



INQUIRY ON REDUCING ADULT REOFFENDING

WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO
THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
COMMITTEE

1 APRIL 2025

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Inquiry on Reducing Adult Reoffending

Written Evidence to the Public Accounts Committee

Submitted: 1st April 2025

Recommendations

Extern believes the Public Accounts Committee should:

1. **Ensure multi-year funding** for the voluntary and community sector. Longer term funding provides stability for organisations and their skilled workforce. It supports service development and the fostering of true partnerships to achieve outcomes and reduce reoffending, while drawing on existing best practices and the lived experiences of those impacted by the Criminal Justice System.
2. Support the Department of Justice in **achieving cross-departmental collaboration** and working for a new Programme for Government Strategy on Offending and Reoffending and establishing a unified vision to drive meaningful change.
3. Support the Criminal Justice System in **developing and implementing trauma-informed rehabilitative programmes** that focus on intensive support and leverage existing best practice models, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.
4. **Support the adoption of community-based solutions** over custodial sentences, especially for non-violent crimes, to decrease reoffending rates and support rehabilitation efforts.
5. Support Criminal Justice System organisations in **developing agreed outcomes**, and in capturing and linking data to measure and deliver those outcomes, thereby facilitating informed decisions on effective resource allocation.

1.0 Introduction

Extern is responding to the invitation from the Public Accounts Committee to serve as a witness in the Inquiry on Reducing Adult Reoffending. We welcome this opportunity and have structured our submission to emphasise the criminal justice services we deliver in collaboration with key stakeholders and funder-commissioners. Our submission highlights the impact of these services, the challenges and opportunities encountered and provides specific responses to some of the recommendations made in the Audit Report. In addition, we have included a file detailing Extern's current Criminal Justice Services (Appendix 1).

2.0 Extern

Extern was established five decades ago, mid-1970's, by a small group of volunteers. The very first service was a justice service, 'Mount Charles Hostel' on Mount Charles Street beside Queen's University. This service included a bespoke 'New Careers – Change Your Future' project designed to support young adults leaving prison to upskill and reintegrate into their communities.

In 1978 the Extern Organisation was formally constituted with charitable status. The early years funding came from generous private donations through the connections of its founders and its earliest commissioner-funder was the NI Probation Service.

Over the decades Extern has extended its portfolio of services based on the ever-changing needs of society. We are commissioned by public sector bodies and government departments from across the island of Ireland and deliver services to support, house and engage adults, young people, families and children who are:

- Facing Family breakdown
- Living with an offending past
- Dealing with Drug, Alcohol and Gambling issues
- Street homeless or facing homelessness
- Living with the impact of suicide and dealing with mental health issues
- Engaging in alternative education and employability supports
- Children Looked After

- Displaced from their country of origin
- Members of the Travelling Community

Extern extended its reach into the Republic of Ireland at the turn of this century and for more than 21 years has delivered family and children services on behalf of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, Youth Justice Services for the Department of Justice regionalised Neurodiverse Services for the HSE.

In Northern Ireland Extern's criminal justice services exist to support the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Department of Justice and the Probation Board and are outcomes focussed on reducing adult reoffending.

Our current trauma informed criminal justice services include

- Extern Prisoner Support Project (PSP).
- Extern Criminal Justice Floating Support (CJFS)
- PBNI Approved Premises – Extern runs the Innis Centre (Belfast City Centre), Dismas House (South Belfast), and MUST Hostel (Cookstown)

For a deeper understanding of each service an overview is included in the accompanying Appendix document 'Extern Criminal Justice Services'.

2.0 Extern Criminal Justice Services Alignment

Extern criminal justice services are in full alignment with the following.

➤ Department of Justice Corporate Plan 2022–2025

Extern services support the four main themes of the Department of Justice Corporate Plan 2022–2025:

- Support Safe and Resilient Communities
- Address Harm and Vulnerability
- Challenge Offending Behaviours and Support Rehabilitation
- Deliver an Effective Justice System

➤ Programme for Government 2024–2027

Prioritising the creation of safer communities is a key focus on each of the three Extern services.

Extern focuses on cross-governmental strategies to reduce offending and reoffending and prevent individuals from entering the criminal justice system through timely and focused interventions. The services are low threshold, high tolerance, and accessible to those in or at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

3.0 NI Audit Office Report Recommendations

Extern has reviewed the NI Audit Office Report Recommendations, and we have highlighted the key recommendations we are in a position to make comment on: -

3.1 Recommendation 3 – Timely accessibility to rehabilitation services

Extern fully supports Recommendation 3, we refer to the Extern Prisoner Support Project (PSP) as we believe this service directly meets the targets in Recommendation 3.

