A long haul

Report on a development partnership's intervention for the progression of former prisoners in Cork City

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Genesis

A number of Cork based organisations, in conjunction with the Department of Social and Family Affairs, coalesced in order to run a group based intervention designed to progress former prisoners towards employment, education and training – and, by implication, away from criminal and anti-social behaviour and activity.

The first group commenced in the premises of Cork Alliance Centre in February 2005 and ran until July 2005 (referred to henceforth as group one). The second group began in the same venue in October 2005 and ran until the end of April 2006 (referred to henceforth as group two). Group one consisted initially of 6 participants, ranging in age from 21 to 33, with a mean age of 28 – the number dropped to five after the first month. Group two had a core of seven members, ranging in age from 21 to 43, with a mean age of 33.

Profile on embarkation

Both groups consisted of males with prison records, and all the participants could be said to have experienced extreme marginalisation with its attendant symptoms. Whilst there were members in each group that had experience of employment, it could be said of all participants that they had far greater experience of being out of work. On the whole, members of both groups had not experienced the opportunity of skills or personal development. In the experience of the facilitators, who, as employees of Cork City Local Employment Services (CCLES) have spent years working with a wide range of marginalised groups, this particular target group has probably been the most marginalised they have encountered, and the furthest removed from entering the labour market.

All participants suffered from addictions – often multiple – and as a norm, literacy skills were poor. From information gleaned in the group, dietary habits were poor and nutritional knowledge scanty. Lifestyle was extremely disruptive, chaotic, volatile and irregular. Five people experienced homelessness during the duration of the two programmes. On the whole, most participants appeared to be unfit, unhealthy, and malnourished, with poor concentration levels and low levels of socialisation. Interruption in the group was so frequent it was a norm, in spite of continuous re-contracting on the issue.

All participants had left school at an early age, and most acknowledged that they had been disruptive while at school. One participant had achieved a Junior Certificate level of education, which he completed while in detention. Evidence of ‘constructive’ hobbies or pastimes was relatively rare – one participant was a keen active fisherman, two expressed a

spoken interest in this area, while two others professed an interest in and engaged to some extent in weight training.

Not surprisingly, the confidence and self-esteem levels of group participants were low (despite valiant attempts to camouflage the fact with bluster and posturing). Perceived levels of self-efficacy were also low, with most participants having little genuine faith in their ability to undertake and complete any given task with competence. The facilitators would also contend that most, possibly all, participants had a strong external locus of control, with correspondingly low levels of belief that they had any control over their own lives.

The participants would also have viewed the state and its institutions as hostile or antagonistic elements with which they were engaged in a constant battle of wits. They did not perceive themselves as citizens of a state or members of a nation or a culture. Both groups reported a constant feeling of unease centring on a belief that they 'stood out', were constantly monitored by others, could be arrested at any moment under – in their minds – any pretext, and that they therefore had to be on constant alert. All participants expressed some yearning for a 'normal life', where this level of anxiety would cease.

Generally, most participants had some difficulty grasping the concept that how they managed their own behaviour would have a positive impact on achieving their aspiration. Few, if any, of them had experience of setting an objective and fulfilling it in a steady, planned and objective fashion. They had little faith in the concept of change, and appeared to have a poor grasp of the notion of cause and effect. Generally, the participants had almost no experience of achievement, or of succeeding in a task that they had planned and executed and in which they had demonstrated resilience, creativity and regularity. Consequently, validation, acknowledgement and recognition were not part of their experience to any notable degree.

Initial participant reaction to the intervention

Both groups were astonished and disbelieving for quite a time that the intervention actually existed. They were immensely grateful and frequently expressed a sense of privilege and uniqueness that they were the recipients of a well resourced group intervention specifically targeting them. Both groups were very vocal in their opinion that had they encountered such an intervention whilst younger, their life would have worked out differently.

Objectives of facilitators

The needs and objectives of the participants largely fuelled and directed the objectives of the facilitators. We perceived that without developing and demonstrating resilience, regularity, an ability to tolerate routine, improved concentration levels, taking responsibility for self and others, becoming reliable and trustworthy, planning and undertaking tasks, reflecting on experiences, trusting those around you, toleration of delayed gratification, setting objectives and goals – to name but a few – then participants would struggle to meaningfully integrate into society through the conventional channels of employment, training and education.

As facilitators, we felt that creating a person centred environment was a first step, where participants would feel respected, safe, and understood, and where they would encounter genuineness and understanding. If the participants could be accepted as human beings then they might begin to develop self-acceptance. Generally, the participants had a deep seated self-loathing and profound feelings of failure, resulting in a strong, general fearfulness when faced with change and development.

