



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR JUSTICE

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Employability Strategy: Northern Ireland Prison Service

8 December 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Seán Lynch
Ms Jennifer McCann
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Peter Weir
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Ms Carol Carser)	
Mr Jonathan McNaught)	NI Prison Service
Mr Max Murray)	

The Chairperson:

Joining us are Max Murray, the director of offender services; Jonathan McNaught, the employment and skills manager; and Carol Carser, the head of learning and skills from Hydebank Wood. The document will go out for consultation. I hand over to Max, and then members may ask questions.

Mr Max Murray (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

Thank you, Chairman, for the opportunity to brief the Committee on our development of an employability strategy. It is an important piece of work for the Northern Ireland Prison Service

(NIPS), and we are keen to involve the Committee in it as much as possible. The briefing seeks to inform the Committee in three areas: the current position of employment in prisons; the work undertaken to date in developing the strategy; and the strategy itself. I am also keen to take the Committee's agreement to publish the strategy for public consultation. Several drivers are behind the strategy. Our performance in equipping prisoners with necessary skills to compete in the job market post-release has often been criticised in inspection reports and, more recently, by the prison review team's report. We have started to address those criticisms. In advance of the strategy, we published a learning and skills strategic plan. We are developing a resettlement framework, which we hope to bring before the Committee in the new year, and a revised pathways model. All those will tie in with the Department's stated intention of reducing offending as part of the Programme for Government.

The Committee will be aware that the core purpose of NIPS is to improve public safety by reducing the risk of reoffending through the management and rehabilitation of offenders in custody. The prison review team's report noted that a good prison system has two pillars, one of which is to provide opportunities for prisoners to develop and change. The strategy will contribute to those opportunities.

The learning and skills services provided to prisoners generally fall into two categories: education and vocational training. Much of the work undertaken in education is to improve prisoners' essential skills in literacy, numeracy and IT. We also provide classes, mainly through part-funding from job track programme of the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), to improve employability skills. They focus on areas such as CV development and presentation, interview techniques and money management. Prisoners are also given the opportunity to source job vacancies and receive direction towards further advice and guidance.

Although the prison review team's report figures from the programme are encouraging — nearly one in four got a job on release, which is commendable — we want to do more. Arrangements have been made to upskill existing Learning and Skills staff to deliver an employability skills programme starting in February or March 2012. Prisoners can attend vocational training courses as well as, or as an alternative to, education. Progress is also being made to embed essential skills learning in the vocational training workshops, as many prisoners do not see the classroom as a particularly attractive learning environment.

The opportunity to study through vocational training is attractive to many of our prisoners; courses such as painting and decorating, bricklaying, metal fabrication and industrial cleaning are offered. For example, work at Maghaberry prison is focused on restoring wheelchairs, which are sent out to the poor parts of Africa.

The strategy, however, is about more than learning and skills. Offender services focus on nine resettlement pathways, which deal with, for example, accommodation, drugs and alcohol, and family and financial issues. Offender services also provide facilities, such as Foyleview at Magilligan, for working out schemes for prisoners who are close to their release date and have been assessed as suitable to participate in the scheme. Those schemes are managed at a local level. They primarily place prisoners in employment on a temporary basis, usually with charitable organisations and community groups, to provide them with experience of a working day and of taking responsibility for their own contribution to the workplace. The strategy seeks to build on such schemes and place them at a corporate level.

Before I inform the Committee on the strategy itself, I will brief you on work to date. Research indicates that prisoners finding employment on release reduces the risk of their reoffending by between 30% and 50%. It is important, therefore, to develop a strategy that gives prisoners the best opportunity of finding employment when they leave custody. We began that work earlier this year. To date, we have been involved in consultation with internal stakeholders, including Learning and Skills staff, resettlement and offender management staff and senior management teams.

The strategy is intended to expand the opportunities for prisoners to gain work experience in custody, and employment on release. It has yet to be presented to prisoners for consultation. That will be done in due course depending on the Committee's views of the strategy following this presentation. Some work has been done to explore the external employment marketplace. There have been discussions with organisations such as NIACRO, the sector skills councils, Invest NI, Enterprise NI and, more particularly, Business in the Community.

