

# CONNECT

**Let nothing dim the light that  
shines from within.**

**— Maya Angelou**

**“** If anyone who is reading this is struggling with their  
mental health, please reach out for help.

— Read Stanley's Story, Page 7

**“** [Art] is special for us and helps us to clear our heads...

— Read about Karolina, Page 11

**“** We're really thankful that we had the opportunity to  
share our experience...

— Get Some Advice on Release, Page 8

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# Introduction

**W**elcome to the third edition of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) Connect Service User Newsletter. It is another packed edition and the fact that so many of you want to contribute to the newsletter is truly inspirational. You are sharing your thoughts, your reflections, and your experiences to help others, and I want to thank you all for that. As Robin Williams said, “no matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world”.

On this year's front cover, we have a photograph of the Aurora Borealis, or the Northern Lights, that we saw in May of this year. They really were a sight to behold for those of us who were fortunate enough to see them. Some of us slept through them, and some of us just didn't

know what was going on in the skies above us but the photographs on the news and social media in the days after allowed us all have a glimpse. It reinforced for me, that at times what we see depends on what we look for. When we look for negativity, that is exactly what we see but when we look for the positive things and look for the good in people, we can be amazed by

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what surrounds us. Via this newsletter, we are highlighting the good and the positive and we are amazed.

In this edition, we have an interview with Fiona Greene, the Chief Executive of NIACRO. NIACRO are a key partner for PBNI, and a special thanks goes to Fiona for participating in the interview. We have reflections about time spent in custody and how to prepare for

release, we have reflections about being on probation and community service, we have feedback about Duke of Edinburgh and many articles about how creative writing and arts help rehabilitation and desistance. We also have some recipes to try, one of which was provided by the Making a Difference (MAD) Service User group in Ayrshire, and I look forward to seeing your photographs in next year's edition.

We couldn't produce this newsletter without the support of Prison Arts Foundation – thank you, and please do read the article by Prison Arts Foundation on page .

If this edition has inspired you, if you have experiences, stories, art, poems, quotes, recipes or anything else you think others might enjoy reading, please get in touch with your Probation Officer, your Probation Services Officer, or your Community Service Officer via [ServiceUser@probation-ni.gov.uk](mailto:ServiceUser@probation-ni.gov.uk).

I hope you enjoy reading.

**Gillian Montgomery** Director of Operations, PBNI



## Interview with Fiona Greene CEO NIACRO

**I**n January 2024, the Connect Service User Group in Portadown were delighted to welcome Fiona Greene, Chief Executive of NIACRO to their monthly meeting.

The group extended the invite to Fiona having heard from her at a previous PBNI event. As some readers may recall, the Connect group interviewed PBNI Chief Executive, Amanda Stewart shortly after her appointment in 2021 so Fiona knew the level of questioning she was going to receive, and she didn't shy away from the challenge!

Fiona spoke passionately about her role and about the importance of the

Community and Voluntary Sector, and NIACRO in particular, which led to one of the members calling her the “perfect Chief Executive” – we're pretty sure

...the importance of  
“ second, and  
third  
chances...

this phrase is now on display in her office! Fiona spoke about the importance of second, and third chances, and we'd an interesting discussion about body positivity! Here's a snapshot of what Fiona spoke about, the questions and the answers. Our sincere thanks to Fiona for participating.

Fiona opened by providing an overview of some of the services offered by NIACRO in the community and in custody, including the Skillset programme which focuses on training and employment, the APAC programme which focuses on supporting tenancies, the Aspire programme, debt management and welfare/benefits advice. Fiona also told us about the new NIACRO disclosure website that we saw in its early stages and were able to provide feedback on. This provides a calculator to help you work out for how long and when you have to disclose your convictions. Fiona also told us about the work NIACRO are doing with businesses and employers to encourage them to be more open to employing individuals with convictions and some of the progress that has been made in this regard (you can find the full range of NIACRO services by going to NIACRO website [www.niacro.co.uk](http://www.niacro.co.uk)).



## DO YOU WORK IN PRISONS AND WHAT SUPPORT IS OFFERED FOR PRISONERS ON RELEASE?

We work in each of the establishments, and we also run the Visitors Centres for the prison service. We meet with the men and women on committal, and our Family Links team check to see if there are family members that they want us to contact; our staff reach out to mums, partners, grannies - we'll do all of that. We believe that if people keep their relationships up when they're inside, there's more likelihood of them having somewhere to return home to and if that isn't an option, then they'll still have better connection into the community and supports, and have a better chance of reintegrating. It's all about support.

## DO YOU FACE ANY FUNDING PRESSURES OR FINANCIAL CHALLENGES?

We do, we didn't know our full budget this year until June. I've been in the sector over 30 years and this is the way it is. You have to be able to live with that risk, but it's stressful for staff because they have mortgages and bills to pay like everybody else, it's stressful for funders like PBNI because they don't want the services to stop, but anybody who comes into our sector knows there will be financial pressures. But we do our best to look after our staff and we give them good training and skills and we want to pay them well and keep them. We've had many staff work with us for years and years, decades, which says so much about NIACRO.

## WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO JOIN NIACRO, WHAT WAS YOUR VISION, WHAT HAVE YOU BROUGHT TO NIACRO?

I have worked in the sector for a long time. I studied law as my degree, so I always had an interest in policy and how legislation and regulations can be changed for the benefit of people. I went into welfare rights because of my belief in social justice and I've been involved with the Law Centre for a long time as well.

I started out in welfare rights and then worked in Victim Support NI, Chest, Heart and Stroke as their Care Services Director and then I joined NIACRO as Director of Operations. When Olwen Lyner, our former Chief Executive retired, I applied for the role of Chief Executive and was fortunate to get it.

NIACRO wrapped up all of my job experiences and importantly my personal values and beliefs; to be honest, I'm privileged to work in it, never mind lead it.

A really important part of my job is to focus on our staff, because the work they do is so difficult and challenging and important, so I know my place is to look after them. I have come through different organisations and been



the project worker, the middle manager, the senior manager and the board member and Chairperson; I have enjoyed all of those roles so I believe I can bring all of that experience together to lead our team as they carry out challenging roles. Different leaders have different styles and everybody has their own thing to bring. Sometimes I wonder if I am bringing anything new or different and we all doubt ourselves at times – I am no different in that. I am very human and very emotional as well, but that's what drives me.

“...needs are changing,  
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challenges in  
communities.”

I work very closely with our staff, and our key stakeholders like Probation, Prisons and our service users. When funding is tight though we need to look at what works best for the people we are delivering our services for and to. I'm open minded and I'm not wedded to something just because we've always done it – needs are changing, there are more challenges in communities. My vision is that we will grow stronger together and adapt the services we deliver to meet those changing needs.

I believe fundamentally in the work that NIACRO does. I think for everyone working in the criminal justice system, one of our first jobs is to provide hope. A lack of hope can make problems worse and impossible to overcome; if you can connect to one or two people every day and then keep trying day after day then that's really important.

That's my philosophy – keep providing hope.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT?

People who have come through or who are going through the criminal justice system have a lot to say, but often don't get the opportunity. I know you might think I have continued a lot to say but you all have more to say and when you are able to share your experiences with other people that's even better, you can show people what can be achieved with a bit of help and a bit of support. I fully believe that your focus, PBNI's focus on involving service users is absolutely the right thing to do, and it's something that I am keen to do more of. As professionals we try to deliver the best service but we can make assumptions for the best intent; we need not to assume we know best and we must hear directly from you all. I want to give people who use our services the chance to tell me what they want, what works for them and how they want services delivered. That's how we can be the best at what we do!



# ●●● A Holistic Approach to Reintegration

## The Duke of Edinburgh/Endeavour Award

Six service users engaged on a six-month programme to encompass the three sections of the bronze endeavour award. The group worked in collaboration with the Quaker Connections, who with the support of volunteers delivered 6 cookery classes and were able to support the participants to complete Level 1 in Basic Food and Hygiene Certificates.

The cookery classes covered cooking on a budget and incorporated information sessions on employment, training, disclosure, budgeting, benefits (NIACRO) and Hidden Water's – circle of support. The service users have fully engaged with the programme and enjoyed sitting around the table and sampling their culinary dishes and conversations.

### ACTIVITIES

Crosskennan lane animal sanctuary gave us the privilege of supporting them in looking after their horses. The group also went on a social visit to the Ulster Museum and an art exhibition at 2 Royal Avenue run by the Prison Arts Foundation. Another strand of this programme is the service user group, which is open and will continue past the life of the programme. We were pleased and privileged that Aileen McLaughlin (Assistant Director) joined us for a session making us feel valued and listened to.