The group was established to facilitate participants move from their positions of ‘stuckness’, or impasse, and this could not happen without respectful but firm challenging of behaviour and attitudes. A cosy, cohesive, warm and accepting environment in itself without respectful but firm challenge would be counterproductive as it would merely serve to enable a group to stay as they were, trapped in destructive, self harming behaviours.

As facilitators, we felt that creating an environment in which the participants developed solutions to their own difficulties, as much as possible through their own discovery, understanding and insight, would lead to deeper and more lasting change. As facilitators, we were ultimately aiming for a change in participant self-concept, that participants would learn about and accept themselves, gain some self-respect and self-confidence, and feel more able to negotiate with the world in which they lived.

The steering group

The existence of the steering group is, from the viewpoint of the facilitators, an essential component of the intervention. Periodic reporting back to this group induces reflection as well as forward projection. It is also useful for participants to be aware that everyone reports to someone, and that good and bad news must be ‘owned’ and revealed. (On occasions when attendance numbers were poor, for example, the group members often encouraged us to massage the numbers).

The steering group contains in its membership a solid core of experience in the field that has acted as an essential resource to the facilitators, considerable management experience, and active representation from the principal funding agency at all levels and stages of decision making and planning, which rules out misunderstanding and provides access to key decision makers in DSFA. Above all else, it is composed of members whose principal and overriding concern is the progression and well-being of the target group. The group is indebted to the DSFA for its empathic, open and trusting stance towards the philosophy and culture of this particular intervention.

Section 2

Contrasting the groups

The learning and outcomes of the group one were captured in a report undertaken by Siobhain Murphy, which detailed considerable qualitative and quantitative outcomes (see Appendix A for outcomes to date from group 2). The second group – up to Christmas 2005 – looked fair set in certain respects to supersede the outcomes of the group one. Attendance was superior and levels of participation were generally higher. The group had a clear, charismatic and intelligent leader, who was engaged in a certified course in gym instructorship. Generally, concentration levels were better than in the first group and participants were tuned in to a higher level to each other.

This potential for progression was not entirely universal or straightforward. While in one sense, the group was cosy, cohesive and highly bonded, it was often deeply resistant to challenge and frequently engaged in disruptive, deflective behaviour when change of behaviour was mooted.

Members would act contrite when called on this ‘blocking’ behaviour, but would nonetheless revert quickly to it when they felt challenged. It was our view that because of the older age profile, the longer time spent in prison, the deeper and more entrenched addictions and so on, that change for group 2 was more daunting and intimidating in its prospect than for group 1.

Christmas proved to be a crucial turning point for the cohesiveness of group 2. During the Christmas period all group members partook heavily in drug and alcohol abuse, and the group never recovered its pre-Christmas attendance levels.

Post-Christmas attendance levels became very uneven and unpredictable. From the facilitators’ point of view, it became ever more difficult to ‘follow a plan’ as the participants on

Wednesday might be different to those who attended on Monday. It seemed that the more we sought to contract on attendance, the more volatile the group became.

Many of the participants in group two clearly led chaotic, volatile and unstable lives punctuated by the threat or reality of serious violence. Events outside the group often looked like making the existence of the group unviable. The facilitators often considered calling a halt to the intervention, but the participants always pleaded for the programme to continue and they (the facilitators) eventually reasoned that as long as anyone showed resilience, it was worthwhile continuing, and perhaps others would return.

There had been volatility in the first group, but if someone went absent, it was rarely for longer than a week, and they often seemed to turn a corner and become stable for a few weeks after such an episode. Unfortunately for group two, going on a binge changed complexion as it now meant taking heroin, a drug which did not feature in a meaningful way on group one. It is estimated that at least four people in group two became heroin users, the bulk of this occurring over the Christmas period.

There were also concerns about the youngest member of the group, who, at 21, was considerably younger than the rest of his peers. He had been in prison for relatively petty misdemeanours, in contrast to others in the group, who had experience of much ‘harder’ crime. At times, when they shared their experiences, they clearly shocked this younger member. In fact, he might have been better suited to group 1, where the age and criminal profile of the participants were both ‘lower’.

Nature of programme: identifying needs

The programme sought to meet client needs. One of the difficulties in meeting the needs of this target would be the general low level of self-awareness in the participants, the low regard the participants held for themselves, their general inarticulacy, allied to their alienation in society. In short, they had very little idea of what they – or anyone – needed in order to progress their lives or ‘careers’. In order to voice their needs, substantial capacity building needed to be undertaken.