Subject to the strategy, we also have section-75 equality screening. It is planned to revisit that screening and the need for regulatory impact screening at the consultation stage. We intend to consult widely with anyone who may be able to contribute to the strategy's development,

including members of the public, political parties, criminal justice stakeholders, the voluntary sector, and representatives of employers, businesses and prisoners. Consultation will be through forums and focus groups, including through the press and media and attendance at face-to-face meetings.

I turn now to the strategy itself. A great deal of work is done in the prison environment to provide prisoners with skills and qualifications to find employment. However, it is arguable whether we now provide the skills and qualifications required by the current and projected employment market. As I outlined, a number of our prison workshops equip prisoners for employment in the construction industry. However, it will be no surprise to the Committee that 2010 estimates from the Construction Skills Network show that construction output has declined by 15% in Northern Ireland against a rise in the UK as a whole of 4% or 5%. The strategy, together with other strands of work in the Department and NIPS, provides an opportunity to ensure that we are looking to the future. A recent report by the Northern Ireland Adviser on Employment and Skills, Bill McGinnis, notes that the emerging sectors with employment needs include renewable energies; health and life sciences; and creative and digital media.

I am not saying that we can meet the needs of those sectors with people with high-level skills, such as scientists, but we can equip prisoners with some of the lower-level skills that are needed in those and other sectors. There is no doubt that it is a challenging piece of work, but, together with ongoing work in identifying offenders' services needs profile and reviewing what learning and skills services are provided to prisoners and how they are delivered, the strategy will provide a framework to do that. It will provide services according to prisoners' and employers' needs, not NIPS's needs. It will provide real work experience in prisons, develop employer alliances and explore the feasibility of social firms.

It is a challenge that NIPS cannot meet on its own; we will need to work in partnership, and statutory, voluntary and community organisations all have a role. For example, the aim of the Department for Employment and Learning is to promote learning and skills to prepare people for work and to support the economy. Organisations such as the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), work with offenders and employers to understand employment issues and to help prisoners into work or training.

In conclusion, the strategy is designed to provide a framework to support prisoners to access

employment on release by providing them with opportunities to gain work experience in custody and by giving them access to employment-related services during resettlement leave and on release. NIPS will work in partnership to achieve that, and I include the Committee in that. I look forward, therefore, to working with the Committee during all stages of the strategy's development and implementation.

Ms J McCann:

Thank you for your presentation. Raymond and I were in Hydebank and Maghaberry yesterday, and we saw the vocational training site, which is very impressive. We were conscious that more than 70% of prisoners have numeracy and literacy difficulties, and there are prisoners who have addiction problems. The vocational side of the training was particularly good.

I was going to leave my next question until any other business, but, given that it is included in your report, I will ask it now. You talk about implementing the strategy, and, obviously, it is in everyone's interests that people do not reoffend. You said that a huge investment will be required. Can the Department update us on the protest in Roe House, which is costing a great deal of money? It is in everyone's interests to get things settled there. Where does implementation by the Department of the agreement of August 2010 sit? I know that that is not a question for you, but I thought that I would bring it up now because I was going to raise it in any other business.

To return to the employability strategy, the training site is very impressive. What percentage of prisoners use it? Have those who use it been assessed on their level of literacy and numeracy? Do you feel that it will help the prisoners who need extra help, and how do you see that rolling out?

Mr Murray:

I will leave it to Carol to answer the specific question on the operational context; as head of learning and skills, she will certainly have a comment to make.

With regard to the report that I just read, that strategy cannot be seen in isolation from other work going on in the Northern Ireland Prison Service, not least the strategic efficiency & effectiveness (SEE) programme, which is intended to deliver a new way of working in the Prison Service. It will, hopefully, introduce the concept of a core day with fixed timings for

unlocks and lock-ups but also attendance at work placements. It will, hopefully, provide a greater predictability in how the regime operates and is not susceptible or vulnerable to staffing shortfalls or affected by other priorities or emergencies.

We hope to put the service on a different footing. Part of the challenge is to make sure that we do that but that we have sufficient work placements and other opportunities available for prisoners. The last thing we want is the new operating model in the prisons through 2012 and into 2013 but without the work opportunities or the other infrastructure in place. It is a case of trying to balance those needs. I do not think that we will see a major change through 2012 and 2013, but the strategy will start to position us as 2012 moves forward to be better placed by 2013, hopefully to take forward the employability strategy in its fullest form.

