towards release can all contribute to meeting the needs of the family.

Question Responses

Q1. Do you agree that positive relationships and family contact are important factors in influencing how people cope with imprisonment and their reintegration and rehabilitation upon release?

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NIACRO agrees that positive family relationships and family contact are important factors in influencing how people cope with imprisonment and their reintegration and rehabilitation upon release. This belief drives many of the services we have been delivering, in partnership with the Prison Service and others, for many years including Family Links, and, more recently, CHIP (Children of Imprisoned Parents). We see the truth of this statement in our work with people in prison, but also those recently released from prison. Aspire Mentoring Service and Aspire Community Engagement, for example, support young men in the community, often immediately upon release. Aspire staffs’ contact and engagement with family members is often critical in helping the participant to progress towards a more stable lifestyle.

With respect to family contact, family members observed:

**Coping with Imprisonment:**

“It helps people maintain relationships and stops people living in a bubble when they are inside. Gives people something to look forward to.”

“Helps them know they have someone to come home to and somewhere to go.”

“Visits have kept us in contact – keeps him sane and excited for getting out.”

“Phone calls are good.”

**Returning to the community and reducing reoffending:**

“Without contact people are lonely and have nowhere to go which may lead them to hostels and could lead to them reoffending”

“Helped him get back into his way of living – Freedom”

“Help for when a dad can’t return to his family”

“Support around them on the outside”

“Knowing that we are sticking by him, he has said he won’t reoffend”

“Fear that he could lose his family again impacts his choices”

“Services e.g. AA, mental health need to be set up for dads as soon as they are released to reduce reoffending”
Q2. Do you agree that the overall outcome of the strategic approach to strengthening family relations should seek to support and encourage family engagement, leading to positive outcomes for people in our care?

NIACRO and the families we support do believe that the overall outcome should be to seek to support and encourage family engagement. However, it may be appropriate for the Prison Service to consider deepening its consideration of family support and engagement, and in particular to consider:

i. The person in prison is a family member rather someone who has family members. If he or she can be supported to retain their position within the family unit (including recognising the responsibilities that come with that, as a father, son, uncle or brother etc.) this must increase the potential for long-term positive outcomes for that person. Perhaps those who don’t have contact with children whilst in prison can still be supported to prepare for resuming parenting upon release. Speaking in the context of men in prison, Farmer comments:

“Consistently good family work, which brings men face-to-face with their enduring responsibilities to the family left in the community, is indispensable to the rehabilitation culture we urgently need to develop in our penal system and has to be integral to the changes sought. It helps them forge a new identity for themselves, an important precursor to desistance from crime, 5 based on being a good role model to their children, a caring husband, partner and friend and a reliable provider through legal employment. However, responsibilities are not discharged in a vacuum. Families need to be willing and able to engage with the rehabilitation process, so harnessing the resource of good family relationships must be a golden thread running through the processes of all prisons, as well as in the implementation of all themes of the white paper.”

ii. There can be positive outcomes for the rest of the family unit, as well as for the person in prison. Funded by the Early intervention Transformation Programme, CHIP was delivered between September 2017 and March 2019 by NIACRO in partnership with the Prison Service and was designed with these principles at its heart.

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3 The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime, Lord Farmer, August 2017
2. Policy Context

General Comment

This section references the need to “continually assess what is currently being delivered, to develop consistency in services and have the best mix and reach of services available across prison establishments.” NIACRO perceives the need for NIPS to provide better leadership; in bringing partners from the voluntary/community sector responsible for delivering services together at appropriate times. We need a clearer picture of your vision for each service and how each fits together and how we can work better collaboratively towards a shared end. This is particularly the case when new services are introduced.

Question Response

Q3. To what extent do you think the current NIPS processes and procedures facilitate quality family engagement and what improvements could be made?

i. Induction to Visits.

Families at Hydebank have recently reported a positive experience of induction to visits, including the tour and the option to have a visit after induction which benefits family members and helps them to ‘settle into’ the visits regime. This is contrasted with families’ experiences at Maghaberry where the provision of induction is not consistent and does not appear to have a regular schedule of dates available throughout the year. We recognise that changes in staffing impacts on the ease with which inductions can be made available. However, we hear first-hand from families how important inductions are to helping them to settle into a pattern of visiting and so induction is an important foundation to enabling family engagement to take root at the early stage of a sentence. Induction too is important for family members of remand and short-sentenced prisoners who face their own particular uncertainties.

ii. Child-Centred Visits

Whilst there have not been consist child-centred visits offered across the prison establishments, the recent innovations at Hydebank in particular have been positive including extending these visits to grandchildren and cousins.