Perhaps, the most effective definition of needs expressed was the participants’ view that they wanted to live a ‘normal life’. Considerable time was put into exploring what this meant to each person – it was brainstormed, discussed, sketched and debated. Gap analyses were carried out. Where are you now vis-à-vis your target? What do you need to bridge the gap? How will you get it? Will your present behaviour help you to achieve your goal? What changes can you make to bring it nearer?

Contracting was a large feature of both programmes. One way to build self-efficacy and internalise locus of control is to set manageable goals, attempt to fulfil them and reflect on the process. In both groups we encouraged participants to own and be responsible for their goals, and not undertake them simply to please someone else (particularly the facilitators). Each time a goal was set, participants were asked to return to the group and report on progress. Participants in both groups were strongly encouraged to return to the next session regardless of whether they had made progress or not. This worked more effectively with group one than group two. There was a period in the Spring of 2006 where almost every time a participant set a goal they failed to return for the next session. Some of these goals were (to us) quite innocuous, but clearly represented a serious challenge to group members, to the point where it resulted in no-shows. An unfortunate characteristic of group two was that absences were rarely curtailed to one session but could be long-term and in some cases, permanent.

Section 3: From theory to practice

Guiding principles

The philosophy that guided the programme was a humanistic one, which propounds that all people, given the presence of certain core conditions, have the capacity to grow and develop to such a point that they are able to resolve their own issues. Rogers (1961) declared these core conditions to be empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. When a person is able to resolve their own issues, they have control of and are able to take responsibility for their own lives: in short, they are empowered.

Empathy is linked to understanding, it occurs when one person feels they have been listened to and understood. Being truly listened to and understood by another has a transformative beneficial effect. Congruence refers to realness and genuineness, the feeling that the person listening to you is sincere and not acting or feigning interest. One might think that unconditional positive regard is a particular challenge with a group of former prisoners, but we find that there is a difference between the core person and their actions, and it is the core person, with their abilities, qualities and faults, that we try to connect with. The facilitators must own up to difficulties and say that we sometimes hear of behaviours that are distressing, or that we wish to condemn, but this group has faced condemnation all their lives and it has done nothing to aid their progression. We believe that when the participants feel they can trust us to say whatever they think or believe, then we are in a position to start exploring, and sometimes vigorously (but respectfully) challenging behaviours and attitudes.

The ‘how’ and the ‘what’

Because we came to the intervention with an overarching guiding principle, it influenced the content and delivery of the programme. In our view, how we delivered the programme was at least as important as what we did. Empowerment could not be achieved, or self knowledge grow, if the two facilitators lectured and instructed the group members how to live their lives. Instead, we sought to elicit the views, knowledge and opinions of the participants, pool it together, and generate a coherent piece of learning from it. In order to achieve a state where group members feel they have more control over their lives, we spend a lot of time discussing what it was they had control over.

We often begin the job-search skills side of the programme by engaging in role reversal, so that the group members empathically understand what employers need and are looking for. A typical opening might be “if you are looking for someone to paint your house, what kind of a person are you looking for”? We might break the group into two to answer the question, and pique their interest in the activity by making it competitive – which team will get the most. We were surprised in both groups at how stringent they declared they could be, and how much they expected an employee to bring to the table. They focused as much on personal qualities, such as honesty, reliability, common sense and integrity, as on technical ability or price. The group would be asked if they felt their list was reasonable and fair. After asserting that it was, they might be asked to consider how many of the qualities they felt they already possessed, which ones were within their range, how they might acquire them, and how they might prove to an employer that they possessed them. Each of these stages could take quite an amount of time, and there would inevitably be digressions, disagreements and attempts to deflect and escape from the activity. Yet what we were working towards was a contrast between where people were, and where they needed to be if they wanted to achieve their stated objectives. Initially some people might be deflated by the activity – being used to the immediate gratification of drugs, they were now setting themselves tasks and targets that they themselves had generated, considered necessary and would seek in others. Achieving them would take time, graft and effort. Most importantly, all the learning they reaped from the activity was being generated by the participants themselves. They were naming their direction, they asserted it was the right way to go, and knew that they either lived up to standards they were setting or they didn’t. Either way, group members could see that control and responsibility for movement lay with themselves.

Participants could also see that some of the qualities they felt were needed in an employee – such as staying power, the ability to get on with others and work in a team, a track record of

sticking to a task, taking on responsibility and so on – could be developed by participating in the programme for its duration and availing of training opportunities that came their way.

This activity – of looking at what an employer needed – could then be repeated for any job area the participants were interested in. The group members declared it to be a very interesting experience – they could put themselves in the shoes of the employer and see that what they sought was rational, reasonable and understandable. If you know what someone needs, the awareness provides you with the potential and opportunity to provide it to them. The group participants were therefore becoming more aware of the way the world operated, that there was comprehensible rationality underpinning it, that they had some say in how they interacted with it, and that they could figure these things out for themselves (at least in theory, and applying and testing such knowledge was the next step).

