

Minister's Office Block B,
Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
Ballymiscaw
Belfast
BT4 3SG

Christine Darrah
Clerk to the Committee for Justice
Room 242
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

17 February 2022

Dear Christine

Department of Justice 2022-25 Draft Budget – Northern Ireland Prison Service

Thankyou for your letter of 4 February 2021 seeking additional information across a range of matters relating to the Departments response to the 2022-25 Draft Budget. This response deals specifically with the request to the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) for an analysis of the impact of the services provided by Belfast Met and how this will be affected by any reduction in funding.

The provision of learning, skills and employability training to those detained within custody has been outsourced to the Further Education (FE) sector since 2015. The adoption of the FE delivery model has ensured that those detained within NIPS care have benefited from the colleges ethos of improving life chances for everyone, by building their self-confidence through learning and by demonstrating how education and skills provide positive opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration into society. The colleges role also supports NIPS strategic aims to deliver a modern service, ensuring that services offered are commensurate with delivery in the community.

Over the outsourcing period both Belfast Met and North West Regional College have developed significant staff and operational experience in managing and delivering educational programmes in a custodial setting. NIPS and the colleges have also developed effective and productive working relationships which have delivered a range of initiatives and achievements that have provided the foundation and ambition for the new Service Level Agreement which sets the strategic direction for learning and skills over the next five years.

Delivering learning and skills in a custodial environment remains challenging, particularly given the high level of learning deficits within the prison population, compounded by the high number of remand prisoners and high numbers serving short sentences. Self-reported information upon committal to custody points to the need for support in helping people into employment (or indeed to continue with education) upon release from custody. For instance, in 2020 of those in NIPS care who provided responses, a high proportion (78%) left school aged 16 or below, 45% had no qualifications and 68% did not have employment prior to entering custody.

Since the commencement of outsourcing, delivery by the FE Colleges has seen improvements in the levels of engagement with learning and skills which has been evidenced through improved attendance and retention rates, and attainment of recognised qualifications, which ultimately has led to better educational outcomes for individuals.

Budget reductions will undoubtedly impact on front line delivery, reducing what we deliver and impacting on how we continue to deliver the wide range of programmes that best suit the needs of the prison population. The provision of learning and skills is a crucial element of an individual's pathway to employment upon release. The correlation between employment and reducing reoffending is well known, which is why NIPS places such an emphasis on enhancing the employability of those in its care. Any impact to the delivery of skills needed to obtain employment, will unquestionably have a bearing on the persons ability to contribute positively to society upon release. In addition, these decisions have the potential to impact on groups that are most at risk of

reoffending, such as remand prisoners and those on short sentences. Not being able to deliver programmes that will address their rehabilitative needs may have a detrimental impact on reoffending rates and ultimately run the risk of an increase in the number of victims.

CLAIRE McCORMICK DALO