

## NATIONAL NETWORKS OF DPs WORKING WITH EX-OFFENDERS

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## **1. THE ROLE OF NATIONAL THEMATIC NETWORKS IN MAINSTREAMING THE OUTCOMES OF EQUAL**

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"EQUAL provides a range of resources, including support to National Thematic Networks (NTNs), to assist the transfer of good practices that have emerged from its Development Partnerships (DPs) into mainstream policy and practice. The NTNs have a key role to play in this mainstreaming process, as they provide a structured framework for identifying innovative good practice that responds to policy needs, and they also help to establish links with policy makers and other stakeholders. They offer opportunities for DPs to discuss and validate the most promising outcomes of their work and assist them in the dissemination and mainstreaming of these products and methods. The NTNs thus enable effective dialogue between those promoting innovative activities and those responsible for the development of policy. This practical support to mainstreaming is a new feature in the Human Resources Initiatives of the European Social Fund.

### **New approaches to sustainable reintegration of prisoners – Networking as a means of increasing the impact of EQUAL Development Partnerships working with ex-offenders**

During the first phase of EQUAL (2002-2005), a total of 45 Development Partnerships (DPs) were launched, in 12 different Member States, to pilot new approaches to improving the integration of ex-offenders into the labour market. Most of these DPs (26) were concerned primarily or exclusively with preparing people in custody for their future lives outside the prison walls and/or providing resettlement support in the crucial, early months after release. These DPs involved statutory institutions/authorities of the criminal justice system as active partners. The other DPs did not include key actors from this system in their partnerships and they only addressed ex-offenders as part of their wider range of target groups.

Though in the first round of EQUAL no National Thematic Networks (NTNs) were formally established on this specific topic, many “ex-offender DPs” closely cooperated in strong informal networks, notably in Germany and the UK. These networking activities have not only increased the “visibility” of the new approaches piloted by the DPs but also helped to attract and maintain the interest of decision makers, as a basis for further developmental work on a larger scale.

An initial analysis of information contained in the EQUAL Common Data Base (ECDB) indicates that, in the second round of EQUAL, there is a marked growth of interest in issues related to the integration of ex-offenders:

- 65 DPs are now planning, or have already started, new action in this thematic field and the vast majority of these DPs (52) address ex-offenders as their primary or exclusive target group;
- the number of Member States with “ex-offender DPs” has increased from 12 (round 1) to 19 (round 2), including seven of the new Member States;
- 14 Transnational Partnerships (TPs) in the second round of EQUAL have a primary or exclusive focus on ex-offenders, compared to 6 TPs in round 1.

Several Member States have launched, or are planning to establish, National Thematic Networks of DPs working on ex-offender issues in round 2. Also, a number of these new NTNs intend to cooperate in one or more transnational network(s) in order to more effectively exploit European experience for their own work in their respective national contexts.

Currently, EQUAL offers both a critical mass of good practice and experience emerging from round 1 and a new momentum and scope for further thematic activities and mainstreaming that are reinforced by the experiences of the first round.

This paper describes some of the outcomes and successes of the networks of “ex-offender” DPs in Germany and the United Kingdom. It is intended to stimulate and underpin the work of relevant NTNs in round 2.

## 2. OUTCOMES AND SUCCESSES OBTAINED BY NETWORKS OF EX-OFFENDER DPs IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

### 2.1. IMPROVING THE LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF EX-OFFENDERS: SEVEN GERMAN STATES SIGN AN INTER-GOVERNMENTAL AGREEMENT FOR JOINT ACTION

The German [e-LiS Development Partnership](#) (DP) was launched in 2002 to promote the employability of ex-offenders and to prepare them for their re-integration into the job market. The DP involved six Northern States (Länder) of the Federal Republic of Germany<sup>1</sup> and was based on 32 separate but inter-related projects. It focused on new forms of learning and support that facilitated access to marketable training qualifications, covered existing gaps in provision and stimulated the motivation of the participants. One of its most significant innovations was the use of information and communication technologies in prisons, including the introduction of e-learning, and this raised particularly sensitive problems for the penal institutions involved ([see also section 2.2](#)).

Though it was not initially conceived as a National Thematic Network, e-LiS actually fulfilled many of the functions that are attributed to EQUAL NTN, by:

- identifying policy gaps and needs that are reflected in the work of the DP's projects and attracting the interest of relevant policy makers in all the Länder;
- designing and implementing from the DP's outset a clear strategy for horizontal and vertical mainstreaming;
- creating links and organising exchange and transfer of experience and good practice between projects working on similar themes;
- providing a platform for effective dialogue between those who were implementing the projects and those who were responsible for developing policies for the re-integration of ex-offenders.

