

Strengthening Family Relations 2019-2024

A Consultation on a new Strengthening Family Relations Strategy for Northern Ireland

Summary of Responses

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1. Introduction

1.1 This document provides a summary of responses received to ‘Strengthening Family Relations’, the Northern Ireland Prison Service’s (NIPS) consultation on a new draft strategy to improve the outcomes for people in our care and their families in Northern Ireland.

1.2 The strategy builds upon the previous [Family Strategy 2010](#) which recognised the important contribution that families make in supporting their loved ones on their rehabilitation. A considerable period of time has passed since the last strategy and, in keeping with the [Prisons 2020](#) family engagement commitment to have strengthened family ties with people in our care in recognition of the critical role they play in reducing re-offending, renewed focus was given to the development of the new strategy in 2018. The purpose of this strategy is to influence and enhance current and developing plans in order to generate better overall outcomes for those in our care and their families. In essence we are seeking to ensure that strengthening family relationships is mainstreamed in our work with individuals in the same way as employment and education.

1.3 During the early stages of development the views of key internal stakeholders, including people in our care, were sought. External stakeholders were engaged when the consultation launched on 21 February 2019, closing on 22 April 2019. The public consultation was also issued directly to 37 external key stakeholders for comment. 13 written responses were received and a number of these captured and reflected views expressed at consultation events, facilitated by delivery partners. Comments from a further consultation event were also considered. Two responses were received after the deadline, which were accepted due to the fact the deadline fell over the Easter period. A full list of consultation respondents is attached at Annex A.

1.4 This consultation response document outlines the key themes and issues that arose from the responses received to the public consultation, and summarises the responses to the questions asked in relation to: the overall outcome of the strategic

approach (in particular family engagement) should lead to positive outcomes for people in our care and helping rehabilitation; current processes and procedures; principles; themes; priorities; working with partner organisations; and a range of additional comments.

1.5 Some common threads throughout the responses include:

- the recognition of the needs of adult family members, including spouses and partners;
- the delivery of dedicated training for new and existing staff;
- the need for a dedicated Families Team and access to Family Officers;
- the need for a finance and resource commitment to enable implementation of actions flowing from the strategy;
- the use of technology to promote and enhance family contact outside of visiting times;
- the establishment of a family forum or family peer support structure; and,
- suggested operational improvements.

1.6 Consultees were asked to respond to nine specific questions. Although this was the preferred method for response to the consultation, a significant proportion of responses were made in alternative formats.

1.7 The following sections provide an overview of the key issues raised during the consultation process and highlight the key themes with regard to the questions posed, as well as a summary of the additional comments.

1.8 To ensure transparency we have published copies of the written responses on the Departmental website with this report. Some responses have been anonymised.

2. Summary of Consultation Responses

2.1 It is worth noting that this summary does not reflect each and every view on all of the issues, but seeks to highlight the key themes identified under each question. As comments were received, not specific to the questions asked, a summary is provided in this section.

2.2 Responses on the whole supported and welcomed the proposed strategy and the commitments outlined in the document. The tone of each response was positive. In particular, the broad definition of the family was well received and the recognition that each family is unique. Some respondents acknowledged the document's reference to the fact that some family relationships can be harmful (one respondent highlighted that if a partner is responsible for domestic abuse, then maintaining this connection will not help desistance from future offending or help support the person in custody).

2.3 A range of constructive comments were received. Most responses related to phrasing, inserting additional words and rewording to demonstrate a strengthening of commitment. Not all of the requests are reflected in this document; however, they will be considered and addressed during the re-drafting and implementation of the strategy.

2.4 Some comments sought clarity on aspects such as delivery and implementation. Several respondents asked for reassurance that the strategy will be adequately financed and resourced, with an accompanying time bound, costed action plan. A comment received suggested that one of the themes was particularly ambitious (*Families are Safe and Well*), given that some of the responsibility for this lies outside of NIPS. The same respondent suggested splitting the actions under each of the themes to determine which can be implemented quickly and which need further consideration.

2.5 Respondents acknowledged that as an organisation, NIPS had changed and the strategy is seen as an opportunity to build on the good work already being

undertaken. Many respondents commended NIPS for the on-going work they have already been engaged in with families. Programmes delivered by partners such as Families Matter, Family Links, CHIP, Parenting Matters and Aspire were referenced.