We continue to advocate for the removal of the requirement that the person in prison completes a course as a prerequisite for accessing longer visits. However, the feedback from people in prison who took part in the Play Matters play sessions in Maghaberry in March 2019 were that they would appreciate more of this approach before child centred visits; they found it gave them ideas about how they can structure the longer visit. Several reflected that they had had the ‘best ever’ visit after the play-modelling sessions.

We continue to observe the potential for child centred visits to become a better opportunity for parents/grandparents to be involved in their child/grandchild’s education, thus helping to instil the sense of parental responsibility and family ties.
iii. Recognition of Further Needs

Acknowledging too the greater flexibility being introduced with respect to the timings of visits at Hydebank under certain circumstances, the following are some of the additional needs that NIACRO has observed and families highlighted at the feedback sessions and may require consideration regarding special arrangements:

- **Children with Autism and other special needs**: provision for children with autism for whom the noise and activity level over the Saturday morning visits often makes visiting prohibitive. We understand that NIPS is aware of and considering this particular need.

- **Older people particularly with dementia**: for whom the mainstream visits arrangements can be overwhelming.

- **Trailing new times for visits**: perhaps over or after tea time/after tea time.

- **Use of Skype**: NIACRO (and families) welcome more and more flexible use of Skype, particularly at Maghaberry once a dad has come off the Family Matters landing and for foreign national families, at home and overseas.

- **Foreign nationals’ committals phone calls**: NIACRO has observed foreign nationals not getting access to their committal phone call because of the complications associated with getting a PIN code for an international code or setting up the translation service.

- **Greater presence of Family Officers during visits**: it is an important resource for families to have access to Family Officers, especially in the case of a busy visit turnout.

iv. Access to health-related Information

It is important too that there is an accessible, structured and consistent means by which families are informed about health concerns, particularly when a family member is admitted to hospital, or where families ought to be consulted about wellbeing, medication, etc.

v. Opportunities for Prison Service Engagement with Families

NIACRO has been part of several encouraging developments in the past 12-18 months including a visit by Ronnie Armour to children participating on our CHIP and SCOPE projects, which resulted in the implementation of some of the children's ideas about improvements to visits. We also appreciated the input of Prison Service staff to a residential for CHIP families. We have observed positive interactions between families and Prison Service staff during visits as a result of these initiatives.

vi. Family Input into PDPs (Personal Development Plans).

Through CHIP, families have had the opportunity to input into PDPs which Sentence Managers have welcomed. CHIP has made family members aware of PDPs and enabled them to put forward suggestions through inmate notes. This has included, for example, areas of interest for training that the person in prison may not have mentioned and/or
pursued themselves. Seeing the value of this over the past 18 months, we welcome plans at Maghaberry to bring a Sentence Manager into the visits hall, so that family members’ suggestions can be captured at the time.

The best outcome would be a consistent approach to ensuring all families know about the PDP and have been told how they can contribute, with accessible and structured means of doing so. Issuing contact details of their family member’s designated Sentence Manager may be a useful starting place so that family members can be confident that they will get through to someone who can act upon their suggestions or concerns.

Several family members felt that NIPS did help to facilitate family engagement, although one partner recounted the disappointment associated with being unable to enter a visit because of a transport delay. Another mum commented:

“He’s been away a good couple of times before and I’ve never had NIACRO [CHIP]. It’s a great support now and impacted on the children’s behaviour.”
3. Principles

Question Response

Q4. Do you agree with the principles outlined which will underpin the strategic approach to strengthening family relations?

Q5. Would you like to see additional principles applied?

NIACRO is supportive of the principles outlined in this section and does not see the need for additional principles, with the following observations:

Families treated with fairness, dignity and respect
In recent times, NIACRO staff and families we support have observed Prison Service staff being very welcoming to children, going above and beyond to make them feel comfortable when on visits.

Wherever possible families are included in their relatives’ rehabilitation
Whilst we recognise that this is a principle and not an action, it would be helpful to have some more detail about how the Prison Service anticipates these principles taking root in action, particularly in relation to:

- Family members’ input into safer custody;
- Protocols for making families aware of health (including mental health) difficulties and particularly when their family member has been admitted to hospital.