Closure of the programme will be a



celebration of success for the service users, and also their way of thanking the programme providers.

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### WAYNE (REFLECTIONS)

With the realization that successful re-entry into society demands more than mere freedom, probation has embraced an innovative support system. This involves focused support groups tailored to the unique needs of ex-prisoners, evidencing a shift towards holistic rehabilitation. At the heart of this paradigm lies the transformative power of focused activities and communal engagement. In this article, we delve into the multifaceted landscape of one such pioneering support group, where individuals find solace, guidance, and a path towards meaningful reintegration. From collaborative endeavours like the Probation Service User Group to hands-on experiences in cookery and volunteering at a local animal sanctuary, participants are offered a diverse array of avenues for growth and self-discovery.

### EMPOWERMENT

However, beyond the mere mechanics of activity, the underlying ethos of these support groups is rooted in the cultivation of self-belief and personal development. By fostering a sense of agency and autonomy, participants are empowered to navigate the complexities of post-incarceration life with resilience and determination. Moreover, these groups serve as bastions against the pervasive spectre of isolation, offering a lifeline of camaraderie and support in the face of societal stigmatization.

### INVOLVEMENT

Central to their mission is the cultivation of confidence and collaboration, essential ingredients for successful reintegration into the fabric of society. Through collaborative projects and initiatives, participants not only hone valuable skills, but also rediscover their innate capacity for contribution. Whether through the pursuit of the Endeavour Award or the collective endeavour of working on their own initiatives, every step taken within these support groups is a testament to the transformative power of community and purpose.

Ultimately, the aims and goals of these support groups extend far beyond mere rehabilitation; they encompass the profound



quest for redemption, belonging, and a renewed sense of purpose. By providing a safe space for growth and healing, they pave the way for ex-prisoners to reclaim their rightful place in society, armed with self-belief, resilience, and a steadfast commitment to making a meaningful contribution.

## THE DOFE ENDEAVOUR AWARD

### GARETH (REFLECTIONS)

I was asked if I wanted to partake in the HRH Duke of Edinburgh award without knowing too much about it. I assumed it was a nonsensical government scheme to encourage people of low education, the unemployed, or people with physical or mental dispositions to basically get off their backsides. While all of the aforementioned might be true, reading about the history of it, meeting the people organizing it and mainly those volunteering, have completely changed my opinion on how I look at it.

### ATTRIBUTES

I am part of a team of 6 volunteers and 3 organizers at a small but wholesome sanctuary for mistreated animals mainly horses. The tasks while menial and not very rewarding, are of course things that need done for the animals, and that's the most important part of it all. They might be horses that we work with for the most part, but after some time I like to think that we as volunteers and those horses draw similar parallels. I've learnt some of the horses were badly treated, not looked after and lived in miserable environments', just like us as

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volunteers and people may have. My main concern is not for the award, but for the inurement that for however long these animals live, it will be in a better and happier environment. This is all the gratification I need. It's a truly wonderful way to spend a day, and something I absolutely both recommend and implore anyone to look into and try if the occasion arises.

### BEST SELF

The second part is that I earlier drew a parallel with the animals and would like to expand on that a little further. I know without

going into too much detail that my fellow volunteers like me, have come from difficult circumstances, and I see how this experience can elevate them. This cannot be ignored. I believe people have it in them to show others the best side of themselves and to rise above judgement, and that's something I've seen working with every one of them, and it's been a pleasure.

### RECOGNITION



It cannot, however, go unmentioned, in my opinion, that the organizer in charge of the award (Claire) and her team (Ciaran & Virginia) have been the true heroes behind this. I cannot say with any confidence that I trust the government in the decisions they make and how they treat some members of society. However, I can say these organizers do not get the funding they deserve or enough recognition. It shows me that while I may not have faith in the system, there are people who care and are devoted. They can rise above judgement to help people see the best versions of themselves, and I cannot be more grateful for it. When times get difficult we forget what that best version can be, and these people have helped me at least see its still there.

### OPPORTUNITIES

Another mention for the Quaker Connections who are a wonderful organization I have since read about, who operate throughout the country and beyond offering amazing opportunities. They have some great people (Kate), helping people rediscover themselves. Through the DofE award team I have had the chance to enjoy some light cooking courses that I never thought in a million years I'd have been interested in. Once

again it shows just how passionate these organizers are, and how underappreciated they can be. I will urge anybody to get involved with them if the opportunity arises.

Healthy Breakfast!

### SERVICE USER GROUP (BELFAST)

Again the sceptic in me says what will this actually change? Well, I can see the benefit of it in helping people undertaking probation by making it less intimidating, and a less anxious experience. by giving those going through it a voice to oversee change. I often use the phrase, "I want to be humanized," and of course being given the chance to voice concerns helps with that. I can't take any credit for it as it was not my idea, but

other guys in the group suggested removal of screens to make people feel less enclosed and caged when talking in the offices. Much to my surprise they actually took them down. So again, it removes a little of the scepticism I have in the system and departments in place. They are listening so we have a voice.

### SEAN

"I find it difficult being in groups, but this group made me beat that fear and I greatly appreciate it.

"To all the amazing people who have worked with me, those versions of the devil are not me anymore. Thank you all for helping me bloom into the best of me. I will honour each and every one of you for contributing to my growth. Most of all passing the crown,

**Continued Page 22...**



# ●●● Recipes to try!

## EASY JAM FLAPJACKS

Soft, delicious flapjacks with a layer of tasty jam. These are really simple to make and are healthy (sort of)!!

### WHAT YOU NEED

- A 20cm x 20cm tin
- Medium size saucepan
- Greaseproof paper
- Wooden / plastic spoon
- Knife (not a sharp knife!)

### INGREDIENTS

- 250 g unsalted butter

- 150 g light brown sugar
- 2 tbsp golden syrup
- 350 g porridge oats
- 180 g raspberry jam

### METHOD

Line a 20x20cm tin with greaseproof paper and preheat the oven to 170°C (fan, 190°C non fan). If you don't have greaseproof paper, you will need to coat your tin really well with butter to try to stop them sticking.

Melt the butter, sugar and syrup in a saucepan over a medium heat and stir regularly.

Add the porridge oats to the pan with the melted mixture and stir until they are completely coated in the butter mixture.

Put half of the mixed oat mixture into the lined tin and spread across the tin – try

to make this an even layer.

Add the jam on top of the layer of oats and spread evenly.

Add the rest of the oat mixture on top and spread evenly. Bake in the oven for 35-40 minutes, or a little longer if you prefer crunchier flapjacks. Check the mixture after 30 minutes to make sure it isn't going too brown at the edges. Some of the jam might bubble up through the oats – that's ok, it makes it extra chewy!

Leave to cool in the tin for 30 minutes before removing and leaving to cool completely on a wire rack. Cut into squares and ENJOY!!

Please take some photos of your flapjacks and send them to [ServiceUser@probation-ni.gov.uk](mailto:ServiceUser@probation-ni.gov.uk) or to your Probation Officer / Probation Service Officer and we'll publish in our next edition!



## Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Cake Bar

### WHAT YOU NEED

- A 20cm x 20cm (roughly) tin
- Small saucepan
- Medium sized bowl
- Greaseproof paper
- Wooden / plastic spoon
- Knife (not a sharp knife!)

### INGREDIENTS

- 130g butter
- 50g caster sugar
- 150g light brown sugar
- 1 large egg
- 1sp vanilla extract

- 280g plain flour
- 1 tsp bicarbonate soda
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1 tbsp cornflour
- 200g chocolate chips

### METHOD

Preheat your oven to 160 Fan/180°C/ Gas Mark 4. Line the tin with baking paper.

Put the butter into a small saucepan and melt it over a low heat.

Add your melted butter and both sugars to a large bowl and mix together until fully combined.

Add in your egg and vanilla extract and mix again until fully combined.

Add in your flour, bicarbonate of soda, salt and cornflour and mix until you form a yummy cookie dough.

Add in your chocolate chips and hold

back 20-30g to pop on top of the bar.

Spoon mixture into cake tin and push to edges. Push some chocolate chips on top.

Place in pre-heated oven for 22-25 minutes or until a skewer comes out fairly clean.

Leave to cool in the tin for around 20 minutes.

### OPTIONAL

Drizzle melted chocolate over the top. Enjoy!

