



Public Accounts Committee

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Reducing Adult Reoffending in  
Northern Ireland: Extern; NIACRO

10 April 2025

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Tom Buchanan  
Mr Pádraig Delargy  
Ms Diane Forsythe  
Mr Colm Gildernew  
Mr David Honeyford

**Witnesses:**

Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Ms Patricia Devlin	Extern
Ms Emma Purdon	Extern
Ms Fiona Greene	NIACRO
Ms Rachel Long	NIACRO
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** We now welcome to today's meeting Emma Purdon, who is director of communities and family services with Extern; Patricia Devlin, who is programme manager in criminal justice services with Extern; Fiona Greene, who is chief executive of NIACRO; and Rachel Long, who is director of operations with NIACRO. Tá fáilte romhaibh uilig. *[Translation: You are all very welcome.]* We also welcome to today's meeting Stuart Stevenson, who is the Treasury Officer of Accounts with the Department of Finance; and Dorinnia Carville, who is the Comptroller and Auditor General at the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). Thank you all for attending today and agreeing to brief the Committee today. I am not sure which of you is going to make some opening remarks. We will then go to members' questions.

**Ms Fiona Greene (NIACRO):** Thank you, Chair and Committee, for the invitation to today's session, which provides NIACRO, along with our colleagues in Extern, with the opportunity to speak to you about the work that we do to support the reduction of adult reoffending in Northern Ireland and to make recommendations for future implementation in reference to this inquiry. You will already have our briefing, which was forwarded to the Committee. It provides general information on NIACRO and our services. Briefly, we are a voluntary organisation, working since 1971 to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. We are guided by our vision, which is of a society in which the rights and needs of all people are equally respected and protected. NIACRO's diverse range of services includes early intervention programmes, mentoring, employability services, finance and debt advice, and family support programmes. We help to create meaningful change for over 7,000 people annually, and we facilitate over 30,000 prison visits across the prison estate each year.

At NIACRO, we believe that people who have offended, or those who remain at risk of offending, should and can be provided with support services to address personal and systemic barriers, and that, when those services are properly resourced and made available at the right time, people, families and communities can be kept safer. Involvement in the criminal justice system, including imprisonment, affects the whole family. Keeping community and ties improves the resettlement of people leaving custody, improving the conditions at release to build a life away from crime. Our services, such as Family Links, which was referenced by the director general of the Prison Service at this Committee last week, our visitor centre service, and our family and money matters advice service are available to anyone impacted by custody and are aligned to the Department of Justice's strengthening family relations strategy.

Turning to our employability support, research shows that securing a job is the most significant factor in breaking the cycle of reoffending. Similarly, engaging in and maintaining participation in training programmes has a proven impact on reducing reoffending. In our briefing paper we refer to previous iterations of our employment support programmes, namely Reset and Jobtrack. Our current programme, SkillSET, sees NIACRO staff based in the three prisons in Northern Ireland, as well as in each council area, providing support in basic life skills, developing a CV, applying for jobs and providing vocational training. We also deliver a service called Disclosure, providing individuals and businesses with advice and support on spent convictions to ensure safe and fair recruitment.

Another focus of our services is providing trauma-informed mentoring support services to achieve stability with housing, health and finances. Colm Walsh, a lecturer at Queen's University, in a recent evaluation of our INSYNC programme funded by the Executive programme on paramilitarism and organised crime (EPPOC), noted the nature of the support that our staff provide. That could have been issues with money, housing, benefits or the basic things in life such as access to food. In all cases, project workers worked alongside service users to help to attend to those issues. Our mentoring services such as assisting people and communities (APAC), Aspire and Transitions, which Amanda Stewart referred to at last week's session, and our women-specific service called Connections, work intensively with service users to find accommodation, apply for benefits, keep appointments and liaise with families and communities to ensure that long-term further wrap-around support is available to support a settled life.

NIACRO is one of a number of voluntary and community organisations working in the criminal justice sphere, and we are all vital to the operation of the criminal justice system, not least in providing support services to reduce offending and reoffending. Our role is business-critical to the Department of Justice as we leverage funding from all sources and align our own priorities to criminal justice agencies. Our staff bring expertise, skills, adaptability, a culture of partnership and a willingness to work with people on the margins. Above all, we are trusted by the people and families we are here to support, and we never lose sight of the fact that everyone who works with us chooses to.

To conclude these opening remarks, I quote Shadd Maruna, a criminologist:

*"Desistance is a process, not an event. The focus here is not on any particular moment of change or transformation but rather on the maintenance of crime-free behaviour in the face of life's many obstacles and frustrations. A key to reducing reoffending is understanding that the person involved has to be at the centre of their own rehabilitation. Families, communities, policymakers, legislators, service providers and the criminal justice system can work together to assist."*

We welcome this opportunity to discuss our services, and are looking forward to your questions. I will hand over to Emma now.

**Ms Emma Purdon (Extern):** Thank you, Fiona. Good afternoon, everyone. On behalf of Extern, I thank the Committee for inviting us to participate in the inquiry into reducing adult reoffending.

Extern is a community and voluntary organisation commissioned by public sector bodies and Departments. Since the mid-1970s, we have grown our services portfolio to support, house and engage adults, young people, families and children. In the context of today, our criminal justice services are commissioned by the Supporting People programme and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. Our services are delivered in partnership with our commissioners and the wider organisations in the statutory and voluntary sectors that make up the criminal justice system.

Effective partnership working is essential at all stages of service delivery. Extern's criminal justice services are fully detailed in your briefing pack. They include the prisoner support project, the criminal justice floating support project, and Probation Board for Northern Ireland-approved premises. Extern

runs the Innis Centre in Belfast, Dismas House in Belfast, and the MUST Hostel in Cookstown. The focus of each is on reducing adult reoffending, supporting rehabilitation, ensuring community safety and contributing to an effective justice system. Additionally, we are committed to the safeguarding of adults and children and to public protection.

