

CONSTRUCTING PATHWAYS FOR PERSONAL PROGRESSION

After conflict flared up again in 1969, a significant number of politically motivated prisoners were detained in penal institutions in Northern Ireland. As a result, the focus of the Prison Service and other Criminal Justice agencies was very much determined by security concerns. However, the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement that was signed in 1998 provided a mechanism for the release of this category of prisoner and the profile of Northern Ireland's prison population became similar to the rest of Europe. The new atmosphere of change and optimism after the agreement presented an opportunity to develop an effective resettlement strategy for prisoners that would improve their employment prospects.

During a transnational event hosted by the EQUAL Personal Progression System at Hillsborough Castle in 2003, John Spellar, who was then the Minister responsible for Criminal Justice, explained the relevance of this project. He stated that *"The Northern Ireland Prison Service has been actively working to assess prisoners' resettlement needs and developing their contacts with the relevant departments and employers. Now, each prison establishment has in place an EQUAL Personal Progression System worker who assesses need in relation to employment and other issues. For many prisoners the work being done will make a real difference to them!"*

BUILDING THE PATHWAYS FROM INSIDE THE PRISON

The Personal Progression System Development Partnership (DP) exists to provide pathways to employment for people in prison and to contribute to the effective resettlement of people on release.

The DP has helped to put flesh on the bones of two significant, prison-related policy initiatives. The first of these is the recommendation of the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland of March 2000, that "aftercare and support to discharged prisoners should be adequately resourced." Then in 2001, a Joint Thematic Review by the Inspectorates of Prisons and Probation called for "a national strategy to be drawn up and implemented to achieve the effective resettlement of offenders sentenced to imprisonment."

The DP was designed to involve those key players who could together address the resettlement needs of the long term unemployed within the prison system. These actors were the [Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders](#) (NIACRO), the [Probation Board for Northern Ireland](#) and the [Northern Ireland Prison Service](#). NIACRO is a voluntary organisation with a long track record of operating training, employment and community reintegration programmes for offenders and it has also coordinated the work of this DP. Given the potential importance of the Personal Progression System (PPS), it was decided that it should be trialled in all of the three penal institutions in Northern Ireland. Maghaberry is a high security prison 20 miles west of Belfast, while Magilligan is a low to medium security prison in the North West of Northern Ireland and Hydebank Young Offenders Centre is on the outskirts of Belfast. A dedicated staff member employed by NIACRO, with EQUAL funding, was located in each of these establishments but also created professional contacts in the surrounding communities or in areas to which prisoners might return after their release.



Working towards an ICT qualification in Maghaberry Prison

In all cases, these members of staff operated across disciplines to introduce employability assessments and to contribute to jointly agreed resettlement plans for prisoners that would support their pathways to employability on their release. They also established strong working relationships with a range of public sector, private sector, voluntary and community agencies so that these agencies could be called on, sometimes at short notice, to offer different forms of support to offenders as they left the prison gates.



Planting spring bulbs during the Horticultural Training Programme

The PPS workers were actively engaged in motivating and supporting prisoners, monitoring their progress and coordinating their release plans but their target groups were different depending on the nature of the institution. In Hydebank Young Offenders Centre, the project worked each year with 40 young men who were not linked to other programmes in the centre and at considerable risk of unemployment, re-offending and return to prison. In Maghaberry, the DP targeted annually 60 prisoners who would have a statutory link with the Probation Board on their release. At Magilligan, the target was also 60 prisoners

but those who were intending to remain in the North West area after their release and so this pilot was able to establish a tighter, geographical, support network around the prison. In the course of the project's life time, a total of 429 individuals have benefited from its services and support. A few of these benefits are illustrated by some quotes from prisoners who expressed their wish to remain anonymous and this has been respected:

- *"I have had regular contact with the project since release and I have passed literacy and numeracy courses."*
- *"Without the project I wouldn't have bothered because I hate going to Job Centres!"*
- *"Within two days of release, I was working and now I'm training for a managerial post."*
- *"This time, I had more opportunities coming out of jail than I did before I went in!"*

Then there was Rob (not his real name), a 34 year old man in prison for malicious wounding and assault who had 10 previous convictions. PPS approached his previous employer about the possibility of his returning to work and was advised that a driving position might be available. With EQUAL funding and the support of the DP, Rob was able to obtain driving lessons, take his test and get a licence. He is now back with his old company in a secure full time job. Unlike Rob, Kevin (again not his real name) was a young offender and he had 27 convictions. While in custody, he had worked in the gym and on release he agreed to go on a Modern Apprenticeship Course and also received help from PPS to find employment at a local leisure facility. Though re-convicted 6 months later, Kevin re-engaged with the project and after his last release, he achieved a forklift-driver's qualification.

In terms of the overall results, half of the participants maintained contact with the project for the full three months after release and, of these, 25% have found permanent full-time or part-time employment and 40% have gone on to further education or training.

