

Reset: An Opportunity to Enhance Offender Resettlement and Rehabilitation through Mentoring

Stephen Hamilton*

Summary: Reset, also known as the Intensive Resettlement and Rehabilitation Project, is a paid mentoring scheme for prisoners leaving custody introduced by the Probation Board of Northern Ireland in March 2014 and funded through the Northern Ireland Executive Change Fund. The mentoring service, which is delivered by NIACRO, supports the work of Probation Officers and specifically assists mentees at the critical stage of transition from custody to the community. It offers practical support, bespoke to each mentee, supporting an explicit desistance approach. This paper describes the development of Reset and its implementation in Northern Ireland from 1 March 2015 to 31 March 2016, and outlines the results of an independent evaluation carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Keywords: Imprisonment, releases, resettlement, rehabilitation, mentoring, community service, reparation, victim needs, probation, prison, Northern Ireland.

Background

Leaving prison and the transition to resettlement is a critical point in a prisoner's life. We know that a significant proportion of prisoners released are recalled to custody either as a consequence of failing to comply with the supervisory requirements of release or because of reoffending, and this often happens within the first three months of release (Department of Justice, 2015a). According to the Department of Justice Offender Recall Unit, 197 recalls to prison were made in 2013 and 187 in 2014. There is a significant financial cost and pressure to the criminal justice system when people fail to comply with court orders, but more importantly there is a human cost when mentees go on to reoffend.

* Stephen Hamilton is Assistant Director in the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, with lead responsibility for the Intensive Resettlement and Rehabilitation Project (RESET). Email: Stephen.Hamilton@pbni.gsi.gov.uk

Development of Reset

The Probation Board of Northern Ireland (PBNI) is the statutory organisation that works at every stage of the criminal justice process: at court, in custody, in the community and with victims of crime. Every Probation Officer in Northern Ireland is a social worker, professionally qualified and trained in risk assessment and risk management. Raynor and Vanstone (2015) and Doran and Cooper (2008) show how having professionally qualified staff is an important reason why Probation is so effective in rehabilitating mentees, holding them to account and helping them change their lives. The unique skill and value that Probation Officers bring to the criminal justice system is their ability to engage positively with mentees, thereby supporting their desistance from crime. PBNI has a long history of working in partnership with the criminal justice organisations and community and voluntary sector to assist in changing lives for safer communities.

Desistance theory emphasises the need for a dynamic, person-centred approach to supervise and support individuals who have offended. The challenge of the desistance journey is one that transcends the boundaries of criminal justice institutions and organisations, incorporating the need to support and repair relationships within families, communities and society. Maturity, building social bonds/capital and the development of a crime-free identity are important parts of desistance (Maguire and Raynor, 2007; McNeill and Whyte, 2007).

PBNI had been exploring ways in which it could enhance prisoner rehabilitation and resettlement. It was clear that there was a need for further support to prisoners from the moment they left the prison gate to prevent reoffending and assist in rehabilitation. Evidence suggests that individuals are less likely to reoffend if they can access appropriate, practical support and develop pro-social bonds. Lewis *et al.* (2007) found that positive results regarding attitudes to crime and reconviction rates support the suggestion that pre-release work by professionals trained to address thinking skills and practical problems may be central to resettlement. Desistance research acknowledges generating and sustaining motivation as vital to the process of change and it may be that, along with assistance to resolve practical problems, the relationships noted above play a key role (Maguire and Raynor, 2006; McNeill and Whyte, 2007).

PBNI sought to explore ways in which practical support could be delivered to assist in the desistance journey. At the same time the Department of Justice was consulting on its 'Supporting Change: A Strategic Approach to Desistance' document. This document, published in September 2015, has the objective 'To provide focused support of individuals in the criminal justice system increasing the likelihood of living a life free from further offending'. It states that it is recognised that continuity of care and practical support are two key issues that affect the process of desistance. The process of resettlement from prison and through care support for individuals returning to the community was identified by those consulted as being particularly important.

