

# COMMUNITY SUPPORT

## ANNUAL REPORT

**1 APRIL 2014 TO 31 MARCH 2015**

### Introduction

This has been a good year for the development of Community Support, but with some sadness. We saw approximately the same number of prisoners inside and out, but we increased the number that we saw outside. This was an important change as supporting prisoners post-release is the main focus of our work.

We experienced the sad death of two of our mentees, one found on the street, and one after a serious illness during which he was released into the care of his family. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of both these men.

This year also saw the setting up of a new management committee, and we are very grateful to those who agreed to serve on it.

We continued and grew our close links with other statutory and voluntary agencies. NIACRO, the Prison Service, PBNI, the Quaker Service, Prison Fellowship are all represented on our Advisory Group. This met less often than in the past both because there is less need for it now that we are set up, and because some of its functions are being carried out by the management committee. Nonetheless, it remains an important group for us because of the on-going learning that we gain from these meetings, and also because it gives us an opportunity to feedback ideas to other groups. In particular we would like to record our thanks to Sile McClean from NIACRO who has recently retired. She was a tremendous support to us from the beginning.

Our Volunteer meetings, held approximately monthly, have been key to developing our planning and strategy. They have also been central to our learning which came through sharing about our encounters with our mentees. Regular supervision was vital for each of us. Also important were the meetings we held with statutory and voluntary groups represented on our Advisory Committee.

As well, we have continued our relationship with Community Chaplaincy in London: this represents similar groups in England, Scotland, Wales and ourselves in Northern Ireland.

### Impact

The following table shows the numbers that we visited in the past year.

<b>Total Visits</b>	<b>Individuals seen once</b>	<b>Individuals seen twice</b>	<b>Individuals seen three times</b>	<b>Individuals seen four times</b>	<b>Individuals seen five times</b>	<b>Individuals seen over 5 times</b>	<b>Total number of individuals seen</b>
<b>1106</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Visits to people inside</b>	<b>Visits to people outside</b>						
<b>512</b>	<b>594</b>						

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The 34 individuals that we saw over 5 times make up the group that have engaged with us for regular on-going support meetings. These meetings have become very important to us as mentors, and seem equally important to our mentees, judging by the faithfulness with which they turn up. Approximately 66% of these have been out of jail either for over a year, or for the longest period in their lives.

### **Mentees**

Meetings with mentees can cover a wide variety of situations. Sometimes a mentee has walked away from his family because pressures have become too much; or they have gone back on drugs and had a bad episode; or they worry about making contact with their children; or we are contacted by a solicitor looking for a reference and sometimes we are able to give this; or we give evidence at court which on occasion seems to influence judges to choose bail or release on license to further time in prison; or we are able to arrange hostel accommodation; or we work with other agencies, such as the Methodist Church or De Paul housing – finding housing for sex offenders is particularly difficult and this year we helped one man get a place after a wait of three years, and we helped get housing for 8 others; or we meet a guy at the gate, drive him to a port to catch a boat to England, and arrange for him to link with a similar group to ourselves; sometimes we get calls that mentees are threatening suicide; some of our men are lifers who can go through a fairly long process of adjusting to life on the outside.

Much of our work goes under the heading of advocacy, with judges, benefits, housing, Probation, Mental Health services in prison, and other agencies.

The centre of our work is our relationship with individual mentees. Everything else depends on this.

### **Good relations**

As part of our work we make a contribution to good relations. One way we do this is by our own diversity, and by being known for this inside the prison with staff and prisoners, and also by other agencies. It is very important to us to mainstream good relations: prisoners are just as entitled to and have just as much need to a diverse society, as do citizens living outside prisons.

We make it clear that we deal with all-comers irrespective of their background. Some of our mentees live life at the coal face of interface problems – with people whom they perceive as enemies and with the police. For many their first experience of diversity is inside the prison themselves, when for the first time in their lives they have to deal with people from a variety of backgrounds. The good news is that in some cases they make new friends. However, such contacts can often cease on release. Nonetheless, they can speak to their peers about their experiences.

We also helped liaise between about seven prisoners and their home situation in cases where paramilitaries had issued threats against them if they returned home.

Seven other prisoners were given support by a mentor different in background from themselves. And we also sought helped prisoners find placements for addiction issues in contexts quite different from their own background.

## Cooperation with other agencies

As mentioned already we have been greatly helped through our relationship with NIACRO, Quaker Service, and De Paul Housing. We have had constant support from the prison staff, especially in the Offender Management Units in Magilligan and Maghaberry and we appreciate this very much. Probation supported us with funding, and made several referrals to us. And Prison Fellowship continue to support us through our Advisory Panel. We have also taken part in the meetings of the ASFO, a group of NGOs working in the area who meet to share ideas.

## Funding

Our funding this year came from PBNI, the Lottery Fund, Stephen's Green Trust, Lloyds TSB, the Community Relations Council, and two gifts from individuals of £500 each. Our grateful thanks to all.

## Context

Like all other groups we are now forced to work in a context of cutbacks. Some of this is obviously counterproductive. Prisoners are being locked up for longer than ever periods because of staff shortages. That inevitably increases strain which in turn leads to more incidents. These sometimes lead to property damage and increased costs as a result of court cases. The tragedy is that all this is predictable because of cutbacks that have already taken place in England and Wales with the same outcomes. The decrease in funding in the sector has made serious inroads into the work of our partner groups.

## Hopes for coming year

Our hope for the coming year is that we will continue the trend we established this year by increasing the number of prisoners that we saw post-release. We also hope that we will be able to recruit some new volunteers, and that some of these will themselves be ex-prisoners. While it may take some time to get this in place, we see it as being very important, because the capacity of someone who has been inside to talk to prisoners, all other things being equal, is going to be greater.