The best interests of children are paramount to any decision making
Whilst not disagreeing with this statement, it is important too to be aware of and responsive to the needs of adult family members; these are as legitimate and important as those of children and young people, particularly for people in prison who do not have children.

Effective partnership working is key to successful outcomes
CHIP, which supported families of people in prison, and Aspire, which supports many immediately upon release, are two projects delivered by NIACRO that have and continue to build upon evidence of what works to support and benefit the whole family unit. We welcome the opportunities we have had to share this learning with the Prison Service and in particular to create opportunities for the Prison Service to hear from and interact directly with family members.
Suggestions for improvements from family members:

“More frequent family visits for longer”

“Transport support”

“Longer visits without having to do courses to get them.”

“More times/activities with the kids – more frequent visits”

“Longer visits with dads having time to play with their children during visits”

4. Themes

General Comments

Family Contact
Many of the commitments NIPS cites in support and encouragement of family contact are positive, although there are several different types of commitments listed on Pg. 11-12. Some are readily measurable (for example, provide a programme of family days and events). Others are less specific (for example, encourage and promote meaningful contact through various methods including visits, letters, telephone calls and electronic means). Still others are more aspirational (for example, encourage and promote meaningful relationships by enhancing family contact as much as possible). It may be helpful if this list were to be split into: a list of action points that can be put in place quickly and easily; actions which require more consideration; and those which are aspirational and will require specific further actions to be identified over time.

The diagram on Pg. 12 does not acknowledge the contribution that NIPS’ partners make to providing support. For example, regular information and support for family members may be more likely to be delivered by partners such as NIACRO (though Family Links) than directly by the Prison Service and partner organisations play an important role in helping to create opportunities for trust and relationships to build between families and Prison Service staff.

Families Feel Included and Engaged
The same observation may be made about the list of commitments relating to families feeling included and engaged on Pg. 13-14 and it may be helpful if some of these commitments were made more specific. For example, communicate policy, procedures and expectations to enable families to engage positively. What documents would be shared with family members and how and when would this happen? Or in the case of share appropriate information with families; how will it be assessed whether information is appropriate to share?
Several of the commitments are achieved through NIPS’ partners (for example, *identify opportunities for families to access and participate in activities which promote wellbeing*). In such cases, it may be helpful to specify which commitments NIPS can deliver working alone and which it can achieve when working with partners (such as SE Trust, Barnardo’s, NIACRO and others).

**Families are Safe and Well**

To claim responsibility for the safety and welfare of families is an ambitious theme, taking in a wide range of responsibilities and commitments, some of which must lie outside the responsibility of the Prison Service, with statutory as well as community and voluntary partners. To what extent ought this theme to be the responsibility of the Prison Service? Might it be more appropriate if safety and welfare of families was recognised as the responsibility of other agencies (statutory and voluntary), with the Prison Service having a duty to support their efforts?

As such, it may be helpful if commitments that require a partnership approach were specified as such. For example, *support and empower people in our care and their families to access relevant services*... NIACRO would assume that NIPS would require the support of partners delivering programmes (such as CHIP) to support and empower family members of people in prison to access relevant services that could help them to sustain improved wellbeing.

**Children**

It would be beneficial for NIPS to become a trauma informed organisation. However, it will be necessary to consider which roles within the Prison Service would be trained in this and the specifics of the impact the Prison Service anticipates this having across prison establishments. Is it realistic for the Prison Service to recognise and respond to the impact of childhood adversity on children or to maximise physical and psychological safety of the child, facilitate recover of the child and family or to impact upon children’s resilience or ability to cope? It may be appropriate to review/prioritise some of the commitments listed on Pg.17, taking into consideration what is within NIPS’ influence and control.

**Question Responses**

**Q6. Do you agree with the outcomes / themes outlined?**

NIACRO agrees with the outcomes and themes. However, it may be helpful to align outcomes under several subheadings: NIPS, people in NIPS’ care, family members, and the whole family unit. Throughout the document, outcomes relevant to different groups are listed together. Separating out desired outcomes for particular groupings may also help to prioritise which outcomes are realistic (and within the remit of the Prison Service), which require a partnership approach, and which may be re-considered to be beyond the sphere of influence of the Prison Service.