It was against this background that an application was made to the Northern Ireland Executive Change Fund – a fund set up to deliver new initiatives with a preventative focus which will contribute to longer term savings to the public purse. The application was successful, and PBNI was awarded £472,000 to pilot the Reset project. PBNI then carried out a competitive tender process, and NIACRO was appointed to provide the mentors.

The primary objectives of the Reset programme were defined as:

- reducing the number of recalls to prison in the first 12 weeks following the release from custody of prisoners who PBNI assessed as a medium or high risk of reoffending through the Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation (ACE¹) score
- reducing the ACE scores of participants
- improving mentee outcomes in relation to accommodation, employment, training/work experience, self-esteem/confidence and social/family integration.

In the bidding process assumptions were made about the criteria for the scheme, with initial numbers seeming to restrict the scheme to high-risk male mentees. However, due to lower prison numbers than predicted, a case was made, and accepted, to extend the criteria to include all men and women leaving prison, on post-custody supervision, who are assessed as having a high or a medium likelihood of reoffending. The mentoring relationship commenced four weeks prior to their leaving custody and continued for a maximum of 12 weeks after release.

¹ ACE Risk Assessment Instrument. For more information see Cooper and Whitten (2013).

The appointment of the Reset partner, NIACRO,² was managed through the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) during April 2015. NIACRO then, in an impressive turnaround time, conducted a recruitment process for the seven mentors. NIACRO's bid design also incorporated a part-time post for specialist benefits and debt advice and the equivalent of one subcontracted post with Housing Rights, another community voluntary sector organisation, which focused specifically on accommodation support needs.

PBNI retained funds for an Area Manager to project manage the initiative, which proved to be an essential resource, not least for the intense level of communications required with a wide range of stakeholders, and also to undertake the work required to develop the range of new processes to support NIACRO in the operation of the project. Funds were set aside for evaluation and data collection, which included an interim report and a final report by NISRA (NISRA, 2015).³ This paper references the interim evaluation, with the final report due for publication in 2016.

Mentoring

Reset commenced operationally in mid-June 2015, working with those due for release from 1 July 2015, and aiming to work with approximately 200 mentees throughout the year. In order to assist voluntary take-up of this project, mentors approached all those who met the project criteria in prison, to encourage engagement. NIACRO had structured its staffing so that each of the three prison establishments in Northern Ireland had a mentor who formally spent part of their time each week physically based in a prison. This was key to the high uptake levels.

Mentors met the consenting mentees on their day of release, and supported them during their first day out. They saw them on a daily basis for the first week, and if required for longer, to provide practical support related to the personal and social factors identified by their Probation Officer (PO). This has included sourcing and maintaining accommodation for homeless mentees, accompanying them to resettlement appointments, and providing social access support to help keep them free from offending. The support lasted a maximum of 12 weeks.

² NIACRO is a charitable company limited by guarantee which has been working for more than 40 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities (<http://www.niacro.co.uk>).

³ NISRA: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (<http://www.nisra.gov.uk/>).

Evaluation of RESET

The interim evaluation by NISRA of Reset involved an analysis of the data recorded in the Probation Board Management Information database (PIMS), data logs the mentors completed each time they met with their mentees, and mentee questionnaires administered at the start and end of the programme. In addition, interviews were held with stakeholders and randomly selected mentees, and input from mentors was gathered through focus groups, telephone interviews and mentor case closure questionnaires. Due to timing constraints the interim evaluation covered the operational period until the end of October 2015. A final evaluation report will be completed by NISRA and will be publicly available when published.

From 1 July to 31 October 2015, 160 eligible individuals were offered a place on the Reset programme, 98 of whom agreed to take part. By 31 October 73 were engaged, post-release, in Reset, 18 had successfully completed the programme, and seven had been recalled to prison, either for non-compliance with licence conditions or for further offending. Over half (54%) of the Reset mentees were aged 30 and over. In terms of ACE score, just under three-quarters were assessed as having a high likelihood of reoffending and the remainder as having a medium likelihood. Just under one-fifth of mentees were considered a significant risk of serious harm to others (ROSH) and 16% were part of the Reducing Offending in Partnership (ROP) initiative (Doherty and Dennison, 2013). The majority of mentees were subject to determinate custodial sentences (DCSs).

