



**Barnardo's NI Response to
Strengthening Family Relations – a draft strategy
April 2019**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 10,000 children, young people and families, across more than 50 different services and programmes, and in over 200 schools. We provide a wide range of services including working with children affected by parental imprisonment, as well as supporting children in or leaving care, promoting good mental health and wellbeing amongst children and young people, and providing family support and early intervention. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) draft strategy 'Strengthening Family Relations'. We welcome the direction and tone of the draft strategy, particularly the recognition of ensuring that good family relationships are a 'golden thread' throughout, and we are encouraged that it considers and makes reference to a number of other relevant frameworks and strategies beyond the Prison Service and the Department of Justice, including the Draft Children and Young People's Strategy and the Draft Programme for Government, as well as recognising the recommendations from Lord Farmer's Review (2017).

Our comments are informed by our experience of delivering the [Barnardo's NI Parenting Matters service](#) in Northern Ireland's prisons since 1996, which focuses on improving the lives of children affected by parental imprisonment by developing and maintaining links between children and their imprisoned parent. It is this experience that equips us with the understanding of why it is so important that good family relationships are, as the Farmer Review said, "a golden thread running through the processes of all prisons".

Though we have provided comments on the various elements of the draft strategy below, we would first like to make an overarching recommendation that this strategy, when finalised, is accompanied by a time bound, costed action plan, with appropriate resource allocated, following further stakeholder engagement. This action plan should be overseen by a cross-sector, multi-agency working group to ensure consistent and sustainable implementation and accountability.

1. Strategic Approach

- 1) Do you agree that positive relationships and family contact are important factors in influencing how people cope with imprisonment and their reintegration and rehabilitation upon release?

Yes. As noted in the consultation document, evidence and research demonstrate how these relationships can have a positive impact on desistance. It is also important to consider the impact that such positive relationships and family contact can have on outcomes for children affected by parental imprisonment, including in relation to the prevention of intergenerational offending and on promoting better mental health and emotional wellbeing amongst this group of children.

- 2) Do you agree that the overall outcome of the strategic approach to strengthening family relations should seek to support and encourage family engagement, leading to positive outcomes for people in our care?

Yes, we welcome this outcome. We believe there are associated positive outcomes for both the person in prison and their family, including any affected children.

2. Processes and Procedures

- 3) To what extent do you think the current NIPS processes and procedures facilitate quality family engagement and what improvements could be made?

We appreciate that over the past number of years, the NI Prison Service has made significant efforts to move from a service rooted in security to one that seeks to drive better outcomes for people in prison and their families. However, there are a number of areas where we

believe further attention and/or investment could improve processes and procedures to help support quality family engagement:

- **Pathway planning:** Involving the family in pathway planning from an early stage would help engage the family in the resettlement efforts post-release, and provide the family with the information and understanding required to facilitate effective resettlement. We recommend that families should be engaged as soon as is appropriate in each case.
- **Family support:** We believe a family centred approach is an effective way to reduce reoffending. We consider HMP Parc to be an example of good practice, where the prison is visible in the community and it fosters relationships with schools, for example teachers bring children's school reports to imprisoned parents. HMP Parc's Parc Supporting Families (PSF) team is a group of dedicated staff and community-based workers who are committed to maintaining and developing relationships with both family and the community. PSF aims to provide support, encouragement and guidance to re-integrate prisoners and also to encourage them to be effective parents. Support is provided via a Family Link Officer. We recommend that NIPS considers the experience of HMP Parc and explores the potential of developing a dedicated Families Team within the staff, with decision making authority and in-depth training.
- **Child centred visits:** In recognition of the role of families in effective resettlement and reducing reoffending, as well as the importance of good contact for children affected by parental imprisonment, we believe a family centred approach to visits is needed. This could include implementing visiting slots only for families with children on a particular day, a policy in Belgian prisons and also in HMP Parc in Wales. Using facilities to improve family and child-centred visits with age appropriate provisions, or to improve and maintain contact outside of visiting hours, would also improve contact and support better outcomes. In addition, we recognise the family-focused visits delivered within the Families Matter programme as an effective model of best practice that supports the whole family unit and can promote better outcomes for both the child and the person in prison, with all key family contacts present and therefore providing a more

holistic support environment for both. We would be keen to explore with the Prison Service how the principles of these visits could be extended beyond the programme and developed for other establishments.

- **Training for staff:** In order to translate strategic vision into meaningful culture change, ongoing training for staff across the Prison Service is needed to reflect the role of the Service in strengthening family relationships. Barnardo's NI recommends that prison staff receive comprehensive training on the role of families in supporting resettlement, as well as the impact of imprisonment on children and families, to ensure that this aspect is regarded as integral to the role of all staff working within prisons – and, crucially, that they understand *why* it is part of their role to recognise and support this.

Trainee Prison Officers receive a half-day session dedicated to the importance of families delivered by a relevant provider, such as Barnardo's NI Parenting Matters service; the session is generally well received by trainees, and feedback indicates that it is an area they haven't previously considered. However, this brief training session is often timetabled in if and where possible; we recommend that instead, family issues are regarded as a critical component of training for all new staff, as well as at induction and continuous professional development opportunities, for existing staff: we believe giving this element more importance within the training schedule would support a culture change and formal recognition of the role of staff in supporting family contact, in support of the Prison Service's aim of reducing reoffending.

In addition, we believe where possible prison staff who have received family focused training should remain in a position which allows them to build close links with external providers to provide a continuity of service to families and children and to have the opportunity to become specialists in the theme of supporting families, family contact, and the family and children resettlement pathway.

3. Principles

- 4) Do you agree with the principles outlined which will underpin the strategic approach to strengthening family relations?
- 5) Would you like to see additional principles applied?