**Q7. What additional themes would you like to see explored?**

The themes identified appear to cover the key elements of strengthening families, although within these themes, the following elements may require further exploration:

i. **Person in prison as family member:** recognising that the person in prison is a family member rather someone who *has* family members. If he or she can be supported to
retain their position within the family unit (including recognising the responsibilities that come with that, as a father, son, uncle or brother etc.) this must increase the potential for long-term positive outcomes for that person.

ii. **Adult family members**: awareness and responsiveness to the needs of adult family members; their needs are as legitimate and important as those of children and young people, particularly for those in prison who do not have children (without denying that the needs of children are important too).

iii. **Families and children who do not visit the prison**: whilst the Prison Service may reach families and children who do not attend the prison for visits through partners (including NIACRO), is it appropriate for NIPS to make a distinction between the influence it is possible to have upon families who visit and families who do not?

iv. **Family members of those on remand**: is it appropriate for NIPS to make any distinction between the relationships that the Prison Service aspires to have with family members of those who have been sentenced versus those who are in custody on remand? Or what of those serving short sentences?

v. **The specific needs of women and also of younger people in prison**: for both of these groups, family supports may be different to those of the majority of the prison population and require special consideration.

vi. **Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Families**: those living in Northern Ireland and for whom the cultural and language barriers make the imprisonment of a loved one all the more difficult (including navigating the justice system and attending the prison for visits); and those living overseas, require special consideration.

vii. **Families feeling included in safer custody**: NIACRO staff have no experience of families being invited to be involved in or consulted over safer custody. Whilst the Headway landing in Hydebank is a successful model, where information is shared with family through regular updates and good communication between staff and families, we do not see this modelled elsewhere. Safer custody must be the most critical element of families feeling included.

**Q8. Do you think the NIPS priorities are aligned to the themes identified?**

Families made the following observations about some of the ways in which their experiences do not always align with the priorities outlined:
Q9. Outline how best NIPS could work with partner organisations to achieve the overall outcome of supporting and encouraging family engagement, leading to positive outcomes for people in our care?

Our key observation is the need for leadership, as well as clear and frequent communication from NIPS. We would welcome the Prison Service bringing partners from the voluntary/community sector who are delivering services together regularly to provide a clearer picture of NIPS’ visions and expectations for each service. Particularly, how each vision fits together and how we can work better collaboratively towards a shared end. This is especially helpful in cases when new services are introduced.

It would also be helpful and practical if partner organisations had a more direct means of contact with designated staff. NIACRO staff often struggle to get information regarding someone in prison or the details of a particular Sentence Manager we need to speak with. An agreed protocol for sharing information with partners would make a difference to our work and partnerships.

Family Officers and visits staff make an important contribution towards current good practices and it may be helpful to specify the vision NIPS has for these roles within the context of this document.
**Closing Comments**

NIACRO is supportive of the intent behind this document. Whilst we recognise it to be a positioning paper and not a firm strategic plan, we would welcome the Prison Service moving towards identifying priorities for specific actions in the near future, particularly with regards to:

- Family involvement and consultation in health care and safer custody;
- Family involvement in Personal Development Plans and post-release planning;
- Development of visits and induction (including child-centred visits);
- Specified role of Family Officers and visits staff in taking forward other points for action identified throughout the document.

Summarised below are the main areas highlighted as important for further consideration within this response:

- Considering the person in prison as family member rather than simply having family members and the instilling of family responsibilities that go along with that;
- Better consideration of the needs of adult family members (in addition to and distinct from those of children);
- Distinguishing between the family contact needs of men and women and younger people in prison;
- Distinguishing between the needs of families and people in prison who have received longer sentences, short sentenced and those who are on remand;
- Distinguishing between what support may be extended to families who do not visit the prison as distinct from those who do;
- Identifying the particular needs of BME people in prison and their families, and considering the cultural and language barriers they face, whether family members are living in NI or elsewhere;
- Distinguishing between what is realistic for NIPS to achieve working alone, given its remit and reach, and what requires the involvement, or may perhaps be the responsibility of partners (voluntary, community and statutory);
- The requirement for NIPS to co-ordinate contributions of partners and ensure clarity of responsibilities.

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Additional Family Feedback

We asked a few of our own related questions to families at the two feedback events, to parents and to the children. The summaries to their responses are provided below.

To the children, we asked

What’s the best thing about visiting and what could be better?

- “The best thing is when you first see them when they come in”
- “I think what could be better is being able to sit beside them”
- “I also think what could be better is when you’re talking to your parent for the prison officers not to stare”
- “Get a full hour visit”
- “There could be music to lift the spirit”
- “Seeing new things in the tuck shop”
- “The best thing is playing with toys and making new friends”
- “Dogs you can see”
- “Having a sandpit with toy tractors and cars”
- “Have a toy shop”
- “A library to read and have toys in”
- “More chairs and benches – have extra seats”
- “Computers and X-Box/PlayStation”
- “A big TV and films”
- “For the parent to get out of their seat to play”
- “To be able to do stuff together”

How do you contact your family member? What could be better?