Through our front-line services, we witness the profound impact of offending on victims, communities, families and the individuals themselves. We continually adapt and innovate our services to meet the growing complexity of the needs and risks that are being presented. Our services are accessible, non-judgemental, welcoming and supportive, particularly for those individuals who are facing significant barriers. Extern co-designs its services to address the societal factors that can lead to offending and reoffending. These societal factors include trauma, poor mental health, addictions and the lack of suitable accommodation. Understanding why offending behaviour occurs is critically important: it is usually a symptom or an outworking of a previous trauma.

Together with our community and voluntary partners like NIACRO, we provide targeted, specialist interventions within a prosocial model, improving health and well-being, reducing offending and enhancing individuals' quality of life. Collaboration among the community and voluntary organisations working to reduce offending is facilitated in the voluntary and community sector social enterprise (VCSSE) forum — that is not easy to say. The forum is chaired by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to share best practices, address challenges, improve communication and discuss common issues. The forum provides a space for networking and building professional relationships, highlighting each organisation's specialist focus and avoiding duplication in the provision of our services.

Extern welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government under Safer Communities to develop a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending. Tackling offending and reoffending cannot be the sole responsibility of the Department of Justice. As previously mentioned, it is the broader societal issues that contribute to offending that require a shared effort from across various Departments. We believe that that commitment will lead to better outcomes and enhance the impact of all services. Service delivery providers in the community and voluntary sector face significant challenges, including budgetary constraints against increasingly high costs, lack of multi-year funding and regular cliff edges in our funding. Our sector remains key in delivering services that help reduce reoffending. We remain committed and are ready to work in partnership with all stakeholders to address these challenges through the development of the cross-departmental strategy.

In closing, we highlight three key recommendations that the Public Accounts Committee could focus on for us: support the Department of Justice to achieve the cross-departmental collaboration; support multi-year funding for the voluntary and community sector; and support the implementation of community-based solutions over custodial sentences, especially for non-violent crimes, to decrease reoffending rates and support rehabilitation efforts. Thank you for this opportunity to speak. We are happy for any questions.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** OK, thank you very much for two very thought-provoking presentations. I suppose I should have said, although it is not really a current interest, that I previously worked as a social worker, so I have worked with both organisations and gained an understanding of what you bring to the table in this respect of a complex area of work.

It was very usefully flagged up there. We often think about offending and reoffending as an individual thing with that person, but the idea that you have raised there is that people, families and communities and, indeed, public life and public services, in terms of finances and all of that, all stand to benefit from improvement in this area. That is interesting. I also noted the focus on housing, health and finances as being some of the stabilising factors or challenging factors, as well as that lack of multi-year funding, which we have recognised for a long time across many parts of the work that we do here, is a challenge to all of that.

The first question from me is this. Can you briefly outline to Committee some of the key high-level challenges that you face in trying to successfully rehabilitate adult offenders and reoffenders whilst they are in the community or in custody?

**Ms Greene:** With the high-level challenges, we begin with the lack of a cross-departmental strategy and, more importantly, action plans for the delivery of reoffending and rehabilitative programmes. It would be folly for me not to mention the funding and resourcing issues that the voluntary and community sector currently faces. I know that Diane Forsythe chairs the all-party group for the voluntary and community sector, so she is well aware of the cliff edge that Emma Purdon referred to in relation to some of the funding challenges that we have all experienced with the UK Shared Prosperity

Fund, for example. As I said in my opening remarks, one of the key factors for reducing reoffending is to ensure that someone sustains a job. NIACRO's response to that over many decades has been to deliver, in the community and also in the prison setting, employability programmes. Our current one is called SkillSET. It is funded currently by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, with contributions from the Prison Service, the Probation Board and a private charity in Ballymena called the Gallaher Trust.

One of the challenges for us is that reoffending — reducing someone's proclivity to go on and reoffend again — is a long-term challenge, from both an individual and a societal perspective. Year-to-year, and sometimes month-to-month, funding presents voluntary and community organisations like ourselves with the challenge of retaining the skilled staff that I mentioned, who are really vital. The work that NIACRO, Extern and others do is difficult, often misunderstood and challenging in itself, but it also comes with the rewards of knowing that, ultimately, we are here to help people who perhaps have not been assisted by society or others in the past. With just the right support in the right time, we can be there to help, guide and walk alongside them in their journey.

Therefore, the high-level challenges are around funding, the conditions of funding and also the conditions for the voluntary and community sector in obtaining that funding. On a practical and operational level, even in the prison setting, it can be having enough space to deliver programmes. We mentioned in our briefing that one of the operational challenges that we experience in the delivery of our programmes is the fact that staffing in the prison can become very stressed if they have sick leave or security issues. Prisoners have quite a lengthy regime on a daily basis, so it is really important that rehabilitation and the programmes that we all provide inside the prison, through the gate and into the community become paramount and are given space and place to do that. It is a challenge for prisons and the Probation Board because their resources are limited too, and their ability to support us is limited in that regard. We are looking forward to working with all the agencies on that strategy, the action plan and coming out of that to meet these challenges together.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Coming from that, one of the areas in which I have an interest is restorative justice. From your work with individuals, do you think we could and should be doing more in the restorative justice space? Would that lead to better outcomes regarding reoffending, in your experience?

**Ms Patricia Devlin (Extern):** I have no personal experience of delivering restorative justice, but I am aware that there are a number of accredited restorative justice practitioners across the statutory sector. Service users want to be heard, and victims also need a voice. The success of any delivery of restorative justice comes down to the people who are involved in the process, and that requires consent from both parties. It may not always be deliverable at a particular time, because both victim and perpetrator need to be ready and in the same place.

Based on my personal professional experience, I would say that sometimes service users are not actually asked, "What happened that led you to do this? What happened to you?" As part of the restorative justice process, it is not about them talking about their own problems and what have you, but it can trigger that conversation for people to show that they understand that there is more behind what had led them to that. Victims need a voice. They need to be able to express their needs and the impact of the offending on their immediate lives, their families and their communities. There is a difference: in my experience, service users will often accept something better from someone who is not a professional. A person in the community who has had direct experience of being offended against can carry more weight than my saying, "No, you shouldn't have done that".

