

Breaking the cycle of reoffending

Independent Research
Queen's University, Belfast



extern
Prisoner Support Project

Funded in partnership with:

NORTHERN IRELAND
PRISON SERVICE

 **Housing
Executive**

 Department of
Justice
An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Ministry of the Law
www.justice-ni.gov.uk

WHAT IS THE PRISONER SUPPORT PROJECT?

Extern's Prisoner Support Project

A co-designed, two-phase intervention providing intensive, holistic support to people serving short-term sentences — before and after release.

"They're always there. They always answer the phone no matter what, and that's what I like, that support. Because I think that would save a lot of lives."

PSP participant



Extern piloted the PSP since February 2024 in partnership with the Northern Ireland Prison Service. It targets one of the hardest-to-reach groups in the criminal justice system; short-term prisoners with overlapping, complex needs who repeatedly fall between services.



THE PROJECT SUPPORTS

Men serving short sentences (<1 year) in HMP Maghaberry who present with significantly higher levels of complex need than the wider prison population.

157 individuals supported between February 2024 and March 2026



The project addresses the drivers of reoffending, building personal strengths, supporting safer reintegration, and reducing reoffending.

WHY IS PSP NEEDED?

Northern Ireland has the highest rate of short-term prison sentences across the UK and Ireland.*

25.7%

of NI's prison population are serving short-term sentences

VS

5% in England & Wales

18% in Scotland

11% in ROI

52%

of short-term prisoners return to custody within three months of release

VS

19% of the general NI prison population (within 12 months)

*Source: Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) (2023) Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland. Belfast: NIAO.

"More needs to be done to develop alternatives to short-term custodial sentences."

Source: Public Accounts Committee, Report on Reducing Adult Reoffending in NI, 2025

Short-term sentences are costly, and gaps in rehabilitation support are fuelling the cycle of re-offending.

COST

THE EVIDENCE

*"Extern's intensive and holistic approach meets its aims of contributing to reductions in offending behaviour and greater stability for a group that typically faces significant barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration."**

*Source: Butler, M., Campbell, A., & Hanna, C. (2026) A mixed methods evaluation of Extern's Prisoner Support Project. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast.

Reducing Reoffending

71%

had a reduction in the frequency and/or seriousness of offending

51%

were not returned to custody

50%

committed no further offences during the pilot project.

Community & Health Outcomes

46%

secured accommodation

37%

accessed prescribed medication

25%

demonstrated reduced harms in substance use

48%

registered with a GP

10%

engaged in education, employment or training

41%

engaged with other services and activities.

Savings: Prisoner support is highly cost effective compared to custody

CUSTODY

PSP

Cost per person / per day

£156.00

VS

Cost per person / per day

UNDER £10.50

FUNDING CLIFF EDGE

Funding ends 30 June 2026.

Without renewed investment, the Prisoner Support Project will close, supports will be lost and the re-offending cycle will return to crisis level.

PSP delivers for:

- **Department of Justice** — reduced reoffending, fewer victims, safer communities
- **Department of Health** — reduced crisis demand, greater engagement with treatment
- **Department for Communities** — homelessness prevention, improved welfare access
- **Public Health Agency** — improved health and harm-reduction outcomes
- **Housing Executive** — greater housing stability, reduced emergency accommodation demand

"The PSP is making a positive and measurable impact for one of the hardest to reach groups in the criminal justice system"

Source: Butler, M., Campbell, A., & Hanna, C. (2026) A mixed methods evaluation of Extern's Prisoner Support Project. Belfast: Queen's University Belfast

Fund PSP. Support safer communities.

To discuss funding or find out more:

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We are most grateful for the support of the following:



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