Please take some photos of your flapjacks and send them to [ServiceUser@probation-ni.gov.uk](mailto:ServiceUser@probation-ni.gov.uk) or to your Probation Officer / Probation Service Officer and we'll publish in our next edition!

Thanks to our friends in the Making a Difference Service User Group in Ayrshire for this recipe!



# Stanley's story

**M**y name is Stanley and in 2005 I was given a life sentence with a minimum term of 12 ½ years to serve before being considered for release. At the outset, I need to say that I am so very sorry for what I did and anything I write here about the challenges I faced doesn't take away from how my victim's family felt.

When I was coming back in the prison van after court, the only way I can describe how I was feeling was stunned. I knew I was going to get a life sentence for the crime I committed, and I believe I deserved this sentence, but I was still shocked. I know that might be difficult for you to understand but I didn't know what prison held for me in the next, at least, 12 ½ years. I was sentenced in an English Court, so I started my time in an English prison. I wanted to come 'home' as my family couldn't travel back and forth from Northern Ireland to see me, so I started the process of requesting a transfer to Maghaberry prison straight away. This took well over a year to happen.

## CHALLENGES IN CUSTODY

The prisons I was in from my time on remand right through to release had issues with

If anyone who is reading this is struggling with their mental health, please reach out for help.

drugs, and mental health challenges experienced by prisoners and staff alike. I entered the prison system with an addiction which added more pressure on me; I had a choice to make, and I decided that I wanted to break the addiction which wasn't easy due to the availability of substances.

It took me two to three years to come to terms with what I had done and the seriousness of my crime and it affected me mentally. I had nightmares, and depression, and my thought process was all over the

place. At various stages over the 12 ½ years in prison I got it hard mentally and depression would have set in but I did a lot of courses which helped me overcome my mental health issues and addiction problem. It was really hard as I had lost my family, my friends and my freedom. But I got myself back to near as normal as you could be in a prison.

## WHAT WORKED FOR ME

I knew I needed to fill my time, to distract me from thinking about my addiction. I applied for a job and worked 7 days per week when I could, I progressed to a trusted job and worked from 9am until 4pm. This helped me put a lot of my time in and gave me confidence in myself. I got to know a lot of long term and lifer prisoners, and I saw that they were going through the same emotions I went through. I wanted to be able to help them and I applied to be a 'Listener' in the prison. I had to complete an intense six week course and I passed the exam at the end of the course and was assigned, with another inmate, to a wing of 38 inmates. We were on call 24/7. This was a responsible position to be in and helping others, helped me. Over a year and a half we had 100s of requests for help from inmates. We dealt with inmates who were suicidal, depressed, finding it hard to cope with being locked up in prison away from their partners, wives and families. I had to deal with a lot of their depression and state of their minds, and making sure that inmates knew how their families were coping without them at home, health wise, financial etc. This experience really helped me get through my time in prison, both mentally and physically. If anyone who is reading this is struggling with their mental health, please reach out for help. If you are currently in prison, please get in contact immediately with a listener, the SO, or your Probation Officer, they will help you through your times of need.

## A LITTLE HELP...

After work in the evenings was one of the most difficult times for me. I spent a couple of hours with the friends I had made in prison, they were people like me who I knew weren't going to take me down a wrong path. After lock-up I watched TV and read a lot of books, I had gone to art classes and over a period of time learned how to sketch portraits,

which I did for some prisoners, so I got into a routine and accepted this is what I had to do for 12 ½ years.

My sister Margaret was a fantastic help to me. I was on the phone to her most nights, and had many visits from her which was priceless, she brought me my clothes and always made sure I had enough money for my canteen. Also, what helped me was that she told me that when I got out, I could have a place to live in her home.

My faith is very important to me and I have relied on my faith in the Lord to get me through dark days and weeks.

## SUMMARY

So, this is just a very long story made very short, I could write a book. But in summary, custodial sentences are challenging and you



have hard choices to make from the outset. Don't let anyone tell you it's easy, it isn't.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If I could leave you with a few pieces of advice, they would be: Use your free time well, get a job or go to courses or both, and spend your time with people who you know aren't a bad influence on you. It will give you something else to think about other than the length of time you are going to inside and it helps the days go quicker. Keep links with your family / support network on the outside. You'll need them when you get out. Ask for help if you're struggling with depression, anxiety or any mental health issue.

**Stanley Service User**

# ●●● Our Advice for Release from Custody

**O**n 28 November 2023, some members of the Connect Service User group from Portadown were invited by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) to go to Magilligan Prison to meet with a group of individuals in prison who were nearing the end of their sentence, to talk about our experiences of leaving prison and trying to settle into the community again.

## A RETURN VISIT

This was one of a number of initiatives that NIPS put on to celebrate International Men's Day. Our group had been asking for quite a while about the opportunity to go back into the prisons to share our experiences, to tell the prisoners what worked and what didn't work for us, to help them avoid some of the pitfalls that we know about because of our experiences. When we received the invite, we couldn't turn it down, even if it meant leaving at 7.00am and over a 2hr drive to get there! It was nerve wracking going back to the prison and the closer we got, the more anxious we got, but the car journey gave us the chance to talk through with our group facilitators what we really wanted to get across, and also to talk through how we were feeling. At our service user group earlier that month we had discussed with all group members what experiences we needed to share and we brought a checklist with us in case nerves took over and we forgot what we wanted to say! We've included the key points here and these are relevant no matter how long you have been out for. We're really thankful that we had the opportunity to share our experience and hope it is something that we can repeat in all of the prisons.

## OUR ADVICE FOR LIFE ON THE OUTSIDE

### KEY POINTS

Get ID before you get out if possible – it makes everything easier!

Get a Bank Account sorted if you can.

Get help setting up Universal Credit before you get out – link with your PO or NIACRO to help you.

Get details of the GP surgeries in the area you are being released to – if you've lived in the area before, that's fine but that's not always the case.

Save some money from your jobs, don't spend it all on tuck shop or when on ATRs / UTRs!

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experience...

### BE PREPARED

For it to take time to build up trust again with family and friends – they will remember what you did that caused you to end up inside, show them by your actions and how you make them feel, that you really have changed.

To give up some of your friends / friendship group on the outside to help you stay out of contact with Police.

For some challenges if you are going to a hostel in terms of availability of drugs and some of the people in hostels – this is a test of your ability to make good choices to help you stay out of prison.

To abide by your licence conditions / curfews – this can be hard, but you need to do it to stay outside.

A level of frustration when dealing with other agencies – nothing happens as quickly as you want it to but keep a cool head and talk to your Probation Officer if you are getting frustrated.

For challenges that you haven't expected – have a plan now for how you will try to deal with them.

### WHAT HELPED US

Keep yourself busy and use your time well, this might be a job, volunteering,

linking in with a local church, drawing, painting – whatever works for you.

Working with Probation – work hard to build up a good relationship with your Probation Officer, inside and outside. Be open with them, they are not there to get you recalled – they want you to stay out and be the best you can be. If you can't get on with your Probation Officer, raise it properly, don't stop attending appointments – that will get you recalled!

Taking support where it was available – peer mentoring is a great support and this is available through a number of organisations now.

Not overpromising – it takes time to settle back into the outside, take each day as it comes, set small goals for yourself each day, even if that is only getting up, making your bed and getting showered – if you just make your bed every day, you have achieved something. During the hard days, this is really important.

Having a plan for how we were going to avoid alcohol / drugs – it isn't enough to simply say I won't use when I get out, you need to have a plan for how you will avoid when you are tempted, believe us, you will be tempted.

Lining up support in advance of getting out – be that through work, volunteering, Church, NI Alternatives, counselling, addiction support, whatever it is that you know you are going to need.

Keeping your mind active – this might be doing a crossword, going to the gym, painting, creative writing – you will know what works for you. But have this planned.

Knowing that there are food banks and





clothing banks in most locations where you can access if you need help and knowing that the people who work there are really kind and want to see us succeed. If you need help getting set up when you get out, St Vincent De Paul and Drop Inn centres may be able to assist with getting the practicalities sorted like furniture, clothes, electricity/gas/oil.

#### FINAL PIECES OF ADVICE

Prepare for release now – don't wait until the

months before you are due for release / eligible for release.

Link in with Probation at the earliest opportunity, also with NIACRO, Start 360 and whatever other supports are in the prison so this can be set up on the outside for you without you having to wait.

Do as many courses as you can. This will help when you get to the Parole Commissioners but you need to show by

your actions and behaviour that you have learned from the courses.

It's challenging but it is worth it! Don't risk getting recalled over something you can avoid doing!