Self-evaluation

We thought it important to build participant self-trust, which was strikingly low. One activity that highlights this might begin with a question, “If you go for an interview, what would you consider to be a successful outcome”? Most groups asked this question will answer “get the job”. Then we might ask, “which aspects of the job-hunting process do you have control over”? The group might generate such answers as – what you apply for, where you locate vacancies, the standard of the CV, their appearance and so on. By undertaking an exercise of the type described above – working out the needs of the employer – they can even go a fair way to foretelling the questions an employer might ask, and the answers the employer would like to hear. It soon becomes apparent that the area they have least control over is who the interviewer decides to give the job to. They might do everything possible to be prepared and ready for an interview, and perform well in the interview and might not get the job for several reasons. So, they could do extremely well, and feel they have failed, unless they change their idea of success. The group inevitably arrives at the point of understanding that they are handing how they feel about themselves over to an agent outside themselves, and that this is not a healthy, safe or empowered thing to do. They could perform extremely well in the interview, but feel bad about themselves because the interviewer awarded the job to another person. As a result, they might well feel they have failed, and be more circumspect about putting themselves forward again. By means of the above activity – one of several we use to generate reflection and debate – we encourage the participants to reflect on their behaviour and actions and evaluate themselves fairly. What we hope for is to facilitate the participants to a level of insight where they realise that if they have done all they can, as well as they can, they have succeeded, and that persisting at this level will help them to accomplish any goals they set for themselves.

Reality check

Dealing with reality was a very important part of the content of the programme – again, how this was done was critical. Not berating or ridiculing someone for a belief, or expressing an opinion, was one of the few ground rules the facilitators proposed. Fear is a big factor in the lives of former prisoners. Without exception, the group members believed that they had made a complete mess of their lives, that they had utterly failed and were looked down on and derided. Deep down, their fiercest critics were invariably themselves. They had a very low opinion of their ability to undertake even the simplest tasks, so a major change, such as undertaking training or taking up employment, generated enormous fear. Initially most participants believed that the sole function of an interview was to catch out the interviewee in the act of lying. They seemed to have no distinction in their minds between a police interview, court appearance and a job interview. One simple way to disabuse them of that notion was to bring in an employer with extensive interview experience to meet the group. Another was the system outlined above, to get them to understand an employer's perspective and the rationale behind it so the process could be de-mystified.

Some views were ardently held on to so as to allow the holder to opt out. Immigrants were frequently blamed for their unemployed state, though their unemployment generally preceded the arrival of immigrants by several years. Others made exaggerated wage demands. One participant who had chalked up a 15 year prison record by the age of 30, had left school at 12 and had never worked, breezily declared that he would want to be taking home 700-800 euro a week to make it worth his while getting out of bed. We asked, "how much do you think you'd need to be earning to take home that amount"? The group estimated he would be earning 1,000-1,100 a week gross. We then revealed that though we had been working for up to 20 years, we were earning a fair bit less than that. We asked the group if they really thought they could earn over 50,000 a year as things presently stood. One can never be quite sure what will strike a chord with a group member, but for the participant in question it was clear that he was deeply struck by the exchange. Normally voluble, he scarcely spoke for two sessions. When he re-engaged with the group, he announced that he was seeking a job in order to start building up his CV. He didn't care what he was doing or how much he would earn, he needed to get working, cover up the holes in his CV, gain the confidence of an employer, and in time begin to advance up the ranks. Some time later, he fulfilled his objective, and found a job as a cleaner at 10 euro an hour. Some months later he changed jobs, into construction, for a higher rate of pay, and a company pension plan. Not long after joining this firm, he also became a keyholder.

Many of the group had career goals that they were unlikely to attain. One participant in his mid 30s spoke of doing an apprenticeship in block laying. The reality was that he looked very unhealthy and unfit, he was a decade and a half older than the average apprentice and he had no Junior Cert (a requirement for obtaining an apprenticeship). It may not have been impossible for this participant to get an apprenticeship, but the odds were long. Several participants spoke of wanting to get driving jobs, but they were banned – in some cases for up to 10 years – from driving. We could not shy away from confronting participants with the reality of their situation, but we always endeavoured to disabuse them respectfully of difficult to achieve aspirations.

