

Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit: A Human Rights and Equality-Led Approach to Supporting Desistance

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Summary: The Probation Service Strategy Statement 2021–2023, the precursor to the current Strategy Statement, began a process of restructuring the Probation Service’s approach to the multiple complex issues involved in criminal behaviour. Rooted in the belief that social inclusion factors such as addiction, poor mental health, and homelessness can be responded to more effectively through a revised and structured approach, a new Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU) was established to oversee the effective co-ordination and implementation of the Probation Service’s work in these areas. The role of SIRU is to draw together the work of the Probation Service across issues such as those outlined above, in order to ensure a consistent and coherent approach, leading to better outcomes for everyone engaged with our service. This is in response to an understanding and appreciation of the social context and the ways in which the above needs may interrelate and require complex and innovative solutions, rather than thinking of rehabilitation solely as one of individual treatment to reduce/remove criminogenic risk. The Unit aims to ensure that our work is aligned with wider social inclusion policy directions, in order to maximise opportunities to support reintegration and thereby reduce reoffending. The Unit is grounded in the Probation Service values of accountability; collaboration; compassion; empowerment; and inclusivity. Flowing from these, the Unit also aims to embody the values of equity and progress. This article will focus on SIRU’s strategic goals, setting out the initiatives and partnerships that will support them, and outlining how their achievement will support the operational outcomes of the Probation Service.

Keywords: Inclusion, reintegration, community.

Introduction

Reintegration is a core objective of probation supervision. The Irish Probation Framework (IPF) sets out reintegration via its inter-reliant symbolic and practical

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dimensions.¹ Regarding the former, the IPF highlights the acceptance of people who have previously committed offences as integrated members of their respective communities. In terms of practical supports, the IPF refers to enabling people who have previously committed offences to access prosocial opportunities such as housing, education and employment (Robinson, 2007).

However, barriers to accessing prosocial opportunities for people under probation supervision are often beyond the direct control of the Probation Service and are shaped by experiences of poverty and social exclusion. To address social-exclusion-related barriers to reintegration, and the relationship between social exclusion and the underlying causes of crime more generally, the Probation Service began to develop capacity in the area of *social inclusion*² with the establishment in 2022 of the Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU).³

For the Probation Service, social inclusion refers to the process of enabling individuals, particularly those who have offended or are at risk of offending, to participate in society by removing barriers and supporting access in areas such as education, employment, housing, health and community engagement. SIRU interprets social inclusion to mean a proactive effort to support the reintegration into society of people who have offended, by promoting access to essential services and opportunities, reducing marginalisation, and fostering a sense of belonging, responsibility and participation in community life.

Although SIRU is a small unit within the wider Probation Service structure, it has the potential to play a significant role in supporting the achievement of the Probation Service's strategic goals and embedding a culture of social inclusion. The Unit is grounded in the Probation Service's core values of accountability, collaboration, compassion, empowerment and inclusivity,⁴ and cascading from these comes the value of equity. Equity is recognising that everyone has different needs, backgrounds, and barriers – and giving people the specific support they need to succeed. By promoting equity, SIRU aims to ensure that support is fair and inclusive – not just equal. SIRU will ensure that these values are consistently central to the Unit's work plan and decision-making.

1 The IPF is a bespoke model of probation practice that is evidence informed, underpinned by research, and aims to deliver the best possible outcomes for clients.

2 The Department of Social Protection *Road Map for Social Inclusion 2020–2025* defines Social Inclusion as follows: 'Social Inclusion is achieved when people have access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable them to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally.'

3 An APPO was appointed to the Unit in November 2022, while one HEO was recruited in July 2024 and an additional HEO recruited in November 2024.

4 Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–2026.

This article illustrates the role that SIRU will play to support the Probation Service, both in its day-to-day work and in the achievement of its strategic goals. We begin by summarising work undertaken by the Unit to date, outlining the prioritisation of key social-inclusion-related work streams, and the approach adopted by SIRU in identifying barriers and advancing solutions. We then discuss the potential value of this work to the Probation Service, our clients and community safety.

Elevating stakeholder voices: Informing SIRU's work

The work of SIRU is aligned to Probation Service strategic policy as well as wider Government social inclusion policy. However, at the heart of the Unit's work is the goal of enabling Probation Service staff to support people engaged with probation. Ultimately, our aim is to improve outcomes for our clients and bolster their efforts to achieve desistance and reintegration. This outlook shaped the establishment of SIRU's strategic goals.