Will you repeat the question? Have I answered it for you?

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I am just wondering whether you believe that we could get better outcomes from the better or further use of —.

**Ms Devlin:** Yes, I do, from providing that space and from that interpersonal, human connection.

**Ms Greene:** May I come in to declare an interest? I co-chair the restorative practices forum in Northern Ireland, and I also sit on the DOJ's adult restorative justice working group. I am very aware of the Department's developments in terms of accreditation for restorative justice organisations, as well as looking at how referrals come from the criminal justice system. That will build on the success of the youth conferencing service in the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) and, as Trish said, give victims and witnesses, and victims and people who have caused the harm, an opportunity to come together to repair harm. That has to be done carefully and in a safe way. I worked in Victim Support, which is also

on the working group, for many years. You see the benefits for victims, sometimes in extreme cases. It is done on a case-by-case basis, but the Department is doing the right thing by bringing forward those plans. There is the potential for more repairing of harm to be done when safe practices are resourced.

**Ms Forsythe:** Thank you all for being here. Last week, the Department, the Prison Service and the Probation Board all spoke very strongly about the important role that the voluntary and community sector plays in delivering justice in Northern Ireland. To what extent can you provide support and services to the adult offender and reoffender population in Northern Ireland? Are there significant gaps in the number of clients you can support and the type of services that you can provide, both in custody and in the community?

**Mr Boylan:** That was a wee handy question there.

**Ms Rachel Long (NIACRO):** Just to clarify, Diane, are you asking about the types of support available, and the gaps in meeting need, both in custody and through the gate into the community?

**Ms Forsythe:** Yes.

**Ms Long:** OK. As Fiona and Emma set out in their opening statements, the services that we provide across adult reoffending are, in the main, about supporting relationships. Strengthening family ties is a big piece of the work that we do. I know the numbers that were talked about in last week's session. The Probation Board has seen an increase in the number of people that it supports; I think that there has been a rise from 5,000 people under supervision to 6,000 people in the past wee while. Our resource has remained static. There has not been an increase passed down to the community and voluntary sector to meet that need. We have a big demand for our services. For example, our Family Links service, which is about supporting family relationships, is funded to work with about 1,200 families a year, but about 4,000 people come into prison on an annual basis. That is from meeting people at committal stage and reaching out to support families there. So we are not able to meet the needs of everybody who comes into prison at that initial point, which is a crucial point.

In addition to that, moving to employability support, Fiona talked about our work around skills-building and supporting people into training and employment. In the year that we are just moving into — 2025-26 — we are funded to work with just over 500 people a year to support them into paid employment or education and training support. If we set that aside, the number of people who would like to avail themselves of our services and support — the demand — is much greater than the need that we can meet. We provide services around stabilising finances. Our financial advice and money matters service is really in demand. As you can imagine, a lot of people who are coming into custody or serving community sentences have debt issues. They may have drug debts, gambling debts and so on. Access to money, benefits entitlements and so on — they need somebody to advocate for them. A lot of the people whom we support struggle to open a bank account, even to be able to have a salary paid into it. Those are some of the issues that we struggle with. I am looking at our figures for stabilising finances. Last year, we supported around 800 people there. Again, we could probably double that figure.

With regard to our advice services on supporting people with disclosure and how to safely and fairly recruit people, last year we supported around 700 people with how to disclose their conviction, where they need to, when applying for work in a way that complies with legislation and meets Access NI requirements. We have a busy disclosure helpline. Again, there is demand for that. Currently, we have one staff member to staff that helpline. Over the past wee while, we have actually had to bring in our own resources to fund that ourselves, because we have not had the resource to do so.

Gaps-wise, there is a good suite of services available around mentoring support and all the things that I have talked about. At the moment, for NIACRO, it is welcome to see, hopefully, coming down the line in the Justice Bill and the successful transformation bids, bail support programmes, electronic monitoring and so on, and more cross-departmental wrap-around support and connectedness. We welcome those things by way of meeting need. Certainly, the services are there, but it is a matter of lifting them up so that they are able to reach.

**Ms Forsythe:** Is the funding there? You mentioned that you were funded to work with 1,200 families and 500 people on employability. Are those numbers set by the Department according to what funding it has available, as opposed to being demand-led?

**Ms Long:** Very much so.

**Ms Forsythe:** You are saying that there is a significant gap —.

**Ms Long:** We have had to reduce the numbers. Sorry, Diane. Last year, we were able to reach 700 or 800 people with our employability work. As you will know, there has been a reduction in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocations this year. We have had to reduce that figure to 500 in the context of there being an increased prison population and more people needing support. It is a real frustration for us that we have had to do that.

**Ms Forsythe:** Absolutely. Then there is the pressure on the voluntary and community sector from the increase in employers' National Insurance contributions, which drives that down even more. There are definitely gaps. Demand is increasing.

**Ms Purdon:** That is what we are finding in Extern. If you read our submission, you will have seen that one of our new pilot schemes, which just started last year, was the prisoner support project. It came off the back of the audit report that was done in 2023. We developed that for a two-year pilot. Just as Rachel was saying, even the funding for that —. We worked very closely and co-designed it with the Prison Service, working with prisoners and governors in the prison. There was not even enough funds to start it, so Extern had to dip into its own reserves in order to fund that two-year pilot. The very positive results that we are getting are all off the back of that. It was commissioned to work with 80 prisoners in the prison, with a warm handover out into the community for 60. In its first year, it has worked with 118 prisoners. Out of those 118 prisoners, 87 have not reoffended. That shows a reduction of almost 50%, because, as stated in the audit report, 52% of prisoners reoffend within the first year. At the minute, due to the work that the team is doing in the prison and outside it on homelessness, addiction and mental health, only 26% of those whom it worked with have reoffended. Even within that, there were some who, as soon as they came out of prison, did not engage with the community. We are looking at the figures in that as well.