Building self-efficacy and delegating power

The members of both groups had little experience of interacting with society. None of them had bank accounts, they weren't sure how to get themselves accommodation, they had little education, training or work experience, they weren't members of any clubs or societies, and they had likely never dealt with a state agency (on a voluntary basis) other than DSFA. In short, they had no experience of 'doing things', of undertaking the small, everyday tasks most people are barely conscious of doing.

We felt it essential that group members begin to interact with society, and every week we tried to agree on small tasks with the group, tasks that were relevant to their progression or their lives. The group would take responsibility for going for rolls at the break, getting everyone's order and returning with a receipt. Those interested in going to the gym would be responsible for buying books of tickets, and replenishing the stock as it ran low – and also making sure no one abused the system, by taking tickets they had no intention of using. People interested in joining a course or an activity group were coached to make an enquiring phone call – often they just didn't know what to say. Group outings were organised by the participants, from ringing about transport, to booking an activity. Members were usually genuinely nervous when considering and in the process of making a phone call. We made sure to focus on their relief and sense of achievement when they had accomplished an outcome.

Being trusted with small sums of money, or with tasks that affected the whole group, was a novel and uplifting experience for most group members. Their initial expectation of us was that we would perceive them negatively and in an untrustworthy and adversarial light. As they perceived the trust endowed on them by the facilitators, the staff of Cork Alliance (and, even at a remove, by the Steering Group), and most importantly of all, by each other, their self trust began to grow. It was striking how many participants explicitly doubted our wisdom

when we handed them a 20 euro note to get refreshments. It was also striking how something in them shifted at that moment, and how they made sure to honour the trust shown in them.

Other tasks might involve going about driver theory tests, getting PLC prospectus, checking information in some state agency, registering for a course, buying some piece of equipment and so on. These tasks would be agreed at each meeting, and the previous tasks discussed. We sought to establish a routine, where the participants were undertaking and completing tasks on a regular basis, and getting used to being able to get things done. It was notable that the perceived sense of self efficacy of most of the participants began to rise appreciably as time went by.

Programme content and managing life issues

Course content was often dictated by events that occurred in the participants' lives. Given the often chaotic and volatile nature of their lives, crises were frequent and often threatened to spin out of control unless the participant was given the opportunity to examine the situation in a detached and objective environment. The problems that arose for one group member would often be something that others could identify with. We did insist on the ground rule that participants could speak of their own issues, but not the issues of non-group members.

A great deal of time was devoted to developing a wider sense of self. Many former prisoners will refer to themselves as 'ex-cons'. We sought to widen and amplify their self perspective. Considerable time was spent exploring participants' qualities, strengths, needs, and objectives in life, so that they would begin to see themselves as far more than 'ex-cons'. Truth be told, this was the area where we met most resistance, particularly in group two, where the participants found it hard to voice anything about themselves that was interesting or positive. Nonetheless, we felt unless this redefining of their self-perception occurred, then we were simply running to stand still.

Tai chi and acupuncture

For the facilitators, it is evident from the moment we walk into an ex-prisoner group that in terms of fidgeting, lack of concentration, noise and fear of engagement, that such a group is unlike any other (that we have experienced). We were keen to try new methods that would help slow things down, relax people and boost their health. Tai chi and acupuncture were two such methods, and we were lucky to encounter a proficient trainer who was willing to give a standard price regardless of numbers attending.

Tai chi is about slow, controlled movement and breath control. It was exactly what the participants needed, but they were unable to stick with it. On the one hand, it required too much effort, on the other, they felt it was too slow. The group took to acupuncture for a few months, and it was astonishing to see the group members strewn around the floor, completely unguarded and fast asleep. Some of them would sleep for hours in the middle of the day, showing how unbalanced their lives must be.

It is hard to quantify the effect of these interventions, but the participants all tried things they would have considered outside their norm. Some participants felt acupuncture was relaxing them and helping them to control their substance intake. It was certainly an interesting and innovative experiment, and one the facilitators would recommend repeating on future interventions. As numbers began to decline, these activities were dropped as they no longer represented the initial good value for money.

Section 4

Issues for facilitators

Boundaries:This client group requires high levels of support. They experience grave difficulty in negotiating social interactions that most of the population would take for granted. It can be difficult to be resolute on boundaries when dealing with such a vulnerable and marginalised group, yet clear boundaries are a must with this client group.

Supervision:Given the previous point on boundaries, the facilitators feel that regular and ongoing supervision must be part of any further interventions.

Ongoing professional development:It is important for the facilitators of such a challenging programme to continually update and advance their knowledge and skills, particularly in the areas of counselling skills/techniques, and addiction.

Concentration levels:The client group, through poor nutrition, abuse of substances, lack of familiarity with a learning environment, peer pressure, and much else, generally exhibits low levels of concentration and a low boredom threshold, making it difficult to stick to planned activities. Sessions have to be lively and varied.