2.6 Prison staff were also praised for their compassion and help by one respondent; however, in contrast, several comments were noted about prison staff's lack of patience, understanding and respect for families. Several suggested that new and existing staff undertake ongoing training to reflect the role NIPS has in relation to embedding the focus of this strategy, strengthening family relationships.

2.7 Some responses from the voluntary and community sector stated they are happy to engage further with NIPS to share their knowledge and support NIPS in its endeavour to become trauma informed. Some also highlighted in their responses their role in delivering programmes to enhance family relationships, such as those listed above.

2.8 Many operational and practical suggestions were received to strengthen family relations. These were considered within the strategy commitments and those out of scope were shared with operational colleagues. The enhanced use of technology featured a great deal across a number of responses, with one respondent stating that technology should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat, so long as risk is properly managed. It was suggested that technology could be used more effectively to inform visitors about the suite of programmes available to their loved ones, for instance by way of a website or social media. In addition, it was recommended that technology should be used to promote contact outside of visiting times - comments received call for the widespread use of video calls such as Skype.

2.9 Other operational comments relate to visits, for example; request for longer visits and more child/family centred visits; inability to access a visit or not permitted a full visit if public transport delayed; the conditions of waiting areas and the facilities in the visiting halls (e.g., lack of toilet/baby changing facility, uncomfortable seating not suitable for those with mobility issues and the increased distance from a loved one make it difficult to hear and participate in conversation). One comment stated that some policies actively work against family contact, such as not allowing split visits or

the rules about access to the family room or caravan at Hydebank Wood. The following issues were also raised: ensuring better transport; ensuring the visiting rules are clearly displayed and are consistent; and better induction sessions (especially at Maghaberry) to include meeting dogs and dog handlers.

Support for families

2.10 Support for families was a theme which frequently arose. Respondents recognised that families need support in order to, in turn, support their loved ones. Suggestions were made for a family peer support group, to provide an opportunity to share experiences and receive advice, support and guidance, which can encourage continued contact with a loved one in prison. The establishment of a consultative family forum (which could be used prior to the implementation of new procedures) was also proposed. It was also recommended that peer mentors within prison are used to provide support to maintain family contact. In addition to peer support, recommendations were made to establish a family support team within the prison and for family officers to be more visible, particularly during visiting times. It was hoped the additional support for families would also allow for families to be more involved in the rehabilitation of their loved ones.

2.11 On a few occasions reference was made to considering the needs of all family members, including parents, partners and spouses. It was felt that the document does not weight importance on the relationship of the couple, as a foundation to the wider family relationship, where a stressed couple relationship can serve as a significant barrier to strengthening wider family relationships.

2.12 A respondent suggested a whole system approach should be applied, by broadening the scope of the strategy to become a Department of Justice-wide approach to ensuring a more universal and consistent attitude to strengthening families across the justice system. It was also suggested that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland should be recognised as a key partner with NIPS in the final strategy. Another respondent saw the strategy as an opportunity for the Department to lead on a justice-wide children and family reference group.

2.13 Many respondents pointed to research such as the [Lord Farmer Review 2017](#) and papers published by academics at Queen's University Belfast and the University of Edinburgh on strengthening family relations; examining disparities in prisoner outcomes; designing prison-based parenting programmes; and allowing imprisoned fathers to parent. A comment was received acknowledging the document's reference to Lord Farmer's concept that good family relationships must be a golden thread running through the processes of all prisons.

3. Responses to Individual Consultation Questions

3.1 The summary below outlines the key themes arising from the specific questions asked within the consultation document. It should be noted that some issues were raised in more than one section of the consultation questionnaire, and may be relevant to strands of the strategy. Therefore in order to ensure that we accurately reflect the issues raised within each strand, there may be some duplication in the content of the key themes.

Q1) Do you agree that positive relationships and family contact are important factors in influencing how people cope with imprisonment and their reintegration and rehabilitation upon release?

3.2 The majority of responses agreed with this statement, with one respondent suggesting that a change in language in the strategy could demonstrate a stronger commitment to the value placed on family relationships, by replacing the word 'important' in this statement, with the word 'critical'. It is suggested that a stronger commitment would be in line with the Lord Farmer's 2017 report on the importance of strengthening family ties.

3.3 It was noted in a response that positive relationships have wider benefits, not just for the person imprisoned, but also for the family and in particular, children.

Q2) Do you agree that the overall outcome of the strategic approach to strengthening family relations should seek to support and encourage family engagement, leading to positive outcomes for people in our care?