Thus, the experience of the e-LiS DP offers a stimulating example of a thematic network that combined both a sectoral and a geographical dimension to achieve horizontal and vertical mainstreaming effects. One of its outcomes is described below.

#### The RESO-Northern Alliance – a new framework for sustainable cooperation

One important outcome of the networking activities has been the adoption of a formal agreement by the Ministries of Justice of the federal states that



participated in the e-LiS DP and, in addition, by the State of Lower Saxony, bringing up the number of Länder to seven. This agreement was concluded in March 2005 and resulted in the establishment of the "RESO-Northern Alliance" (RESO-Nordverbund), which is a structured framework for cooperation between the administrations of justice in the fields of education, training and labour-market programmes for the social integration of offenders.

The approach that led to the formation of the Northern Alliance was presented at a transnational EQUAL conference, in Berlin in October 2005. Hildegard Jansen from the Department of Employment and Social Affairs of the federal state of Bremen has been involved in this process from its beginning. In addressing the 200 participants Jansen said, *"this agreement was the logical consequence of more than two years of successful work in the e-LiS partnership. Experience from e-LiS has demonstrated how education and labour market measures can be effectively combined to foster the rehabilitation of ex-offenders."* She then went on to explain that,

<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Schleswig-Holstein.

*“these successful approaches must now be transposed into general practice throughout our penal systems. The creation of the Northern Alliance opens up new opportunities for sustainable cooperation and joint further development that will improve the delivery of our rehabilitation policies”.* The conference brought together representatives of the Ministries of Justice and other relevant Departments, prison services and more than 30 DPs from twelve EU Member States, to discuss “New ways for a sustainable re-integration of offenders”.

The members of the Northern Alliance have made a firm commitment to engage in coordinated action to improve the employability of prison inmates, and to promote the exchange of experience and transfer of good practice between the relevant institutions in the justice and penal systems. The key objective specified in the agreement is *“to develop and validate common standards for the successful educational and vocational integration of ex-offenders”.* Drawing on outcomes and recommendations emerging from the e-LiS DP, the Northern Alliance has agreed to cooperate on establishing such standards for a range of interrelated thematic areas, including:

- the combination of relevant assistance and employment measures inside and outside the penal institutions, as part of an integrated support system;
- the introduction of modular, flexible and individualised education/training processes, based on a common approach to individual assessment and profiling;
- the joint development and use of IT-based learning systems;
- ensuring the labour market relevance of education and employment offers in prisons;
- the development of an agreed system for the re-integration of ex-offenders after their period of custody.

The members of the Alliance have also agreed to coordinate their action in initiating the necessary legal changes and creating favourable framework conditions for their work in the above thematic areas. Decisions are made by a consortium of high level representatives of the Ministries of Justice and are then implemented by the permanent Steering Group of the Alliance which also comprises representatives of all seven Länder.

Each of the participating Länder has taken a lead role in one of the thematic areas, and/or a responsibility for particular tasks in the organisation and management of the Alliance. These tasks also include cooperation with EU Member States and non-EU countries. *“Transnational exchange and cooperation is a very effective way of reducing the time and resources that are required for new developments”* says Jürgen Hillmer, who coordinated the transnational work of e-LiS. Hillmer highlights the fact that *“through our EQUAL partnerships we have now established contacts with several dozens of projects across Europe, all working on thematic issues similar or complementary to ours. We want to set up a European Network of all these initiatives. One of the contributions of the Northern Alliance to this network will be the development of a Knowledge Portal to collect and update relevant national and European experience and make it easily accessible to all members”.*

Since its creation, the RESO Northern Alliance has attracted considerable attention from other parts of Germany and some of the other nine Länder that have already indicated their strong interest in cooperating, and sharing experience, with the Alliance.

## **Tackling barriers to employability action in prisons**

Right from its start, e-LiS adopted a networking approach that enabled it to make optimal use of its resources in finding solutions to those problems that were common to all the six Länder. Two main problems had to be addressed:

- **Lack of adequate provision and resources for the re-integration of ex-offenders into employment.**

Ex-offenders are one of the “hardest to place” groupings but are not a priority target group for active labour market measures. *“Most of the inmates in our prisons still lack individual competences that are important for vocational and social re-integration and this hampers their chances of living their future lives without re-offending. Recidivism and exclusion from employment represent a high cost for our society that may well exceed the cost of preventive education and labour market measures”*, explains Jürgen Hillmer. At the beginning of the DP’s activities, only a very small minority of people in custody had access to educational and training provision that was adapted to their needs.

