

# COMMUNITY SUPPORT

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## ANNUAL REPORT

1 APRIL 2015 TO 31 MARCH 2016

### Introduction

Dialogue For Diversity run six main projects: Migrants Support, Community Support for ex-prisoners, Dialogue between divided groups, Community Development, Church Reform, and Support for the Irish Language. Steady progress was made in all areas.

### 1. Community Support

#### Mission statement

Community Support was set up:

1. To assist a number of newly released prisoners to avoid re-offending
  2. To help mentees to improve their self-image and self-confidence through a befriending service
  3. To encourage mentees to develop their talents and hopes to the full
  4. To help mentees to link with existing statutory and voluntary agencies
  5. To review the pilot project as a means to develop a wider post-release Service.
  6. To work with others engaged in prison work to develop post-release services
- Crucial to our mission is linking newly-released prisoners to existing support services.

#### Impact

The following figures give an overview of our quantitative impact this year:

<i>Number of individuals visited</i>	<i>Number of visits made</i>	<i>Number of visits inside</i>	<i>Number of individuals seen inside</i>	<i>Number of visits outside</i>	<i>Number of individuals seen outside</i>
149	968	385	124	583	71

Some individuals were seen many times as the following table shows:

<i>50 or more visits to one individual</i>	<i>30 or more visits to one individual</i>	<i>20 or more visits to one individual</i>	<i>10 or more visits to one individual</i>	<i>5 or more visits to one individual</i>
3	6	14	28	46

The following table shows the number of those seen regularly who went back inside:

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Number seen regularly	Of regulars: number seen outside	Of regulars: number who have not yet been released	Of regulars: number seen outside who are now back inside	Number deceased
28	20	3	4	1

The above table shows that there are 28 whom we saw fairly regularly, and were therefore giving them on-going support. Those who received 5 visits may have been seen a number of times inside and have decided not to follow up post-release.

Of the 20 that we saw regularly outside, 4 (20%) went back inside in the current year. This figure is encouraging, as we deliberately try to seek mentees who do NOT have a low risk of re-offending. We continue to visit those who were recalled and most will continue on the path towards being crime-free.

The figure of 71 people seen outside is encouraging: we set it as an aim for this year that we would increase the number of people we saw outside prison, but we are still seeing more inside than outside.

This is a considerable amount of work for an average of four volunteers. The figures give little idea of the stories behind the mentees. Some of this can be seen from the following

### Mentees

Some of support involved: working with a prisoner's solicitor to help him get access to a house that was willed to him so that he could avoid homelessness; phoning prisoners to remind them of multiple appointments, including those with Probation – drugs, in this case prescription drugs, made remembering appointments difficult; at other times helping prisoners deal with conflict with the statutory bodies with which they have to engage; working with a prisoner to make contact with Gamblers Anonymous, with whom he is now doing well; getting a prisoner an introduction through a church which led to a job, which in turn led to the expansion of the business; visiting a terminally ill former prisoner; encouraging many to make contact with AA, occasionally writing references for prisoners for court; making contact with paramilitaries through intermediaries to see if it is safe for a prisoner to return to his home area.

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 not a single up hill journey, but rather one of many twists and turns in the cycle of change.

### Issues

Housing: this has been an on-going issue, especially for sex offenders. For public safety reasons housing for them needs to be approved by a number of agencies. A consequence is that by the time this has been completed a flat that was on offer has already been let. Our volunteers have spent many hours chasing up possible accommodation, and sometimes we have been successful. We have also worked closely with De Paul Ireland and the Methodist Church on housing.

A second issue was with people with disabilities. Apparently the Prison Service has a statutory obligation to support people as far as the prison gates, and the NIHE has a responsibility from the moment they present themselves in a Housing Executive office, but no body seems to have responsibility between these points. Voluntary groups, like Community Support, and individuals in statutory bodies can and do help out in these situations, but it remains a gap in provision.

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### **Good relations**

As a group we welcome prospective mentors from all faiths and none, and work with prisoners from different backgrounds. If prisoners so desire, we help them make links with their own ministers of religion. Many arrive in prison after confrontations at interfaces, or with the police. That is why Good Relations is at least as important with prisoners, inside and outside prison, as it is anywhere else in Northern Ireland.

### **Cooperation with other agencies**

We continue to have excellent relations with prison staff in both Maghaberry and Magilligan, and they have been very helpful to us in making contact with prisoners. We also work closely with Probation: one of our mentees described his Probation officer as the best he has ever had – and he has had many! He had good reason to think this. She goes way beyond the call of duty in working on his behalf to ensure he gets many entitlements which he might not otherwise receive. Probation and the Prison Service both continue to serve on our Advisory Group. We are also very grateful to the Quaker Service, Prison Fellowship, and NIACRO who continue to support us.

### **Funding**

The Stephen's Green Trust has remained our main funder 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.

### **Context**

Much of our work is taken up with addictions which are a huge problem in themselves both for those who suffer from them, but also for those who suffer as a result of their wrong actions while under the influence of drink and/or drugs. But these addictions are also symptoms of the underlying problems so many prisoners suffer from: problems that sometimes spring from a chaotic family history. Addictions are also greatly influenced by the surrounding culture. It remains something of a mystery that so little seems to be done at a political level to address the culture of drink, given that the annual cost to Northern Ireland from alcohol related injuries exceeds £900 million – just shy of £1 billion. It is important some of those who suffer from addictions come from families who have done everything possible under the sun to help their son or daughter get sorted, and families in these instances can suffer as much as many victims of crime.

A specific factor in the past year has been a slow down in court work because of pay disputes. This has meant many more being kept on remand for much longer periods.

Sadly, this year also saw the deaths of two of our mentees. Both were young and their deaths were tragic. Our deepest sympathy goes to their families.

### **Comings and Goings**

In the past year we have welcomed three new mentors. We said goodbye to two who have moved on: Carmel Flynn and Michael Bingham. We thank Carmel and Michael for all their efforts and wish them well on their new journeys. We also said goodbye to Irene Surgenor from Quaker Service who had served on our Management Committee and we are very grateful for all the help she gave us. We welcomed Fionnuala Watters to the Management Committee.

As well, Willy Gribben retired from the Prison Service and also from our Support Group. Again we thank him for all the support he gave us from his role in Resettlement, and wish him all the best in his retirement.

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We would also like to give warm thanks to Sile McClean who left NIACRO during the year. From the very start of the project she has been a great support and we also wish her well in her retirement.

Ideally we would like about seven mentors seeing approximately 35 mentees in total, so we have room for a few new volunteers.

### **Management Committee:**

Aileen Oates (Chair), Bernadette McMahon, Fionnuala Watters, Osmond Mulligan, Brian Lennon.

**Coordinator:** Brian Lennon.

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