Strengthening Family Relations
Response to Policy Consultation
April 2019
1.0 Introduction

1.1 Relate NI welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department of Justice’s consultation on “Strengthening Family Relations”. We welcome the Department’s commitment to this issue and to improving the consultation document through the input of a range of stakeholders.

1.2 Relate NI was established in Belfast in 1948. Over the last 71 years, we have supported thousands of individuals, couples and families to address issues in their relationships, primarily through the medium of counselling and therapeutic support.

1.3 In the 2018/2019 year, we directly helped 2,799 people throughout Northern Ireland through our services. These services indirectly helped a further 4,767 persons who were partners, children or wider family members of those who accessed our service.

1.4 We also provide Safety in Relationships, an education programme which informs, educates and challenges perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse in relation to their abusive attitudes and behaviour patterns. It provides a framework to challenge perpetrators on an individual basis to take responsibility for ensuring that their attitudes and behaviours promote safety in intimate and family relationships.

1.5 Our services take referrals from partners in Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT’s); Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS); Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), community and voluntary sector organisations (CVS) and directly from individuals, couples and families across Northern Ireland.

1.6 Relate NI’s work focuses not only on the couple relationship, but on supporting the development of healthy and constructive relationships in society. To this end, we work with children and young people, individuals, couples and various compositions of the wider family unit.

Strengthening Family Relations – Our Response

2.1 We welcome the move to a strategic approach for the Northern Ireland Prison Service, and that this approach recognises the importance of positive relationships and family contact as ‘factors influencing how people cope with imprisonment and their re-integration and rehabilitation upon release’. It is
important that this commitment is supported with resources and commitments in light of research, which indicates that ‘Strong family relationships on entry to prison do not automatically translate into positive resettlement outcomes upon release. Rather it is the strengthening of these attachments throughout the prison sentence (and beyond), which has a sustained impact on reducing reoffending risks, albeit an effect that is diminished when considered two years after release. This positive effect of improving family relations is also evident when considering abstaining from class A drug use and successfully finding employment on release from prison’

2.2 We further welcome the recognition of the diverse approaches which individuals have of defining family; the unique circumstances which exist for individuals and the commitment to define family in the broadest sense. In our long experience of working with people, we understand that families are dynamic entities, and as such, dynamic understandings of families and family relationships are required in order to maximise the benefits of strengthened family relations for those in prison. It is important that this commitment underpin the outworkings of this strategic approach in a practical and meaningful way.

2.3 We also understand that the context of this important area will have different implications for practice depending on who it is who is completing a prison sentence i.e. a female prisoner who is the mother figure in her family; a foreign national who may not have immediate wider family contacts in Northern Ireland etc. As such, we recommend that careful consideration is given to the specific measures required to ensure that all people can benefit equally from this strategic approach.

2.4 It is important to highlight that the research quoted above also highlights that the effects of strengthened family relations may not be uniform. The research highlighted:

“Placing greater emphasis on prison-based strategies to enhance family relations presents a real opportunity for measurable success in reducing reoffending (Jeffries et al. 2001). However, it is important not to overplay the contribution that visits make. We find only a moderate contribution of visits from parents, and no clear evidence that the frequency of visits is important or that visits from partners and children have a similar role to play. As a result, prisons should consider other strategies that may also contribute to prisoners feeling more connected to family during the course of their sentence and on release.”
2.5 We note that the consultation document doesn’t weight the central importance, when intact, of the couple relationship as a foundation to the wider family relationship. The serving of a prison sentence is a considerable vertical stressor in both the couple and the family relationship, and indeed a stressed couple relationship can serve as a significant barrier to strengthening wider family relationships. Relate NI recognise that different interventions and/or approaches will be required depending on the specific context. As such, we recommend that the final strategy document recognises and actively builds on this important distinction, and that the commitments contained in Section 4: Themes, embed specific actions which support the couple relationship in a productive and meaningful way, and that this should be given greater visibility within the final document.

2.6 In relation to the principles, Relate NI advocates the merits of a strengths based and pro social frame of reference with regards to the work envisaged in this approach. A systemic approach has the potential to address individual needs, promote interconnection and restore cohesion and resilience.

2.7 Relate NI believe that the direction of this strategy is positive and welcome the development of this document from the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. It is of fundamental importance that the work envisaged here is planned, effectively resourced and embedded effectively. In order to deliver successful outcomes, it is important that this work is seen as a care way of working, and not as discretionary effort.

2.8 Further to the feedback provided in this response, we support the identified themes contained in the consultation document. We look forward to seeing how the themes contained in the strategy are used to shape plans, resources and work with partners to achieve the outcomes listed.

2.9 We would also like to highlight work undertaken by New Philanthropy Capital and the Indigo Trust which explores the importance of a shared measurement approach in this area.

---

1 Brunton-Smith, I. & McCarthy, D.J., (2016) The Effects of Prisoner Attachment To Family on Re-entry Outcomes: A Longitudinal Assessment, The British Journal of Criminology 57 (2), 463-482