#### Connect Service User Group



## Ashes to Gold Group

**O**n 23<sup>rd</sup> November the charity Ashes to Gold celebrated 10 years with an open day and thanksgiving lunch for the local community at their Grow Project/ Restore Workshop on the Dunhill Road in Coleraine.

Two service users from the Coleraine area attended along with Probation Staff. Both service users and Probation staff were very impressed with the open day, enjoyed lunch and meeting the Causeway Coast and Glens' Mayor Steven Callaghan who took the time to have a good chat.

#### FACILITIES

Ashes to Gold are a charity committed to promoting positive mental health and providing support for those in need. They support people with special or additional needs, long term unemployed or are undertaking Community Service. Ashes to Gold support clients by teaching new skills, providing counselling and empowering them with the ability to make a difference in their lives. They have various projects in the Causeway Coast and Glens area.

The **Grow Project** provides opportunities for horticultural activities for community day placements referred by the local trust and some places for Community Service within Probation. Basic skills from planting seeds to harvesting are taught, with follow on workshops and cookery classes with the final produce. There were many beautiful flowers/ plants on display at the open day.

The **Restore Workshop** has a team of woodwork experts who run workshops teaching their skills in a variety of projects. On display at the open day was an array of impressive work including reindeer, Christmas trees, snowmen and trains all

crafted from wood by various community groups.

Ashes to Gold are a  
charity  
committed to  
promoting  
positive  
mental health...

#### Other Ashes to Gold projects:

**OASIS** – is a counselling service. Grief counselling, mental health support, support given for addiction with SMART Recovery programmes planned for 2024. Oasis also has an emergency food bank available for those in crisis.

**MOORBROOK** – café and fisheries

**Kicking Habits** – kickboxing project

**Blossom women's group** – a ladies only project, who have to date delivered self defence classes, DIY workshops, craft workshops, sewing, basic car mechanics, gardening and have many projects planned for 2024.

**Love Grace** – a project within **Blossom** whereby it collects, prepares and delivers handbags to various women's refuges around the country, as well as local women who may not live in a refuge but have been affected by domestic abuse, harassment or male violence.

(Bags can be preloved but all toiletries or treats must be new/unused)

**Liz Coleraine**



# ASHES TO GOLD

# ●●● The Therapeutic Benefits of Diamond Art



Cat or Tiger?



Affirmations



True Reflection?

I discovered Diamond Art in Rehab. I'm a recovering alcoholic and have been sober now for just over a year.

During my period of heavy addiction, I found myself in chaotic situations, unfortunately leading to police intervention and finally the support of Probation. I had suffered a stroke during this time also.

## RECOVERY TOOL

Diamond Art Painting was one of the most useful tools in my recovery. When I began my Rehabilitation programme in Newry, I suffered 'Wet brain'. My mushy brain meant that I was unable to think clearly or well. The volatile decisions I made whilst in addiction led me getting into trouble with the police for drink driving and altercations with my then husband.

## FOCUS

Diamond Art is an effective way to eliminate depression and sadness. While doing painting with tiny diamond beads I felt more focused and relaxed. It helped improve the strength of my hands and fingers which had been affected by my stroke. Debilitating arthritis and other hand-finger wrist issues took away the pleasures of life that I once took for granted. These issues affected the capability of my mind. That's why doctors and Health Care Professionals encourage such patients to take up a hobby such as Diamond art.

## INTRICACY

Diamond Art is beneficial for the brain and provides significant mental exercise. The process of diamond art is done with different steps. Like sorting the tiny differently coloured diamond beads, picking them up then placing the beads on the tiny symbols on the canvas and this process is continued until an intricately beautiful pattern is created. These steps have major

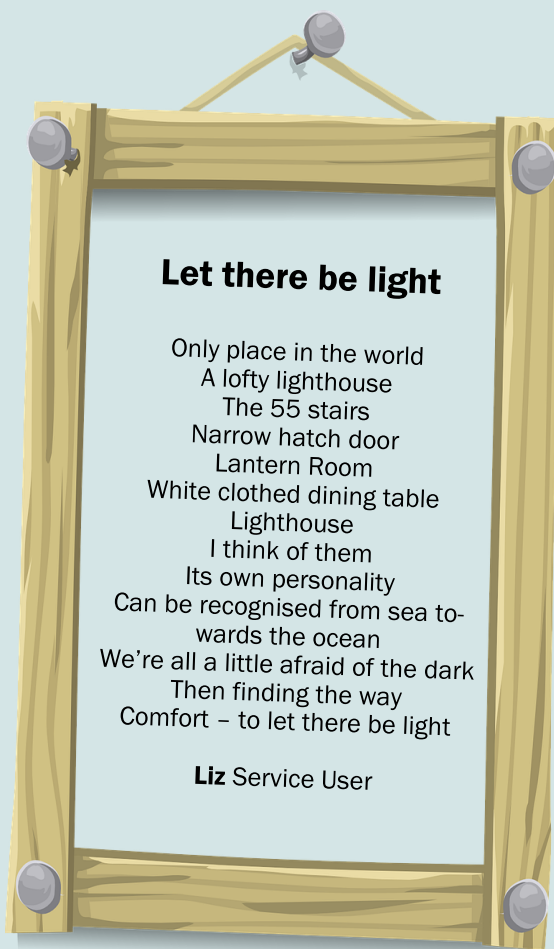
impacts on the mind. The repetitive movements of the diamond beads build a good mental focus and sharpen your mind. Your brain will become more active and focused during the whole process of diamond Art.

## MOTIVATIONAL

Diamond painting is a proper workout that requires your full attention. It improves your mental focus. It can boost your memory and strengthen your mind. It can keep you motivated for work. You will feel much more productive after doing the diamond art – I certainly did! Ultimately, Diamond Art is an enjoyable and wonderful hobby. Loss of control is a very common side effect of addiction, and this type of therapy helped me learn how to refocus, re-discipline myself and most of all enjoy and live a healthy life!

Angela Service User

Diamond Art is an effective way to eliminate depression and sadness.



## Let there be light

Only place in the world  
A lofty lighthouse  
The 55 stairs  
Narrow hatch door  
Lantern Room  
White clothed dining table  
Lighthouse  
I think of them  
Its own personality  
Can be recognised from sea to-  
wards the ocean  
We're all a little afraid of the dark  
Then finding the way  
Comfort – to let there be light

Liz Service User



# ●●● Karol's Christmas Tree

**I**nnovative and creative is how we like to think of Karol our service user whose festive decorations have been taking on a life of their own in his locality.

Karol tells us he always enjoyed art when he was at school in Poland and was always interested in creative pursuits. He states that he discovered decoration ideas during lockdown in 2022 on Pinterest and decided he could have a go and maybe improve on what was already out there!

## CREATIVITY

He initially experimented with putting together 'little trees' as presents for

family and friends, and teachers at Christmas time. He sourced the wood from his previous employer as it was going to be scrapped and then sourced other items in January sales from local retail outlets. Karol tells us that he finds the cutting, burning, designing very relaxing and enables him to forget about his worries when he is creating it. From start to finish he tells us 5 hours of labour goes into each 'little tree'.

Karol is looking at new projects for 2024, possibly plant boxes and we wish him well with his creativity.

Karol, thank you for sharing with us.



Karol's 'Little Tree'



A Little Red Tree

“ [H]e finds the cutting, burning and designing very relaxing

# ●●● Karolina's Creative Art

**I** starting to have an interest in Art aged 10. I started by making cards for family for Birthdays, Easter and Christmas. It made me happy being able to do this for people. I always came first in Art at school. I liked to make masks using beads and glue.

I use all sorts of materials for my art now. I will see pieces of rubbish and know that I can make something with it. I will have a vision for it. I have boxes and boxes of different materials at home. My daughter likes Art so it is something that we can do together when we have contact. It is special for us and helps us to clear our

[Art] is special for us and helps us to clear our heads...

heads and forget about everything else.

## DE-STRESS

This piece that you see was made from shells that I collected from the beach. I always bring home stones and shells when I am at the beach. Sometimes I will spend a long time looking for a particular shell because it is in my vision for my art. I will keep looking until I find the shell that I want. When I paint with my hands I push my negative emotions out from my mind

through my fingers. It helps me deal with my stress. I would encourage other people to take different materials and try it. My message would be to try and don't give up.

**Karolina** Service User



Karolina's Wonderful Shell Art

# Conor's Art

I started doing Art in P6. Because of my ADHD the Teacher made me sit on my own with my desk facing the wall. Because I had no-one to talk to I started to doodle in class. When I was 13 I started to do pieces like the Mona Lisa and Leonardo Di Vinci in crayons. They were really good, I wish I still had them.