Unreliable attendance/time-keeping:Particularly in the second group, this made planning and follow on quite difficult

Heroin & Crack Cocaine:Since the recent easy accessibility of such drugs it can be hypothesised that hard drug addiction is set to escalate in the short term, making the running of long-term group interventions for this target group more unstable2.

Chief learning points

The facilitators have experience of working with 3 ex-prisoner groups in total, two under the aegis of the steering group, and one in conjunction with the Intensive Probation Service – all of these interventions based in Cork City. This, perhaps, does not represent a sufficient level of experience from which to draw definitive lessons, but the facilitators are willing to make a number of observations.

Firstly, ex-prisoner groups are among the most volatile and demanding that the facilitators have experienced to date. Chaos, in terms of attendance and behaviour might be considered to be one of the few constants. We see the underlying reason for such behaviour as fear of change in people with a low opinion of their capacity to change.

Participants frequently reported that attempts on their part to change were often subject to intense resistance by their peers, as it seemed to highlight the peers own lack of movement. Participants were often advised to keep their goals and ambitions private, for fear they would be undermined by those closest to them.

In terms of addiction, environment and peers proved to be another critical/negative factor – those attempting to go ‘clean’ were most often undermined by those closest to them.

The escalation in the easy availability of hard drugs in Cork City makes the experience of group one, and the Intensive Probation Service group, very different from group two. Group two was simply decimated by heroin addiction. Given that the programme is long-term in nature, aiming to facilitate a change in the self-concept of participants, then the intervention is more vulnerable to members falling prey to disabling addictions, undermining the viability of the project. This is an issue that the facilitators feel has to be addressed before a third group is run.

2 See Appendix B for a letter to the Drugs Task Force on this issue.

Christmas: In the experience of the Steering Group, most holiday breaks with a group comprised of former prisoners appear to have negative consequences for post-break attendance, but Christmas, with its attendant trappings of consumption and excess, is in a disaster league all of its own. Nothing brought this home more than overhearing two participants catching up on how their Christmas had been – in the first week of February!

Trust is very difficult to build with a group who feel under constant surveillance and who feel they exist outside society. Trust among group members was lower than we have experienced with any other target group.

There is a very thin line between ‘success’ and ‘failure’ as some of the case studies show (below). It can be argued that all of the participants gave real consideration to change, all of them felt a sense of identification with and belonging to the group (even after they had dropped out), and all of them had at least imagined a different life for themselves. All participants feel they benefited from the group, and that it has been a major beneficial experience in their lives.

One learning from group one is that the benefits of the intervention can be long-lasting. Very tellingly, of the 12 participants of the two groups, only one has since spent time in prison. For many participants, they are currently enjoying their longest spells to date living in freedom. Others have held down jobs for longer than they ever have before.

On the question of a reduced recidivism, it is worth noting that it costs approximately 100,000 Euro a year to keep a person in prison. Even if a participant spent two years in a PLC college, the level of state subsidy is considerably less than the cost of a year’s incarceration. Moreover, once active in the workplace, he then becomes a net contributor. Therefore, just one successful outcome – such as a participant getting a job or attending a PLC – saves the state far more than the cost of running a six month programme, including all associated costs, such as salaries and programme funding.

A further learning is that it is difficult to set outcome objectives with any degree of confidence – measuring the success of the programmes is difficult to do. The facilitators are confident that, because of having the experience of group one and the IPS group, then group 2 was by far their best and most skilful intervention. The quantitative outcomes alone, however, would not support such a claim3. Nonetheless, the participants of group two were more ‘hardened’ than the two previous groups, and group two was badly afflicted by heroin. In short, measuring success presents difficulties, as each group is unique and presents its own challenges and opportunities.

The chief, and overriding, learning is that this client group is extremely marginalised and far removed from the labour market and they require tremendous levels of support and resources. The reality is that most of the group participants had been supported over time by the agencies that recruited for the programme (Cork Alliance Centre, Churchfield Youth &

Community Trust and The Linkage Programme), and many participants made use of these supports before, during and after the programme.

In short, the programme was designed to complement the excellent work done by the aforementioned agencies and the CCLES and DSFA are grateful for the opportunity they have been given to input into the progression of such a marginalised group, and for the openness and acceptance of said agencies in facilitating their participation. The CCLES and DSFA have viewed at close quarters the dedication, skill, resilience and effectiveness of those agencies working in the front line with the target group, and the real difference they make to the lives of such a marginalised sector.