'Department should develop greater and more timely accessibility to rehabilitation initiatives to address the identified gaps in support for short-term prisoners. It should also review the adequacy of 'through the gate' support and, along with all relevant stakeholders, devise a solution(s) to better assist short-term prisoners' transition to the community and resettlement in the early period post-release'.

This recommendation emphasises the need for greater and more timely accessibility to rehabilitation initiatives for short-term prisoners. It also focusses on the need for the development of solutions to assist in their transition to the community and resettlement post-release.

The Prisoner Support Project was developed following a meeting with Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) in 2023. During this meeting there was a discussion on the escalation of reoffending and readmission back into custody within the first three months of discharge by prisoners who had received sentences of 12 months or less. With the focus on the year 2019-20, the respective one-year adult reoffending rates for those released from custody was 52%.

This rise in reoffending rates was identified as being linked to the discharging of short-term prisoners without any support prior to release and, post release back into society the lack of community supervision probation orders and post custody support from any statutory body.

Further to discussion between NIPS and Extern on the identified gap in support to short term prisoners to reduce the rate of reoffending, Extern proposed the 'Prisoner Support Project' (PSP) to address the gaps identified.

This new project was proposed to run for two years to ensure the securing of a skilled staff team to deliver on the complexity of needs being presented by short term prisoners and as identified by research included in appendix four of the Audit Office Report under Recommendation 3:

Appendix 4 '*Research identified issues which impact on an ex-prisoner's ability to access and retain accommodation*' also highlights that

- A significant proportion (16% in 2019-20) of prisoners are released with 'no fixed abode', or to short-term or unstable accommodation, leading to higher reoffending rates.
- Continued and ongoing support within the community is often absent
- Service users' non-housing needs (particularly health and mental health) are not always dealt with in a multi-disciplinary way prior to release and issues often arise accessing health and community services.
- Temporary accommodation is often unsuitable for a service user's need and circumstances, particularly where alcohol and drugs are problematic. (66% of prisoners in 2022 reported having used drugs at some stage in their life.)

This new service was co-designed with the input from the experiences of short-term offenders and the funder to ensure it would alleviate these four separate areas of concern.

Extern believed in this new service from its extensive experience over the years in delivering similar projects and knowledge of what contributed to successful delivery. When NIPS confirmed the budget available for the two-year service delivery, it was evident that it was

below the need to ensure a quality effective service to reduce the rates of reoffending from short term prisoners.

In January 2024 the Prisoner Support Project commenced and was made possible through the support of the Extern Board of Trustees and their commitment to match the funds from NIPS for the next two years. This decision was reached as the new service was in line with Extern's strategic direction to continue to develop impactful criminal justice services to meet the evolving needs and in partnership with NIPS and the Department of Justice into the future.

The process of finding a match funder post the two-year funding commitment was agreed to commence post the first year of service delivery. At this stage there would be initial evidence of the impact of the service to bring forward to potential match funders.

The PSP is a programme of intervention which begins when the individual is still in custody and it implements the "Let's Talk" programme, based on the 'Good Lives Model', to help service users to look at different areas of life and develop the skills required for a productive, non-offending life.

Overview of the Prisoner Support Project team:

- 2 Keyworkers based within HMP Maghaberry
- 4 Social Workers based in the Greater Belfast Area
- A Project Manager
- An Administrator

Overview of the PSP in operation

Referrals

- Prison officers will refer service users via prism to the PSP Keyworkers or the Keyworkers will go out to the houses within the prison on a weekly basis to provide potential service users information about available support.
- Self-referral is also available.

- Running concurrently to this, NIPS will refer the service user to other services based within the prison e.g. Housing Rights, NIACRO and Start 360 to create a holistic package of support.

Operation

The operational delivery of the PSP includes:

- completion of an initial risk assessment
- Following assessment, the implementation of the 'Let's Talk' Programme commences. This is a bespoke intervention based on Ward's Good Lives Model which supports individuals to take agency over key life areas which combined overall result in them achieving a good life.

Evaluation

To measure the impact and effectiveness of this intervention, our keyworkers within the prison will complete Justice Outcome Star Assessment with each service user at the first and last points of contact within the prison. The keyworkers refer onward to our Community Social Workers who will then complete a comprehensive risk assessment beginning at the referral stage.

Evidence of Service Impact

In the April 2024 - March 2025 financial year, the service has achieved the following outcomes (this is a snapshot in time and all cases continue to be live to the project):

- 50% of individuals who needed accommodation from a cohort of 60 are now in accommodation secured by Extern Community Social Workers and they are supporting the individuals to maintain their accommodation
- 21 individuals accessed mental health services
- 25 individuals accessed addictions services

To date 74% of short-term prisoners [87 from a cohort of 118] released from Maghaberry and who availed of the service have not returned to custody since engaging with the programme.