- **Difficulties of reconciling new flexible processes of individualised learning with the rules and the contextual conditions in prisons.**

The introduction of IT-based learning must comply with strict security regulations in the penal institutions. e-LiS found that there were no “jail safe” learning platforms and software programmes available on the open market, which met these regulations. Thus, such platforms and programmes had to be developed and also, prison staff and trainers, who were not yet familiar with new IT-based approaches, had to be trained in their use.

The e-LiS DP tested responses to these problems through its extended network of projects, each of which had a particular focus on one or more specific aspect(s). This approach enabled every actor in the network to draw on, and benefit from, the experience of all the projects. Now, the combined outcomes from these projects provide a comprehensive and validated model of good practice that is applicable across all of the participating Länder ([see also section 2.2](#)).

The RESO Northern Alliance provides the framework for implementing and enhancing the lessons learned from e-LiS on a larger scale. Its work is a practical response to the European Employment Guidelines which place a strong emphasis on reinforcing social inclusion and preventing exclusion from the world of work. In its Recommendation ([2004/741/EC](#)) on the implementation of Member States’ employment policies the Council stresses, in one of its specific recommendations to Germany, the need “to increase participation in lifelong learning, especially for the low-skilled, SME employees and older workers.”



Training in Prison

Though they are not specifically referred to in this recommendation, prison inmates are part of the target group that is most excluded from the process of lifelong learning.

## Creating conditions for change

Establishing sustainable cooperation to implement new approaches to the rehabilitation of ex-offenders does not only require good coordination and effective mechanisms for exchange between the operators. “*In the successful step forward from the e-LiS Development Partnership to the RESO-Northern Alliance three factors were absolutely crucial*”, emphasises Hildegard Jansen, namely “*actively building a relationship of mutual trust between all key actors; identifying, and focusing on, common interests; and developing a considerable degree of perseverance and staying power to overcome possible setbacks*”.

The EQUAL partnership concept, on which e-LiS was built, helped to meet these requirements. Involving all primary stakeholders, in particular the Ministries of Justice, in defining the problems to be tackled and making decisions on possible solutions created a climate of trust. This climate made it possible to move, in a relatively short period of time, from initial ideas about the creation of a structured cooperation framework towards the actual formation of the Northern Alliance. In summer 2003, the first step of this process was a stock-taking of the available education and training offers for people in custody and the roles of the relevant providers. Based on this analysis and proposals from e-LiS, a working group involving representatives of the Ministries of Justice was set up in spring 2004 to develop common basic principles for cooperation that led to the formal agreement on the Alliance in March 2005.

Thus, preparatory work on the creation of the Northern Alliance was an essential element of the mainstreaming strategy of the e-LiS network and proceeded in parallel to the activities of the 32 e-LiS projects. Whilst the problem of financial resources for the future hung over this whole process like the sword of Damocles, the early focus on mainstreaming provided sufficient time to tackle the issue and now the continuation of the Alliance’s activities has been secured.

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## 2.2. PRISON INMATES IN GERMANY CATCH UP WITH THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

The [e-LiS Development Partnership](#) (DP) has demonstrated how prisons take advantage of the opportunities that the use of computers offers for learning and teaching, in order to prepare ex-offenders for their way back into work and everyday life outside the civil penal institution. The DP operated from June 2002 to May 2005 and linked together more than 30 individual projects in a network spanning six Northern federal states (Länder) of Germany ([see also section 2.1](#)). It involved 19 prisons which were carefully chosen to reflect the specific situations and roles of different types of penal institutions, a number of training providers and organisations specialising in the fields of course development and delivery, and two universities that provided expertise in the development of a learning platform and the piloting of this platform in the prisons.

### e-Learning to help Ex-Offenders meet new Requirements on the Job Market



*IT-based learning for prisoners*

*computers. Also, our penal system can no longer ignore the internet and we must train prisoners in the use of this medium.”*

Through developing, testing and operating a common learning platform, e-LiS has laid solid foundations for the introduction of new forms of computer-based training into prisons. “*Just like everyone else, prisoners need a high level of media competence to meet the new requirements of the labour market*”, says Wilfried Hendricks, Professor at the Technical University of Berlin and Director of the *Institute for Education in the Information Society* which played a leading role in promoting IT-based learning in the prisons. He is convinced that “*if we really want more prisoners to acquire such competence, they must learn to learn with*

The new platform for e-learning is based on the open source software ILIAS, which was modified and further developed by the *TZI Center for Computing Technologies* at the University of Bremen to respond to the specific requirements of the penal system. Managed by *TZI*, this platform is now accessible to prisons in all the Länder that were involved in the e-LiS network. It offers learning modules, that can be used online and an overview of all the learning software that has been tested by e-LiS for use in prisons. These modular educational/training programmes make it possible to meet the different needs of the heterogeneous group of prisoners, including young people and adults, women and men. Teachers and other members of staff have been trained in its use and in some jails inmates have completed their first training units using the platform. “*We want to address primarily slow learners and people with other learning difficulties. We have also found that young people, in particular, respond very well to these new offers*”, explains Elisabeth Theine from the Ministry of Justice of Brandenburg.