We have completed the first year of it. It is looking very positive. Over the next year, though, it will be down to us to go out and look for the funding to keep it going. Again, we will hit a cliff edge at the end of the year. Eight staff are employed, and they are all new staff. They are all dedicated and working very hard to make it work, but it is up to us now. We will come out to the Departments. I am warning them now that we are coming out soon, just to show that this is working and making a real difference. However, as Rachel said, we have waiting lists in all our projects. We have 91 beds for the approved hostel provision, and there is a constant waiting list. As soon as an individual comes off a probation order, they are moved out of that hostel into another hostel to clear the bed for somebody else to come in. There is not a free night for a bed; as soon as it is empty, somebody else fills it. The bed does not get cold. That is the same across all our projects.

**Ms Forsythe:** They are amazing outcomes, and having that demonstrable statistic is important on the back of the Audit Office report. The Department told us that it has a dashboard that should capture those types of things. Have you been involved to date in the development of the Department's refreshed offending and reoffending strategy to capture those things, and, if so, is it likely to represent an improved and more effective response in comparison to previous strategies that it has had on this?

**Ms Greene:** We are at the early stages of the discussion to scope out what is needed. The Department will look to other Departments for engagement, collaboration and commitment, and it will certainly get that from the voluntary and community sector, and hopefully through this Committee and the findings of the Audit Office report. We have something substantial to build on. We find ourselves in very difficult times, and the Audit Office report was done on the back of COVID, so there were particular issues with the development and implementation of strategies for the Department across the board.

From our perspective, and through the voluntary and community sector forum that Emma referred to, there is a real opportunity to do something very meaningful and special, but it needs to come from a cross-departmental approach and not just a strategy. There has to be action around specific targets within those action plans. There has to be accountability, because justice and accountability are fundamental values of NIACRO, so those are things we do with our individual service users and families on a daily basis. Accountability needs to go the whole way through. Offending is not necessarily caused by the Department of Justice or anything within its auspices, and reoffending and reducing reoffending happens in the community, so it has to be a cross-departmental, Executive-wide approach. It is about people keeping people safe, but it is also about giving people a second chance to make a positive contribution to their communities and society.

**Ms Forsythe:** I am glad to hear you are in there working on that with them. Thank you.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Diane, at the start you raised the important issue of the victims' voices. The Committee, as of today, has written to the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime to see how we can get that voice into this inquiry. Thank you for that.

**Mr Honeyford:** Thanks for coming in. Last week, the Department talked about regionally introducing the short-term prisoner programme. I appreciate that it is early, but can you tell us how that works in practice?

**Ms Devlin:** As Emma said, we have worked with 118 service users so far. Just to give you an idea of how needed this service is —. Bear in mind that we are just coming to the end of our first year, and it takes time for a service to embed and for the relevant people from another organisation, and the prisoners themselves, to become aware of the service and understand the remit and criteria. We have had 336 referrals to the service in the first year. When they were screened, 106 were appropriate and 38 were waiting to get on the programme. We have two key workers who are based in the prison who deliver the programme piece, and four social workers who support the service users who have completed the programme in the prison. Some of the success is based on our stats and the outcomes that Emma has just presented about the 26% who return to custody and 74% who do not return. Of the 31 who did not return to custody, 11 left the service on discharge but had completed phase 1 of the programme. Some of them may have left the catchment area. At the moment, one of the gaps is that the community support is only delivered within the greater Belfast area. We would love to be able to develop that regionally and for it to operate out of Magilligan and Hydebank, where we could reach young people and women. Of the 20 who continued with the service, 14 accessed it only for short-term immediate intervention after discharge.

From a human rights perspective, it is about consent and partnership. We do not do things to people. One of the reasons why the PSP was set up was because it would reach the cohort of people who were being discharged from prison and were not already linked in with support or supervision from the Probation Service. Most people do not want to be on probation, but what comes with that is structure and support and people to advocate for them to get other services. The service is entirely on a voluntary basis. Fourteen accessed for immediate intervention — GP registration and benefits — and then six remained for long-term intervention. Anyone who returned to custody was generally because of low-level offending.

To measure outcomes, we use a model of assessment called Outcomes Star. There is one that is specifically tailored to justice. It facilitates the service user themselves. As Fiona said, the service user is at the centre of the support. They work in partnership with the key worker to identify where they are in their journey within a total of 10 domains. The domains that will be particularly interesting and focused on for the PSP project are substance misuse and mental health, because those were the two key areas identified in the co-design of the programme where services were not always available to people when they were coming out. I will not use the word "restrictive" but, with regard to movement on the journey, obviously you cannot see the outgoings of that until they are out. There is a baseline reading taken just before they start the therapeutic programme that we offer, which is called Let's Talk. There is another reading taken on the completion of the programme, which has three phases. Some people, depending on when we catch them and how long they have left of their short sentence, may only have completed phase 1, some may have completed phases 1 and 2, and a smaller number have completed phase 3. Going forward, as we bed in for longer, the number that will complete phase 3 will obviously increase.

We have seen across all the domains that there has been positive movement. The service user, in partnership with the key worker, will self-assess as to where they are around motivation and ability to change on a scale of one to 10. The lowest score was 4.3 and then, on review, some people were getting up to 6.6. It looks like small increments, but for a person who nobody has had that conversation with before and who has not had the opportunity, it is quite significant. You sometimes find that, within that immediate time when they are just released, there is a little bit of, "Oh, I am out", and you might have a bit of a dip back. However, once the support is built in again, we continue to use that tool to review and should see an upward trend again of people moving more towards independence with those key areas. A lot of support is required for them to attain those key areas.

I have talked a lot now. You will have to remind me of the question in case I have missed something.

