



# keeping prisoners and their families together

## summary report

A review of family and social support within the North East Reducing Re-offending Action Plan.

Barefoot Research and Evaluation

## About Northern Rock Foundation

Northern Rock Foundation is a charity formed in 1997, when Northern Rock converted to a plc. The Foundation receives 5% of the plc's pre-tax profits each year and is one of the UK's largest independent funders of charitable activity. Its current objectives are to tackle disadvantage and to improve quality of life in North East England and Cumbria. It does this through grant-making, policy and research work, training and development activities, special initiatives, loans and other investments. *Think* is the Foundation's research series, launched in 2007 as part of its work to inform and influence the wider policy environment.

More information [www.nr-foundation.org.uk](http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk)

## About the authors

Barefoot Research and Evaluation is based in Newcastle upon Tyne. It has particular expertise in work with vulnerable and at-risk groups and on projects and strategies to support them. Barefoot Research and Evaluation has carried out work for Nacro, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, the Probation Service and local authorities on initiatives to reduce crime and re-offending and improve community safety. Christopher Hartworth has almost 20 years' experience of research and evaluation, beginning in developing countries in poverty alleviation programmes and continuing in the North East of England in work with disadvantaged communities and reducing re-offending projects in both prisons and local communities.

More information: [www.barefootresearch.org.uk](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk)

# Foreword

*Homeward Bound* – a play commissioned by Action for Prisoners Families, written and performed by the M6 Theatre Company, is a powerful tool for helping us to understand the complex interplay of family relationships and the impact imprisonment of a loved one has on family members. In a short piece of compelling drama, the audience is brought face to face with the burdens carried by those left behind when a parent and partner goes to prison. This play speaks louder than any words I could use to remind us all of why we need to rethink how we work with prisoners and their families to enable relationships to be maintained.

However, alongside powerful techniques that highlight the need for understanding, we also need detailed analysis of the problems and research that identifies potential solutions. This report, commissioned by Northern Rock Foundation and produced by Barefoot Research and Evaluation, is a follow-up to previous research undertaken in the North East in 2005. The earlier work explored what prisons in the region were doing to support relationships between parents in prison and their families and this is a timely refresh of that original study.

This new report demonstrates how arrangements for taking forward actions under the NOMS Regional Reducing Re-offending Action Plan and the Pathway structures in the North East of England are having an impact and addressing the needs of the children and families of prisoners. Central to this improvement is the role played by the voluntary and community Sector (VCS).

The Children and Families Pathway (*Families and Social Support* in the North East) is arguably the most under-served in terms of formal structure, policy and resources. The way in which commissioning develops and the extent to which the VCS can win tenders to deliver services is of tremendous importance to the future success of NOMS in helping prisoners to maintain family ties and achieving a reduction in re-offending. Whilst the findings of this report make clear the extent to which prisons in the North East have improved their practice in relation to helping prisoners maintain family ties, there is still a need for the ROM to drive further change – persuading prisons and probation to use existing resources differently in order to achieve better outcomes for children and partners of prisoners, resulting in fewer victims of crime in the future.

**Paul Cavadino, Chief Executive, Nacro**

# Foreword from Northern Rock Foundation

This report is the latest welcome addition to a body of work and experience that the Northern Rock Foundation is helping to build in the field of penal reform. From early in its relatively short life, the Foundation has committed substantial funds to trying to improve the conditions and life chances of prisoners and their families. We believe that this approach serves all in our society, including victims, better than a purely punitive approach to penal affairs.

In 2000, the third year of our operations, the Trustees committed £1.4 million to supporting the Inside Out Trust in running restorative justice projects in eight North East prisons, a scheme evaluated by the International Centre for Prison Studies. That was the beginning of a major investment of our time and resources in exploring and delivering better ways of working with offenders before, during and after custody. We followed this in 2004 with another initiative worth £4.2 million, focused on tackling re-offending; a further £1 million agreed in 2007 to extend and promote the work funded; plus grants worth £1.3 million to organisations working to reduce crime by working in prisons and communities across our area.

But these investments would be merely big numbers without the attention to partners and the determination, shared with them, to learn from experience that are essential characteristics of these projects. We have striven to support evaluation and learning alongside direct services; we have also built strong relationships with statutory commissioners and voluntary sector delivery bodies, and independent analysts of both. A charitable funder, with no political axe to grind and no electorate or shareholders to please, can sometimes be most helpful by raising awkward questions or shining a light on overlooked topics.

In 2003, we responded to a grant application from Nacro to carry out research in the North East into support for family relationships whilst a parent is in prison. The Trustees funded the work knowing that maintaining positive family relationships was an effective way of reducing the risk of re-offending. The original report, completed by Barefoot Research and Evaluation, reached an audience of policy-makers and kick started a useful debate. But given the wide interest in re-offending, and key developments including the establishment of NOMS and the regional action plan on reducing re-offending, in 2006 the Foundation decided it was timely to commission an update.