The networking approach in e-LiS lubricated the exchange and transfer of experience between the different prisons, which was essential in ensuring that the common learning platform suited their individual situations. Building on the results achieved so far, the next steps will be to permanently anchor the use of the platform in all the prisons in the six Länder and to strengthen its response to gender specific needs ([see also section 2.1](#)).

## Reconciling new approaches to IT-based learning with the Constraints of the Prisons

The introduction of e-learning in prisons raises sensitive questions about the safe use of such new technologies in a secure environment. e-LiS addressed these concerns by developing and piloting a closed intranet providing protected access to the learning platform. *“e-LiS offers a very differentiated multi-level security concept that takes account of the diverse situations in different prisons and enables specific rights of access to be defined for each individual inmate”*, explains Professor Jürgen Friedrich of the TZI. The development of approaches to e-learning that are appropriate for use in prisons has also been a central theme in the transnational partnerships in which the e-LiS network was involved. Most of the transnational partners had a very similar



Prison gate

point of departure, that is described by Walter Hammerschick of the Vienna *Institute for the Sociology of Law and Criminology* who coordinated the work of the Telfi DP in Austria: *“For a long time, the idea of allowing access to an IT network from jail was perceived as incompatible with the nature of penal institutions. We had to tackle problems that related to the particular conditions of imprisonment, such as security issues and specific legal requirements.”*

Positive experience from the e-LiS network has nourished expectations that these problems can now be overcome. Some prisons have already progressed with “internet simulations” and further work concerns the establishing of a technological infrastructure that enables the controlled use of selected web pages as a learning medium in a way that complies with the security regulations of penal institutions.

### Managing the process of innovation

Responding to technological and security requirements was not the only challenge for the e-LiS network. Loading the learning platform with relevant content and acquainting teachers, trainers and prison staff with the new methods of teaching and learning, which are inseparably linked to its use, were equally important pre-conditions.

### Identifying, adapting and testing suitable learning modules and software

Four e-LiS projects, including specialised university institutes and training providers in three different federal states, worked together to feed the learning platform with relevant content. The first step in this process involved an analysis of the needs of those 23 projects in the network that were set up to provide ICT based training for different groups of prisoners and for trainers or other staff. This was followed by market research on existing learning software that could be adapted to meet these needs and also to enable secure and cost-effective links to be made between the education and training bases in the prisons concerned. The outcomes of this research are contained in a database of suitable education software and modules that are available on the market. Appropriate software and learning materials selected from this database were then tested in real situations and adapted for practical use in, and by, the prisons.

### Training teachers, trainers, tutors and other members of staff

All key partners in the e-LiS network were convinced that the introduction of new methods of learning and training in prisons could only be successful if these methods were accepted and supported by informed, motivated and qualified staff. Therefore two of the e-LiS projects, again from different federal states, cooperated on a programme for in-service staff training. This programme was aimed not only to develop the IT- and media-skills of teachers and trainers who are involved in prison education but also to provide information for, and foster competence building amongst, all those who might play an active role in the implementation of the new approaches. Activities included running courses and workshops, offering tele-learning modules and on-line tuition and organising structured exchange between actors from all e-LiS projects on a range of topics, such as

- didactical and technical aspects of IT and media based learning and teaching,
- content management,
- profiling and assessment practices,
- methods of tele-tutoring,
- project management and team building,
- network and security issues,
- evaluation and quality management,

Further information and training activities were focused on issues related to the practical implementation of the EQUAL principles of Gender Mainstreaming, Empowerment and Transnational Cooperation.

Conclusions from the e-LiS evaluation confirm that e-learning for prisoners is most successful in situations where periods of self-study are allied to cooperative or group learning and that the active involvement of trainers/tutors is crucial, including their on site presence at several stages of the learning process. The evaluation also emphasises the need to further clarify the demands on, and the roles of, these tutors and to assist them in the use of didactical approaches that take account of the specific target groups and learning environments in prisons. The lessons learned from the piloting of different methods and tools for in-service training within the e-LiS network now provide a substantial pool of practical experience that will guide future development work in this field.