I had a Math's and English Teacher who saw that I wasn't really into Math and English so he said there was no point in trying to teach me them. But he also was into Art and he knew I was too, so we started to do paintings together.

“ I am very self-critical and I am a perfectionist

## SELF-TAUGHT

My art got even bigger when I helped to paint a mural at St Brigid's school in Kilkeel. I have never had any proper art training or qualifications , I am self-

taught. I can spend 1 or 2 hours working on a piece of Art if my concentration allows it. Sometimes because of my ADHD I might not finish a piece because my mind has moved on to another one. Anyone can draw but you have to really want to do it because it takes a lot of time.

## STANDARDS

I enjoy working on my Art but there are 2 sides to it. I am very self-critical and I am a perfectionist. Even when people compliment me on it I know that I can do better. But my mind is always ahead of me thinking about the next thing

Make  
art  
Often

because of my ADHD.

## SOME EXAMPLES

The pieces that you see here are examples of what I like to draw. I like to draw beautiful women as I admire their figure. This drawing is of Demi-Rose who is a model and has a beautiful natural figure. I liked drawing the dog as I love animals. I love the way he looks as he holds the stick in his mouth. You can see the texture of his fur. I am looking forward to see my art in print in the magazine and have my own copy.

Conor Service User



Some of Conor's Art





# ●●● Making Belfast Work

## Interview

**W**hat follows is an interview with a service user about the Making Belfast Work programme.

### **TELL ME ABOUT THE PROGRAMME YOU WERE INVOLVED WITH.**

This was funded by 'Making Belfast Work', it was a 3 year scheme for "offenders who could empathise rather than sympathise", there were 12-15 of us who were spread out all over Northern Ireland but mainly Belfast, Larne and Bangor. We acted as Outreach Workers who worked with the young people who came in. I was based on the Falls Road and the Shankill. We did Duke of Edinburgh, First Aid, Drug Awareness and took them canoeing, abseiling, mountaineering and weightlifting. The PO referred them to me and another worker as part of their sentence or at PSR stage and they did a course with us. We then wrote reports to the PO and to Court.

### **HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THIS?**

I was on Probation for 6 months for 'joyriding' in the early nineties, I was doing the courses, I did Duke of Edinburgh and then stayed on voluntary and finished it. I did my Duke of Ed leadership and then became an instructor. I did my Bronze Medallion to be a lifeguard, completed First Aid courses and trained in the Mournes. Tim Chapman was involved at the time and he pushed it forward for me to apply. "He saw the potential". I was only 19 but I went for the interview and then got a call back.

### **WHAT IS A STAND OUT MEMORY FOR YOU?**

There were so many memories. I remember the cross-community work, we would have brought both Protestants and Catholics to the YMCA and we just didn't think of the tensions at the time. We were the fastest group to get our Duke of Edinburgh and Royalty came to meet us.

I have great memories working with Challenge for Youth and working with NIACRO. I really liked it because you had a lot of contacts, you knew people who you could lift the phone to if someone needed help.

I also remember when a group member got sick when we were out on the canoes, we

had to act quickly, act responsibly and canoe to get help.

There was another time that a shark came up Strangford Lough, we had to get out of the water immediately.

We found a body in the Lagan, again I had to be responsible and look after the young people in my care. That was a traumatic day.

You wanted to get  
up in the  
“ morning and  
go to work.

### **YOU WOULD HAVE MET MANY PROBATION STAFF AT THAT TIME, WHAT QUALITIES DO YOU THINK MAKES A GOOD PROBATION OFFICER?**

There was always a good atmosphere in the office, there was banter, you could laugh and carry on. We weren't made to go there, we wanted to go there. I remember Tina, Marita, big Tom all from the Falls Road, and the receptionist Fiona. It's all about getting on with people. I remember the PO would have drove up to lift you. She pushed you. She was good at building your self-esteem. She went the extra mile.

Probation gave me a start! They were good to work for, but I also remember a change in the management during my time. When I started there was a manager there who was approachable, if you had a problem, his door was always open, he was really nice. Then they brought in another manager, it felt that he didn't

believe that me and the other worker had the right to be there. It was as if he felt we were being rewarded for being bad. Other people said it gave us a chance to get on our feet. I remember a big issue in the news at that time, republicans and loyalists were getting out under the Good Friday Agreement and were getting jobs, this caused a split in opinion. It felt like that for us too because we had been on probation.

### **WHAT SKILLS OR QUALITIES DID YOU BRING TO THE JOB?**

I was a guy for taking charge, I was responsible. It was really important to be able to relate to people. I also knew my bearings, I got that from stealing cars! I also came with experience, so when the young people came in telling stories, I could empathise with that. I also knew what was real and what was bravado. The role worked really well, the young people would speak to you, there was a difference with your role and a PO's role.

I was a success story, I didn't have to convince them to stop offending, they saw me working for PBNI, getting a wage, they respected that and then thought 'I can do that too'.

### **HOW DID THIS WORK IMPACT YOU?**

I loved it!

You wanted to get up in the morning and go to work.

It gave me confidence, I didn't think that I was smart enough, but you had to do a test as part of the course and I came out top of the class! I was working from experience.

### **ARE THERE ANY LESSONS LEARNED FOR YOU? WHAT HAVE YOU TAKEN AWAY WITH YOU?**

I remember loads of people's stories! I remember a young traveller who was to have an arranged marriage, I remember talking to him about his situation, he had no choice! He was petrified. I remember talking to loads of people about their situation.

I also remember the cross-community work, it impacted me. To start with I went across with my name badge 'Liam', I came across an 80-90 year old woman who used sectarian language towards me, my name badge said 'William' after that.

I wouldn't change it for the world, it set me





up for life. That was my first job and I had good support. It taught me how to work with people, how to work with bosses, how to communicate, it taught me respect.

### WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON 'SERVICE USER INVOLVEMENT'?

Probation needs to get opinions of their clients.

I think things are too formal now, too many rules and regulations, the authority thing is difficult, some young people don't like an authority figure. The way it worked back then was, they had a PO and then they had us as mentor. It worked because they had to go and see their PO so we were able to link in with that, it meant they came out more. Sometimes I would have went in as a support person when they were completing

PSR interviews, the young person felt more secure. Some young people you can catch, befriend them, take them out, they would share things with me and then if there was concerns I would go back to the PO. The relationship worked well, I was one of the boys but they knew that I worked for PBNi. A lot of communication is about what's not said too. It takes a while to build up trust, it takes time.

If there was a funding opportunity, Probation should bring some people onto their books, have these people on hand, they are there to follow through with the clients. One of the worst things about the Making Belfast Work was that the funding was just gone! We no longer had a professional duty to talk to that person anymore, once trust has been built up and

then it's just cut! You need to be able to follow through.

Young people now is all about technology, we didn't have the phones then that they do now, it's a barrier. Could probation introduce an app that's interactive, that they can speak to their PO through, or be able to put grievances through on the app. It could be for information, but it should be reader friendly. Often probation has too much information written down and it's not easy to understand for young people.

The personality the PO has or the style they have of doing the job is important, the best examples of good working was the informal, having a bit of banter, getting on with people. People not criminals.

**Anonymous**

## Community Service Story

**D**iane (not her real name), was sentenced to 75 hours Community Service for stealing food. It was her first time in court, and she found it a scary experience. At the time, she was suffering from depression.

She had limited friends at school and was not academically minded but interested in beauty and healthcare. Keen to gain employment, she was enthusiastic about enrolling in the NIACRO programme alongside Community Service, where service users gain help with employment skills and see credit for up to 20 percent of the sentence for courses completed. During her Community Service, she worked with Janette to put in job applications, and develop her CV.

### CONCERNS

She was very nervous at her Community Service induction, but had a choice of placements, and this helped to settle nerves. She also had a pre-visit before her Community Service hours started, to remove her anxiety about starting. Diane did her Community Service in Lisburn City Church, where she helped with the foodbank and cleaning duties. Their welcoming environment and non-judgmental approach coupled with assisting people who need their services, helped to develop Diane's confidence and allowed her to contribute meaningful work alongside the team. She is now moving to a new placement on Saturdays because she has just been successful at securing employment.