**Mr Honeyford:** The question was how well you believe it is working in practice.



**Ms Devlin:** Yes. If I refer to my notes, I can give you a couple of examples.

**Ms Purdon:** May I step in, David? One of the issues that has been identified in the first year is —. As Trish said, the focus was on addictions and mental health, but certainly the majority of prisoners coming out short-term are coming out to no fixed abode. As was flagged in the Audit Office report, in 2019-2020, 16% of prisoners were released to no fixed abode. Unfortunately, that is something that this team is having to pick up as well. Before we even get to look at the addictions and mental health, we have to try and get those individuals into some kind of housing somewhere so that they are not on the streets of Belfast. It highlights the cross-departmental need for Supporting People and the Communities, Health and Justice Departments to work together on all these issues. Certainly, we have had very positive figures in the first year, and we hope that continues into the second.

**Ms Devlin:** We have had very positive commentary from the service users we have worked for. We proactively seek out their feedback. Obviously, no programme is going to work unless you have service user buy-in.

One of the things we noticed is that the two key workers are very proactive. They will go out to the houses in the prison and on the landings. They had to publicise the service at the start. By word of mouth, prisoners were approaching them — "My friend down the block says great things about you. Can you help me?" It is almost self-generating. Not all those people, obviously, met the criteria, but the fact that they were coming to the staff themselves is significant. Last week, Beverley Wall spoke about how one of the challenges of working with short-term prisoners is that they maybe do not feel that engaging in a significant piece of work is worth their while if they only have a short sentence. The fact that people are coming of their own volition and asking for it is really quite something.

**Mr Honeyford:** Last week, we heard about the increasingly complex needs of prisoners. That is one of the things that came out, and the Prison Service has commenced a review of the prisoner development model. Have you been involved in that review?

**Ms Long:** Yes, we have indeed. We met the lead of the review team to contribute to it and feed into it. I know that in NIACRO, and it is the same within Extern, our key prison staff are based in and alongside the prisoner development unit (PDU) teams in the prisons and are very much seen as trusted partners, working day and daily hand in hand with the PDU team. We did feed back into the team. Our view is that the PDU model is good: it is probably the right model, and it works well. The PDU staff are excellent, have all the expertise and know about our services. They know, when they are assessing somebody's need, whether NIACRO or Extern is best placed to take someone. Start360 is where they need to get the support from. They have all that information and knowledge. The issue is that they are being redeployed in order to pick up other roles within the Prison Service, where they are absolutely needed to be, in order to backfill those roles. However, they are being taken away from the work they need to do to support reoffending and rehabilitation. Our staff have stepped in, over the last few months, to help the PDU meet a backlog of assessments and help it perform its role. Therefore, we have good understanding of what is needed. However, as I say, the model itself is a good one, and it is just about the Prison Service having the right workforce levels and numbers in order to adhere to it.

**Mr Honeyford:** My next question is around your views. Within the current model to meet the complex needs of prisoners, what change is needed? Is it really staff numbers? Is there anything else?

**Ms Long:** Very much so. It is about —. The other bit, as Fiona says, is around the ageing prison estate. Yes, there has been Davis House — a fantastic facility, recently opened. However, even getting access for us to deliver our programmes —. We are really good at flexing and creating programmes to meet the needs of short-term-sentence prisoners and others, but finding somewhere to deliver those programmes in the prison estate is a real challenge. The prison staff may not have the capacity to unlock the cells and bring somebody over to engage in our programmes. Those are the operational issues that we experience. We have staff ready to go and deliver programmes, we bring in external providers to deliver them, and sometimes they have to be cancelled at the last minute because there are not safe staffing numbers to unlock. Those are some of the barriers that we come up against. It is about having the right resource levels within the prison to deliver on that.

**Ms Purdon:** We agree.

**Ms Devlin:** Just to pick up on that, we identified that there was a need, and certainly capacity, to add an additional key worker into the prison, but we were unable to do that because there was literally nowhere to put them.

**Ms Purdon:** There was no desk, no seat, no phone.

**Ms Long:** We have to be able to record. Data was mentioned in the report as well. It is important that we are able to evidence our outcomes and record that we met somebody and what difference that has made. It is even down to having somewhere for our staff to be able to log on to the prison system to accept the referrals and to report back on what they are doing. Those are difficulties that we experience as well.

**Mr Honeyford:** So it is not the model that changes; it is the resource.

**Ms Long:** It is the resource and the environment.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you for being with us today. From your experience and the work that you do, do you think that enough is being done to reduce the numbers going to prison in the first instance by providing, for example, alternatives to short-term sentencing, improvement of bail, and information and support to reduce numbers being placed on remand?

**Ms Devlin:** We all think that more can be done. Discussion on short sentencing and potential alternatives has been ongoing for a number of years. I remember being at a series of workshops up here as far back as 2018 where we talked a lot about alternatives to short sentences. Some things that came up during that time were the value of community hubs and restorative hubs. Restorative justice was very much considered to be an alternative option at that time. Through the sentencing Bill, there was consultation in 2020 for the community and voluntary sector to feed into. More could be done to embed the short-sentence community alternatives and to engage them in that at a very early stage. Resources can contribute to prevention as well as reaction to the offending. If more resources are put into the prevention end of it, that will help.

People who have engaged in community disposals tend to have a more successful outcome than short sentences on their own, because they are required to engaged in more therapeutic and supportive work. There might be a perception that they are a soft option. They are not, because they demand more of the person. In my experience of working with people through our criminal justice floating support and, particularly, through our approved premises, service users will tell you that it is easier to go back to prison. That is one of the issues that arose over the Christmas period with some of the PSP service users. They were having challenges getting accommodation and — this is really sad — in order to achieve shelter, food and company over the Christmas period, some of them decided that they would do something quite low-level so that they could get back to prison. If that is happening, that is your evidence that an alternative is needed.

In order to make community disposals more successful, the resourcing around that has to increase in respect of health services and accommodation. Accommodation is key. Fiona said that the single most important factor in desistance is constructive use of time and meaningful activity by way of training and employment. For a lot of people, that cannot happen because their accommodation is not stable enough or they are reliant on a crash facility. You need some sort of address from which everything else can happen. The possibilities for alternatives to short sentences are possible, but there are so many other things in the background that need to be improved first. I hope that that answers your question.

