

**3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Criminal Justice Agencies Conference,  
Dublin Castle – 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016**

***Evidence-Informed Decision Making: Putting Research into Practice  
in Criminal Justice***

**Opening Comments by Vivian Geiran, Probation Service Director**

Members of the Judiciary, Secretary General of the Department of Justice and Equality, distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentleman, I am delighted to welcome you all here, to Dublin Castle, today – for the third Annual Criminal Justice Agencies Conference, on the theme: *Evidence - Informed Decision-Making: Putting Research into Practice in Criminal Justice*. I am particularly delighted to welcome some colleagues and friends from abroad today – specifically: Directors of Probation in Northern Ireland (Cheryl Lamont), Guernsey (Anna Guilbert) and Jersey (Brian Heath). This is, I believe, a landmark event in the developing engagement between the Department of Justice and Equality, the wider family of Justice agencies and the academic and research community.

I would like to thank the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development (the ACJRD), the Department of Justice and Equality, colleagues in the other criminal justice agencies, as well as academic and research colleagues, for their support and encouragement in developing this practice-research engagement, and in growing this partnership as a real priority, as well as ensuring that this Conference has become a reality.

Today's Conference brings together key criminal justice bodies, with researchers and important figures from the academic community in Ireland and internationally, to develop the engagement between us all, to *further* enhance the already strengthening relationship between research academia and practice in criminal justice. It is an opportunity to share knowledge and expertise and to improve the knowledge base and services for the benefit of all, not only in the Republic but also on the island of Ireland, and elsewhere.

But, why bother? *Why* is it so important to make the link – and develop that link and engagement – between research and practice, and to put what we learn from research, into practice? Well, while research for its own sake is always interesting, and to be valued, there are other reasons we should do it: including to inform our stakeholders on how we are doing, and to develop policies that are evidence-informed. I believe though, that its real added value is when it helps those of us delivering public services to do our jobs better; not just do them *well*, not even just do them *better*; but to be the very *best* we can be. Our communities, and our service users, deserve no less. I do recognise that not every aspect of the value we add to the lives of individuals and of communities, can be easily measured. Nevertheless, much of the outcomes of our work *can* be measured and we must ensure that we do so. We must evaluate what *can* be evaluated, while part of our task is to find creative and realistic ways of assessing the 'harder to reach' areas of the impact of our services.

A commitment to research and evaluation helps an organisation to improve its operations and services, and to ensure it can maintain its ability to continually address new challenges, and explore new opportunities, as well as address gaps and continually improve performance and the contribution that each individual member of staff can make. The Department of Justice and Equality, and its agencies, recognise that imperative, and we are committed to improving the knowledge and data systems, and accessibility to them, to enable and support data analysis, research, and the service development it enables.

Arising from the findings of the review of the Department of Justice and Equality, the so-called 'Toland' report, and more particularly from the recommendations of the Report on the Strategic Review of Penal Policy, published in 2014 by Minister Frances Fitzgerald TD, the Department of Justice and Equality has identified data, information and research as a key area in which the Department and its agencies must build capacity and capability. I, as a member of the Department's Management Board, have been tasked with chairing a cross-agency working group on Justice data and systems interoperability. That group, with representatives from the relevant justice agencies and units within the Department itself, has been working for some months now and making good progress, in capturing and linking existing data sources, identifying priority areas and projects for development, and facilitating collaboration in operational system connectivity – to enable joined-up service delivery – and research. You will have an opportunity to hear more about aspects of this work over the course of today.

The Probation Service, in common with other Justice agencies, is committed to deliver high quality services, to learn from experience *and* evaluation, and to constantly improve performance, informed by research evidence and, in turn, practice development. We acknowledge, as part of that commitment, that robust and credible research and evaluation is necessary both as a measure of best practice in quality professional service delivery, and also in developing and providing a strong evidence base in turn, for that practice.

Probation Service staff, service users, and other stakeholders, whether Courts, other criminal justice agencies, government, communities, the general public or persons engaged with the Probation Service, expect services with an assurance of quality, and to be accountable. Research and evaluation conducted by researchers, both as part of their academic development and during their subsequent careers, represent an important contribution to that critical process and the developments arising.

The Probation Service has worked consistently over recent years to refine data management systems and processes to provide important information and data for analysis, in a timely and user-friendly way. In Probation, Prisons, and more widely in the Justice system, we are wholehearted in our commitment to support research and evaluation in our work and new developments. In the Justice family of organisations, there is a shared focus on promoting research and supporting researchers, including student researchers, and the more established academic community, in studies and reviews of the operations of

the criminal justice system; all in pursuit of better and more effective actions and outcomes for all concerned.

We welcome proposals for research and, when funding is available, commission research studies. As our economy recovers and finances strengthen, I look forward to the Probation Service, and the wider Justice sector, commissioning new research studies in the near future.

This year the Probation and Prison Services are hosting and facilitating PhD candidates and Masters' students in their research projects as well as studies by academics and graduates on a range of important and valuable issues. Later this Summer we hope to invite applications to conduct commissioned research and evaluation studies on specific matters of interest and relevance to our work, particularly themes and issues in cross-cutting areas, for example, prisoner resettlement and offending by women.

The Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service have an established and very important research co-operation agreement with the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the preparation of recidivism studies. Studies have now been published for 2007, 2008 and 2009. Further studies will be published this year and it is hoped to continue to develop and expand this data reporting and analysis in the coming years. The Central Statistics Office have a uniquely valuable role to play in relation to data analysis and research in Ireland, and we are delighted to have the ongoing opportunity to work with them.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the important role that the *Irish Probation Journal* has played since its inception in 2004 in publishing new articles and studies by young researchers and established academics on criminal justice topics and issues. The *Irish Probation Journal* was established as a cross-border partnership by the Probation Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and has been published annually for the past twelve years. The 2016 edition will be published this coming November. It will be available free online, as all previous editions are, on the Irish probation Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland websites.

It is not only important that research and evaluation is carried out, but also that it is published and shared, to increase our knowledge and to be tested further. Research reports must not just be 'us' talking to ourselves. Published research has a huge role to play in informing our stakeholders and citizens generally about how we are doing, and in contributing to penal policy debate. The *Irish Probation Journal* provides just one such forum for debate and dialogue, and promotes the sharing of good practice, and plays an important role in stimulating innovative thinking. It also provides a valuable peer-reviewed opportunity for academics, researchers and practitioners to present their knowledge, research findings and examples of better practice to a wide readership. In addition, the Journal offers a forum for continuous learning and development not only for authors and readers within the two probation services, but also for the wider criminal justice readership; international colleagues and beyond.

The Journal is, at the moment, one of the few publications in Ireland for criminological studies and articles. While I am proud of the ground-breaking role that the Journal has played thus far, I will look forward to the development of more journals and publications in Ireland, featuring serious criminal justice studies and commentaries.

I want to thank ACJRD for their work in the organisation of this conference. The ACJRD, of course, has a longstanding commitment to research and development in criminal justice in Ireland – since long before it was popular or profitable! This year, ACJRD nears the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its establishment – by a visionary group who saw, even then, the importance of research and how it can impact on policy and practice development. One of the key factors in the success and the longevity that ACJRD has enjoyed has been its interagency and multi-disciplinary nature: it really has worked hard to include all key stakeholder interests; and done so successfully. Today's organisers have put together a really exciting and energising programme, featuring some of the best Irish and international experts.

I look forward to today's plenary papers, to the workshops, and most of all to the entire collective engagement that all of you have to make to today's event and what we can benefit and gain from it.

Thank you.

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