3.2 Recommendation 1 - Cross-Governmental Collaboration

Extern supports recommendation 1 of the Audit report and the 2025 Programme for Government (PfG) both of which refer to cross governmental/departamental responses and collaboration as being crucial in addressing the issues that the people who engage in our criminal justice services face daily and which contribute to their reoffending.

A Critical Challenge – Temporary Beds and Accommodation Supply

One of the key critical challenges to addressing reoffending is the lack of availability of accommodation (collaboration with Dept of Communities, NIHE) for those leaving custody following a short-term sentence as is evidenced above in the figures under 'evidence of service impact' from the PSP.

Collaboration across the Departments is critical to avoid individuals exiting prison and ending up on the streets with no fixed abode leading to immediate reoffending.

To illustrate this further the pressure on accommodation is also experienced in **Extern's Probation Approved Premises (hostels)**.

Of the 91 PBNI Approved Hostel beds, Extern provides 42 beds across 3 hostels in Belfast and Cookstown. Extern has operated PBNI Approved Hostels from the 1980's.

The 2023 Criminal Justice Northern Ireland Inspectorate's review of Probation Approved Premises highlighted that "Having a home on release from custody is one of the key elements that can support men and women leaving prison to stop reoffending and contribute to their rehabilitation."

Extern Approved Premises work in partnership with key statutory agencies including the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi), Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and Social Services to ensure that all the needs of the service user are met, and any risks are appropriately managed.

Our partnerships working at grass roots level can only be strengthened with the joined-up collaboration of the Departments at the highest level in the development of their strategies and future PfG.

One of the current challenges being faced is the blockage in the system, known as bed blocking within temporary accommodation (hostels) due to a lack of provision of affordable housing for individuals identified as ready for 'move on'. This has resulted in significant barriers to getting suitable accommodation for those leaving custody.

Also, the lack of accommodation has a detrimental impact on the ability of the person to fully engage in a holistic package of support to address their mental health and addiction needs (collaboration with Dept of Health).

The role of Approved Premises is critical in the rehabilitation of individuals exiting the prison system with no fixed abode and has been publicly acknowledged by the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in 2023;

The 2023 CJINI report identified a 6% recall rate based on a total of 10 out of 176 individuals resident in the seven Approved Premises across Northern Ireland.

“Approved premises play a vital role in our community and provide an invaluable service to the criminal justice system in terms of public protection, monitoring the behaviour of residents and supporting enforcement action when needed,” said Jacqui Durkin, Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland. This low rate of reoffending and recall to custody highlights the quality of work carried out within Approved Premises by staff who, in partnership with statutory agencies, work to address the issues of homelessness and offending.

Commending staff on their commitment and professionalism, Ms Durkin **continued “We found staff working in approved premises were highly committed to the work they were doing, and day-to-day practice was good. We also found evidence of effective partnerships and collaboration between the approved premises and local Probation Officers, Police Officers, Northern Ireland Housing Executive staff and others.”**

Of the 121 service users who resided within Extern’s Approved Premises in 2024-2025, 18 were returned to custody either for breach of court order (11) or new offences committed (7). These statistics support the findings of the CJINI inspection and are testament to the effectiveness of the work carried out within Probation Approved Premises and the contribution that this makes to public protection and reducing offending in Northern Ireland.

The need for access to social housing is further corroborated by the **Homelessness Strategy 2022-27** which recognises the reality that to assist those who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness, we must consider issues beyond housing. **‘Wherever possible homelessness should be prevented; but if homelessness cannot be prevented it should be rare, brief and non-recurring’**

The 2025 PfG has given an undertaking to “Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing” and Extern very much welcomes this commitment.

The importance of tenancy sustainment when working with service users who have a history of offending behaviour cannot be understated. **Extern’s Criminal Justice Floating Support Service (CJFS)**, supports individuals who have been through the criminal justice system and who have been convicted of a variety of offences to obtain and sustain tenancies in the community since 2004.

The service works in collaboration with PBNI, NIHE, NIPS, NIHE and HSCT and a variety of other agencies from within the statutory and voluntary sectors to promote community safety by providing a high-quality service which provides service users with opportunities to realise their full potential within an offence free life. Extern’s Criminal Justice service offering

provides support and risk management on a regional basis, underpinned by Government Strategies.

The CJFS plays a vital role in preventing and reducing offending and the effects of offending through the work that they deliver with individuals who are assessed as being of medium to high risk of reoffending.