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## 2.3. IMPROVING EX-OFFENDERS' ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT SERVICES IN THE UK

Many ex-offenders have an antipathy towards the formal approach and authority of public agencies and services. This can be reinforced by the fear of having to admit to a conviction or having that conviction discovered which may be more likely to happen when looking for a job. One participant in a UK EQUAL DP put it very succinctly, *"Without the project I wouldn't have bothered because I hate going to Jobcentres!"* The implication of this is that employment advisers have to be very conscious of the needs of this "hard-to-reach" target group if they are to establish relationships of sufficient quality to assist ex-offenders along their pathways to employment.

### Helping Employment Advisers in their work with Ex-offenders and other Disadvantaged Groups

Within the round 1 mainstreaming activities of the UK's National Thematic Group on Employability, advisers from the national employment service have been supported in delivering a more effective service for "hard-to-reach" groupings. These advisers now feel that they listen better to their customers, ask more appropriate questions without making assumptions, re-evaluate their interview techniques, think more widely and explore and evaluate their performance. Neil Couling, South East Regional Director of Jobcentre Plus, believes that *"This very*



*EQUAL DPs explaining their approaches to employment advisers*



*successful initiative united EQUAL projects in bringing about the necessary cultural change that will enable our Jobcentre Plus staff to move forward in tackling 'hard to reach' groups."*

## **Reaching those at the Greatest Distance from the Labour Market**

The core of the UK Government's strategy to combat unemployment and help people to move off benefits and into work is the New Deal. This vision of *"work for those who can, support for those who can't"* is actually delivered by Jobcentre Plus through its network of Jobcentres and Jobcentre Plus offices. The New Deal aims to give the unemployed the opportunity to develop the skills and experience that employers require and to assist them to find lasting, worthwhile jobs. The New Deal also aims to improve the overall skills base of the British workforce and provides help to employers whose businesses are suffering from staff shortages. The programme is mandatory for young jobseekers aged 18 to 24 and for those aged 25 and over who are claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

Jobcentre Plus is thus the gatekeeper to employment, to training and to what used to be called unemployment benefit and are now allowances aimed to get people into work or self-employment. As it plays such a pivotal role in ensuring that individuals can access the financial benefits to which they are entitled and the training and employment opportunities that are currently available, it is vitally important that this service does not either consciously or unconsciously discriminate against those of its clients who may present the greatest challenges in terms of their labour market integration. Jobcentre Plus realised the difficulties that its advisers had in building a rapport and working with these hardest to place customers and it established 13 different priority categories of people for whom it should provide a better service.

All of this is was in keeping with the guidelines of the European Employment Strategy that aim to attract more people to the labour market and to make work a real option for all. It also reflects one of the 2004 recommendations from the European Council to the United Kingdom that urges the UK to *"ensure that active labour market policies and benefit systems prevent de-skilling and promote quality in work, by improving incentives to work and supporting the sustainable integration and progress in the labour market of inactive and unemployed people; address the rising number of people claiming sickness or disability benefits, and give particular attention to lone parents and people living in deprived areas."*

## **Sharing EQUAL's experience**

There was some time that elapsed between the establishing of Jobcentre Plus and EQUAL being able to offer support to its advisers in dealing with hard-to-reach groupings. Jobcentre Plus was launched with a number of Pathfinder offices in September 2001. In advance of this launch, the new Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus, Leigh Lewis, invited a number of key stakeholders to join a forum which would be used to inform the development of the new service. Carers UK, which was the managing organisation for a first round EQUAL Development Partnership (DP), was invited to chair the training sub-group of this Jobcentre Plus Stakeholder Forum. Part of its work was to review the training on individual target groups that was available to Jobcentre Plus and its staff and to identify any gaps in these training opportunities that members of the Forum might help to fill.

In advance of developing any training on individual target groups, the sub-group felt that a more important task was to identify issues common to all target groups, for example isolation or lack of confidence and to explore how a tool could be developed which would address how all members of Jobcentre Plus staff worked with hard-to-help customers.

The next development was during the Theme A or Employability workshop session at the UK Equal Dissemination and Mainstreaming Seminar on 25 November 2002. This session discussed the identification of core training needs common to various EQUAL target groups, and the development of common training, as a possible national mainstreaming activity under EQUAL Action 3. Following that seminar, a meeting was held with Dan Jefferson, Head of Public Affairs at Jobcentre Plus and the possibility was raised of DPs within Theme A contributing to the work proposed by the Stakeholders Forum by developing a support tool. It was felt that this could be an excellent opportunity to ensure that the work of EQUAL DPs fed directly into a core service and was effectively mainstreamed.