A key consideration in the early development of the Unit was a commitment to ensuring that the voice of those who have experience of engaging with the Probation Service informs policy and practice. In March and April 2024, a series of consultation sessions were held with people with lived experience of probation supervision. The first of these took place in the Probation Service's offices at Haymarket, Smithfield, in Dublin, and was co-ordinated by an external facilitator, with the primary focus being to inform the development of the Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–2026.

The second consultation, which involved twenty-two participants with lived experience of probation supervision, representative of gender and geographic diversity, was held at a neutral venue. Importantly, this session was co-designed and co-facilitated by SIRU and a lived-experience advisor. This collaboration significantly improved interpersonal trust and open communication, a noted benefit of peer involvement (Swirak and Quinn, 2023). A SWOT analysis of Probation Service engagement was utilised to focus participants' feedback, which highlighted strengths including positive and supportive relationships with Probation Officers; weaknesses such as systematic barriers to engagement; an opportunity to utilise lived experience to support engagement and trust-building; and a threat to effective practice in the form of multi-agency-related obstacles and retraumatising experiences. It is noteworthy that experiences of poverty and social exclusion were present within each of these themes.

Participants noted compassion and empathy on the part of Probation Officers with regard to their previous experiences. However, the consistent reality emerged repeatedly of having to navigate probation engagement alongside issues related to housing instability, addiction and mental health support needs, and childcare and transport costs. These issues raised barriers to engagement, which itself can raise a barrier to trust-building with support agencies, including the Probation Service. This feedback is crucial to SIRU in our work to support the Probation Service in navigating complex issues affecting clients in its work to support desistance and reintegration.

In addition to consulting those with lived experience of Probation Service engagement, the SIRU team engaged in regional focus groups with staff to identify key challenges affecting their client group, with regard to the remit of the Unit. Housing and homelessness arose as the most prominent social-inclusion-related challenge identified by staff across the Probation Service, which inhibits the successful supervision of clients and their ability to support desistance effectively. This issue was followed by mental health, and then addiction. Of note, staff raised the absence of multi-agency co-ordination, which can result in clients falling between gaps; this aligned with the feedback from those with lived experience regarding multi-agency-related obstacles and retraumatising experiences.

It is crucial to SIRU that our work is driven by the voice of our key stakeholders, mindful of the challenges that staff face daily when supporting clients, and for clients in striving to live prosocial lives and successfully reintegrate into their communities. The themes identified above shaped the development of SIRU's inaugural work plan: prioritising work to embed lived experience within the work of the Probation Service; addressing the specific needs of women engaged with the Probation Service; and working to improve access to housing stability for our clients at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Empowering clients: Embedding lived experience

The Probation Service, in its current Statement of Strategy, has committed to embarking on a journey to embed lived experience, a process led by SIRU:

Pillar 4: Enabling Social Inclusion – Develop mechanisms to embed lived experience, victim and community voices to inform and enrich our work.⁵

5 Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–2026.

The benefits of utilising lived experience within the criminal justice system, as well as across other areas of social inclusion, are well grounded and the practice has been embedded in the voluntary sector to great effect (Irish Red Cross, 2019a; TPI, 2019a; Buck, 2021; Hoey *et al.*, 2022; Villani *et al.*, 2023; English, 2024).⁶ The ongoing evolution of this work has resulted in the development of toolkits and standards frameworks to support the embedding of lived experience across sectors including health (Naughton *et al.*, 2015; Kelly and O'Neill, 2024), housing (Housing First National Office, 2024) and the criminal justice sector (Irish Red Cross, 2019b; TPI, 2019b).

A core action with regard to lived experience in the current *Probation Service Action Plan* is to co-design and establish a consultative forum with people with experience of probation supervision. A consultative forum is envisioned to facilitate the regular involvement of lived experience voices in the development of Probation Service practice, policy and training. Led by SIRU, in December 2024, the Probation Service made a call for nominations for *Lived Experience Advisors* to support the co-design of a consultative forum – an important component to ensure end-user engagement throughout the design process. A significant number of nominations were received from Probation Service operational staff and Probation-funded community-based organisations, as well as self-referrals directly from former clients. Three advisors with extensive experience working in health and criminal justice settings in positions such as peer support workers and training consultants, as well as reflecting geographic and gender diversity, were recruited. Throughout 2025, the lived experience advisors have worked alongside SIRU and the Probation Service's Lived Experience Working Group, in designing workshops to develop the design for a structured forum that can identify systemic barriers faced by clients and inform development of probation interventions and programmes. This process has addressed areas such as supporting forum membership, establishing clear purpose and value, and ensuring whole-of-organisation engagement.

