

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 NIACRO, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, is a voluntary organisation, working for 35 years to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities. NIACRO provides services under the headings of: working in communities; working with children and young people who offend; working with offenders and ex-prisoners; working with prisoners, their families and children; influencing policy and practice; and applying resources effectively.
- 1.2 NIACRO's Vision is to be acknowledged as making a unique contribution to the development of a society in which the rights of everyone, including offenders, are equally respected.
- 1.3 NIACRO's Mission Statement is, "working to reduce crime and its impact on people and communities.
- 1.4 NIACRO services work with some of the most disadvantaged and socially excluded children and their families through Mentoring, Independent Representation and Advocacy, Independent Visitor Schemes, Child and Parent Support, Family Links, APAC, Base 2, Youth Employability, Reach Out and Jobtrack.
- 1.5 NIACRO welcomes the opportunity to respond to DHSSPSNI Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland.

Families Matter

- 2.1 NIACRO welcome the Government's commitment to improving the life chances of children and young people and that the Families Matter Strategy underpins the OFMDFM 10 year strategy and action plan. It is important that the policy is part of the overarching strategy in order to ensure that the outcomes envisaged for all strands of the 10 year strategy can be achieved.
- 2.2 NIACRO works with many disadvantaged and stigmatised families and while we understand that universal services are indeed in place for everyone, it is our experience that many of the most vulnerable families do not access those universal services. Therefore, it would be helpful to have a specific section in the strategy to outline how disengaged families will be targeted for services in particular, families and children of prisoners, families of young offenders, families with drug and alcohol difficulties etc.,
- 2.3 NIACRO welcome the reference to Article 8 of the Human Rights Act which upholds the right to family life and the commitment to working in partnership and taking parent's views seriously and with respect. However, it is our experience that many families are intimidated by child protection, mental health and looked after children structures and

do not understand their rights within those systems. It is important that appropriate advocacy and legal advice services are available to families and that professionals do indeed commit to maintaining a balance between interference and effective support.

- 2.4 NIACRO welcome the commitment to working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector who often engage with the most disadvantaged and difficult to reach families and children. However, in order for the partnership to be real the Government needs to fulfil its commitment to other policy initiatives such as Positive Steps.
- 2.5 There are a great deal of evidence based, good practice models available for engaging disadvantaged families, many of them piloted and provided within the voluntary and community sector with multi agency support. However, the implementation of Positive Steps which would place such services within a long term funding and service delivery model alongside statutory provision is still not a reality. Therefore, good projects and services continue to be lost.
- 2.6 NIACRO would welcome a further emphasis within the strategy for parents of adolescents who are going through a great deal of change within their lives and whose parents often struggle to access appropriate universal and specialist services for them.
- 2.7 NIACRO are concerned that Making a Positive Contribution is framed very negatively by the emphasis on not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour and is out of step with the more positive framing of the issues in the rest of the document. Families and Young People in the main do make a positive contribution when facilitated to do so and this should be the emphasis. The specific need to target families who are exhibiting anti social or offending behaviours should be addressed within services for hard to reach groups as outlined above.

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