At a subsequent UK Mainstreaming seminar in March 2003, there was considerable enthusiasm for collaboration of this kind. As discussions unfolded, it was clear that different DPs could bring very different expertise to the development and delivery of what could become a highly innovative product. It was also felt that this collaboration would create an opportunity for promoting EQUAL and the work of DPs, which at that moment in time had a very low profile. In the end, five DPs agreed to work on this activity and together they covered three main categories of the thirteen different priority categories of Jobcentre Plus as follows:

- Ex-offenders who have served custodial sentence ([KEEP](#), [NewLIFE](#) and [Women into Work](#));
- People with health condition or disability ([Positive Futures](#));
- Invalid Care Allowance recipients or people in receipt of Widows' or Widowers' Benefit ([ACE National](#)).

These five Equal projects decided to run a one-day workshop and seminar for 60 Jobcentre Plus advisers from the London, South East and East regions. This activity was viewed as a pilot for future development. A planning group was established with representatives from all five Equal projects and from Jobcentre Plus staff to jointly organise the event. It was decided that the seminar would focus on key themes common to all disadvantaged groups and the Barriers to Employment seminar was finally held at the Holiday Inn, Bloomsbury, London, on 7 December 2004.



*EQUAL workshop animators rehearsing together with the ARC theatre company*

During the event, the barriers for 'hard to reach' client groups were explored using workshops covering three themes; disclosure, transferable skills, and stereotyping/stigmatisation. These hour-long workshops were led by members of the EQUAL partnerships who explored with the participants what it was like to be in the client's position facing an adviser for the first time. The workshops also considered how the difficulties in initial interviews could be overcome so that the outcomes would be as valuable as possible both to the client and to the advisers. The three workshops were supplemented by interactive sessions at the beginning and end of the day. During these sessions, the ARC theatre company helped the whole audience to explore some of the issues and concerns that had been raised by individual delegates.

## The Positive Outcomes

As a result of their participation in the seminar, the advisers believe that they now see each customer as an individual and are more aware of his or her situation. As Lynne Crossley an adviser from the South Region put it, *"I now show greater empathy to customers, am more aware of what issues and concerns customers have and I change my interviewing technique to suit the individuals and their needs."*

Parvinder, Lynne's colleague believes that *"I have learnt that there are often underlying factors or causes for an individual's behaviour that are not obvious and I probe more than I used to. I consider whether I have subconsciously stereo-typed when I am interviewing clients."*

As London is such a large city, there is always a risk of professional isolation and of agencies ploughing a lone furrow, without reference to each other's activities and services. However, the advisers from the London area now realise that there are people 'out there' in various EQUAL partnerships that can help and advise them on issues related to ex-offenders and other groupings. They are now working more closely with the EQUAL Partners and making sure other advisers know about these additional sources of assistance. Neville Boulton who works in the East End of London feels that *"This day will really make me think about the way I work in future. I never realised that there was so much expertise out there in my local area."*

The intention now is not to stop at this pilot but to explore other opportunities in the second round to share the experience of EQUAL with practitioners who are working in related fields. The final word is left with Ben Gladstone who was closely involved in the planning and implementation of

the seminar. He is convinced that *“this Jobcentre Plus event will lead to many future joint events whereby EQUAL projects will pool resources to deliver joint support and development for the benefit of service providers.”*

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)

## 2.4. A BRIGHTER FUTURE WITH NEON - UK

There were a number of strong, imaginative DPs established in the UK during EQUAL round 1 that focussed on issues concerned with (ex) – offenders. However, it was only towards the end of this round that they had the opportunity to come together and to begin to exchange their hard-won knowledge and expertise. As a result, they made very little impact on policy at national level and there was only one concerted attempt to influence the practices of other bodies which is described immediately above.

### Networking to Mainstream

A National EQUAL Offender Network - known as NEON for short - has been established in the UK. NEON has been built from the bottom-up by representatives of every offender focused EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland – a total of 10 projects. All of these DPs have an exclusive focus on ex-offenders but within this focus, different sub-groups are being targeted and different methods and approaches are being explored. Project leaders of all of these DPs collaborated in the preparation and submission of applications for the second round of EQUAL to ensure that their activities would be complementary and that there would be no duplication of effort.