3.4 There was overwhelming support for the overall outcome. Again, it was noted that there are positive outcomes for both the person in our care and their family.

3.5 In response to this question, reference was made to Lord Farmer's 2017 report, calling for NIPS to remain cognisant of the inter-relationship between the three legs of education, employment and good family relationships.

3.6 It was highlighted that the positive prosocial attributes developed as a result of positive family relationships will reduce the likelihood of homelessness, family breakdown and repetitive patterns of offending, however families will need support to enable them to do this.

3.7 A common theme that arose throughout responses was that of resources, and it was recommended for the new strategy to be resourced as an essential component of NIPS strategic and operational corporate plans.

3.8 Although agreeing with the statement, one response called for NIPS to deepen its consideration of family support and engagement, to recognise the person in custody as a family member, rather than someone who has a family.

Q3) To what extent do you think the current NIPS processes and procedures facilitate quality family engagement and what improvements could be made?

3.9 Considerable comments were received in relation to operational matters, some more detailed than others. Some responses commended the quality of engagement and improvements made, whilst also providing constructive suggestions for change, to enhance quality family engagement.

3.10 An example provided of how processes and procedures facilitate quality engagement is the family induction to visits, including a tour with the option of a visit with their loved one in Hydebank Wood College. In contrast, the experience for families in Maghaberry is very different, where the provision of induction is not consistent and does not appear to have a regular schedule of dates available.

3.11 It was also suggested that quality family engagement could be enhanced by improvement in:

- Communication and information sharing
- Family involvement in Personal Development Plans
- Visits – visiting experience, Child Centred Visits and booking visits

- Family Support
- Staff training
- Transport
- Phones / technology

3.12 One response stated that without a full understanding of current NIPS family processes and procedures, it is impossible to answer this question. The same respondent suggested NIPS should undertake a trauma informed review of the effectiveness of the family care system.

3.13 A request was made that families should be consulted about policies/procedures/decisions relevant to family contact, prior to implementation.

Q4) Do you agree with the principles outlined which will underpin the strategic approach to strengthening family relations?

3.14 There was resounding support for the principles outlined in the consultation document. To further strengthen the principles, some amendments and additions to the wording under each principle were suggested by two respondents. One response stated it would like to see how NIPS anticipates these principles taking root in action.

3.15 In relation to the principle “*The best interests of children are paramount to any decision making*”, one respondent stated that although they agreed with the statement, it was also important to be aware of and responsive to the needs of adult family members, particularly for those who do not have children. (The needs of adult family members and partners / spouses have been raised by several respondents generally).

3.16 Comments received from the consultation events with families agreed with the principles that will underpin the new strategic approach, however, they indicated that at present, NIPS do not adopt all the principles outlined. They specifically referred to the principle that “*Family members should be treated with fairness, dignity and*

respect”, as they felt this wasn’t always shown by prison staff (although some family members commended prison staff).

3.17 A comment was received advocating the merits of a strengths based and pro social frame of reference with regards to the work envisaged in the suggested approach.

Q5) Would you like to see additional principles applied?

3.18 In response to this question, suggestions were received to revise the wording of two principles, as well as a request to move the principle about the interests of children to the top of the list, so it provides the focus for the other supporting principles.

3.19 A number of additional principles were suggested:

- Families are supported to enable them to build the capacity, strength and resilience to support the prisoner;
- Strengthening Family Relations is central to successful rehabilitation of people in our care and to promoting community safety. Partnership working with families is recognised as equal to education and employment, the other two rehabilitation activities. It is positive family relations that bring stability and structure to prisoners’ lives, particularly when they leave prison.
- A principle to reflect a commitment to facilitating family engagement, including recognising different family needs, and removing barriers or obstacles to contact and engagement with planning. This would include facilitating visiting times outside of school hours, ensuring visiting environments are family friendly, and that the impact of security decisions on visiting families are considered and communicated.

Q6) Do you agree with the outcomes / themes outlined?

3.20 Generally, most responses agreed with the themes and outcomes as per the consultation document, however, some commented on how they will be challenging for NIPS to implement.

3.21 One response suggested aligning the outcomes featured within the themes under several subheadings: NIPS; people in NIPS care; family members; and the whole family unit. They made the point that separating out desired outcomes for particular groupings may also help to prioritise which outcomes are realistic (and within the remit of NIPS), which require a partnership approach, and which may be considered to be beyond the sphere of influence by NIPS. In addition, it was suggested that the actions should be split into those that can be put in place quickly and easily; and those which are aspirational and will require specific further actions to be identified over time.