### REASSURE

Diane says: "Community Service was amazing for me, it made me feel so much better about my situation by meeting new people and doing things for people without anything in return. I lost my job due to what I did and now I am nearly finished my community service, and I have a full-time job that I enjoy now, because my community service pushed me to being better. I

Welcoming environment  
and non-judgemental  
approach...

am now back to myself doing better and would love to say thanks to LCC Community trust for making me feel good in a bad situation. You made me feel so welcome."

**Mairia** Community Service Officer



Foodbank volunteering

# ●●●She Leaves the Room

If you have any sort of faith or religious beliefs, there has probably been a time in your life when you have questioned the existence of the divine (no matter how you may conceive God to be). There are very rare occasions when someone is given a sign. This is the true story of one of those occasions.

## ON THE BEATING OF SILENT WINGS

It was a Wednesday. The weather was cold and dry, grey clouds cast an oppressive gloom over everything. I note this as a fact, briefly observed through a window, but it has no bearing on this tale.

We had already instructed the ward staff to remove all the now unnecessary apparatus of life. As, trolley by trolley, banks of equipment were removed from the room we bore silent witness as our daughter was slowly, and tenderly, freed from a tangle of cables, leads and tubes. The room quieted and we were finally spared the incessant electronic cacophony of beeps and alarms. Harbingers of doom whose message had been received and understood.

At this point our sole focus was on her. The entirety of our reality starkly defined by the

sterile hospital walls and harsh, clinging scent of antiseptic pervading the room we were in our universe, this room, revolved around the single bed cast adrift in its center. A bed upon which our daughter lay in quiet repose, like Sleeping Beauty awaiting true love's kiss. A kiss, which for her, would never come.

## SAD FAREWELLS

Knowing that time was limited, but unknowing of what quantity remained to us, we invited the family into the room to bid their farewells. Grandparents, followed by uncles and aunts, were granted a few precious moments each. Once the last family members had been gently ushered out by the ward staff they

...a final sharp  
inhalation in  
anticipation of  
the pain to  
come.

huddled outside the room's windows, drawing comfort and solace from each other's presence amidst shared tears.

We closed the blinds and shut the door, cocooning ourselves away from the world. For a busy children's ward, it was unnaturally quiet. As though the entire unit was holding its collective breath. A final sharp inhalation in anticipation of the pain to come.

## GRAND ADVENTURES

We sat down on her bed, one on each side, sandwiching her between us. We each wrapped our arms around her and held her tightly. With my free hand I opened my Kindle and read the last chapter of *The Hobbit* out loud, determined to finish one last story for her. Stories had always been our favorite way of connecting. She had always loved it when I gave characters their own unique voices. Over the past seven years

her giggles had slowly turned to smiles and finally into a roll of her eyes as her ability to communicate had deteriorated. The story of Bilbo, as he had grand adventures, fighting trolls, giant spiders and finally the evil dragon, Smaug, was one of her favorites. Like Bilbo she had had adventures and fought her battles, but Bilbo had had a mighty hero who had slain his dragon for him. Bilbo was able to go home to his beloved Bag End and live happily ever after. Her dragon was called Batten's Disease, and even though she had been just as brave, fought every bit as hard as Bilbo, it had won their battle. Her story would end here today, in our arms.

## ANGEL

Whilst I read mum stroked her hair and face with tender caresses. Her eyes were closed as she lay between us, her breathing slow and shallow. We instinctively knew, as we exchanged glances, that her race was almost run. I set aside my Kindle and in an unspoken agreement we took her hands in ours and prayed to her "Guardian Angel." As we had done for every night of her thirteen and a half years. There was peace in the routine and grace of the prayer. When we had finished mum used her phone to play a piece of music, a lullaby. It had been written especially for her as a gift by a close family friend. The piece was a haunting roundelay. Its repetitive melody gradually falls away into the softest notes of a piano. A beautiful, personal gift for a child who had not been able to see since she was six years old. Listening to this piece always filled us with a sense of gratitude to have had such wonderfully talented people show their appreciation for our amazing child.

## TIME STOPPED

We squeezed her hands and kissed her forehead. Her eyes flickered beneath their lids, so we knew she was aware of us, still with us. Then mum spoke, "It's okay baby, you can let go, mummy and daddy will be ok." Tears began their slow, creeping passage down our faces as mum continued.

"We love you up a sky and down baby, it's okay, let go."

I managed to croak out a feeble, "We love you baby." I was afraid to utter any more lest she hear the break in my voice.





# Patrick's Story



In that moment time stopped for me and in that frozen instant my senses exploded. I could feel every pore of the skin on her fine, delicate hand. I could fathom the depth of fragrance in the perfume that mum was wearing. In that heightened state I became aware that something truly incredibly was happening. I felt a presence in the room. I had a sense of enormous power, akin to that of a freight train thundering through a station. The sheer mass of air displaced moving onlookers backwards as if a giant, invisible hand had firmly but irresistibly pushed them backwards. That strength, that presence moved between us and when it had passed our daughter was gone. Her body remained but her essence, her spirit, had left.

## GRIEF AND AWE

Time snapped back to its normal, relentless march and I looked across at my wife.

"Did you feel that?", I asked incredulously, doubting my own experience. She nodded her mute agreement.

"She's gone", she said.

I don't know how long we sat that way, holding her hands clasped in ours. Struck dumb by equal measures of grief and wondrous awe.

To this day I don't know the truth of what we experienced that day, but I do know that at the very instant of her death something came for our daughter. It only takes a short leap of the imagination, or faith, to assign this experience to God in the silent beating of an angel's wings. Was or telling us she would be safe now?

**Anonymous**

**F**irst and foremost, discharged prisoners have the same right to housing, healthcare and community care services as anyone else.

Before this can happen, laws and policies oblige local authorities to assess the needs of vulnerable people prior to their release. Failure to do so results in local authorities and health and social care breaching their duties. Examples are the Care Act 2014 applicable in Northern Ireland and the National Health Service and Community Care Act, 1990 in England (NHSCCA) and the Care Programme Approach (CPA). Prison staff can use these to obtain services for prisoners which they are legally entitled to. All too often, however, as outlined in the 2004 NACRO conference on mental health, Dr Adrian Grounds stated " We commonly see mentally ill men being released at the end of their sentences who at the very least should go to suitable accommodation, they should be registered with a GP and have had follow-up by their local mental health service arranged. Distressingly often, and notwithstanding efforts by their probation officers, they leave with no address: only an instruction to present as homeless to the housing authority. In the absence of an address, the relevant mental health team either cannot be identified, or they will refuse to commit to seeing the patient, or both."

## APPROPRIATE SERVICES

The importance of pre-release assessment and identification of needs is of paramount importance in facilitating a smooth transition and signposting to appropriate services and support. The newly released prisoner may have immediate housing issues and mental health and substance misuse problems or chronic physical ailments and ongoing medical conditions. The challenge facing people upon their release back into the community is manifold.

## SIGNPOST SERVICES

Appropriate, tailored packages of care will need to be implemented to address such issues. Every individual is unique and faces their own challenges and

problems. The question is whether or not the right steps are taken by the authorities, social care, jobs and benefits and health professionals to make community transition prison altogether less problematic and stressful experience. Signposting services are key to this prior to release, identifying particular vulnerabilities and immediate needs of prisoners such as housing, healthcare, the need for a keyworker from a health trust and registering with a GP. Not all released prisoners have any support network, even family support due to circumstances, therefore an immediate vulnerability presents itself. Who is this person going to turn to when in dire need? Whether it's emotional support, financial or accommodation. An all encompassing holistic approach is required to effectively assess and evaluate needs prior to release and post release. Assistance with filling out benefit forms, application for housing with the housing executive, registering with GPs and referrals to specialist services such as community addiction and counselling.

“ Every individual is unique and faces their own challenges and problems

## CARE PLAN

Every newly discharged prisoner faces their own challenges, some have a myriad of issues which need addressed. Effective tailor made packages of care planned prior to release can significantly reduce the stress and provide relevant support and any required treatment which are required. A multifaceted targeted approach, bespoke assessment of need, social and health related will in some way, safeguard the rights of the newly released prisoner back into their communities and afford them the opportunity to integrate successfully back into society.

**Patrick Service User**

# Support Hub Launched

## Prison Arts Foundation

**F**red Caulfield, Executive Director at Prison Arts Foundation

acknowledged the strong network established with Prison Arts Foundation (PAF), in partnership with Start360 and the Community Sports Network (CSN), who developed the Support Hub/Braille Service initiative.

