

# **TRAVELLERS IN PRISON INITIATIVE**

## **THREE YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN, 2015 – 2018**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) is a project which has evolved and developed during the second half of 2014. The TPI is a response to the particular needs and circumstances of Travellers within the 14 prisons within the Republic of Ireland and within the Central Mental Hospital. It is recognised that there is a disproportionate number of Travellers within Irish prisons – although Travellers only account for 0.6% of the overall population in the Republic of Ireland they account for 22% of the female prison population and 15% of the male prison population (source: Irish Prison Service). The TPI has been developed to support existing programmes, to provide more co-ordination and to set up new projects aimed at assisting Travellers in prison and at reducing the number of Travellers in Irish prisons.

The background to the TPI can be traced back to the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) research report on ‘Travellers in the Irish Prison System’ produced in May 2014. This excellent piece of research clearly documents the challenges and difficulties being experienced by Travellers within Irish prisons. The research report formed the basis of a well-attended workshop (attended by over 50 people) which was jointly hosted by the Irish Travellers Movement (ITM) and St. Stephens Green Trust (SSGT) and which took place on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2014 in Portlaoise at the time of the ITM annual meeting. The Portlaoise workshop included presentations from the Irish Chaplaincy in Britain (who described their prison initiative) and from IPRT. There was unanimous approval at this workshop for setting up a project or initiative which would focus on the issue of Travellers in Irish prisons.

SSGT decided it would provide financial support to this initiative concerning Travellers in Irish prisons. In order to assist SSGT and other potential funders to develop and to design this initiative (the TPI) it was considered useful to establish a Working Group comprised of Traveller organisations, key statutory agencies and other interested parties. This Working Group met on three occasions in the Franciscan friary at Merchants Quay in Dublin – on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2014, on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2014 and on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2014. These meetings, attended by 20 people (see Appendix 1) and chaired by Stephen Rourke from SSGT, primarily focused on issues relating to the overall breadth and shape of the TPI, to the key themes and action areas for the TPI and to issues concerning the delivery and management of the TPI.

The key outcomes from the three meetings of the TPI Working Group, from the initial IPRT report and from the Portlaoise workshop in July 2014 are reflected in the 2015-2018 Strategic Plan for the TPI (as set out in this document). In addition to setting out the main strategies, themes and operating arrangements for the TPI, it is also anticipated that the Strategic Plan will provide a context and rationale for relevant agencies and organisations to provide financial assistance to the TPI. Whilst SSGT has made a commitment of €70,000 per year for the three years of the TPI it is evident that more can be achieved (e.g. in relation to Travellers accessing services in prison, provision of counselling and 1-to-1 support to Traveller prisoners, pre-release and post-release strategies) if more money is available to support individual projects and actions within the overall workplan.

The 2015-2018 Strategic Plan for the TPI has been structured around the following headings:

- **Key features of the TPI**
- **Main themes and action areas for the TPI**
- **Delivery and management arrangements for the TPI**
- **Budgets and financial requirements for the TPI**

## **2. KEY FEATURES OF THE TPI**

- The TPI has significant potential both in relation to supporting particular actions within Irish prisons and in relation to positively influencing policies, procedures and protocols which impact upon the lives of Travellers in Irish prisons. In this context the TPI should be viewed as a process of bringing about positive change as well as an initiative which will assist the progression of individual actions.
- Whilst it is often difficult to separate the lives of Traveller prisoners between the time before they entered prison, the time they spend in prison and the time after they leave prison, it will also be necessary to be fairly focused in relation to the main priorities for the TPI. At this stage there is a limited amount of €70,000 per year available for the TPI and there is a danger that its impact will become too diluted if it is spread too thinly across too many areas of work.
  - The main concentration will be upon the time which Traveller prisoners spend within the Irish prison system – around work areas such as counselling, accessing services, mental health, Traveller support groups, pre-release strategies, literacy. Work will also take place

with families of prisoners so that the family and the prisoner remain in contact and that they are ready and prepared for the release of the prisoner.