Two reviews are ongoing into learning and skills. One is on the subject matter that is delivered through learning and skills, and there will be an emphasis on the essential skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT. However, there has to be a balance because we know that young offenders get bored very quickly, so you need a stimulating programme. We will also review the delivery mechanism to look at how we deliver learning and skills. We are looking to bring in an external consultancy from the Department of Finance and Personnel to look at whether the current in-house model is the best model for delivery or whether we should consider alternatives.

However, on the specific question of meeting the needs —

Ms Carol Carser (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

In relation to literacy and numeracy, all new committals in all establishments would be assessed within the first couple of weeks of being in custody. Based on those assessments, offenders would be offered a range of courses that we think are suitable for their needs, so they would be placed in classes according to ability. I see a three-tier system, with some classes as a hook into education to encourage young people to participate. It may not get them a qualification, but the next step would be into literacy, numeracy or IT, where they will get a qualification. On the vocational side, they would go into workshops, where they can do some real work.

Ms J McCann:

I agree. The link with the outside once they leave is essential. Could we have a report on that?

The Chairperson:

If members are content, we will write to the Department to ask for an update on the protest and where it is with regard to August 2010.

Mr McCartney:

I was struck by how crucial links are: these are all good projects, and one will affect how another is delivered. Therefore it is good to hear that. Will the employability strategy be tailored to the demands of each prison and to even the category of prisoner in each establishment or does one size fit all?

Mr Jonathan McNaught (Northern Ireland Prison Service):

It is far from a one-size-fits-all approach. We recognise that each prison has its own set of prisoners, ranging from young people in Hydebank Wood and women through to Maghaberry, which has a high proportion of remand prisoners, and then on to Magilligan, which has a much more settled population. We see a certain consistency across all three but also the flexibility to have a different approach in each prison depending on the prisoner groups.

Mr McCartney:

The recommendations have to work their way through and people have to analyse and pore over them. One recommendation for Maghaberry in particular is having nearly four prisons in a single prison. Would that give prisoners a greater chance of success with learning and skills than the current situation, which — I am not saying that it is mixed up — makes it much more difficult for staff to work with people?

Mr Murray:

A penology debate on the optimum size of a prison has been going on for a long time, and, in Europe, the optimum number of prisoners has been thought to be around 400 to 500. The current budgetary pressures have driven those numbers up. Smaller, more homogenous groups in a smaller setting than is the case with the 1,200 prisoners in Maghaberry might create better cohesion. If it had smaller units, it could provide better co-ordination. That having been said, the current emphasis in the Prison Service — I am leading on all the offender management interventions and their delivery — is on new procedures and the work that will be taken forward in the new year under the PRT will be based on individual need and will be down to individual assessments. As Carol says, that includes educational and skills assessments and will look at

tailoring sentence plans to meet the specific needs of the individual. Therefore in some ways, the fabric of the prison does not matter; rather, the individual needs of the prisoner should be met if we can get the structures and systems correct.

Mr McCartney:

Carol might have a view on this. I take it that some sort of analysis will be carried out? We were in Ash 5 yesterday. Is the reoffending rate among people who live that experience higher or lower than in the general population? Is educational attainment higher or lower? When you get that picture, you can decide whether to replicate it, and we know what better educational attainment means for crime. If people leaving that part of the prison are not reoffending, we have to learn the lesson from that.

Mr Murray:

I do not know whether you have visited Foyleview or Magilligan yet.

Mr McCartney:

I am going tomorrow.

Mr Murray:

The proposition in Foyleview is that the 84 prisoners should largely run their own environment with minimal supervision, and, hopefully, they will be suitably risk-assessed to work out in the community. It is about restoring self-esteem, self-worth and self-value and, hopefully, working to getting jobs on release.

Mr S Anderson:

Thank you for the presentation. Max, you touched on educational needs and vocation, and you mentioned what is going on in prisons with bricklayers, plumbers, electricians or whatever it is. However, there has been a big shift in what is required.

Have you taken soundings from universities or the workforce to find out what skills are required from the prison courses rather than allowing the prisoner to decide what course to do? Will there be a need to give that opportunity when they finish their time and go out to compete with everyone else to get a job? Have you done that to see what the needs are?

