Dear Sir/Madam

We are a group of academics who have been engaged in research and teaching related to imprisonment, rehabilitation, supporting vulnerable families and programme evaluation at Queen’s University Belfast and University of Edinburgh. We appreciate this opportunity to respond to the ‘Strengthening Family Relations 2019-2024 Draft Consultation Document’ and the inclusion of a reference to our research on the Families Matter programme at Maghaberry Prison in the document.

Having read the proposed strategy, we welcome NIPS’s recognition of the role that families can play in rehabilitation, desistance and helping people to cope with imprisonment. We also believe that the broad definition of ‘family’ adopted in the document is appropriate given the complexities of modern day families. Moreover, NIPS rightly acknowledges that some family relationships may be harmful and that there is a need to adopt an individualised, person centred approach to assessing family relationships, so as to ensure that family relationships are only maintained and developed when they are judged to be beneficial for both the family members involved and those imprisoned. In addition, the principles and themes put forward in the document to underpin NIPS’s strategic approach, policy and practice in this area are also admirable and to be welcomed. It is not always clear, however, how the aspirations and ambitious goals outlined in this document will be operationalised. It is with this in mind that we offer the following thoughts and suggestions.

As stated above, there is much in this document to welcome, especially as it appears to be the intention of NIPS to continue the good work they have already been engaged in with families. Much of this work has been praised for its positive impact and innovative nature. Nonetheless, there are opportunities to build on this work to increase its potential reach and effectiveness. Based on our previous research on the Families Matter Programme at Maghaberry Prison (see Butler, Hayes, Devaney & Percy, 2015) and ongoing work with NIPS and families affected by imprisonment, we would like to offer the following suggestions for inclusion in the document:

1. Include an additional theme on effective partnership working and within this theme, propose to undertake a mapping exercise in which the range of programmes and supports offered to those imprisoned and their families are listed, along with their eligibility criteria and duration. While there is a lot of positive work being undertaken within NIPS, one concern that emerged from our previous research is that opportunities to turn short term outcomes into longer term positive
outcomes may be lost because of a tendency not to consider how the short term benefits gained through programme participation can be sustained and developed throughout the remainder of a person’s imprisonment (see Butler et al., 2015; Hayes, Butler, Devaney & Percy, 2018; Butler, Percy, Hayes & Devaney, 2019). On completion of a programme, it is important to consider how individuals will be progressed to ensure that the gains made are not undone by a failure to think through how the short term outcomes achieved through their involvement in the programme can be turned into positive outcomes over the medium to longer term. In addition, careful thought needs to be given to programme eligibility criteria in order to assess whether there are gaps in current service provision and whether such eligibility criteria exclude certain groups of people (potentially those with complex and/or particularly challenging needs).

2. With regards to the family contact theme, some additional points to consider is the establishment of a family peer support group. Based on our previous research, families can benefit from the creation of a culture of peer support, as it provides an opportunity to share experiences and receive advice, support and guidance, which can encourage continued contact with an imprisoned loved one when families may be debating the merits of doing so (see Butler et al., 2015). Working with families and loved ones to encourage visitation is important not only for helping to maintain family relationships and rehabilitation but also due to the positive role visitation can play in reducing adjudication charges (Butler, Kelly & McNamee, 2019). In past research, it has been noted that social workers and/or family members may be reluctant to bring children to visit family members in prison due to concerns about the suitability of the environment for them. It may be useful for NIPS to not only undertake familiarisation work with family members but also with social workers with a view towards tackling these concerns and ensuring that these individuals are aware of the wide variety of visiting opportunities available (see Butler et al., 2015). Moreover, it is important to ensure that the cost of making telephone calls from prison is not disproportionate, as telephone contact is a key means by which families keep in contact during imprisonment and for imprisoned parents to remain involved in a child’s life. Consequently, if telephone access is restricted due to staffing shortfalls, inadequate access to telephones or because of the excessive cost of telephone calls, it can hinder family contact, contribute to relationship breakdown and/or have a negative impact on how people cope with imprisonment (see Butler et al. 2015).

3. Under the theme of ‘families feel included and engaged’, consideration should be given to providing information on the NIPS website and/or social media about the wide range of programmes available so that family members are informed about what services are available and can actively encourage their loved ones to avail of these services. Past research has again highlighted the key role that families can play in encouraging imprisoned loved ones to participate in programmes, as well as the positive pressure they can place on them to successfully complete these programmes (see Butler et al., 2015). However, families must be aware of these programmes, their eligibility criteria and be kept informed of the performance of loved ones on these programmes for this to work. In addition, ongoing work with NIPS and the Families Matter programme suggests that, where appropriate, it may be beneficial to involve family members in challenging prison misconduct. Not only does this help to keep families informed of their loved ones behaviour during imprisonment but it can actively involve them in the desistance and rehabilitation process as they may be more impactful in challenging the misbehaviour of loved ones than prison staff.

4. As part of the ‘families are safe and well’ theme, thought should be given to the use of peer mentors within the prison to provide advice, support and guidance to those imprisoned about how they can try to maintain their family contacts, improve strained relationships or demonstrate that they are thinking about their families during their imprisonment. In the Lord Farmer Review (2017), the use of peer mentors on the Families Matter programme in Maghaberry Prison was highlighted as an example of best practice. While this suggestion differs from how the peer mentors are used on the Families Matter programme, it provides an opportunity to build on this work and extend it to provide an informal support to imprisoned parents and encourage them to take part in rehabilitative programmes. Past research indicates that peer recommendations can be an effective means of recruiting participants to take part in such rehabilitative programmes (see Butler et al., 2015; Butler et al., 2019).

5. In addition to the above, under the theme ‘children’ emphasise is placed on NIPS staff being aware of child protection and wellbeing concerns, as well as adopting a trauma informed approach
to their interactions with families and children. It is worthwhile considering how this approach can be applied to the prison visits context and how staff respond to potential incidents of disorder or misconduct during visitation. In our past research, concerns were raised by families about the potential for children to witness potentially distressing scenes during visitation and, in some cases, it was stated that individuals were reluctant to allow their children to attend these visits in case they witnessed such an incident (see Butler et al., 2015). Specific training and guidance should be provided to staff regarding how best to respond to incidents of disorder and/or misconduct during visits in line with a trauma informed approach to care and an emphasis on child protection and wellbeing.

These suggestions are offered in a supportive manner and are intended to help strengthen the admirable and ambitious goals of the ‘Strengthening Family Relations 2019-2024’ document.

If you have any further questions or would like to discuss any of the points raised in this submission with us, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours Sincerely

[Signatures]

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References