In the Financial year 2024-2025 the CJFS team supported a total of 390 cases. (Compared with a total of 334 in the year 2023-2024) Adopting a triage system, this work was a combination of short term (e.g. support with benefits and G.P. registration) and long-term interventions designed to support tenancy sustainment. Though not a commissioner requirement to report on these outcomes, internal stats show that, in the quarter 01/01/25 to 31/03/25 only four service users, out of a total of 186, breached their court orders and were recalled to custody and only one was charged with a new offence.

Case study 1

To support the insights shared in the document, Extern brings forward two case studies.

The first one highlighting the challenges faced by service users on their release from custody if they are not able to access accommodation.

Mr. B is a 58-year-old man. The Prisoner Support Project began supporting him in September 2024 and he completed Phase 1 of the "Let's Talk" Programme prior to his release from custody. He has a history of chronic homelessness, and his addiction, mental health and offending history have made it more difficult for him to attain temporary accommodation.

Mr. B is assessed as having a mild learning disability but does not reach the threshold for statutory learning disability services nor is he assessed as meeting the threshold for Complex Needs points with NIHE. Mr. B was subject to a beating from individuals who were known to him through previous temporary accommodation within which he formerly resided. His resulting injury requires surgery, but this cannot be carried out as he requires accommodation

for his recovery. He is at risk of further negative attention due to his possession of prescribed opioid medication which is regarded as currency on the street.

Whilst the Prisoner Support Project is supporting him to engage with services to support his mental health and addiction and have made appropriate referrals to temporary accommodation he remains of no fixed abode as his presenting issues are problematic for accommodation providers.

He has been offered temporary accommodation, which is unsuitable to his needs as it is in the same area and with the same provider with whom he had met those who subjected him to the beating. The absence of suitable accommodation poses significant additional challenges in maintaining contact for further work with Mr. B. The PSP has secured assessment for him with statutory mental health services, and they will continue to support him to attain PIP, which may assist with the allocation of complex needs points in the future to attain accommodation.

Case Study 2

A former resident of one of our Probation Approved hostels, Innis Centre

Dear Sir,

I am writing to express my sincere thanks and gratitude to the team at Innis Hostel, Belfast as I will be moving to a flat of my own.

I came to Innis Hostel in November 2022, after having spent 20 months as a prisoner. I had a few changes of clothing and little else, including self-esteem and hope for the future, as whilst I was serving my sentence I separated from my partner and lost everything that mattered to me in life.

Ten months later I completed the first of six modules of a BA (Hons) Degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, and I am far more confident and hopeful of a better future.

The staff at the hostel have never judged me and have always been positive and supportive. They have helped me get my feet back on the ground and in the real world. For someone who has lost everything and feels utterly worthless a simple kind word can make a world of difference to your day and there have been plenty of those from the team at Innis. At all times I have been treated with the utmost respect and as a human being, something I did not expect in all honesty.

I would like to thank my key workers, who have regularly checked in just to see how I am doing and helped answer any queries I may have had, and supported me where necessary with filling forms in. Nothing has ever been too much trouble for them.

I would also like to thank all of the wider team at Extern, whose hard work and vision enables people like me, who have paid the price required by the justice system, to rebuild their lives in a judgment-free, supportive and welcoming environment. I do not think I would be able to write this email had I not been placed into the care of Extern and the staff at Innis Hostel.

My heartfelt and most sincere thanks

3.3 Recommendation 8 – expedite identification of alternative problem-solving approaches

Extern endorses the expanded use of community hubs, restorative justice approaches, and problem-solving courts as alternatives to short custodial sentences, which have been demonstrated to be ineffective in reducing offending. Extern has recently engaged with representatives from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland (PPANI) to explore the feasibility of developing a pilot Support Hub in Belfast City Centre. This hub could serve a limited number of PPANI Category 2 and Category 3 offenders with complex needs. We concur with our colleagues at the Department of Justice (DoJ) that such an initiative would have a positive impact, although it would need the necessary funding.

Conclusion

As an organisation Extern partners with, and is an advocate for, those in our society who deserve a second chance. When working with people who are marginalised, who feel vulnerable and isolated, and may find themselves unable to break out of the situation they find themselves in, we reach in and beyond what is visible; to support the people who engage in our criminal justice services towards a better tomorrow, and we do this in partnership with public sector bodies and government departments.

We are stronger together and encourage the Public Accounts Committee to consider Extern's service-led evidence-based insights for reducing adult reoffending in Northern Ireland. Leveraging our expertise, insights, and actionable proposals, we believe our contributions and that of the wider sector have significant potential to further aid in transforming the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and effectively lowering reoffending rates into the future.