Prison Law & Policy Branch
Room 308
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast BT4 3SU

22^nd^ October 2009

Dear Colleague

**Northern Ireland Prison Service Draft Family Strategy 2009-2014**

As the largest voluntary children’s organisation in NI, Barnardo’s works with several thousand children, young people and their families here every year, providing broad based family support as well as focused child protection services. Our varied range of services includes work with children, young people and families who have a relative in prison, as well as young people at risk of offending, in care and leaving care.

This response has been particularly informed by Barnardo’s Parenting Matters service whose work includes group-based parent support within communities and prisons. Barnardo’s broadly supports the objectives and vision of the Strategy; however, there are a few key points we wish to highlight for your attention.

1. The systematic collection of data on children of prisoners and addressing their needs should be put in place at the earliest opportunity.

2. Guidance must be put in place to ensure the needs of children of prisoners are fully reflected in any children’s services plan.

3. Chapter Three ‘**Commencement of this Strategy**’ states that Family Support Officers (FSOs) are now based within each establishment. However, in our experience they are not yet operating at all locations and this should be addressed immediately in order to ensure that all families are appropriately supported. It is also our view that the **Underpinning Principles** outlined in Chapter Four should recognise the paramount needs of children, as well as the benefits to prisoners of regular family contact, by clearly stating that visits should always be child-centred.

4. In relation to Chapter Five’s **Action Plan** and **key issues prior to a person entering the prison system**, it is stated that Social Services have lead responsibility to ensure a dependant child is not placed at risk when a custodial sentence is imposed and no childcare
arrangements have been made. Barnardo’s believes it would be useful here to provide some practical detail and guidance as to how this will take effect, particularly which agency will have lead responsibility in initiating contact with Social Services. If it is intended that the Court Service fulfil this role then requisite training should be provided. It is particularly important in relation to the sentencing of women that child impact assessment reports are carried out for all cases and made available to Magistrates before sentencing.

5. A point of accuracy, with regards to information, advice and support for families, the reference to a NIACRO Strategic Advisory Group (p.13). It was our understanding this was now an inter-agency group for the families and children of prisoners and that the name had been changed to reflect this, therefore we would be grateful for clarification.

6. The Action Plan (p.17) also states that during a custodial sentence, families will be provided with timely information by the transferring prison to allow for changes to planned visits. In order to mitigate the impact on childcare and other arrangements, as well as the possibility of families being unknowingly on route to a prison at the time of a transfer, we would suggest that the Strategy specifically says that as a minimum families should be informed 24 hours ahead of inter prison transfers. We would also suggest the possibility of transfers taking place on those days in prisons where no visits are routinely scheduled in order to further minimise disruption.

7. With regards to providing information and support to families at times of crisis during a custodial sentence there needs to be clearer mechanisms for sharing information with family members about a prisoner’s physical health or emotional well-being. It is important that the Family Care Line (p.18) is in operation and that the Action Plan specifies who families contact if their FSO is unavailable.

8. In relation to pre-release support under the Action Plan, Barnardo’s would like to stress that this area is particularly under-developed and under-resourced. It is our view that significantly more information should be provided to prisoners before release. We would like to see this addressed in the Strategy. Barnardo’s also believes there should be increased policy and practice development around post-release support and transition back into communities, and we would welcome discussion with the NIPS on this issue.

9. Finally, Barnardo’s are concerned that full implementation of the Strategy will be delayed through inadequate funding, especially given the current budgetary climate. We would therefore appreciate clarification about how the Strategy will be resourced, and also whether consideration has been given to the development of a working group comprising NIPS and other voluntary agencies to assist in monitoring its effective implementation.

Barnardo’s welcomes the production of this Strategy and Action Plan and the recognition of the important role NIPS has in helping and supporting families and prisoners. However, we have outlined some key concerns that we believe need to be addressed in order to make it as effective as possible for families and children.

If you require any further information, please contact do not hesitate to contact me,
Yours faithfully

Margaret Kelly
Assistant Director, Policy