- Whilst the significant focus of the activities of the TPI will relate to work within prisons and with the families of prisoners, the TPI will also consider other matters such as research on the reasons as to why there is a disproportionately high level of Travellers within Irish prisons and the development of post-release strategies in order to prevent recidivism and family difficulties. However, the common overarching theme or focus will be upon the issue of Travellers in the Irish prison system.
- It is better to develop one significant initiative rather than allocate sums of money to 4-5 local projects on the ground (as would have happened in previous grants programmes of St. Stephens Green Trust). It is considered that there will be more of a longer-term impact if one initiative could be put in place which would be directed/driven by a representative management committee (including representatives from key agencies such as the Irish Prison Service and the Irish Probation Service).
- It will be necessary to employ a Co-ordinator or Manager to pull together all of the various strands of the TPI and to ensure that all of the main aspects of the workplan are being progressed in a satisfactory and effective manner. This will sometimes involve the Co-ordinator setting up activities by him/herself and, more likely, setting them up with other agencies and organisations. It is likely that the Co-ordinator role will be a full-time job and he/she will be supported by the committee to be set up to oversee the TPI.
- A positive policy environment currently exists in relation to prison/penal reform in Ireland. This positive policy environment would suggest that there will be a reasonable level of support from key agencies for actions set out in the TPI workplan. Indeed, some of these actions could involve a re-orientation of existing services provided in Irish prisons by key statutory agencies and voluntary organisations (the Irish Prison Service has produced a comprehensive listing of all the various services being provided within each of the 14 prisons in the Republic of Ireland).
- The TPI should aim to have universal coverage across all prisons within the Republic of Ireland – there are a total of 14 prisons, of which 3 are open prisons. These 14 prisons are spread across a smaller number of campuses and it is feasible for the TPI to aim to have an impact and a presence across all of the prisons. Some prisons have a disproportionately high

number of Travellers (e.g. Castlerea, Loughan House) and will be a particular focus of attention for the TPI. The TPI will also have a focus on Traveller prisoners in the Central Mental Hospital.

- The TPI should be flexible and adaptable enough to respond to changing needs, changing circumstances, changing opportunities. The TPI will be an important initiative dealing with the issue of Travellers in the Irish prison system and, as such, it should have the capacity to respond to new challenges and new needs. Whilst there will be an agreed workplan at the beginning of the initiative this can be adapted to enable the TPI to proceed in the most effective and impactful manner.
- There could be an important and enhanced role for Traveller Development Groups and Traveller Support Groups in relation to the needs and circumstances of Travellers in Irish prisons. There are a number of Traveller Development/Support Groups across Ireland and it is considered that they could play a stronger role around issues concerning prison visits, establishment of peer support groups for Travellers in prison and family support for the families of prisoners.

### **3. WORKPLAN – MAIN THEMES AND ACTION AREAS FOR THE TPI**

The TPI will have a number of primary focuses in the period from 2015 to 2018. These focuses and themes have been selected on the basis of where the most significant needs exist, where the greatest impact can be made and where there are opportunities for enhanced collaboration between relevant agencies and organisations. The workplan for the TPI between 2015 and 2018 will have 8 main themes or action areas. These are as follows:

- 1. Counselling.** Travellers in prison should all be provided with opportunities for 1-to-1 counselling and support to discuss and work through issues of concern to them. A universal counselling service for all Travellers in Irish prisons would build upon the work already being carried out by groups such as the Traveller Counselling Service and Exchange House (in relation to addiction counselling). For reasons of acceptability to prisoners it might be necessary to call the person(s) delivering counselling services a Support Worker or Links Worker rather than a Counsellor. This Support/Links Worker could also be connecting with the families of Traveller prisoners and acting as a liaison between the Traveller prisoner and his/her family. This aspect of the workplan for the TFI will involve greater co-ordination

between existing services so as to ensure that more Traveller prisoners can access counselling/support and that unnecessary duplication does not take place.

2. **Traveller Peer Support Groups in Prisons.** References have been made in various reports and discussions to the isolation and loneliness experienced by Traveller prisoners. There is a low take-up of services within prison by Travellers and there are a significant number of Travellers on 23 hour lockup within their cells. It is considered important that work takes place on setting up Traveller Peer Support Groups within prison so as to counter isolation and the negative feelings and emotions which come from spending too much time by oneself. Establishment of Traveller Peer Support Groups, and the facilitation of these groups, will be an element within the TPI workplan. This type of work would build upon existing programmes being developed (e.g. Meath Travellers facilitating groups in Wheatfield Prison) and would need to be viewed in the context of the Prisoners Councils which may be set up in Irish prisons. It should be possible to develop programmes and modules which have transferrable potential across the Irish prison system (both in relation to Peer Support Groups for Travellers and to Traveller awareness programmes within prisons).
3. **Family Support.** When a Traveller is spending time in prison there are often difficulties and problems in maintaining the contact between the prisoner and his/her family and in preparing for the time when the prisoner is going to be released and return to his/her family. Much more work needs to take place on liaising with the prisoner and his/her family whilst the prisoner is in prison and, if appropriate, on creating more opportunities for greater contact between the prisoner and his/her family. The role of children is particularly important in dealing with family support situations. The Irish Prison Service is in the process of implementing a new family support model and it may be possible for the TPI to influence this model in relation to the needs and circumstances of Travellers. The TPI could encourage and enable Traveller Support/Development Groups to do more work around family support for Traveller prisoners and liaising between the Traveller prisoner and his/her family. More opportunities should be developed for the Traveller prisoner to contact with his/her family when he/she is in prison.
4. **Accessing Services in Prison.** The IPRT report on 'Travellers in the Irish Prison System' and other more anecdotal information would indicate that there is a low take-up by Travellers of services which are available within Irish prisons. These services include educational services, training services, healthcare services, addiction services. More work