The Support Hub provides education, employment support and advice, therapeutic support; gym, physical activity training sessions, physical training activities and dietary advice; visual art and creative writing workshops and a host of other activities and services, as well as the opportunity to volunteer in the Braille transcribing/printing unit. Located in Belfast city centre, it offers a multi-component support package for people returning to the community following release from prison, as well as those on probation and those serving non-custodial sentences in the community.

### LIAM'S STORY

I was introduced to creative writing in Magilligan and it was life changing. I'd never read a book in my life or wrote any kind of poetry whatsoever. So on my release, I needed somewhere to go with my newfound skills as such. I started going to the Hub which I was told about by Fred Caulfield and Pamela Brown who taught me creative writing in Magilligan. Initially, the HUB writing group was on one day a month and it couldn't come round quick enough for me as it expelled out all of my demons and took me on a PAF (lol) that I'd never of dreamt of.

### BACKGROUND

First of all I'd like to point to my traumatic childhood which I'd assumed was as normal as normal could be, I was just the average kid who was dragged up through the troubles in the New Lodge Road, North Belfast. I was 9 or so when I got knocked down, suffering a fractured skull and broken limbs, I was also in a coma for three months and when I woke up I had completely lost my memory, I didn't know who I was, where I was or what I was, and I adapted to the troubles fast and furious as you'd say:



Members of Community Sports Network and Start 360 with Naomi Long, Justice Minister (third from left) and Fred Caulfield, PAF Executive Director (right)

### KELLIO

I grew up in Belfast in the shadow of  
death  
hell fires all around me suckin my  
breath,  
I look in ma head and what do I see  
a psychopath, a sociopath, and me make  
three,  
we laugh in the moment at that moment  
in time  
cos rules doesn't matter here livin the  
crime,  
the hate for the five O the filth and the  
swine  
dopamines distortion of normality fine,  
I'm foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog  
a petrol bomb in one hand and I'm ready  
to lob,  
it takes into the sky and its leaving a trail  
a wave of destruction that's the final  
nail,  
anger rage and suffering eatin our lives  
we grew up fast with nothing, sharpening  
knives  
by the time that I was ten I'd a gun up to  
my head  
cursed to god almighty just to shoot me  
dead,  
I raise my arms up to god in a venomous  
scream,  
CAN SOMEONE F\*\*KING WAKE ME  
FROM MY POST TRAUMATIC DREAM!

### A SAFE SPACE

Going to the HUB gave me a focus as to what direction I should take as regards to my writing, I found the Hub to be a safe place, almost like a beacon, a shining light. Pamela's role was and still is extremely valuable to me as she guides me on a journey of exploration and expression. She played a massive part in me writing my first book of poems (*Dragged up through the Troubles*—available from

I was moved to tears so  
many times as I  
talked about my  
childhood...

Amazon) especially with the layout and content selection. I was moved to tears so many time's as I talked about my childhood and then the loss of my wife to cancer, relieving me of so much pent up and buried anger and I transferred it into my poetry.

### EXTRA SUPPORT

They say the truth will set you free, well that's what creative writing and the Hub done for me, not only that but the Hub has given me the confidence to talk to ex-prisoners about my journey and encourage them to do the same. Don't get me wrong, we also talk about



addiction and how it affects family and friends. I always emphasise the benefits of being clean and sober and that anything is possible and how my writing has evolved as I recite some hard hitting truths through my poetry, The HUB is like a club for ex-felons where you feel comfortable to talk about anything such as how and where to get help for it, after all, the proof is in the pudding, as they say.

Everyone is different and everyone has a story to tell and the Hub is the perfect place to release your inner demons and set your spirit free. I found that both Fred and Pamela's guidance invaluable as my second book is nearly ready for release (*Memoirs of a Belfast boy*). I have been coming to the Hub for two years now and I can now attend two days per month. Creative writing has not only changed my life but it has saved my life as I was suicidal after my conviction.

**Liam K** Writer



Liam K with his art

# ●●● A Holistic Approach to Reintegration

## ...Continued from Page 4

applauding each time and showing the very best in me.

When I walked into these places the first day I could have burst into tears because I was nervous. Now I can see a better me, and it's an amazing feeling, to know that you are listened to and respected also".

### JOHNNY

A lot of us started of in this group with trepidation. The first day at Crosskennan was difficult as the group were unknown to each other but soon we became close friends and we are still close as we work together on different projects with the group. It has taken me out of my comfort zone to be here and showed me there are people who care and accept me.

### ALAN

I've met new people, I thoroughly enjoyed the programme especially recommend it to others.

### THE ENDEAVOUR AWARD

"Gives me a reason for getting out of bed."

"Feel like I've achieved something great to add to the CV."

"Gives me a sense of purpose helps pass the time."

"Found it challenging".

"It's been good to have a purpose."

### Belfast Service Users Group

(Photography by Johnny)



Tony's Art

# ●●●The Long Journey Home

Jonny sits at the table looking at the cardboard box in front of him and starts to look through the remains of a life. A mystery as to where or whom the box came from. Back home to his home village, Dumfries, no one knew he was here. No note. No knock at the door.

The box contained the only material links he had to his old life, the life he longed for before his fall from grace. Some items brought delight; others triggered reasons his life fell apart. After years of homelessness, having a connection to his old life was restoring for him, but caused slight disquiet in his newly found mind. As his mind wandered back to the trail of devastation afterwards; he was transported back in time, in his mind's eye, to ten years of struggle.

## CONCRETE JUNGLE

It was morning. A bright morning, but you would barely know. Gloomy towering buildings stole the light, a denoting honesty. The skipper [2], grimy and heartless, wasn't somewhere sleep was found. Night people, abusing drugs, congregating in groups, noise more than the flesh could stand. The smell of a dying fire flew up to his nostrils. Although he found this somehow comforting, for a brief second. It blazed the night before to keep people warm, but morning, once awakened, it wasn't such a welcomed scent. He wondered if it would be better to find somewhere more secluded, quiet, safe. Gathering himself to his feet, he winced in agony. The pain that surged through his body was the ultimate reminder of where he was. Sleeping on a cardboard box on a cold, unfriendly, cemented street was not pleasing

to his bones. Exhausted, he mustered the energy to gather his belongings. But.... Where was his wallet? His shoes?! Distressed, glancing around with a curious dread, the hostile looks from the night people reassured him it wasn't a good idea to question. He hobbled down the street in his socks, and with his dignity in ribbons, he began to cry. Jonny was a country boy, thrust into a concrete jungle where everyone had more street sense, ruthlessness, more than he could ever possess or be. Although Glasgow wasn't always somewhere he saw in this perspective. He had been a professional musician, years prior. Seeing people begging on the streets of Glasgow was nothing strange back then. They came with the territory.

“ He hadn't even heard music in years, never mind played

## CITY CENTRE

Making it into the town centre, he sat down at the busiest place he knew. Taking off his hat, he started to repeat the words the beggars he walked past used to say. "Can you spare any change please?". People walked past, ignoring him. He made enough for something to eat, but not for a pair of shoes. He wandered around behind the buildings to the dumpsters and started to rummage through trash cans for shoes, clothes, anything. But, coming to an unexpected halt, eyes wide like a child; he couldn't believe what was in front of him. There, in the middle of the mounting garbage,

was the neck of an acoustic guitar. The pins, the frets. Moving the rubbish, little by little, refusing to believe it would be unbroken to his astonishment, the guitar was intact. Albeit a few scratches, well quite a few. But the strings were unharmed, the sound hole was unspoiled, and the best part, it played.... *It played!* As he tuned the guitar, he couldn't help but feel it was like a gift from above. He hadn't even heard music in years, never mind played. His hands, cold and ridged from the winter freeze, and after years of not playing a chord, it was evident that he would not play like before. Yet he didn't care. Sitting in that alleyway, between the rubbish bins, it redefined his location. For a time, it felt like heaven.

## HOMELESS

With a glimmer of hope, still in his socks, he walked down Glasgow main street. He stopped at a summer seat. This was no ordinary seat, in fact, part of a Sculpture. He read the name, the 'Homeless Jesus' [3]. Sitting just at the end of the foot of the sculpture where the feet lay, he realised he didn't feel alone. He started to play the guitar, ridged fingers and all, although his voice barely sounded like his own. He didn't care, this was a rare occurrence of delight in the hell he was living in. An elderly couple walked past while he played, stood, listened. He wasn't expecting an audience, he was playing for himself. When he stopped playing, they asked where he was from. While explaining his story briefly, they noticed he had no shoes, but they didn't embarrass him by asking. They listened to him play a little more before they left, but his story hadn't left their mind.

