

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The Community Centre, Dobbin Street, Armagh BT61 7QQ
Tel: 028 9099 7653 Email: bdlennon@gmail.com
www.communitysupportnorthernireland.org

ANNUAL REPORT

1 APRIL 2017 TO 31 MARCH 2018

Community Support is a voluntary group that was set up to offer support and encouragement to newly released prisoners.

Comings and Goings

This has been a difficult year in terms of mentors. Gerry Gribbon, a founder member of the group, found he had too much on his plate. Andy Steed also had to withdraw due to family reasons. We would like to thank both Gerry and Andy for the great work they did over the years. Another old hand, Osmond Mulligan, was off for several months, again due to family reasons, but thankfully is now back in action. We welcomed one new mentor, Joe Baxter, who joined us just before Christmas. All this meant that the number of mentors available was considerably reduced. Despite this, we were able to achieve a sizeable volume of work.

Impact

We made 391 visits in total. This is a considerable work load for 3 volunteers on a part-time basis. We saw 34 very regularly. Those who received 5 visits may have been seen a number of times inside and have decided not to follow up post-release. Some of the support was by phone or text.

Many of those we saw were medium to high risk of re-offending. Of the 34 we saw regularly, 4 are back inside. We will continue to keep in touch with these inside, and to encourage them that the road to a new life is always an up and down one. If the picture is positive this is first and foremost because of the efforts made by mentees themselves, especially given the difficulties faced by all newly-released prisoners. But the efforts of many agencies may well have helped some. The figures give little idea of the stories behind the mentees. Some of this can be seen from the following.

Mentees

Sadly, one of our mentees who had been battling with very difficult mental health issues, died during the year. We offer our deepest sympathy to his family. Another mentee was able to find work, and has now been selected for management training. One of our mentees continues to stay off drink: now for over 1.5 years, the longest time by far in his life. We have been contacted by several former mentees, who have now moved on, but who were grateful for the support they received. Offering this was a privilege for us.

Many struggle with addiction issues, and with underlying problems of depression and anxiety. Sometimes our support has involved simply listening to mentees as they and their families readjust to release: no one should underestimate the trickiness of re-engaging with a family after having been inside for a number of years, especially if there are teenagers involved.

We have helped a number of prisoners with housing issues by meeting with landlords. We have had some contact with solicitors and spoken for prisoners in court. Above all, our task is to support and encourage prisoners. Nothing is more important than this. All of them face an uphill battle post-release, with many road blocks. That is why encouragement is so important. Further, those who re-offend also need to be encouraged: the road to being free of crime for many is one of twists and turns in the cycle of change.

Cooperation with other agencies

We continue to have excellent relations with prison staff in Maghaberry who have been very helpful to us in making contact with prisoners. Probation, the Prison Service, Quaker Service, and Prison Fellowship continue to serve on our Advisory Group.

Issues arising

Housing remains a continuing issue. Also some prisoners still seem to have problems in getting ID cards on release, and in getting benefits. Some of this is related to the disgraceful delay in enabling people to access Universal Credit where it has been introduced. This is a matter of government and it needs to be addressed urgently.

Funding

The Stephen's Green Trust and Halifax have remained our main funders for the past year: we could not have survived without them, and for this we are very grateful. As with all groups our financial position remains somewhat precarious, and we hope that we will be able to find other funders in the year ahead.

End