3.22 It was also suggested that a number of actions and factors under the themes may require further exploration, including:

- Person in prison as family member;
- Adult family members;
- Families and children who do not visit the prison;
- Family members of those on remand;
- The specific needs of women and also of younger people in prison;
- Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Families; and
- Families feeling included in safer custody.

3.23 There were suggested changes to wording, along with additional factors to be considered under each theme, some of which are operational measures, such as the following:

Theme 1 - Family Contact

- It was noted that the diagram under this theme does not acknowledge the contribution that NIPS partners make to providing support.

- It was recommended that this theme is supported by investment in both infrastructure (technology and visiting space) to facilitate better contact experiences and staff training to understand and promote family contact.
- Recommend that resources are invested in exploring the full potential of using technology to promote contact outside of visiting times.
- The commitment to providing a child friendly space was welcomed, but urged that age-appropriate design is considered and the different needs of various ages.
- Recommend that support for families is available beyond the visiting space, with access to emotional and practical support within waiting areas and in the community.
- More widespread use of Skype.
- Ensure rules for visits are made clear and consistent.
- More patience and understanding from staff.
- More time to visit when transport is late.
- Consider the establishment of a family peer support group.
- NIPS to undertake familiarisation work with families and social workers (to alleviate concerns about bringing children to visit a family member).
- Telephone – ensure access is not restricted and the cost of making calls is not disproportionate.
- Suggest including more details as to what the “range of facilities” are. Recommend play resources suitable for babies through to teenagers.

- Suggest adding a third bullet point under Outcomes: “Reduced risk of re-offending”.

Theme 2 - Families Feel Included and Engaged

- Consideration should be given to providing information on the NIPS website / social media about the range of programmes available so family members are informed and can actively encourage their loved ones to avail of these services. Family members should also be kept informed of the performance of their loved ones on the programmes and be involved in challenging prison misconduct where appropriate.
- It was suggested that it might be helpful to specify which commitments NIPS can deliver working alone and which it can achieve when working with partners.
- The commitment to include families in the planning and preparation for an individual’s return to the community was welcomed, however, it was recommended that the family is engaged in this from an early stage.
- Families should be supported, particularly at transition stages such as committal, moves and release. A model of best practice in HMP Parc was referenced.
- Families raised frustration at limited access to information about their loved one, such as healthcare information.
- Families experience was mostly positive, however, they highlighted how they were made to feel uncomfortable by some prison staff at times.
- Include the views of children and young people and consider communication interventions between children and their parent.

Theme 3 - Families are Safe and Well

- One respondent queried to what extent this theme was the responsibility of NIPS. They thought it was ambitious and takes in a wide range of responsibilities and commitments, some of which will lie outside the responsibility of NIPS. They suggested it might be more appropriate if safety and welfare of families was recognised as the responsibility of other agencies (statutory and voluntary), with NIPS having a duty to support their efforts. In addition, they also thought it might be helpful if commitments that require a partnership approach were specified as such.
- It was suggested that peer mentors should be used within prison to provide advice, support and guidance to those imprisoned about how they can try to maintain their family contacts, improve strained relationships or demonstrate that they are thinking about their families during their imprisonment. This suggestion also made reference to the fact that Lord Farmer, in his 2017 review highlighted the use of peer mentors on the Families Matter programme in Maghaberry as an example of best practice.
- It was recommended that the strategy reflects the need for early identification of need and access to effective mental health care within prisons.
- The fact that NIPS will work with partners was welcomed, to support families to access services that improve safety and wellbeing, and also work with partner organisations to provide services and interventions which support families. The importance of working with the voluntary and community sector in the development and delivery of, and signposting to, such services was stressed.
- It was recommended that regular training recognised work with families as a core part of the role of prison staff, closely aligned to the aims of reducing

offending and delivering safer custody, and that staff have the opportunity to build on the universal training to become specialists in this particular aspect.

- It was suggested that another bullet point is added to reflect that NIPS will foster open and/or confidential channels of communication.