## CHANGE

Something remarkable happened inside him. His voice started to strengthen, and he sounded similar to his former self

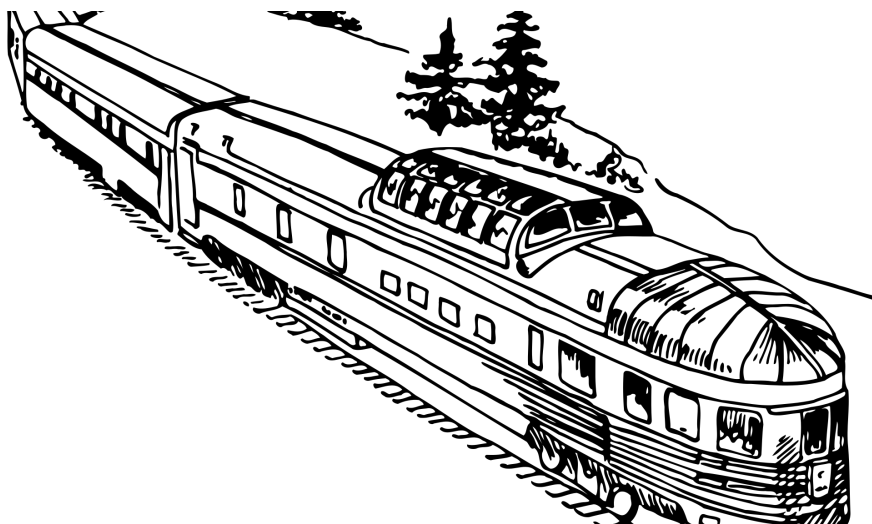


'Homeless Jesus' Sculpture in Glasgow



again. The Glasgow air filled with harmonious talent. People hurrying past gave him some change. Later that day, the elderly couple returned. They had bought 3 pairs of the same shoe in different sizes; they didn't know what size he was. He broke down with humility and thankfulness for the small miracle he so desperately needed.

**Anna Faith Lucas** Blogger/Service User



# ●●● All Aboard Destination Rejuvenation

## And it's Closer to Home than You May Think

**W**here is one of the only places you must enter with a defeat but will always depart with a victory?

You may be picturing an exotic far flung detox spa where the privileged are pampered to rejuvenation by famous life coaches and fitness gurus. Or perhaps a trendy rehab clinic where the rich and famous rub shoulders with the showbiz elite and splash mega money for the privilege as they seek salvation when the tinsel turns to torment. You may be surprised to hear that a pathway to rejuvenation, empowerment and renewed self-belief is being served up much closer to home. And the only cost is opening your mind and inviting the possibilities of change for the better.

### IGNITING HOPE

Welcome to a stint in Ballymena probation. You'll not bump into a troubled rock God or anguished actor. But you'll find some unlikely stars of the real world quietly taking a front row seat to face daily tales of trouble, desolation, anger and objection and somehow igniting hope in the so called hopeless. Let's face it. Nobody rolls up to their first day at Probation with feeling like the star striker in the winning football club.

In football terms, you're only here because you've lost the cup final and got sent off for good measure. You may feel that it was a dodgy decision by the ref, but the red card

has been waved. Game over. Or is it? Extra time anyone? A swift mind-set reset moments in to my first day at probation transformed the possibilities.

### LUXURY ITEM

I'm going to use the time and be present. That was the answer, although I wasn't quite sure what the question was. Time is a luxury most of us do not have. How many of us spend even half an hour a week reflecting on our own behaviours,

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troubles or worries, yet alone take a time out to meticulously work through the steps to plot out a better future?

So, since I was here, I resolved to take time. I felt a little guilty as my probation officers unwaveringly and with true empathy engaged, listened and, most importantly, directed me to paths of light and hope.

Somehow, despite what you might have heard, I had found myself in a place not of punishment but of possibilities.

As each session ended, the weight of the past lessened a little. I'd leave the sessions feeling somewhat exhausted

and yet mildly exhilarated. The kind of feeling you get after a five-mile run when the body is aching, but your mind is alive and rejuvenated.

As I concluded my last session, I thanked the team for their work and support. For their honest talking and their open listening. For their solutions and for their staggering ability to patch up people daily yet remain upbeat and enthusiastic about helping individuals who would never have wanted to meet them in the first place.

### AN OPEN MIND

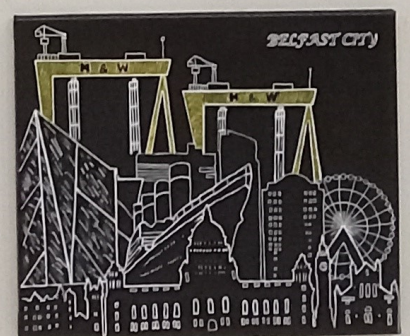
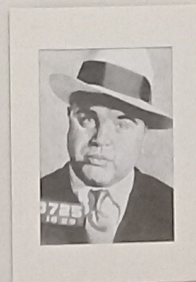
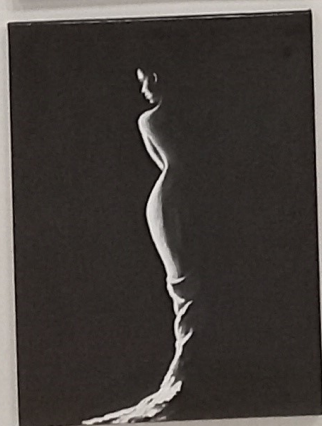
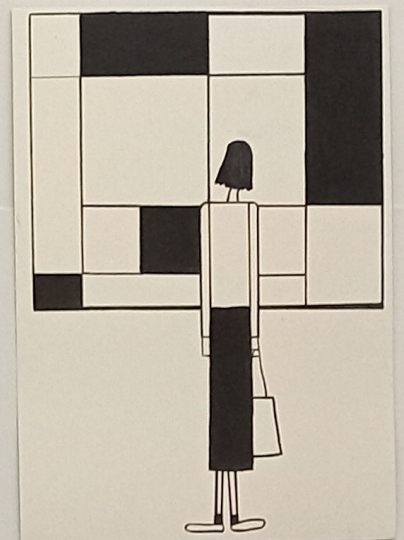
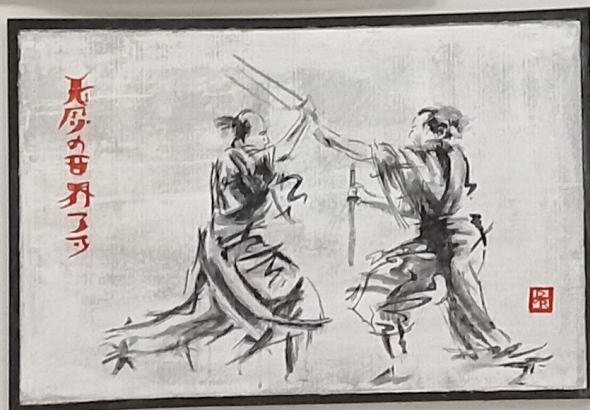
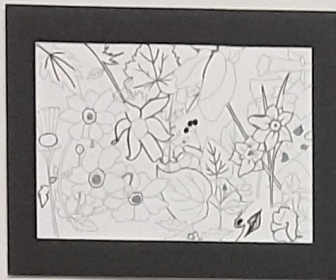
So, back to the beginning. It turns out there is a place where you will enter with defeat and leave with victory. A life win, if you like, imparted in the most unlikely situation.

Just bring an open mind and the will to engage rather than 'just getting through it'. You'll soon realise that the probation team are all rooting for you.

Then you'll slowly relinquish the toxic emotions and circumstances that brought you here to punch a ticket to destination rejuvenation.

**Service User** Ballymena





PAF Annual Exhibition 2024 at  
2 Royal Avenue, Visited by  
Service Users





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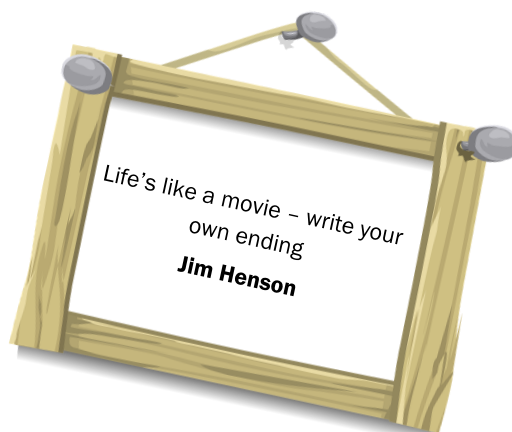
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