**Ms Greene:** NIACRO's position is that we should be trying to prevent as many people as possible from being incarcerated. Incarceration in itself is a big factor in reoffending. That is not to say that justice does not need to be served or that the needs of victims and their sense of justice needs to be set aside. We understand that, when sentencing occurs, there is a balance and a weighing up to be done of all those factors around sentencing and using short sentences as a disposal. We would prefer to see resourcing put into community-based sentencing and supporting and resourcing the Probation Board to supervise the range of custodial disposals that are already there but to develop those more diversionary models.

In particular, one of our big asks will be to raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility and to try to keep as many children and young people as possible out of the system. As they enter adulthood, there is more of a chance that they will become involved in the criminal justice system if they have

been criminalised at an earlier age. We also want to support the ongoing sentencing reforms. We are obviously aware of the current sentencing review and we are looking forward to seeing the outcome of that. In order to achieve the transformation that is needed in the criminal justice system and all of the agencies in and around people who offend and reoffend, it will be really important to make sure that there are enough resources across the piece.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Do you find that some people reoffend in order to get back to what they see as a safe environment, because of the fear that when they get out into society the proper support is not there?

**Ms Long:** Yes, absolutely.

**Ms Greene:** That can happen on an individual basis. The continuing legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland is a factor for some of our service users, particularly in our Aspire programme, which is funded from EPPOC via the Probation Board. We are aware that that funding is coming to an end in the next two years, so we want to take the opportunity to highlight that today as well. We are helping, I think, over 500 people a year.

**Ms Long:** We have talked about our Aspire mentoring programme, which involves community-based alternatives, and whether enough is being done through EPPOC. We are so grateful to have had that funding through the Executive programme on paramilitarism and organised crime, because it has allowed us to support 500 people in the community who are on community-based sentences and are subject to probation supervision. That is a complementary mentoring support where we wrap alongside those people and mentor them. We supported over 200 people last year, and of those, over 77% were not recalled or remanded back into custody or did not come back to the attention of services.

Our Aspire community engagement programme begins at an earlier stage and is for people who are not subject to either probation supervision or any licence conditions and are aged 16 to 30. We know that that tends to be the cohort of people who are in the criminal justice system. That allows us to intervene at an earlier stage in the community for people who are engaging in risk-taking behaviours and are on the cusp of coming into the system. We worked with 336 referrals last year. There is definitely a need but, as Fiona said, there is a growing concern about who is going to pick up that work when EPPOC funding is not there. That is winding down this year and into next year. That is the neediest cohort of people who come through our door in the communities that we work with. They are the people who need that support most.

**Mr T Buchanan:** When we look at offending and reoffending, we always have to keep the victims and their families in mind. What work do you do with victims' groups in order to understand their views when designing programmes and initiatives and all that type of thing?

**Ms Greene:** NIACRO's mission is to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. We exist to prevent as much crime as possible. We understand that people are involved in the criminal justice system and need support to desist from crime and reoffending. We work very closely with Victim Support Northern Ireland and the Victims' Commissioner; we have regular strategic meetings with the senior teams in those organisations. We recently collaborated with Victim Support on scoping out the development of a potential restorative justice project. Again, those things are all dependent on resource, business development time and capacity. We keep victims at the centre of our focus and mind.

As I said at the beginning, the work that NIACRO and Extern do is difficult work and is often misunderstood. There are perceptions around why we are here and what we are doing, but it is simply to reduce crime and its impact. We understand that, at the end of every incident of crime that we try to help somebody not to repeat, there are victims and families, including their own family, who have been caught up in the impact and ripple effect on communities, which can be devastating. That is not just for the big crimes that make the news; what we deem to be smaller crimes can have a devastating impact on the victims and people who witness them. That is really important for us.

There is a massive correlation in that people who offend have often also been victims. One day, they could be the person who caused the harm, and the next day, they could be the person who has been harmed. I referred earlier to our EPPOC-funded INSYNCR programme, which is a counselling service for victims of paramilitary-style attacks. It is largely young men, but there are also some women, who have been subjected to paramilitary-style assaults over the years. That is the first service of its kind. It

is done through the EPPOC funding, and we are continuing with it this year. As Rachel said, however, those things will, potentially, fall off a cliff edge, so we are really concerned that the people who are most on the margins will go beyond the margins.

**Mr T Buchanan:** Thank you.

**Mr Delargy:** Thanks for your presentation and answers. What are the three biggest priorities that need to be addressed in order to reduce reoffending?

**Ms Devlin:** For me, it is accommodation; provision and availability of accessible services; and, obviously, funding for those.

**Ms Purdon:** On behalf of Extern, I will go with that too. Accommodation is the major one for us — that is number 1.

**Ms Greene:** For NIACRO, the three things are a cross-departmental action plan and strong leadership to tackle this issue together; trauma-informed mentoring and robust evidence-based support that is linked to data across the system and to outcomes that are measured against the targets in the action plan; and, of course, multi-year funding for the voluntary and community sector to support the criminal justice system and to recognise our already substantial contribution to the efforts of the criminal justice system and the Department to reduce reoffending.

**Mr Delargy:** Thanks for that. There is so much to take away from today, but is important for us to be able to look at those succinct points.

The Committee consistently looks at best practice in other jurisdictions. Naturally, we often look at the South or England, Scotland and Wales. Should we be looking at other jurisdictions as models of best practice? Are there any that you look to?

**Ms Greene:** On the delivery of voluntary and community sector organisations or just generally?

**Mr Delargy:** In this entire topic, as broad as —

**Ms Long:** We are a part of different networks. Funnily, we were reflecting on this with our team: in years gone by, there were more opportunities for us to go and explore other jurisdictions and take back learning on how they do things. We are part of a European network on specific support for children who are impacted by parental imprisonment. That has been important for us. We are able to visit prisons across Europe and see how organisations like our own deliver best practice. We are proud to say that we are up there on the interventions and supports that are available. That is how we are looked upon, to be honest.