- “Face Time”
- “I use phone calls – FaceTime would be good because you get to see them “
- “A better routine with phone calls would be better”
- “Longer visits” (several children repeated this answer!)
- “Bigger groups of families visiting at the same time”
- “Dad to be able to have a mobile phone”
- “I use Skype”
- “Longer phone calls and longer visits would be better”
- “Phone calls and visits make you happy”
To the adult family members, we asked:

**How can NIPS support and encourage family contact and wider social networks?**

- “Family visits like child centred visits and play matter visit”
- “Skype – More than once a week”
- “Family visits and Skype calls once a week.”
- “Family visits and skype calls more regularly”
- “Skype to be more widely available”

**How can NIPS promote a positive experience when visiting prisons in N.I?**

- “Make the rules more clear and the same each time you’re visiting”
- “More patience from some of the Prison Officers than others.”
- “Somewhere for families to stand when it’s cold”
- “Should be able to bring prams through”
- “When visits are running late e.g. because of the bus, extra time should be added to the end”
- “More understanding from some of the prison staff – not to be treated like we have done something wrong”
- “Clearer rules of what is allowed and what is not”
- “Rules clearer”
- “Extra time if running late because of transport”
- “There needs to be more transport from Belfast”
- “More time with dad – More structured activities e.g. cooking classes / learning a new skill together”.

**Do NIPS encourage families to feel included and engaged to support the person in prison e.g. are families included in decisions, are they treated with respect by staff and any suggestions?**

The majority of families felt that NIPS did, although these were a few further comments:

- “Yes – when I went on visits to Magilligan; not so much at Maghaberry.”
- “Depends on who is on. We were made to feel very uncomfortable by Prison Officers on a weekend visit.”
- “Most of the staff – some are very ignorant. Don’t really welcome you. You’re just another number.”

**Do you think staff have a good understanding of safety and wellbeing and respect appropriately**

- “Yes – staff are good at responding”
- “As far as I know”
- “Yes”
- “Anything I ask them they respond”
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Are people in custody and families aware of services to support safety and wellbeing?

- “Yes I was offered everything”
- “Not made aware when he went in – I have a better knowledge now only through CHIP”
- “Yes”
- “Made aware through NIACRO”
- “Made aware by NIACRO / other people I know”

Are NIPS working to improve services for children and families?

- “Yes – visits are more friendly”
- “Yes – Family visits are good and CHIP support has been great. My Social Worker was unsure of prison policies and the CHIP worker helped with this and talked to my Social Worker.”
- “Family visits do need to be more frequent and longer. CHIP has been a great continued support for myself and my family especially [staff member]”
- “They try their best – CHIP has been positive for my family”

What do you think NIPS should do within the next 12 months to support families?

- “More family matters so we can have more child-centred visits”
- “Longer and extra visits at weekend”
- “Tea-time visits”
- “Changing facilities for dads to help them feel more involved and let them practice”
- “Meet with dog handlers and dogs”
- “Body scanner instead of dogs – don’t like the feeling of dogs searching”
- “Explaining what way the dog works”
- “Longer visits”
- “Spend more time with families – More than one visit a week and outside school time visits”
One partner of a prisoner summed up her experiences as follows:

“Better information could be offered to inmates and visitors about services available to them and family members. From personal experience, Family Officers were only available upon request when seeking advice about specific issues from prison staff. I feel access to services and support could be better promoted by prison staff, especially in the initial stages of imprisonment.

“From a family member/visitor perspective, information and guidance on the internal workings of prison life and operational details currently exist more on a word of mouth basis between family/visitors and prisoners, rather than a structured framework. Especially in the initial stages of imprisonment, it can be very confusing and daunting about procedures and rules of engagement in regards to visits, clothing or items being left for inmates. A lack of information, or ease of access to this, compounds the stress and overall experience for many family members in a potentially negative way.

“Only for the exceptional work of [CHIP Project Worker] and her approachability was I able to access help/support for myself and children. This wasn’t actively promoted by prison staff / Family Liaison Officers in an effective or informative way. Improvement in this area would greatly help the overall effectiveness of available help/support.”