needs to take place on identifying the blockages and barriers which are inhibiting or preventing Travellers accessing more services within prison e.g. is it about a lack of confidence? is it about a belief that they do not need the services? is it about the services not being culturally appropriate to Travellers? The TPI will consider this issue of Travellers accessing services in prison with a view to significantly increasing the number of Travellers accessing available services. There is a particular need to focus on literacy services (53.5% of Travellers in British prisons have self-reported literacy problems) and to explore the greater provision of literacy programmes such as Toe by Toe (Shannon Trust Reading Plan) in Irish prisons. It is anticipated that 1-to-1/counselling work with Traveller prisoners will help to identify blockages in relation to Travellers accessing services.

5. **Women Traveller Prisoners.** Traveller women are 18 times more likely to end up in prison than non-Traveller women whilst Traveller men are 11 times more likely to end up in prison than non-Traveller men. A recent headcount of prisoners within the Irish Prison Service indicated that 22% of women prisoners were Travellers (comparable male figure was 15%). In addition to the higher prevalence of Traveller women within Irish prisons there are also particular issues concerning the stigma of Traveller women having spent time in prison (stigma amongst Travellers and non-Travellers), the difficulties for family relationships and access to children (during time in prison and afterwards) and problems about finding accommodation after release from prison. Traveller women will be a particular focus for the TPI and further research should take place on the needs and circumstances of women Travellers within Irish prisons. Research would also consider what happens to women Traveller prisoners upon their release from prison (around issues such as re-connecting with their family/children).
6. **Pre-release and post-release strategies.** The IPRT research report and discussions concerning the TPI have served to highlight the critical importance of the pre-release and immediate post-release period and the importance of preparing the prisoner (e.g. does he/she have somewhere to live? do they have money? are they being linked into services?) and preparing the family (e.g. do they know the prisoner's release date and when he/she is returning home? what preparations have been made to integrate him/her back into the family?). If the pre-release and post-release process is not handled right it is more likely that recidivism will occur and that there will be difficult and stressful family situations. There is a particularly important role for prison links workers, for support workers and for Traveller

Support/Development Groups in trying to ensure that the pre-release and post-release stages are handled as well as possible. Through the TPI it should be possible to develop templates or models for effective pre-release and post-release work and for the re-integration of prisoners.

7. **Restorative Practices.** Restorative practices is a way of re-building and restoring relationships and of dealing with victims and offenders by focusing on the harm arising from crime and resolving the underlying problems that caused it. Whilst most restorative practices activity takes place outside of prison (e.g. at the pre-sentencing stage) there is also growing evidence of effective restorative practices initiatives in prisons – these deal with the victim/offender relationship, conflict resolution (amongst prisoners and within society), victim awareness and empathy, making amends whilst in prison. Restorative practices should extend beyond the more narrow understanding of restorative justice. The aim of restorative practices should be to develop capacity to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and building relationships. This can be achieved through coaching, mediation and restorative justice and has some potential in tackling problems and issues which might be taking place between Travellers and between Travellers and non-Travellers.
8. **Research and policy.** The IPRT research report on ‘Travellers in the Irish Prison System’ has formed the basis for the establishment of the TPI. It provided the rationale and the evidence base for the initiative. Discussions at the ITM conference in Portlaoise and at the meetings of the TPI Working Group served to identify key issues/questions which required further research – these include ‘Why are there so many Travellers in Irish prisons?’ and ‘Are Travellers receiving heavier sentences than non-Travellers for committing similar crimes?’ (it is interesting that recent research in the United States concluded that 19.5% of black male defendants receive longer sentences than white male defendants charged with similar crimes). Research which informs practice and policy will be included as one of the strands/themes for the TPI and will seek to pull together the learning and the outcomes which emerge from other components of the TPI. It is also anticipated that the TPI will be informed by the experiences of other ethnic minorities in other countries and that these analyses will help to inform the ongoing development of the TPI.

These eight themes will form the core of the TPI workplan for the three year period between 2015 and 2018. They will be developed in more detail for each of the three years of the TPI by annual work programmes to be agreed by the TPI Steering Group and the TPI Co-ordinator.