More locally, we met officials from the Department for Education in England just this week. It has appointed a policy team to look specifically at the needs of children who are impacted by parental imprisonment. We would love to explore that more with the Department of Education here to see what we could do on it. We look at the Nordic countries — Sweden, Denmark and so on. This year, we have looked in particular at their engagement with employers, businesses and the private sector and how they create opportunities for people to work, through prison, out in the community, such as in social enterprises; and at how they support business and the private sector to work with prisoners when they are released. We have looked at those areas in order to bring better practice back here.

**Mr Delargy:** That is really useful. Thanks.

**Ms Devlin:** I will turn that on its head. It is not just about us going to other jurisdictions to look at best practice. We have experience of other jurisdictions coming to us; that needs to be recognised. In the past couple of years, Extern has worked with the probation service of the Republic of Ireland, which visited our approved premises because it does not have a model that replicates those. Only last year, a cohort of people who work in and around the prison service in Finland came here. Finland has fantastic provision for its homeless population and a structured government programme with joined-up working on accommodation and support. It does not have such provision for prisons. The people who came over said that they have real challenges in using partnership and joined-up working to engage with the person at an early stage, before they get out of prison, so they were really interested in our prisoner support project and our criminal justice floating support. I just put that out there.

**Mr Delargy:** Absolutely. It works both ways.

**Ms Devlin:** It does. It is all about mutual learning and sharing best practice; everybody benefits from that.

**Mr Delargy:** Thank you very much for your answers.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I have a wee follow-up question on that. Through your networks, are you aware of places with comparable reoffending rates? Are there places that we are close to on data comparisons?

**Ms Devlin:** Off the top of my head, I am not aware. For all the reasons that we have talked about, we have a higher rate of short-sentence prisoners than the rest of the UK.

**Ms Purdon:** I do not think that we are comparable, but I would need to check and come back to you.

**Ms Devlin:** We will check, and we will be happy to come back to you.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** If you find anything, we would appreciate that.

**Ms Greene:** The Audit Office report highlights the huge disparity between the numbers of remand prisoners in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. We have already discussed accommodation and decisions taken at the time of disposal as factors in that.

**Ms Purdon:** We will look at that and come back to you.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Thank you.

**Mr Boylan:** Thank you very much for your answers so far. Three words come to mind: complex, complicated and challenging. There is no doubt about that. Before I get into the serious questions about how you will influence the recommendations of our report at the end — the Committee will have a conversation about that — I have a simple wee question. If, tomorrow morning, you had the funding for it, and everybody in each Department were playing their part — we know that you work with all Departments and that that is key — would you have all the tools that you need to do the job? You mentioned strategy, but my question is this: if you had the funding, would you have enough experience and understanding of the causes and the solutions? Is all the information sitting there? I know that it is complicated, but I want a better understanding of where we should go with all this. From reports that were done in past years, we understand some of the root causes and that it is complex and diverse, but I want us to get a better understanding of where we should go. I know that it is complicated, but I would like to hear your views on that.

**Ms Devlin:** It is complicated. If I understood you correctly, the question is this: if we had the pot of funding, would we have the tools to deliver what is needed?

**Mr Boylan:** Absolutely.

**Ms Devlin:** Across the voluntary and community sector, there are many organisations, each of which comes with a different specialism in a different piece of the puzzle. With our experience on the ground and what we hear from service users, which is a really good indicator of what is needed, we are able to identify the gaps. One gap relates to the constructive use of time. Another gap is the lack of community hubs for people who are, for whatever reason — their health and well-being or, perhaps, their readiness to engage in focused desistance — unable to be in employment. There is a real need for somewhere for them to come to receive support in order to move towards that. We are in negotiations with funders to provide what we need. We have submitted costs for that. I spoke earlier about regional expansion of services. We could sit here for hours talking about all the things that we could do to contribute to an overall reduction in reoffending. It is all about service development in a place that service users can reach and about publicising that because, often, people just do not know where to go.

**Ms Long:** As you were asking the question, a few things came to mind. We have an excellent workforce in the voluntary and community sector, who are so passionate, dedicated and committed to

doing the work that we do. As you said, it is so challenging and complex. People work in this sector because they want to do that work. They want to see success, and they want to support people to turn the curve and make those changes. We absolutely have the workforce to do that.

There are things that we are doing to ready ourselves and maintain that expertise in the sector. Recently, we developed a centre for development in our organisation. We have registered with an organisation-accreditation body, which was previously known as Skills for Justice (SFJ) Awards. We recognise that we receive core funding through the Department of Justice. We are pleased to be able to say that we have that. As organisations, we recognise that working in this space and this sector requires that level of expertise. Not everybody who comes to work with us is social-work qualified, nor do they need to be; they need to be in Probation Board and other roles. However, with our universities, we are developing qualifications on how we support women in the criminal justice system, for example — on gender-informed responses — and making sure that our staff have the skills and expertise. When we look at desistance theory, our expertise and the evidence tell us that we can have all these different models of work but that it is less about models and more about relationships and relationship-based practice — that is what makes the difference.

**Mr Boylan:** I will just rephrase that slightly. I understand and know that already. My question was more about working with your partners and the responsibility of Departments and all the other partners.

**Ms Long:** And their buy-in.

**Mr Boylan:** They have to be bought in.

My second question is about the Justice Bill. Is there something that you want to be included in it? I am only throwing that out there. We are serious about making recommendations to try to address the issue: that is the responsibility of the Committee. We want to hear that from you. We have an opportunity now.

**Ms Greene:** NIACRO will be appearing at the Justice Committee on 8 May, so we will be back up again in a month's time. We will be there to talk to the draft legislation as it is presented. We will want to raise two areas: one is an amendment; one is not an amendment, which we think should be, and that is raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility. That is an important policy ask for us. Our colleagues in the children's sector, across the criminal justice sector and in voluntary and community organisations support that initiative.