Representatives of these DPs now come together at meetings of the new network and have continued to share new developments. Together they have set out common plans for dissemination and mainstreaming activities during the second round of EQUAL that build on their complementary interests and approaches. They are in the process of establishing a National Policy Reference Group for the NEON which comprises all the bodies, departments and agencies that the DPs will be targeting by their results and products.

### The Need for Coordinated and Advanced Planning

There have been a number of recent developments in the UK that could be used to boost the mainstreaming potential of EQUAL offender-focussed outcomes. The Criminal Justice System is currently undergoing a major restructuring and strategies are being developed for an integrated offender management system within the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), which provides a single, common management structure for the Prison and Probation Services. The National Resettlement Action Plan, the Prolific and Other Priority Offenders Strategy, together with the planned implementation of new sentences (Custody Plus and Custody Minus to be piloted in 2006 and rolled out in 2007) under the Criminal Justice Act 2003, require new

approaches to working with offenders to ensure their successful reintegration into the community and to reduce re-offending.



Linda Pizani-Williams (centre) explaining NEON-UK to a transnational grouping of EQUAL offender DPs

Management and Monitoring Services. In addition, EISS had coordinated the initiative with Jobcentre Plus staff described above. It was therefore in a good position to understand some of the shortcomings of the first round's mainstreaming activities and to do something about redressing these in round two. *"Together we wanted to do something that would mean that we would not all be competing for the attention of the same policy makers and, at the same time, we wanted to give ex-offender projects a more powerful voice,"* explains Linda Pizani- Williams, the Director of EISS.

Whilst these opportunities exist, there was no little real impact of offender focussed DPs during the first round of EQUAL, apart from their involvement in the training of advisers from Jobcentre Plus the story of which is told above. Also there had been no attempt to create a common mainstreaming strategy for these projects sufficiently well in advance. [The European Institute of Social Services](#) (EISS) at University of Kent had had an involvement with EQUAL, as during the first round, it has provided three EQUAL DPs, including an offenders DP called [PRISE](#), with Transnational Coordination and Financial

### Putting the Building Blocks in Place

In the lead up to the closing date for EQUAL round 2 submissions, the phone lines were hot and the e-mails were flying between those who were drafting applications for DPs that would be working with offenders. The immediate results of all of these contacts were that the themes chosen by the different projects were mutually reinforcing and of genuine interest to those responsible for the policies of penal institutions and the related services. As Nichola Cadet, Project Director of the Women on the Move DP puts it, *"this process gave us a real opportunity to learn from each other and we didn't end up reinventing the wheel."* In addition, there was a large commitment on the part of these new DPs to working together within a network. There were also two important strategic outcomes of the selection process in terms of maximising the future impact of EQUAL.

Firstly, all of the recent developments in the Criminal Justice System that have been mentioned above will necessitate close cooperation with the voluntary sector if the required level of support is to be offered to offenders both inside the prison and, particularly, during the crucial early days and weeks after release. Thus, a strong presence of the voluntary sector and statutory/voluntary partnerships was built into the structures of all of the 10 DPs that eventually formed the NEON network. Secondly, National Offender Management strategies are reflected at a regional and local level through the Regional Offender Managers, and local probation and prison areas. NEON DPs exist in four of the nine regions of England and also in Wales and are thus well placed to contribute to five of these strategies. In UKni, where there are different arrangements and procedures, both the Prison Service and the Probation Board are active partners within the [Reachout](#) DP that aims to build on the mainstreaming activities of the Personal Progression System DP in EQUAL round one and, especially, the establishment of a Resettlement Strategy for offenders in Northern Ireland. *"Apart from the mutual support which is very important to us, as the only offender DP in Northern Ireland, NEON also provides a forum for disseminating materials developed during round 1"*, says Pat Conway, Director of Services at NIACRO, the managing organisation of Reachout.

The nine offender projects that were selected in UKgb for the second round of EQUAL are EQUAL [Exodus](#), [Ready for Action](#), [Reset](#), [Women On The Move](#), [Ascend](#), [Changing Directions](#), [Women Building Futures](#), [Asset](#) and [Unlocking Potential](#). All are concentrating on different topics

and approaches and already most of them are leading aspects of UKgb's mainstreaming strategies for the various EQUAL Themes as outlined below.