The most welcome aspect of the revised findings is the clear progress made in addressing some of the concerns highlighted in the original. Improvements have resulted from effective partnership working between ROMs, prisons and voluntary agencies, and we hope that their experience will inform others. More worrying is the evidence that public agencies in this field can only get done those things associated with some measure or target. There is little if any room for flexibility or creative thinking. For these, NOMs and other public sector commissioners will increasingly rely on the voluntary and community organisations. To do so, there will need to be more effective mechanisms to engage the sector and apply the lessons from its work. The report makes several suggestions for how this could be done. We will work hard now, with Nacro and our other partners, to take the report's conclusions and recommendations and ensure they are properly debated within the sector and discussed by statutory commissioners at the highest levels. I hope others reading this report will do the same.

**Fiona Ellis**  
**Foundation Director**

## Introduction

In October 2005, a research report<sup>1</sup> was produced under the auspices of Nacro<sup>2</sup> (and funded by Northern Rock Foundation) which looked at what prisons in the North East of England were doing to support relationships between a prisoner (particularly a parent) and their family (children). The research presented the experience of prisoners and visitors in four prisons in the North East and examined how policy and practice supported these groups across the region.

This piece of work is a follow on from that research and is intended to:

- contribute to the work in the region's prisons that supports the children and families of prisoners; and
- inform the wider Reducing Re-offending Strategy and Delivery Plan.

Families and prisoners, as a research topic, was chosen because it had previously<sup>3</sup> received little attention from policy makers, although it had been recognised by the Government and academics<sup>4</sup> as an area which contributes to reducing re-offending.

This is now changing and it is an area which is becoming increasingly prominent within policy circles. Specifically, there now exists a Family and Social Support Pathway (FSSP) and Delivery Plan (one of seven Pathways in the North East) within the Regional Reducing Re-Offending Action Plan (RRAP). However, it remains an area where there has been relatively little experience of service delivery or policy support.

1 Entitled Keeping Families Together: Maintaining Positive Relationships Between Children and Parents in Prison – A Study in the North East of England and can be seen either on the [www.barefootresearch.org.uk](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk) or [www.vonne.co.uk/issues/offenders/](http://www.vonne.co.uk/issues/offenders/) websites.

2 And was carried out by Barefoot Research and Evaluation.

3 The original research proposal was submitted in 2003.

4 See bibliography in the original research report.

The main report is structured in the following way:

- background to the research
- summary of the original research findings and an update
- the strategic context and developments within the regional RRAP
- the perspective on the RRAP from the Prison Service
- the Family and Social Support Pathway and the voluntary and community sector (VCS)
- lessons from other Strategic Pathways
- how strategy is translated into practice in one prison in the North East
- the future needs of the VCS
- discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

## The Reducing Re-offending Pathways

There are seven Pathways in the Regional Reducing Re-offending Action Plan, with two sub-pathway groups that sit in their own right, and these are:

1. Accommodation
2. Drugs and Alcohol, incorporating Alcohol as a sub group
3. Education, Employment and Training, incorporating Employer Engagement as a sub group
4. Families and Social Support
5. Finance, Benefit and Debt
6. Health
7. Life Skills and Offending Behaviour

Each Pathway has drawn up a Delivery Plan which will be published in March 2007 in the new Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan. Each Pathway is made up of a group of senior professionals drawn from the statutory, private and voluntary and community sectors in differing degrees and meets on a quarterly basis. These Pathways are tasked with addressing the needs of offenders and ex-offenders with the specific purpose of reducing future re-offending.

## **Progress and update**

It is quite remarkable what has happened in the few years since the original research was completed, both in policy and in practice. It is also quite remarkable that visitor numbers have increased between 2004/05 and 2005/06 (with the exception of HMP Acklington which showed a small decline) in the region's prisons (where there is data).

In relation to policy, the North East Regional Resettlement Strategy has developed into a Regional Reducing Re-offending Action Plan (RRAP). Policy has been strengthened and there are moves to operationalise this policy as it relates to parents in prison and visiting families through the development of the FSSP and the associated Delivery Plan. The Delivery Plan and the RRAP are being introduced through service level agreements in an attempt to embed them within the operational (prison) environment – although this is a longer-term process.

There have also been developments within the prisons where the research was carried out, led by the Heads of Resettlement, with the most noteworthy developments being seen within HMP Holme House. Many of the recommendations made in the original research have been fulfilled in certain prisons, for example, addressing staff attitudes and resourcing of the visitor centres.

However, provision for the families of prisoners and parents in prison remains poor in the region's prisons and there continue to be significant gaps in provision. The voluntary and community organisations are best placed to deliver services to families and prisoners, yet they lack sufficient resources and often opportunities in the region's prisons and communities.