Also important for us is reform of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Order. That is key legislation that is decades behind the legislation in England and Wales. It is well due for reform. We support the bringing forward of the reform, as it stands. We look forward to going to the Justice Committee to talk in detail about the systemic barriers that the existing order presents for people in Northern Ireland who live with a criminal record. That is not just for people who have had a custodial sentence or probation supervision; it is for people with fines. Having a criminal record can have a long-term impact on accessing employment, education, insurance and travel. We have countless case studies — if you want to call them that — and real-life stories of people who did something at a very early age that has carried through and hampered them for 40 years. They have lived with shame, regret and disappointment. It has had an impact on their mental health and family life. Those are some of the systemic barriers that we speak to. For me, reform of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Order really needs to happen. It has been a long-term campaign of NIACRO, so that was an easy answer to give to this Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to talk to that.

**Mr Boylan:** I have a final question, Chair, if you will indulge me. Is the funding geared more towards solutions and addressing problems, or is there a mix in which part of it is about addressing root causes and trying to do research? Part B of that question is this: if I were to ask you to name one recommendation that you would like to see in our report, what would it be? I know that that is a challenging question.

**Ms Devlin:** That brings to mind something that I had thought about: strategy. Strategy tends to be based on a reaction to what is not there or to what is there. It can focus more on the outcomes that you want before you have considered the process and what needs to be put in place in order to achieve those outcomes.

**Ms Purdon:** Even with our PSP, the funding that we got from the Department of Justice was to address the issues of substance misuse and mental health. That is relatively new funding, so I think that there has been a change and that we are heading in the right direction with the Department of Justice. It is listening to us. It listens when we tell it what we need to focus on with that money. That is making a big difference. The Department is also being more flexible with us. Although that is a pilot — the Department does not like calling it a pilot — it means that we can nip, tuck and change it as we see fit, over the two years, in order to, hopefully, get the best outcomes.

**Ms Devlin:** We do that based on the evidence of what we see in the process.

**Ms Greene:** To answer your question: it is about having targets for all Departments in the action plan and the strategy that the Department of Justice will bring forward. Those targets should be achievable and feasible, with the understanding that there needs to be a commitment to invest to save in the long term. It is not just investment for financial purposes; it is investment in the future of Northern Ireland.

**Ms Purdon:** You have just reminded me of something. As I said, this does not sit in the Department of Justice. The PSP project proves that. The Department of Health and the Department for Communities should be on board, but they are not. As a result, we are funding that from our own reserves to prove that it meets the needs of our communities and makes them safer. As Fiona said, each Department needs to sign up to a proper action plan that has specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) objectives and to be held to account on those. Although the Department of Justice is leading on that, we need buy-in from every Department.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** I have a quick question that occurs to me as a result of the evidence. You talked about some support being available only in the greater Belfast area, and you identified gaps. There are gaps in cross-border areas. The community that I represent in Tyrone borders with Monaghan and, in Fermanagh, it borders Cavan. There is also Donegal and Derry. Are we cooperating effectively cross-border on offending and reoffending?

**Ms Purdon:** Yes. Extern is all-Ireland. We have bail support in the ROI, and we work with the Department of Justice down there. There are great opportunities for cross-border working as well as cross-border funding, which ticks a box as well. We are useful in that regard: we can apply for that funding, work with the Department of Justice and save it money. There are lots of opportunities.

There is Peace money. The Positive Learning project in Derry was cross-border. It brought offenders from across the border, which is hard to do; it worked both ways though, I must say. They came to Derry, and it was about skills, education and employability. The problem with the Peace money was that it came to a cliff edge. It came to an end, and there was nothing to keep it going. Although we had built and established that project for three or four years, it came to an end and that was that. We are always looking out for opportunities. We also have Creative Ireland funding. That is a creative arts project that brings young people up from Dublin and Drogheda.

**Ms Devlin:** It is geared towards young people who are at risk of offending and reoffending.

**Ms Purdon:** Yes. So, things are happening cross-border.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** It is good to hear that, but are there gaps that create frustrations or loopholes whereby people miss or avoid the work?

**Ms Purdon:** Yes. It is a postcode lottery. As we said, a lot of things are Belfast-centric, because that is where the bigger numbers are. With some of our services and services across the Department of Justice, even the community disposals, it is a postcode lottery. We would need extra funding to be able to roll them out so that everybody has the same opportunities to get the services.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** OK, thank you. I will go to the Treasury Officer of Accounts: Stuart, do you have any comment to make?

**Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance):** It would be remiss of me, from a Department of Finance perspective, not to thank the witnesses for their comments in the inquiry but also on the funding challenges that the voluntary and community sector faces. I spoke last week about the opportunities that a multi-year Budget provides for Departments and arm's-length bodies, given the

cliff-edge issues and challenges that the voluntary sector faces. I know that my Minister is determined to deliver on a multi-year Budget, and, hopefully, that will be happen, for that sector in particular.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Thank you. I turn now to our auditor, Dorinnia.

**Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office):** I have nothing to add.

**The Acting Chairperson (Mr Gildernew):** Thank you.

That was an interesting, educational and informative session. The need for all Departments to work together and contribute has come across strongly. I wonder, at times, whether they understand how much they stand to benefit from all this work. We need to make clear that they will all benefit and that that is the spirit in which they should contribute.

I was struck by the comments about someone being potentially a victimiser today and a victim tomorrow, or the other way around. I suspect that, at times, that happens even all on the one day. It is worth bearing that in mind.

It strikes me strongly that, as finances get tight and you get a drift away from preventative work towards the management of resources, that is entirely the wrong direction of travel. The more difficult things are, the more you should focus on preventative-type work and the benefits that can be derived from that. We are in a bit of a loop of defensive budgeting, and we need to get ahead of that. A lot of the reports that we deal with tell us the same thing in many respects.

Thank you for your contribution to the inquiry. We will pick up the evidence that we have heard today, and, hopefully, it will be reflected in our report. Thank you very much.