#### **4. MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY OF THE TPI**

##### **(i) Steering Group**

The work and activities of the TPI will be overseen, guided and directed by the TPI Steering Group. This Steering Group will be comprised of 12-14 members and will meet on a six weekly basis. The Steering Group will be chaired by an independent chairperson who will be nominated by SSGT. The Steering Group will not be responsible for the employment of staff or managing finances but it will have a role in guiding and directing the work of TPI staff (through the six weekly meetings and perhaps annual or twice yearly review and planning meetings) and in agreeing annual budgets (especially in relation to actions and activities to be funded by the TPI). The membership of the TPI will consist of the following:

- **One independent chairperson (to be nominated by SSGT)**
- **One representative of SSGT**
- **One representative of the Irish Travellers Movement**
- **Two representatives from member groups of the Irish Traveller Movement**
- **One representative of Exchange House**
- **One representative of Pavee Point**
- **One representative of the National Traveller Womens Forum**
- **One representative of Mincéirs Whiden**
- **One representative of Traveller Counselling Services**
- **One representative of the Irish Penal Reform Trust**
- **One representative of the Irish Prison Service**
- **One representative of the Irish Probation Service**
- **One representative from the HSE/Tusla**

##### **(ii) Employment of staff**

The staffing for the TPI will initially involve one worker. This worker will be a full-time Programme Coordinator for the TPI and will be employed by SSGT. The Programme Coordinator will work from the offices of one of the Traveller organisations. Since the Programme Coordinator will not be employed by this Traveller organisation a Memorandum of Understanding will need to be drawn up between SSGT and the Traveller organisation hosting the TPI Programme Coordinator and other workers who might be employed to deliver the TPI. The main purpose of the Memorandum of Understanding will be to ensure that all organisations and groups are clear about



reporting relationships within the TPI and that the Programme Coordinator and any other TPI staff have clarity about their respective relationships with SSGT (as employer) and with the Traveller host organisation (as the provider of workspace and perhaps other supports to the TPI). The Programme Coordinator will be employed on a three year contract in order to correspond to the initial funding commitment from SSGT (which will hopefully be supplemented by financial contributions from other funders). The importance of having the TPI identity independent of any particular Traveller organisation was confirmed by the Working Group.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The IPRT report on ‘Travellers within the Irish Prison System’ has clearly articulated the main concerns and issues relating to Travellers in Irish prisons. It is evident that the problems faced by Travellers in prison are somewhat different to non-Traveller prisoners (e.g. problems around accessing services, around literacy and numeracy, around self-confidence and assertiveness, around prejudice and discrimination). These problems and challenges require an integrated and co-ordinated response by a range of statutory agencies and voluntary organisations and it is our belief that the TPI has the potential to provide this type of integrated and co-ordinated response.

The TPI, through its inter-agency/organisation Steering Group and its Programme Coordinator, can bring together a number of existing strands and activities relating to Travellers in prison, it can provide additional support to these strands and activities, it can develop and set up new actions and projects, it can bring into the Irish context proven strategies from other countries concerning ethnic minorities within the prison system. It is considered that the 8 key thematic action areas for the TPI (set out in section 3 of this report) are all inter-related and are of significant importance for Travellers (and their families) who experience time within prisons in Ireland. The TPI has the potential to make a real difference both through the actions and activities to be supported and, equally as important, through the increased co-ordination and co-operation which will take place between the key agencies and organisations represented on the TPI Steering Group (it will be the first time that these agencies/organisations will have come together).

**STEPHEN ROURKE  
ST. STEPHENS GREEN TRUST  
NOVEMBER 2014**

## APPENDIX 1

### LIST OF PARTICIPANTS WHO ATTENDED MEETINGS OF THE ‘TRAVELLERS IN PRISON’ INITIATIVE IN SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 2014

NAME	ORGANISATION
Stephen Rourke (Chair)	St. Stephens Green Trust
John Mulligan	Breakthrough Consulting
Penny More	Exchange House
Catherine Morley	Exchange House
Ronnie O'Donnell	Exchange House
Deirdre Malone	Irish Penal Reform Trust
Fiona Ní Chinnéide	Irish Penal Reform Trust
Maura Donahue	Irish Prison Service
Ray Murray	Irish Prison Service
Brian Santry	Irish Probation Service
Brigid Quilligan	Irish Travellers Movement
Damien Walshe	Irish Travellers Movement
Michael McDonagh	Meath Travellers
Nell McDonagh	Meath Travellers
Joe McGrath	Midlands Traveller Conflict Mediation Initiative
Aileen O'Brien	Midlands Traveller Conflict Mediation Initiative
Katayoun Bahramian	Pavee Point
John Paul Collins	Pavee Point
Orla O'Neill	St. Stephens Green Trust
Thomas McCann	Traveller Counselling Service