

FROM: BRIAN WHITE
Criminal Justice Policy Branch
12 March 1999

PS/Mr Ingram

PRISONER REINTEGRATION: BRIEFING THE ASSEMBLY PARTIES

Issue: At a recent meeting with Assembly party representatives to discuss reintegration the Minister agreed that officials should provide a paper and further briefing to parties on this issue.

Recommendation: that the Minister should approve the attached draft paper and note that officials are proceeding to set up meetings with Assembly parties.

Timescale: as soon as possible.

Background

The Minister met representatives of the Assembly parties on 2 March to discuss prisoner reintegration. During that meeting it was apparent that, with the exception of Sinn Fein and the PUP, party representatives were relatively unsighted on the issue and it was suggested that before they met the Minister again, it would be helpful for them to be given a paper setting out the actions taken so far, and offered a briefing meeting with officials.

2. I attach a draft paper which we might use for this. We propose to take parties through the paper during the meeting rather than passing it out in advance. During discussion we might also touch on some of the wider issues - such as proposals for changes to the rehabilitation of offenders legislation, conditions for granting a PSV licence, etc. (making it plain that these are issues which have been raised with Government rather than actual proposals for change) to illustrate the spread of issues which the Assembly might want to consider. Some of these are directly within the gift of the Assembly, but even where they are not it will be worth re-iterating the Minister's point that consensus on any one issue from the Assembly would be an important factor in the Government's consideration.

3. Provided the Minister is content, we propose contacting Assembly parties with a view to setting up meetings as soon as possible. We will offer joint or separate meetings, whichever a party prefers.

signed

B R D WHITE

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Copy List

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)

PS/PUS (B&L)

Mr Watkins

Mr Jeffrey

Mr Stevens

Mr Daniell

Mr McCabe

Mrs Collins

Mr McGuckin

Mr Haire

Mr Stevenson

Mr Arbuthnot, T&EA

Mr Matthews, SSA

Mr Conway, Housing Executive

Mr Martin, DOE

Mr O'Neill, DHSS

Mr Hanna, DFP

Mr Godfrey, CCRU

Mr Sayers, LEDU

DRAFT BRIEFING FOR ASSEMBLY PARTIES ON PRISONER REINTEGRATION

The Government is committed to meeting its obligations under the Good Friday Agreement, which says that both governments "will continue to recognise the importance of measures to facilitate reintegration by providing support prior to and after release, including assistance directed towards availing of employment opportunities, re-training and/or re-skilling and further education."

2. Government policy is that prisoners should be given every assistance to enable them to play a full and active role in society, and that they should have full, though not preferential, access to the range of social support generally available to members of the public.

3. The Government is also conscious that the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act is resulting in the release over a relatively short period of significant numbers of long term prisoners, many of whom will not have been able to prepare for release in the normal way. In order to meet its overall aims within these special circumstances, the Government set up a co-ordinating group consisting of representatives of the Northern Ireland Office, the Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Education, the Prison Service, the Probation Board, the Training and Development Agency and the Housing Executive. The purpose of the group has been to ensure that released prisoners had proper access to support services, and that services themselves were aware of and geared to cope with the likely patterns of release.

4. Additionally prisoner welfare organisations were allowed access to prisoners held in segregated accommodation in HMPs Maze and Maghaberry

(Mourne House). This access had two purposes. First, prisoners have been helped to prepare applications for housing, social security and employment services meaning that they will have the necessary paperwork ready for immediate consideration on release. Prisoners held in non-segregated accommodation in HMPs Maghaberry and Magilligan have been given similar assistance by prison and probation staff. Secondly, with a view to the development of training programmes within prison, welfare organisations have made assessments of the longer term reintegration needs of prisoners.

Pre-release reintegration programmes

5. Welfare organisations have now made proposals for training programmes. They will deal with three main themes:

- Personal/social skills development, including confidence building; motivation; stress management; social skills and reintegrating into society;
- Development of employment and employability embracing three areas: personal employment skills; general employment awareness and business planning; and vocational training.
- Training for life in the community in a changing Northern Ireland including conflict awareness; mediation skills; and peace building.

Potential providers were also identified by the groups, particularly in relation to seminar and course work within the prisons.

6. Ministers have now agreed the proposals and reintegration programmes are beginning in HMP Maze. EPIC have been and will continue to deliver services to UVF prisoners through their welfare group visits. Courses for Republican prisoners began on 8 March. Courses for UDA prisoners will begin in April. The Prison Service will meet the costs of external

providers delivering pre-release packages to prisoners in HMP Maze.

Accelerated release prisoners in HMPs Magilligan and Maghaberry receive pre-release services through prison and probation staff.

7. Through their welfare groups prisoners have also sought opportunities for pre and post release vocational training. Ministers have expressed interest in the idea and have asked groups to develop their thoughts and submit more detailed proposals. A full consideration of the request would then be possible.

Post Release Support

Financial Support

8. Prisoners released under the Sentences Act 1998 have not received any special financial support. However all released prisoners receive a discharge grant (£39.85 for those aged 18 to 24, £50.35 for above 24, £101.67 where a prisoner is homeless) and like all members of the public, released prisoners who find themselves unemployed, homeless or otherwise in need may apply for and receive a wide range of grants and social services (such as social security benefits, housing etc.), providing they meet the relevant criteria.

Housing

9. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is responsible for the housing of those in need in Northern Ireland, including released prisoners. Housing is allocated according to need and all applicants must meet the relevant criteria.

10. Applicants granted emergency housing status because of their circumstances are generally housed more quickly than those placed on the

general waiting list. Some released prisoners have been granted emergency status.

Employment

11. On release, as long term unemployed, all prisoners will be eligible for assistance under the "New Deal" programme. LEDU (the Local Enterprise Development Unit) grants are available to ex-prisoners wishing to start up small businesses providing they meet the normal eligibility criteria. Prisoners are receiving briefings on these issues prior to release.

Education

12. Prisoners currently engaged in external courses of study will have their fees met for the rest of this academic year. Ex-prisoners are eligible to apply for the full range of grants for education purposes, provided they meet the relevant criteria. (Voluntary bodies in Northern Ireland, such as the Educational Trust, also provide assistance specifically to ex-prisoners to help them pursue further education).