The interim evaluation showed that both mentors and stakeholders felt that the intensive support provided by Reset positively complemented the Probation Officer role, particularly during the first week post-release when basics such as accommodation, health care and finances were being put in place, and was highly beneficial to mentees. The project was seen as especially important for those who were high risk, ROSH or sex offenders, and those who had no other support. The through-the-gate model was seen to reduce anxiety and, while other programmes were available, the fact that Reset was 'a voluntary open offer of help' made it highly effective. In addition, close working with PBNI and the Probation Officer's case management role including establishing an initial tripartite was seen as critical.

In terms of benefits to mentees, stakeholders noted:

- the valuable role that mentors have had with mentees also known to PSNI⁴ ROP teams
- interviewees generally felt that the right mentees were being targeted
- tailored support, especially in those early days, to meet mentee needs
- also valuable for mentees who have lost all support in the community or whose family/friends have turned their back on them – someone for both practical help and emotional support.

Mentees themselves reported that the main reasons for participating in Reset were support and practical help. They identified a range of challenges they faced following release from custody including accommodation, health care (particularly mental health), benefits, keeping appointments, bureaucracy, substance abuse and addictions, and others' perceptions. Several mentees said that without Reset they would have found these challenges difficult to cope with, and many said they would have preferred the scheme to last longer than 12 weeks post-release.

The application for Reset funding was based on a recall rate of 28% DCSs and 72% extended custodial sentences (ECSs). Of the 98 Reset participants, there were seven recalls to prison, two of which were ECS and five of which were DCS cases. Of the total Reset cases this equates to 20% recall in ECS cases and 7% in DCS. While the report cautioned that it would not be appropriate to fully calculate and compare recall rates at this early stage, nevertheless 'feedback from stakeholders would suggest that this number of recalls supports the indication of a reduction'.

In addition, some stakeholders informed the researchers that while recalls had occurred, they felt that in some instances they would have happened sooner in the absence of the programme. Probation Officers also commented that recall should not be seen as a definition of failure, as in some cases it is entirely appropriate and unavoidable for public protection reasons. Mentees, mentors and stakeholders all reported that progress was being made in keeping mentees from reoffending and preventing avoidable returns to prison.

Mentees exiting Reset were asked to write three words describing their experience of the programme. The words used most often were: 'helpful, supportive, good'. The researchers concluded that 'the qualitative and quantitative evidence highlighted in this interim evaluation provide an early indication that Reset is making good progress towards meeting its

⁴ Police Service of Northern Ireland (<https://www.psni.police.uk>).

objectives. The costs incurred by NIPS [Northern Ireland Prison Service] and the wider Criminal Justice system could potentially be reduced if progress continues and the level of recalls to prison are significantly reduced.'

Conclusion

The project was very positively endorsed by the Northern Ireland Minister for Justice in his address to the Public Protection Advisory Group in Belfast City Hall on 20 November 2015 (Donnellan and McCaughey, 2010). It fits within the spirit of the NI Executive's Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending (Department of Justice, 2013), along with current Programme for Government aims (Northern Ireland Executive, 2012). It is consistent with a number of recommendations in the Owers Review of prisons (Department of Justice, 2011), the desistance work being led by the Reducing Offending Directorate and the Prison Population Review (NIPS, 2014), which highlighted the high number of recalls as a concern. It also supports the positive resettlement findings highlighted in recent Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) prisons inspection reports (CJINI, 2015a, 2015b). At the time of writing the hope, backed by evidence, is that funding can be found to enable extension of this innovative programme, which has the potential to generate savings across the criminal justice sector.