3 See Appendix A

Section 5

Recommendations

- The programmes run to date have achieved sufficient levels of success to continue the intervention.
- In light of the increasing availability of hard drugs, and its effect on group stability, drug testing should become mandatory and offenders dropped from the programme and not re-admitted until they have achieved a predetermined period of drug-free usage, and attended meetings.
- In order to hone selection methods, short programmes should be run in order to determine interest and suitability; interested candidates could then proceed onto a longer intervention.
- Any long intervention should not be punctuated by an extended break so momentum and progress is not reversed or undone
- The programme should continue to be as innovative, flexible and imaginative as possible, keeping abreast of developments elsewhere.
- An attempt should be made to generate a social group for activities and outings so that participants have some gainful, productive and enjoyable activity in their lives outside group sessions.
- Participant, facilitator and steering group perception on the effectiveness of any intervention needs to be seen as a valid factor in measuring outcomes.
- Evaluation is essential to highlight potential improvements, new possibilities and to acknowledge successes and setbacks.

- The steering group should remain open to other interested organisations joining the project, provided they accept the culture and philosophy upheld by the current members.
- The steering group should seek to publicise their work and make it known to all relevant bodies and be open to cooperating with and assisting similar ventures.

Section 6

Case study 1

A was the youngest member of the group (by some margin) at 21, and consequently, had spent the least amount of time in prison. He was a bright, polite, quiet and unassuming young man. He had expressed an interest in becoming a carpenter, but had not completed the Junior Cert. It also transpired that A had literacy difficulties. Though living at home, he had what appeared to be a difficult relationship with his father, who did not understand his inactivity as regards finding a job and reportedly looked with contempt on 'criminals'. Like many former prisoners, A claimed he knew someone (from jail) who had promised him a job any time he wanted, but A had never put the offer to the test, nor was he willing to. After several weeks working through various options with A, it was apparent that he had little idea of what doing an apprenticeship would involve (in order to get one he would have to either re-sit the Junior Cert or undertake a pre-apprenticeship programme). We proposed to him that rather than sign up for a lengthy process that he might not enjoy, it would be better to test his interest. How he would do this became, in itself, a process of a number of weeks, but as he began to get clearer and take ownership and responsibility for his career direction, A's relationship with his father began to improve and A's demeanour and outlook became more and more positive. Eventually A agreed to a two stranded approach. He would sign up for a furniture restoration course in St. John's and would attend literacy classes in Farranree.

A was accompanied to St. John's by his father, which A viewed as a very positive and welcome development. Unfortunately, when he joined the course, he was the only class member who did not bring a piece of furniture with him as most of the group were continuing on from a prior course. On returning to the group to share his experience, A said that the course wasn't for him, and tried to pass the experience off in a nonchalant manner, but it was clear that he felt exposed and humiliated. Former prisoners often feel they stand out when in 'normal' society, and A was upset by his experience. We contracted with A to buy a piece of second-hand furniture and return to the group. At the same time, A had rung and arranged to see a literacy tutor and was again accompanied by his father to the appointment. When he arrived at the meeting, the literacy group were unable to have a tutor

on hand, so they registered him. For A, it was a second item organised through his own actions that had not gone according to his expectations. His attendance immediately became sporadic for the next week or two before he finally dropped out.

We think the experience of A highlights the fear and anxiety that possesses most former prisoners when they embark on a new direction. It also highlights their underlying belief that they lack basic competencies and are unable to function well in ‘normal’ society. Moreover, it underlines the basic difficulty addictive personalities experience in attempting to negotiate their environment – if they can’t experience immediate payoff, give up.

A was on the cusp of enormous change. As such, it was a fearful, vulnerable and crucial time for him. We were confident he would succeed because of the months of work he had done in the group and his improved relationship with his father. Yet it did not work out as we all hoped. From our perspective, there are no easy explanations for A’s actions, nor can we claim to be possessed of any profound interpretations based on reflection and hindsight – in fact, we cannot claim we would have done anything differently.

Case study 2

P is 33 years old. He has spent a great proportion of his youth and adult life incarcerated. He has a fearsome reputation: In spite of same, P is an engaging, clever, charming and charismatic individual. He very quickly established himself as the informal leader of the group, and was the most articulate and reasonable member. In spite of his obvious abilities, P had a crushing lack of self-confidence. He believed that once he walked into a room, everyone ‘knew’ about him. Despite long probing, he was unable to articulate what they ‘knew’. He simply felt he was marked out in ‘normal’ company. Feelings of exposure and being under constant surveillance (by everyone) never really left him. The belief was deep-seated and resistant to the examination of the facilitators.

