

Constructing Pathways for Personal Progression

Signature of the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998 brought with it a new sense of optimism within the prison service. It provided the mechanism for release of politically motivated prisoners, so the profile of Northern Ireland's prison population became similar to the rest of Europe. It also marked the beginning of policy changes designed to improve prisoners' employability and resettlement in the community after release.

The Personal Progression System Development Partnership (DP) follows on from two important prison-related policy initiatives. Firstly, a recommendation of the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland of March 2000 stated that *"aftercare and support to discharged prisoners should be adequately resourced."* Secondly, 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."* This DP focused on putting these policies into practice by providing pathways to employment for prisoners and support mechanisms after their release.

Building pathways from inside prison

At the core of the project is the Personal Progression System (PPS). So called PPS workers, employed by the coordinating organisation, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders

(NIACRO), were placed in three penal institutions: Maghaberry, a high security prison, Magilligan a low to medium security prison, and Hydebank Young Offenders Centre.

The PPS workers carried out employability assessments of individual prisoners and helped to develop resettlement plans to ensure their reintegration after release. They also built up strong working relationships with a range of public sector, private sector, voluntary and community agencies so that different forms of support would be available, sometimes at short notice, as soon as the offenders left the prison gates.

In the Hydebank Young Offenders Centre, the project worked with 40 young men each year, all of whom were at risk of unemployment, re-offending and return to prison. In Maghaberry, the DP targeted annually 60 prisoners with a statutory link to the Probation Board on their release. And at Magilligan, the PPS worker also worked with 60 prisoners per year, focusing in particular on those who intended to stay in the North West area after their release. In the course of the project's lifetime, a total of 429 individuals have benefited from its services and support.

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



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

New approaches take hold

The EQUAL project's success can be attributed to several key innovations. Firstly the concept of employability assessments proved particularly valuable. On the basis of each assessment, a prisoner is offered further training to improve their employability, either through the prison's education department or in the community after release. Secondly, the introduction of PPS into the prison has encouraged the different services, such as probation, education and health, to share their assessments and to develop common resettlement plans.

Another important element pioneered by the DP 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.



Prisoners get training that match employers' needs

These might include appointments with services such as a housing association, the social security office, the doctor's surgery or a training agency.

The long-term impact of the DP's activities was secured by involving the key agencies responsible for implementing a new strategy. A Strategic Management Group comprising representatives from NIACRO, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service took responsibility for the overall direction of the project, while local Steering Groups were established in each of the three prisons. The partnership was clearly successful: the PPS is currently being mainstreamed throughout the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Employers play their part

Another key area of the DP's work was to encourage employers to provide work experience and job opportunities for ex-offenders. For example, employers and training agencies have been invited into the prisons to meet prisoners and to evaluate their potential either as employees or trainees. Several inmates have carried out work experience with local employers, while still returning each evening to prison. And where appropriate, the DP has introduced new forms of training into the penal institutions such as employers explaining the job requirements of a particular sector or tutors running a business start-up course. 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.

This pursuit of change and innovation is reflected in a second round EQUAL project called the ReachOut Programme. The three original partners will be joined by Business in the Community, an employers' organisation in

Northern Ireland. This addition will help to ensure a better match between employers' needs and the employability measures proposed through the Personal Progression System.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm

Country: United Kingdom
Region: Northern Ireland
Project name: Personal Progression System
Project duration: November 2001 – November 2005
ESF priority area: Employability
ESF funding (€): 897 873
Total funding (€): 1 381 479
National EQUAL partners: Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)
Transnational partnership with: Finland, Greece, the Netherlands
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