Mr Murray:

We have not done work recently, but we have worked with universities closely in the past on access courses to get prisoners into third-level education on release, and that operated quite successfully for a time. We now need to revisit that work as part of the strategy and get into discussions with universities about third-level education. However, it is about how we channel resources. The emphasis will be on the basics of learning and skills because unless people can write their name or address or fill in an application form, they do not stand much of a chance, in today's environment, of getting a job. Having said that, it is about a balanced curriculum, and there has to be an opportunity to stretch prisoners to GSCE level, A level or university level through Open University courses. All our prisons still operate those programmes and courses. There are prisoners at Maghaberry who are enrolled in The Open University.

Mr S Anderson:

That is where I am coming from. Those opportunities exist at the minute, and no doubt they will do so in future. Is this an expansion of your budget? Will it cost more?

Mr Murray:

No. We hope to do this, at the very least, within existing resources. We have quite a generous budget for learning and skills; it is upwards of £5 million. We think that we can be smarter and better in how we deploy that money.

Mr S Anderson:

I want to ask about placements outside prison. We keep coming back to the economic climate; we do not know when it will improve. Will that affect your plans for the future, and for getting placements in firms and getting employers to accept work-experience candidates?

Mr Murray:

I have met Business in the Community, which has a strand of work that looks at addressing offending and reducing it, on several occasions. Business in the Community says that it is committed to ensuring that all the organisations and companies that are aligned with it will support and help us in giving prisoners jobs.

There is no doubt about it: you could not launch an employability strategy under worse circumstances. We would not want to start from this position, but we are where we are. One

thing we know clearly: employment has to be a key consideration in helping prisoners who leave prison to cope better when they are in the community. Therefore it is a challenge that we have to meet. It is laudable that, through the NIACRO programme, we are getting one in four prisoners on release to go through their programme in employment, particularly in the current climate. It can be done; we will just have to work at it.

Mr McNaught:

The strategy does not aim to guarantee employment when people leave custody but to equip them at that point with the best chance of competing for jobs in the market. No doubt that is very challenging at the moment. However, we work with NIACRO, Business in the Community and other employer organisations that we know to be looking for skills. We engage with sector skills councils, and there are opportunities out there for people. Our position is to equip prisoners when they leave with skills to compete in the market place. As Max said, we are looking at whether the services that we provide are relevant in that market.

Mr McCartney:

You have a "social firm initiative". What is your definition of a social firm? In reading this, I noticed reference to printing facilities in Magilligan. Is that the type of thing you are talking about?

Mr Murray:

It is trying to set some of our workshops on a more business-like approach. I worked for Belmarsh Prison in London for some years, and it had firms coming in to do basic assembly jobs, such as assembling tail lights, for example.

Mr McCartney:

In the prison?

Mr Murray:

Yes; although I am not saying that we will get there immediately. In the current climate, we have to be cautious about how we move that forward; however, there are opportunities for putting some of our workshops on a more permanent footing than they are at present.

Mr McNaught:

That is exactly so. A social firm tries to provide opportunities for disadvantaged employment groups and reinvest any profits in the business to expand it, thereby increasing opportunities for work experience.

Mr McCartney:

It could be a priority for the Department of Justice that the next Programme for Government be printed in Magilligan.

Mr Murray:

I will leave you to take that up in other quarters.

The Chairperson:

We have no more questions from members. The report is to go out for consultation; when it does so, have you prepared a communication strategy for a public backlash to it? People will say that money is spent on prisoners but that the general public do not get such treatment. Are you ready for that?

Mr Murray:

We are as ready as we are going to be. In fairness, Mr Chairman, we already get that in some ways. We are ready for that backlash.

The difficulty is trying to get our message across; that is one of the reasons why it is important to come to this forum and talk through some of the issues around offender management. There is a misunderstanding in the community that doing something like this is, in some ways, a luxury for prisoners. It is not: it is a necessity. The pathways, for example, were established through significant research that showed what you should do to address offender behaviour for individuals when they go into prison. In the new year, we will look at the desistance model, which is now included in the PRT report, because it shifts the emphasis from the pathways approach of doing it to them to doing it with them. The individual has to change. However, you have to provide the mechanism by which that person can think and work through the change process. If you lock them behind a cell door, you will always get what you have always got. Therefore, I am committed and convinced that this is the way forward. We must change, and we must offer those opportunities. The difficulty is getting that message across.

The Chairperson:

It certainly is a challenge. Thank you very much.