P also believed the future for him was unpromising – no one would want him or accept him, once they ‘knew’. He also had a complex about his tattoos. Unlike the tattoos of most former prisoners (India ink and amateurish!) P’s tattoos were artistic. Nonetheless, he was resistant to contrary views – by his tattoos they would know him.

In spite of these blocks, P showed tremendous courage and positivity. He was open about his doubts and fears, making it easier for others to be so. He also undertook a number of actions. He was challenged to test his theory that his progression was impossible. Some of these challenges went to the heart of his complexes – if people would shun you and ‘know’ you by your tattoos, then have them removed. P accepted the challenge and began laser

treatment. His delight in this process was infectious, and it was possible to see hope creeping behind the ramparts he had erected. Then he undertook a gym instructor's course, with another group member. Mixing with 'normal' people caused him tremendous unease – he confessed that the thought of jumping a bank counter would have been far easier. The course was run on alternating weekends – and P attended in spite of his fears. He also commenced a life-saving course in Douglas swimming pool, which he attended with regularity. Again he felt like a fish out of water, as most of his fellow learners were in their teens. P's unease began to decline however – he initially felt he would be unable to converse with people (in spite of his infectious gregariousness!). P felt profoundly ignorant – having spent so much time in prison produced the feeling in him that the world had moved on and left him behind. As the weeks passed, P would come into the group and report on some humorous incident or other. As a gifted storyteller, he had the group reduced to helpless laughter.

P began to grow in front of our eyes, and to the other group members, he was a clear role model. If P could do so well, why not everyone else, was a frequent question put to the other group members? P took responsibility for many of the group's activities. He generally went to get the refreshments for the tea break. He also managed the tickets for the gym, taking responsibility for maintaining a sufficient stock. If he felt anyone was inclined to misuse gym tickets, he sought explanations or withheld them. All throughout, he regularly attended the gym himself, and he looked extremely fit. A week or two before the Christmas break, P's mood took a downturn, and he became taciturn and withdrawn. After Christmas came the news that he had obtained a relatively substantial amount of money and had begun to use heroin heavily. He managed to make it back to the group on a few occasions, looking a gaunt shadow of his former self. He even managed to get off heroin for brief periods, but always slid back. He was lost to the group, and perhaps to himself. On his rare appearances post Christmas, he spoke passionately of the evil of heroin, how all consuming it was, and of his efforts to break free from it. Unfortunately, due to the lack of supports in Cork, it was a struggle he had to undertake on his own.

Case study 3

R is 36 years old. On commencing the group, he looked in dreadful health. Most days he appeared severely hungover. In an early tai-chi class – a very gentle form of exercise – R had to stop and sit down. He was winded, red in the face and sweating profusely. He made little contribution to the group most days, usually sitting red-eyed and exhausted in the corner. He did share the fact that he often went days without eating, and it was clear from his conversations with others that he abused drugs and alcohol most nights of the week.

Yet R kept coming – every day – and his personality began to emerge, though slowly. He began to show occasional instances of leadership. On hearing of a Cork Alliance client receiving acupuncture, he asked if he could try it. He then fed back to the group that he found it helpful. Soon others wanted to sample it, and within a few days, all of the group were seeking acupuncture. In pre-group discussions with the steering group, acupuncture was mentioned as a means of obtaining interesting results in managing withdrawal symptoms from drugs. Interesting as it sounded, there was much doubt as to whether this client group would try something from outside their culture. R came and did the selling for us.

R returned to the group after Christmas, looking the worse for wear, but followed through on a pre-Christmas announcement that he was going to sign up for two night courses in an adult education college. R duly signed and proceeded to attend each class, and then signed up for a follow on course. By now he was setting his sights very firmly on attending a PLC college in the autumn, and by attending night classes was giving himself every chance of success.

By the end of the group R had missed one session over the course of 6 months. He had changed, by wide and common consent, beyond recognition. His health had vastly improved – he looked completely different, fit, young, healthy and strong. His speech is clearer and more coherent, he is able to engage in conversation across a wide spectrum of topics. His abuse of alcohol and substances has declined substantially.

R suffered a crisis in early February, as a result of which he believed his safety to be in danger. His first impulse was to flee the country. Upon exploration and reflection he came to the conclusion that such an action would undermine all that he had thus far achieved.

He resolved to move outside Cork and continue with night courses and keep intact his plans for college in September4. He duly moved, and in doing so increased his resolve to lead a more meaningful life. From this point, his attitude to his health and his future took a more positive turn, attitudes he transformed into action. R is a radically different person now to the man who appeared on the group in October 2005. At that time he would have been considered to be the least likely to stick things out and change his ways. The extent of his ‘success’, in tangible and intangible terms, has been of immense importance to the facilitators and the steering group, as well as his fellow participants.