In addition to this important work to embed lived experience within the Probation Service, the Service is committed to empowering persons who wish to use their experience of engaging with the criminal justice system to make a positive impact in their communities. Facilitating this pathway, the Lived Experience Action Development (LEAD) Programme is a Probation Service

⁶ Examples of peer-led organisations currently working in the Irish criminal justice system are Care After Prison, which is a national peer-led criminal justice charity supporting people affected by imprisonment, current and former offenders and their families, and Spéire Nua, which is a project assisting people with criminal convictions to access the labour market.

funded programme delivered by Equal Ireland, PACE Ireland, The Turnaround Project, and Spéire Nua. This seven-week programme is designed by individuals with lived experience for individuals with lived experience, and will develop practical leadership, communication, mentoring and facilitation skills, and build confidence among participants. The pilot programme commenced in Q2 2025 and concluded in August 2025, and was presented on by the LEAD Experts by Experience group at the 16th Irish North/South Criminology Conference hosted by Maynooth University in June 2025.

Working with women

The nexus between gender-related marginalisation and the criminal justice system has been highlighted in previous research on the relationship between homelessness and criminal behaviour, which featured in this journal, carried out by Mayock and Sheridan (2013). Within this research, a picture clearly emerged of the institutional cycle tied to marginalisation and social exclusion. Participants experienced significant educational disruption during childhood, as well as experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and reported heavy or dependent substance use along with poor mental health (Mayock and Sheridan, 2013). Such experiences of trauma and adversity have also been found amongst violent female offenders (Al Hassan, 2021).

The Probation Service recognises that interventions for women need to be gender-sensitive and trauma-responsive, as experiences of trauma and adversity are most often at the root of women's pathways to social exclusion and criminal behaviour. It is for this reason that the Probation Service has regularly sought to further develop and improve its policies and practice with regard to women (Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, 2014; Probation Service, 2015; Probation Service, 2016; Probation Service, 2021).

The Probation Service's current work in this area is underpinned by both the *Review of Policy Options for Prisons and Penal Reform 2022–2024* and the *Probation Strategy Statement 2024–2026*. The Probation Service is committed to strengthening gender-specific initiatives and developing new evidence-informed proposals that respond holistically and compassionately to the needs of women who offend. The Probation Service has committed to the development of a new gender-responsive Action Plan. SIRU is currently leading the development of this evidence-informed, trauma-aware Action Plan for working with women with the WISE (Women's Inclusion, Strength and Engagement) Group, formerly known as the Women's Strategy Group.

The input and lived experience of women who have engaged with the Probation Service are critical to the integrity and appropriateness of this Action Plan. Other initiatives underway and in development include the Supervised Temporary Release (STR) Team attached to Limerick Prison, transitional accommodation provision for women in the Southwest and the Traveller Women Community Service pilot in Cork.

Housing and homelessness

As noted above, housing and homelessness arose as the most prominent social-inclusion-related challenge identified by staff across the Probation Service, which can inhibit the successful supervision of clients and their ability to support desistance effectively. The relationship between housing and homelessness and criminal justice system engagement is well documented (Geiran, 2004; Gulati *et al.*, 2019; Seymour, 2004), and it is well recognised that a risk of homelessness faced by persons subject to Probation Service supervision and/or leaving prison has a significant negative impact upon the potential success of criminal justice interventions, such as supervision orders and associated support services aimed at achieving desistance (Seymour and Costello, 2005).

However, since the development of an understanding of this link in an Irish context, the scale of homelessness in Ireland has risen considerably,⁷ with different cohorts experiencing increased levels of risk. Much like homelessness, patterns of criminal justice involvement vary across populations. Across Europe, evidence has found that there exists a small sub-cohort within homelessness, which is associated with long-term and recurrent experiences of homelessness and frequent contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). The interaction of these factors can create an institutional cycle or 'revolving door' for this subpopulation, characterised by recidivism and recurrent periods of homelessness (Hrast *et al.*, 2023). It is within this context that SIRU has commenced its work to support the Probation Service and its clients to navigate this challenge.

During 2024 and 2025, SIRU engaged in consultation with Probation Service colleagues, including those working closest to this issue in the Dublin Homeless Team and the Sex Offender Resettlement Team, as well as the

⁷ In the decade since data on the number of people residing in emergency homeless accommodation was made available by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the number of adults recorded as homeless in Ireland increased by 315 per cent, from 2,385 in June 2014 to 9,899 in June 2024.