We welcome and agree with the principles proposed in the draft strategy, and believe that they could be strengthened by making the following additions:

- In the second principle, a stronger recognition of the critical role that families can play in desistance and a commitment to engage families in resettlement plans wherever possible is needed.
- In the third principle, it is important to reflect also that families come in various formats, and that it is the relationship with the person in prison that is important more so than the 'type' of relative.
- In the fifth principle, explicit reference to working collaboratively with partners in the voluntary and community sector would help underpin the importance of these cross-sector relationships.

We also recommend including an additional principle to reflect a commitment to facilitating family engagement, including recognising different family needs, and removing barriers or obstacles to contact and engagement with planning. This would include facilitating visiting times outside of school hours, ensuring visiting environments are family friendly, and that the impact of security decisions on visiting families are considered and communicated.

4. Themes

- 6) Do you agree with the outcomes / themes outlined?
- 7) What additional themes would you like to see explored?
- 8) Do you think the NIPS priorities are aligned to the themes identified?
- 9) Outline how best NIPS could work with partner organisations to achieve the overall outcome of supporting and encouraging family engagement, leading to positive outcomes for people in our care?

In general, we welcome and agree with the direction of the four themes outlined and the associated outcomes. We have provided a number of comments on each theme below:

4.1 Family Contact

We welcome the emphasis placed on meaningful family contact in the draft strategy. We recommend that this is supported by investment in both infrastructure (e.g. technology, visiting space) to facilitate better contact experiences, and training for staff to understand and promote family contact, with the potential for a specialism to be developed within the staff.

We also welcome the commitment to providing a child-friendly space for positive relations; we urge that these are age-appropriate in design, and reflect the different needs of children of various ages who are visiting, in recognition that a child-friendly space for an infant could be deemed off-putting for a teenager, and therefore be counter-productive, so flexible design and facilities are required.

As referenced above, we believe there is merit in facilitating visits exclusively for families and children at designated times, as in HMP Parc.

We also recommend that support for families is available beyond the visiting space, with access to emotional and practical support within the waiting areas and in the community, delivered in partnership with the voluntary and community sector.

We welcome that NIPS is committed to encouraging and promoting meaningful contact through various methods including visits, letters, telephone calls and electronic means, and we recommend that resources are invested in exploring the full potential of using technology to promote contact outside of visiting times. This could include investigating practices in other jurisdictions, extending the use of Skype, or a secure email service which would enable children and families to engage with their relation outside the time limited confines of a telephone call or visit, and using a communication format which older children may feel more comfortable in engaging with. Further research with children may support the development of an effective technological response to facilitating engagement. We recommend, however, that the introduction of any technologies to support contact are done so with thoughtful implementation, ensuring the best interests of families are considered and usage is safe, flexible and considerate.

4.2 Families Feel Included and Engaged

As noted above, we believe it is important that this strategy recognises the critical role that families play in resettlement and long-term desistance. We welcome the commitment to including families in the planning and preparation for an individual's return to the community and recommend that the family is engaged in this from an early stage as part of the sentence plan. This will require training for staff to ensure that engagement is meaningful and appropriate.

In recognition of the strain that imprisonment can have on families, and to facilitate effective engagement, families should be supported throughout a period of imprisonment, particularly at transition stages such as committal, moves and release. There are models of best practice in place in HMP Parc through the Parc Supporting Families and its Family Link Officer role, as referenced above, and expertise within the local voluntary and community sector to provide similar support in Northern Ireland.

4.3 Families Are Safe and Well

We welcome the commitment to supporting wellbeing and positive life outcomes for people in the care of the Prison Service and their families. As part of this, we recommend the strategy reflects the need for early identification of need and access to effective mental health care within prisons.

We are pleased to see that the strategy recognises the impact of imprisonment on families, particularly in terms of wellbeing. This impact can have a ripple effect across the family, with children too affected by the strain and mental health impact on their non-imprisoned parent, in addition to their own response, as covered in the next theme.

We are encouraged that NIPS will work with partners to support families to access services that improve safety and wellbeing, and also work with partner organisations to provide services and interventions which support families. We wish to raise the importance of working with the voluntary and community sector in the development and delivery of, and signposting to, such services.

We welcome the intended outcome that staff will have a good understanding of safety and wellbeing and will be confident in responding to concerns appropriately. We recommend that regular training is attached to this and that it is recognised as a core part of

the role, closely aligned to the aims of reducing offending and delivering safer custody, and that staff have the opportunity to build on the universal training to become specialists in this particular aspect.

4.4 Children

We strongly welcome that this strategy identifies children as a dedicated theme, and recognises the lasting impact of trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences on outcomes for children – including on their mental health and wellbeing.

We commend the Prison Service for its commitment to becoming a trauma informed organisation. As an organisation with significant expertise and a long history in providing trauma informed interventions and supporting children and families affected by adversity, Barnardo's Northern Ireland would be happy to engage further with the Prison Service to share our knowledge and support the Prison Service in its endeavour to become trauma informed.

We welcome the commitment to train staff on the recognition and impact of childhood adversity. Whilst we welcome the intention to ensure relevant staff are trained in child protection issues and believe this to be a very important training need, it is important that 'child protection training' is not seen as the same thing as trauma training. Safeguarding (child protection) is a critically important, but separate, issue to trauma or ACEs training; while the former is supported by legislation and takes a preventative approach, the latter may look more at the impact of trauma, mitigation and resilience, particularly through the lens of supportive relationships. We believe it is important that Prison Service staff receive both sets of training. As an organisation engaged with both aspects, we would be happy to discuss this further with the Prison Service.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this draft strategy and welcome its direction. We hope the above comments are useful and look forward to engaging with the Prison Service further as this strategy develops and is implemented.

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