

Dear Minister McEntee,

I have pleasure in presenting you with the third annual report of the Interagency Group for a Fairer and Safer Ireland.

I was appointed by your predecessor, the Tánaiste & Minister for Justice and Equality, Ms. Frances Fitzgerald T.D., as the independent Chairperson of the Interagency Group for a Fairer and Safer Ireland in 2016.

The main purpose of the Group is to implement two key recommendations of the Penal Policy Review Group Report (*July 2014 Report of the Strategic Review of Penal Policy* ([www.justice.ie/penalpolicy](http://www.justice.ie/penalpolicy)), which call for much greater cross-government cooperation in the management and rehabilitation of offenders and crime prevention in general.


This report outlines the work the Interagency Group undertook during 2019.

During 2019 progress continued to ensure that offenders have access to the public services they need on release to increase their likelihood of social conformity. In particular, cooperation between the Irish Prison Service, the HSE and the Irish Association for Social Inclusion Opportunities (IASIO) enabled medical cards to be offered to eligible prisoners before release from prison. Cooperation between the IPS and Citizens Information Bureau will mean that ongoing support to engage with the National Medical Card Unit is available post-release. During 2019, work also continued on the implementation of the three year social enterprise strategy for the criminal justice sector. This work has been primarily led by the Irish Prison Service and Probation Service and implementation of the strategy is driven by a Social Enterprise Project Manager. During 2019 the first round of kickstart funding (€300,000 from the Dormant Accounts Fund) was awarded to social enterprises to develop their enterprises with a view to employing people with previous convictions. A second round of funding (€1m) was secured in 2019 for awarding to social enterprises in 2020. Aligned with this, a mentoring support programme has been put in place for social enterprises to improve their businesses and engagement with the insurance industry has taken place to enable enterprises to get insurance cover at reasonable rates when they employ people with previous convictions. Other initiatives undertaken were the promotion of social procurement by public bodies so that social enterprises can provide services to public bodies and social clauses included in contracts that require public suppliers to employ/train long-term unemployed or those with convictions in appropriate roles in delivering public service contracts. A Prison Entrepreneurship Programme was delivered in Wheatfield Prison which enabled people in custody to explore options for self-employment post-release, led by social entrepreneur, chef and journalist Domini Kemp. At the end of 2019 there were approximately 50 social enterprises that were already employing at least one person with a conviction in Ireland. Some social enterprises that work with clients in the criminal justice sector have been approved three year funding under the Community Services Programme, thus securing their viability.

Arrangements for coordinating employment and training opportunities for offenders in prison and on release were improved and a data sharing agreement between the IPS and the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection was devised to improve the case management of employment activation of offenders. However, at the end of 2019, significant challenges remained in relation to providing accommodation for offenders who are homeless and for the welfare of offenders with mental health problems. Interagency coordination is also hampered by the absence of a unique identifier of offenders across criminal justice agencies and the absence of data sharing arrangements across all agencies with responsibilities for offenders on release. In line with our terms of reference, the Interagency Group formulated proposals for research projects with a cross government focus and was disappointed that, by year end, these proposals had not been formally responded to by your Department. The Interagency Group would like to encourage and engage with a commitment to a coordinated approach to research, which supports individual agency initiated research projects within an overall research strategy.

The work of the Interagency Group in 2019 took place in the context of a major reorganisation of the Department of Justice and Equality. A consequence of the reorganisation was that there was a complete change in the Department's representation on the Interagency Group and of its secretariat. I would like to thank the former officials, and our Secretary, Keith Lynn, in particular, for their expertise, support and commitment to the Interagency Group. We welcomed Chrystle Brunet-Lee as Secretary of the Group in July 2019 and Aaron Murphy who succeeded her in December 2019.

I would like to thank the members of the Group for their commitment to improving interagency cooperation in relation to offenders and penal policy and I look forward to continuing to work with you and your colleagues in Government on the implementation of the recommendations of the Penal Policy Review Group Report.



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Ruth Barrington PhD  
Chair  
October 2020