Probation Service representative on the Criminal Justice Housing First Pilot Steering Group. The Unit also consulted with colleagues in the Housing Agency, Local Authorities, the HSE, and homeless service providers across Ireland. This engagement informed the development by SIRU of a housing and homelessness position paper, for consideration by the Probation Service leadership team, which included: recommendations on the improvement of data collection; the consolidation of data-sharing agreements with key stakeholders such as Local Authorities; improved co-ordination of interagency engagement to ensure geographic consistency; and a review of progression outcomes from existing Probation-funded accommodation options to inform any future developments in this area.

In addition to advancing the implementation of a number of these recommendations, SIRU has engaged closely with the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (DoJ) to inform the forthcoming academic research on the scale and impacts of homelessness in the CJS, which was commissioned by DoJ in 2024. The Unit is also co-ordinating an independent evaluation of the Criminal Justice Housing First Pilot Programme⁸ on behalf of our partners in the Irish Prison Service and Dublin Region Homelessness Executive. Housing First is an internationally recognised, evidence-based solution for people experiencing long-term homelessness, with complex needs such as mental health issues, and substance misuse or addiction. The model includes the provision of secure housing and visiting housing and health supports (Tsemberis, 2020). The pilot programme specifically targeted those in the criminal justice sector presenting as experiencing long-term homelessness, with a range of complex needs. This evaluation will inform the future engagement of the criminal justice system in this vitally important approach to tackling long-term homelessness.

As is the case with many of the prospective social-inclusion-related issues that SIRU and the Probation Service engage with, housing and homelessness relate to a complex issue that is not within the direct control of the Probation Service and relies upon collaboration with external statutory and non-statutory agencies and bodies. SIRU will support the Probation Service to ensure that its engagement and strategic collaboration on these issues are as

⁸ The Housing First Criminal Justice Pilot Programme operated from 2020 to 2024, designed for those leaving prison and/or subject to Probation Service supervision presenting as homeless and at acute risk of becoming entrenched in emergency homeless services due to a combination of mental health, physical health and substance misuse issues. The Pilot Programme is a criminal justice specific stand to Ireland's Housing First Programme. As of April 2025, there are 1,060 people in Housing First tenancies in Ireland.

effective as possible in supporting the delivery of the best possible outcomes for our clients, and community safety.

The value of a social-inclusion-focused approach

The establishment of SIRU adds substantial value across strategic and operational organisational functions. The model of work of the Unit to address issues such as those outlined above is national in scope and focuses on advocating for and informing strategic policy change which can benefit many clients rather than that of individual case management. The Unit can operate as a bridge between operational practice and wider social policy, ensuring that probation work aligns with national strategies on social inclusion, as well as supporting the co-ordination of collaborative interagency work essential to addressing social-inclusion-related issues. Taking a helicopter view of operational barriers impacting on the work of colleagues engaging in the supervision of community sanctions, and connecting these barriers to opportunities presented by national strategies or solutions facilitated through interagency collaboration in other local or regional contexts, SIRU can support the development of a cohesive and consistent approach to problem solving.

Rather than responding in isolation to issues like addiction, mental health problems or homelessness, the Unit facilitates an integrated approach, which is also deeply cognisant of the voices of those experiencing these issues. This leads to more consistent, coherent, and ultimately more impactful, responses, which supports ensuring the best outcomes for clients. While it is acknowledged that SIRU is still in its infancy, the Unit has the potential to provide a central framework for aligning and co-ordinating social-inclusion initiatives across the Probation Service.

SIRU ultimately works to embed the value of equity within probation practice, aiming to ensure geographic parity with regard to service provision and connection to necessary supports. Such a person-centred approach echoes the principles of the Irish Probation Framework, ensuring more responsive service delivery that reflects the experiences of clients, especially those with intersecting needs. The Unit's integration and promotion of lived experience into its development and work planning aims to deliver both practical and cultural benefits to the Service that enhance the effectiveness, relevance and legitimacy of the Service's work. By supporting effective reintegration and reducing marginalisation, SIRU enhances the Service's contribution to safer communities and fewer victims.

Conclusion

Since its establishment, SIRU has emerged as a key driver in embedding social inclusion within the Probation Service. The Unit has begun to develop a more co-ordinated, inclusive and responsive approach to addressing the broader social determinants of offending. SIRU development has adopted a multi-year, multi-project approach to identifying social-inclusion barriers and possible strategic solutions, as well as establishing crucial lines of communication with statutory and non-statutory agencies and organisations. SIRU has already demonstrated its value in leading work related to lived experience, working with women who offend, and housing and homelessness, and aims to further this approach in areas such as substance misuse and addiction, mental health issues, and race and ethnicity.

SIRU can support the Probation Service to ensure that the voices of our most vulnerable clients, who experience marginalisation and social exclusion, are both heard and centred in the development of policy and probation interventions.

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