EQUAL DP	POLICY OR PRACTICE AREA FOR MAINSTREAMING
Ready for Action: Theme A	Enabling young ex-offenders to enter the labour market through the creation of a simulated business environment
Women on the Move: Theme A	Integrated support services to meet needs of women ex-offenders
Reset: Theme A	The production of a national resettlement strategy for juveniles and development of practical resettlement support
Exodus: Theme A	Mainstreaming successful models of employment for short-term prisoners in anticipation of the Custody Plus sentence and Prolific and Priority Offenders
IMPACT - Asset: Theme A	Targeting three types of ex-offenders (18 – 24 year olds, women and 50+) and using a multi agency case management approach with a holistic intervention model to give ex-offenders equal opportunities with regards to entering the labour market.
IMPACT - Changing Directions: Theme C	Reducing disadvantaged through Business Creation: Self-employment as an effective route out of exclusion and benefits focussing on sex offenders.
Women Building Futures: Theme H	Providing opportunities for women from disadvantaged backgrounds to access innovative training programmes, work placements and employment in “non traditional” careers
IMPACT – Ascend: Theme B	Developing specific tools and interventions for working with Black and Minority Ethnic prisoners and ex-offenders
Unlocking Potential: Theme A	Targeting employers and employer organisations to identify and overcome the barriers to employing ex-offenders

However, NEON is not content to leave things to chance and has decided to try and create a real expectation and demand for its outputs amongst the potential users of the new policies and practices that it is testing and developing and so it is now forming a National Policy Reference Group to:

- Advise the NEON DPs about current and anticipated developments in policy, practice and legislation;
- Receive evidence of innovative effective practices developed by the NEON projects;
- Act as a “conduit” to other relevant bodies;
- Promote and support national dissemination events;
- Provide opportunities for mainstreaming effective practice into national policies.

Denise Woods who coordinates the three IMPACT DPs believes that, *“through this new group, policy makers and key stakeholders will have every possible chance to find out about the new developments that are taking place in resettlement practices.”* The types of bodies that have been invited to join this National Policy Reference Group include:

- National Offender Management Service
- Prison Service
- Department for Work & Pensions
- Learning & Skills Council (now responsible for all offender learning)
- Home Office (National Probation Directorate)
- Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
- Youth Justice Board
- Department for Trade & Industry (Gender Equality Unit)

NEON is also hoping to attract private sector employer representation before the high profile launch of the group, which will take place in London during the last week of February 2006. This event will be chaired by Ken Lambert from the European Social Fund Division, the Managing Authority for EQUAL in UKgb.



*The logo of NEON-UK which is likely to be used by NEONs in Germany and the Netherlands*

Finally, NEON is very anxious to transfer learning and good practices across frontiers and through the transnational partners of its constituent DPs, it is creating close links with national networks of offender projects in other Member States. NEON is very

interested in participating in, and contributing to, any European events or thematic activities related to offender issues and it believes that some of the topics, which might be usefully explored at European level are:

- Multi-agency working;
- Pathways and in particular arrangements for release;
- E-learning;
- European prisoners held outside their country of residence.

NEON UK, together with NEON NL, also gave a presentation on the European networks at the European Offender Employment Forum conference in Prague at the end of November 2005.

## Contact

### Exodus

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

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The four examples of networking presented in section 2 differ widely in terms of the objectives, specific approaches, outcomes and the context in which they have operated. However, their experience offers some convergent messages. These messages highlight several factors that have played a crucial role in strengthening the networks' capacity for increasing the impact of the work of its constituent DPs and for mainstreaming the good practices that they have developed. Five aspects have emerged as being of particular importance:

- in all four examples, the networks have solicited, or been associated with, the early, active **involvement of stakeholders with (policy) responsibilities outside the framework of the EQUAL Management**, e.g. the Ministries of Justice (examples 2.1 and 2.2), the “stakeholder forum” (example 2.3) or the “National Policy Reference Group” (example 2.4);
- in all four cases the protagonists stress that effective coordination and cooperation within the network was greatly helped by the fact that it had been possible to involve **actors whose roles and responsibilities were mutually complementary rather than conflicting**;
- in some cases (examples 2.2 and 2.3), a substantial part of the success of the networking activities is attributable to a **strong focus on capacity building and “training”** of actors who can play a major role in the wider scale implementation of good practices emerging from the DPs;
- all four examples illustrate the positive effects that a **well balanced regional spread of action within the network** can have on the dissemination and mainstreaming of outcomes from the DPs;
- finally, **a clear identification of, and then building on, common interests** and **creating a climate of trust** between the “networkers” is seen as an essential prerequisite for success in all four examples. Fulfilling these conditions makes considerable demands on all operators who have to persevere in facing and overcoming setbacks and be committed to an on-going exchange of views and developments with their peers and partners.

As a more general conclusion from all four cases, the views expressed by key actors leave no doubt about the important role played by the networks in providing a forum for collective learning and the promotion of a wider use of the practical tools, products and other outcomes that have been developed and tested by EQUAL DPs.