## Discussion of findings

There has been much development in work around the reduction of re-offending in the North East since the original research was completed in 2005. The structure is now in place and it now needs populating with agencies, working in partnership with the prisons, that must be allowed to provide their services to prisoners and families.

Currently, there are two unmet needs within the region's prisons: the needs of prisoners to access services and opportunities to help them maintain relationships with their families, particularly their children; and the needs of visiting families and children to have meaningful and stress-free opportunities to spend time with their family member (parent or partner) and to receive support in the community.

The statutory sector is not best placed to provide these services but the VCS is, and it has the will and ability to do so, with one important caveat. Although the VCS has a champion in the form of the FSSP and the ROM, it lacks the resources to be able to provide services in a coordinated and consistent fashion. It says a lot when NEPACS, which provides most of the highly valued services to prisoners' families in the region, cannot meaningfully engage with the FSSP work because they currently lack the funding for a coordinator.

Engagement of and support for the VCS in work to reduce re-offending in partnership with ROM is critical. On an individual prison basis, this engagement and support is, in principle, provided by the VCS coordinator. The strength or weakness of VCS involvement in an establishment is dependent on the coordinator. However, throughout this research, this role has been identified in many cases as being inadequate and ineffective. It has been said that the individual prison officer has the VCS role placed upon them on top of a multitude of other tasks, and that the position is not placed with a sufficiently senior prison grade.

In summary, the strategic structure for work with prisoners and families to reduce re-offending is there, the relationship with the Prison Service is getting there because of the commissioning process, but the content is not yet there, because of the lack of capacity within the VCS. It therefore becomes clear that this lack of capacity requires attention and support, and it is proposed here that this is best done with the appointment of a resource and coordinating person, rather than a regional network.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions are made.

- The RRAP has evolved and matured and there is evidence of significant developments which connect strategy to operation, although there remains a long way to go before the work is fully embedded within the custodial estate and the community.
- Support and services for the families of prisoners and parents in prison in the North East are few and desperately need improving. It is recognised that without the dedicated work of NEPACS, the support to families would be almost non-existent.
- There are examples of good practice in relation to work with the families and children of prisoners in certain prisons in the North East, e.g. HMP Durham, including the use of an assessment tool which is significantly more useful than OASys. These examples of good practice need to be shared and built upon and put into a framework, which ultimately the FSSP is attempting to achieve.
- Some of the recommendations of the original research report have been addressed in certain prisons involved in the research (e.g. HMP Holme House).
- Support work and interventions around the support and maintenance of relationships need to be available to all prisoners and not just the well-behaved. Arguably, the prisoners with most need for support are those which would not stand a chance of getting it because of the criteria.
- The concerns of the Prison Service are being addressed by the ROM and its commissioning process. In many respects, this research will act as a benchmark and baseline to monitor progress in future years.
- It is not clear whether work with prisoners around supporting relationships has any impact in reducing re-offending because there is an absence of evaluation. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that parenting programmes or family links work has an impact. It is therefore strongly recommended that evaluation in these areas is resourced.
- A VCS offender coordinator would be highly valued by the VCS agencies involved in the FSSP and would support the integration of the VCS into the

work of the ROM. There would be many advantages to all sectors, including the Prison and Probation Services, the VCS, families and children and prisoners, from such an appointment. It is proposed that a VCS offender coordinator would serve the VCS's interests on all of the Pathways, with a particular focus on the FSSP. If an initial funding source can be found for this post, and if impact can be demonstrated, then the ROM has expressed an interest in mainstreaming such a position with the advent of full commissioning.

## Recommendations

Based on the research, four recommendations are made below. Three will directly impact on the level and quality of support that is received by the families of prisoners and parents in prison (although not exclusively as there will be other beneficiaries). The remaining recommendation will provide clarity, direction and information to the Pathways.

- A VCS offender coordinator post should be created to provide a range of roles, including project development, identification of funding and partnership working, driving the FSSP Delivery Plan, strategic representation of the VCS, and ensuring the integration of the VCS in the other RRAP Pathways.
- Terms of reference should be created for each Pathway, including introductory information for new members.
- Each Pathway should create an associate membership who receive agendas, minutes and associated material and have the opportunity to participate.
- There should be a review of the VCS coordinator position in each prison, with the minimum grade for such a post being Principal Officer. In addition to this role, which provides day-to-day support for the VCS in the prison (and community), an additional strategic role should be created, at Governor grade, to represent the VCS on the prison's senior management team meeting. This latter role would also negotiate service level agreements and award contracts.

Copies of the full report are available from the Foundation's website [www.nr-foundation.org.uk](http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk) or from its office 0191 284 8412.



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