Theme 4 - Children

- NIPS should consider how a child protection and trauma informed approach to interactions with families and children can be applied to the prison visits context and how staff respond to potential incidents of disorder or misconduct during visitation. It was suggested that specific training and guidance should be provided to staff.
- A respondent stated it would like to see the recognition that children with a parent in prison also experiences other risks, such as poorer educational attainment and an increased chance of entering the criminal justice system at some point themselves.
- A query was raised in relation to the bullet point about NIPS raising awareness in partnership of the impact of imprisonment on children - they wondered if it should be clarified who NIPS will be raising awareness with.
- It was noted that 'child protection training' is not seen as the same thing as trauma training. It was stated that NIPS staff should receive both sets of training.
- It was suggested that the document does not weight the importance, when intact, of the couple relationship as a foundation to the wider family relationship. The serving of a prison sentence is a considerable stressor in both the couple and the family relationship, and indeed a stressed couple

relationship can serve as a significant barrier to strengthening wider family relationships.

Q7) What additional themes would you like to see explored?

3.24 Include technology in a managed way to help with family relationships outside of visiting times, would be of particular value to those with families abroad or are unable to visit due to illness or disability.

3.25 Include an additional theme on effective partnership working and within this theme, propose to undertake a mapping exercise in which the range of programmes and supports offered to those imprisoned and their families are listed, along with their eligibility criteria and duration.

3.26 A separate theme should be added, 'Our People', which is needed to underpin the implementation of the strategy. It was noted that it is also one of the four topics within Prisons 2020. The respondent believes that how NIPS staff engage with the people in their care and their families is central to success of the strategy. In practice, there is a wide range of approaches, at one end of the continuum, an emphasis on control and containment and at the other an emphasis on rehabilitation. It was suggested that to ensure the success of this strategic approach, governors, managers and staff need to further embrace the 'rehabilitation' end of the continuum.

Q8) Do you think the NIPS priorities are aligned to the themes identified?

3.27 It is suggested that the priorities take cognisance of the 'Visitors Experience' focus groups held during 2018.

3.28 It was also requested that priorities also include:

- o How NIPS will deliver on the successful implementation of the strategy;
- o A commitment to ensure the success of the strategy by including mechanisms to measure progress and to review and revise priorities; and
- o An undertaking to utilise Progressive Regimes and Earned Privileges Scheme as a vehicle to deliver on the strategy.

Q9) Outline how best NIPS could work with partner organisations to achieve the overall outcome of supporting and encouraging family engagement, leading to positive outcomes for people in our care?

3.29 It is requested that NIPS:

- Undertakes a scoping exercise to ensure all relevant partner organisations have been identified and are aware of the strategy;
- Ring-fence resources to ensure the 'case-by-case' approach set out in Section 3 of the Consultation Document is delivered;
- Establish mechanisms to receive feedback from families and partner organisations about their experience of the implementation of the NIPS strategic approach to families; and
- At an appropriate juncture to commission an independent assessment of the strategy with Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland undertaking an investigation into the effectiveness of NIPS engagement with families.

3.30 It was noted that the Principles section omits reference to the Probation Board of Northern Ireland as one of the critical statutory partners in the delivery of services.

3.31 The importance of informing families of what goes on within the prisons was stated, to allow for better understanding, of services such as education, learning, health and other matters.

4. Conclusion and Way Forward

4.1 Consultation responses were received from a range of organisations and individuals, and engagement with stakeholders took place through written responses and facilitated events and meetings. This process enabled a range of views to be collected which have raised many important issues. This report has highlighted the key themes that arose from the consultation responses.

4.2 In summary, all responses were welcoming and supportive of the new strategy and the commitments outlined in the consultation document. Constructive comments were received and considered accordingly. NIPS will continue to work with partners as it develops the final strategy.

4.3 The final strategy will be published in November 2019. Following publication work will then begin with partners to develop and implement an action plan to support and deliver this strategy.

4.4 NIPS would like to thank respondents, and in particular the families of those with loved ones in our care, for shaping how we will work together to Strengthen Family Relationships.

4.5 If you require any further information in relation to the consultation or the summary of responses please use the following details to make contact:

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Consultation Respondents

- Barnardo's NI
- Department of Education
- Family Forum
- Hydebank Family Forum consultation event feedback
- NIACRO
- NIACRO facilitated family consultation event - feedback x2
- Prison Fellowship Northern Ireland
- Probation Board Northern Ireland
- Queens University Belfast and the University of Edinburgh
- Relate Northern Ireland
- Start 360
- Alliance Party
- Youth Justice Agency