Barnardo’s NI Response to the Review of the Conditions of Detention, Management and Oversight of all Prisons – Call For Evidence

Introduction

Barnardo’s is the largest children’s charity in NI and we provide over fifty distinct services working with children and families in many local communities. Last year we worked with over 7,000 children and their families and provided services that ranged from child protection to family support, work with children in care and leaving care, disabled children and young people and with young people at risk of offending and exclusion.

In preparing this brief response we have specifically drawn on the experience of our Parenting Matters service which now works in each of the prison establishments in NI delivering a range of programmes and supports linked to the role of prisoners as parents.

The evidence indicates that addressing the role of prisoners as parents and maintaining when at all possible more effective family links are crucial to the well being of those in prison and their children and have a significant impact on re-offending rates.

Given the very high risk that those children whose parent has been imprisoned will also face prison we believe it is imperative to address the issues of prisoners who are parents now for the long term benefit of them and their children. Children of prisoners are also more likely to persistently truant, fail to achieve in education and suffer from mental health problems. Intervening early with children and families of prisoners will have better overall outcomes for them and the parent who is in prison.

Barnardo’s have chosen to make specific comments on those questions within the Review that we believe link to our work.
Question 1

What would be the characteristics of an effective prison system in Northern Ireland in the 21st century, and what should be its priorities?

An effective prison system would focus on the rehabilitation of prisons and make a reduction in recidivism rates a priority. It would have a human rights approach that would recognise that many prisoners are parents and that their time in prison can have a devastating effect for their families.

Effective prison policy cannot simply be based on the prisoner as an individual but must also recognise their family commitments. The children of prisoners remain a largely invisible group and we believe that the needs of children and families of prisoners must be more firmly on the agenda.

Question 3

What is good in the current system and needs to be preserved?

- In Barnardo’s experience senior staff, Governors and resettlement staff at the NIPS Headquarters recognise the importance and impact of good family relationships for prisoners. They also recognise that for many of those who enter the prison system this may not be the case and that using the time in prison for rehabilitation and to consider and improve family relationships has significant impact on improving outcomes not simply for prisoners but also for their children and partners.

- This recognition has manifested itself in-terms of a willingness to provide a more family friendly focus through more child friendly visits and extended visits and family days.

Question 4

What are the weaknesses of the current system and what needs to be improved?

- There are significant restrictions on how much time can be spent with prisoners by outside agencies due to the strict lock up regime that remains in force in all three prisons.

- Typically there is no prisoner contact from 11.45 am to 2.215pm. This means individual contact cannot take place and prisoners attending programmes or courses have to be escorted back to their cell by prison staff. This impacts significantly on the level of work that can be undertaken.
• There is significant support at management and senior staff levels for the kind of work undertaken by Barnardo's and other organisations but there is sometimes apathy or occasionally hostility from a small number of prison staff regarding what they perceive as a 'soft' approach towards prisoners.

• At times the progressive regimes such as family and extended visits can be jeopardised by the rigid working conditions imposed by the Prison Officers Union.

• The NIPS promotes the idea of having Family Officers in all three prisons. However, staff shortages mean it is difficult to make this a reality and staff in these posts are often moved to more general duties. Barnardo's believes ring fencing the time and resources for these posts is crucial.

Question 8

Are there services that you think could or should most effectively be provided by outside agencies, either within or after prison? If so, how should these partnerships be managed and delivered?

Barnardo's believes the following range of services would be helpful to have in prisons and could be provided by outside agencies.

• While there is specific counselling support provided for prisoners coping with drug and alcohol addiction there seems to be a gap in counselling for those with other issues. Provision of generic counselling in all 3 prisons would be an advantage as often prisoners are left to cope alone with a range of strong/difficult feelings. If a prisoner has a "bad" or stressful visit or phone call with his family he will often sit alone in his cell afterwards with no one to help process what has happened. The majority of prisoners say they don't like sharing personal/family issues with other inmates for fear of it being discussed by others.

• There is little support for prisoners post release. This is often a crucial time when they make decisions which can either lead them away from or towards crime again and is an area that is not well resourced or supported. Although there are organisations in the community that prisoners and their families can access many don't ask for support.

• Families are under tremendous stress when a parent returns from serving a sentence. Family dynamics have changed and children are older and often it can be difficult to negotiate these changes. Additional support for the family and prisoner after they are released is important for re-integration.

• Through-care from prison to home would be an ideal way to resolve this issue. This service would mean a specific case worker was someone allocated to supporting a prisoner inside prison with a remit to follow up on the outside. At present there are different agencies doing both.
Question 9

Do you have any views on specific conditions or regimes for different groups of prisoners, or the treatment of prisoners from diverse backgrounds?

Regimes and conditions for specific groups of prisoners
• Mothers in prison are especially vulnerable and services must be flexible enough to respond to these needs.
• Children of imprisoned mothers are vulnerable and in need and often in the care system due to breakdown of family
• Additional support is often required for this group of women both inside and outside prison.
• Inspire Women’s Project which is funded by Probation is addressing some of the issues for these women and have involved Barnardo’s with this development. Funding has still to be negotiated for Barnardo’s involvement in the future of Inspire.

Question 10

Is there anything else, specific to your organisation, that is important to this review and that we need to know?

Barnardo’s would wish to highlight that during our involvement in prison work we have seen significant positive changes which we welcome. We have developed very positive relationships with the prison service and have been able to draw on many examples of good practice here to support other Barnardo’s services or prisons in the UK wishing to develop similar services for prisoners and families.

We do think that if we want to ensure that prison is focused on rehabilitation and that the children of prisoners are protected then the further developed of a positive family based approach is crucial.

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