The project is perhaps best summed up in the words of one of the mentees. Simon spent ten months in custody and was released on licence. He was one of the first offenders to be supervised through the new Reset mentoring project, and when asked about it he said:

When I came out of prison I was really worried about not being able to find employment. My mentor was William and he has been very supportive in helping me take steps back into employment. He helped me write a disclosure letter to future employers, which is something I was really concerned about. He has also helped me access training and write a CV. William also works closely with my Probation Officer which was important. I have no doubt that Reset will help me stay out of custody. When you surround yourself with positive people it gives you a more positive outlook. This project is fantastic. The support and encouragement I have received has been so important. I won't be going back to custody. I am determined to stay away from crime. I would go as far as to say Reset has been life changing for me.

References

- Cooper, L. and Whitten, I. (2013), 'Assessing ACE: The Probation Board's use of risk assessment tools to reduce reoffending', *Irish Probation Journal*, vol. 10, pp. 193–202
- Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (2015a), *Report on an Unannounced Inspection of Magilligan Prison 27 May – 5 June 2014*, Belfast: CJINI, available at <http://www.cjini.org/getattachment/0f140040-436c-4d56-9a81-7bcc35fc5c90/picture.aspx> (accessed 15 July 2016)
- Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (2015b), *Report on an Unannounced Inspection of Maghaberry Prison 11–22 May 2015*, Belfast: CJINI, available at http://www.rqia.org.uk/cms_resources/Maghaberry%20%20Prison%20Unannounced%20Inspection%20May%2015.pdf (accessed 15 July 2016)
- Department of Justice (2011), *Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service*, Belfast: Department of Justice, available at <https://www.dojni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/owers-review-of-the-northern-ireland-prison-service.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2016)
- Department of Justice (2013), *Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending: Towards a Safer Society*, Belfast: Department of Justice, available at <https://www.dojni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/doj-strategic-reducing-offending-framework.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2016)
- Department of Justice (2015a), *Research and Statistical Bulletin 18/2015 The Northern Ireland Prison Population 2014 and 2014/15*, available at <https://www.dojni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/northern-ireland-prison-population-2014-and-2014-15.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2016)
- Department of Justice (2015b), *Supporting Change: A Strategic Approach to Desistance*, Belfast: Department of Justice, available at <https://www.dojni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/supporting-change-a-strategic-approach-to-desistance.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2016)
- Doherty, T. and Dennison, M. (2013), 'Reducing offending in partnership', *Irish Probation Journal*, vol. 10, pp. 154–161
- Donnellan, M. and McCaughey, B. (2010), 'The Public Protection Advisory Group: A model for structured co-operation', *Irish Probation Journal*, vol. 7, pp. 6–14
- Doran, P. and Cooper, L. (2008), 'Social work: The core qualification of Probation Officers in Northern Ireland', *Irish Probation Journal*, vol. 5, pp. 23–35
- Lewis, S., Maguire, M., Raynor, P., Vanstone, M. and Vennard, J. (2007), 'What works in resettlement? Findings from seven Pathfinders for short-term prisoners in England and Wales', *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 7, pp. 33–53
- Maguire, M. and Raynor, P. (2007), 'How the resettlement of prisoners promotes desistance from crime: Or does it?', *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 19–38
- McNeill, F. and Whyte, B. (2007), *Reducing Reoffending: Social Work and Community Justice in Scotland*, Cullompton, UK: Willan
- NISRA (2015), *Interim Review of the Reset Mentoring Programme November 2015* (unpublished)

- Northern Ireland Executive (2012), *Programme for Government 2011–15: Building a Better Future*, Belfast: NIE, available at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000505198> (accessed 16 July 2016)
- Northern Ireland Prison Service (2014), *Prison Population Review: A Review of the Factors Leading to the Growth in Prisoner Numbers between 2009 and 2013*, Belfast: NIPS Internal Report
- Raynor, P. and Vanstone, M. (2015), 'Moving away from social work and half way back again: New research on skills in probation', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 1131–1147