PROMOTING CHANGE THROUGH INNOVATION

INVOLVING THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTORS

"At strategic level, most had bought into this concept of a Resettlement Strategy but the main question was how to realise it?" explains Pat Conway, Director of Services at NIACRO. However, he adds *"fortunately, our EQUAL DP provided a perfect opportunity to test the types of measures and approaches that might be included in such a strategy."* The DP was constructed from all of those agencies that would have a key role to play in the implementation of any new strategy. NIACRO, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service came together in a Strategic Management Group that had responsibility for the overall direction of the project and local Steering Groups were established in each of these three prisons. Together, the

partners have attempted to change structures and attitudes in prisons that had tended in the past to be too narrowly focused on maintaining security and have also tried to engage employers so that they would be willing to provide work experience and job opportunities for ex-offenders. Throughout the project, the Strategy and Steering Groups have monitored and assessed these innovations and where necessary, changes or modifications have been made.

STIMULATING INNOVATION

Perhaps the most significant new aspect pioneered by PPS is the concept of employability assessments, particularly as research has shown that having a job, and its associated benefits, is the single most significant factor in reducing re-offending. Each employability assessment is then followed up by a consideration of what can be done to reinforce the individual inmate's employability through the prison's education department or training workshops and/or by providing additional training opportunities after release.



Finalising resettlement plans with the Governor of the Hydebank Young Offenders' Centre

Previously, services within the three penal institutions such as probation, education and health had worked cooperatively but there had been no joint resettlement plans for individual prisons. However, the introduction of PPS into the prison provided a stimulus to the sharing of assessments between different services and to the establishing of common resettlement plans. The Steering Group at Maghaberry Prison sees it this way, *"It is still not perfect but PPS has catalysed a set of working relationships. PPS added the capacity of improved identification of common working objectives but this came from addressing the needs of prisoners and not the top down approach which was more about managing prisoners within the institution."* While in the Young Offenders' Centre, the feeling was that *"There is a wide range of outside agencies running programmes in Hydebank. The PPS worker adopted a holistic*

approach to young people and, being physically present on a full-time basis, was able to make an important contribution. The specialism in employability issues added value and acted as a link to other programmes."

Another very important new element of coordination that the DP pioneered was the detailed planning for the period immediately after release. Every ex-offender has a series of meetings lined up with those agencies that can assist his or her reintegration. These might include appointments with a wide range of services such as a housing association, the social security office, the doctor's surgery or a training agency. *"An individual leaving prison is at the greatest risk of re-offending during the early days on 'the outside' and so we are trying to provide a rapid and seamless transition from prison into the community and employment"* says Síle Mc Lean who has managed the Personal Progression System, *"thus, our workers in each prison keep in touch by phone or face-to-face interviews and check each person's progress during his or her first three months after release."* In Magilligan, the Probation Service welcomed these developments because, *"Some agencies would take the view that until a prisoner is on the doorstep of the housing executive or the social security benefits office, they don't exist. PPS stops this by starting the process early."*

As lead partner within the DP, NIACRO was also keen to provide an innovative, effective service for employers. It provided immediate back-up and support by offering information and advice over a telephone "help-line". Complementary support, funded by another programme, was available through NIACRO's publications and a training workshop on "The Fair Recruitment of People with Criminal Convictions" that covers best recruitment practice when requesting and handling conviction information and assessing the relevance of convictions against the duties of the job. Elaine McAvoy from W5, a new Science Park in Belfast, was more than willing to promote this service to her peers and is on record as stating that *"I have attended NIACRO's Training and used the 'Working with Conviction' publication. If I were an employer dealing with the issues for the first time I would find it very useful, as it clears up many of the myths surrounding convictions."*

SUSTAINING INNOVATION

The DP has explored all possible avenues to breaking down the barriers between prisons and local communities and between prisoners and employers so that the impetus created by the project can be maintained. Employers and training agencies have been invited into the prisons to meet prisoners and to evaluate their potential either as employees or trainees. PPS has also used periods of work experience with local employers during which the inmates returned each evening to prison. Where appropriate, the DP has introduced new forms of training into the institutions such as employers explaining the job requirements of a particular sector or tutors running a business start-up course. Finally, constructive use has also been made of home leave with prisoners starting to contact local agencies and services prior to their release so that their re-integration into their local communities will be as smooth as possible.

Olwen Lyner, the Chief Executive Officer of NIACRO believes that *“the project successfully tested a process orientated type of innovation for employability progression whilst in prison which now forms a significant element of the Resettlement Strategy for Northern Ireland that was launched in June last year.”* She feels that *“the innovation has also been context orientated, as there has been a significant shift of emphasis within the criminal justice environment from containment to resettlement and this will continue.”*

This pursuit of change and innovation is reflected in a second round EQUAL project called the [ReachOut Programme](#) that will add [Business in the Community](#), an employers' organisation in Northern Ireland, to the original three partners. This addition is particularly important, as ReachOut will build a 'second stage' employability model by matching the needs of employers who have 'hard to fill' vacancies with the Personal Progression System's employability measures that are currently being mainstreamed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Contact

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)