

## Aspire – ‘Changing Lives to Make Communities Safer’

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**Summary:** The Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015 set out the Northern Ireland Government’s commitment to tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality. It set up an independent three-person panel to make recommendations on the disbandment of paramilitary groups. In response to the panel’s report, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) set up the Aspire Project in September 2017. The aim of Aspire is to reduce criminality and risk-taking behaviour in men aged 16–30 who are marginalised from communities and at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism. One year after establishment, the impact of Aspire was measured by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The findings demonstrate positive outcomes and highlight challenges and recommendations for the future direction of the project. This paper provides an introduction to the Aspire Project, describes its context and rationale and highlights the findings of the evaluation.

**Keywords:** Collaboration, criminality, paramilitary, intensive, cross-departmental.

### Introduction

The Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015 set out the Northern Ireland Government’s commitment to tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality (Northern Ireland Executive, 2015). It set up an independent three-person panel – the Fresh Start Panel<sup>1</sup> – to make recommendations on the disbandment of paramilitary groups. The panel’s report was published in June 2016 (Northern Ireland Executive, 2016). The report contained recommendations for a new strategic approach to tackling paramilitary activity. Recommendation B 12 (p. 27) stated:

Some young men are at particular risk of being drawn into criminal activity and a cross-departmental approach will be required to help achieve better

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<sup>1</sup> The independent three-person panel comprised Lord Alderice, Professor Monica McWilliams and John McBurney, who were appointed to undertake this role in December 2015.

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outcomes. Building on the best practice model of INSPIRE, which works with women at risk of offending, we recommend that the Executive, in conjunction with the Probation Board, should develop, fund and implement an initiative focused on young men who are at risk of becoming involved, or further involved, in paramilitary activity. This initiative should be a collaboration between government departments and restorative justice partners to combine restorative practices and peer mentoring with targeted support in respect of employment, training, housing, health and social services.

In response to this recommendation, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) set up the Aspire Project in September 2017. The aim of Aspire is to reduce criminality and risk-taking behaviour in young men aged 16–30 who are marginalised from communities and at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism. It is a collaborative project led by PBNI and delivered in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI). One year after establishment, the impact of Aspire was measured by NISRA. The findings demonstrate positive outcomes and also highlight challenges and recommendations for the future direction of the project (NISRA, 2019). This paper provides an introduction to the Aspire Project, describes the context and rationale for the project and highlights the findings of the evaluation.

While significant progress has been made in tackling paramilitarism since the ceasefires of the 1990s, paramilitary violence has continued in some communities across Northern Ireland (NI). In 1972, the peak year of violence, 470 people were killed in the Troubles. By 2015 this had fallen to two people killed by paramilitary groups, a sharp, sustained reduction having occurred in 2005 and 2006 (Melaugh *et al.*, 2019). While incidents of paramilitary violence continue to be large in number, today they rarely kill and are mostly directed against members of their own most disadvantaged communities (Braithwaite, 2016).

However, there has been a sharp increase in paramilitary-style ‘punishment’ shootings and beatings by republicans and loyalists across Northern Ireland in recent years. Indeed, there has been a 60 per cent increase in such attacks over the past four years. Figures from the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s (PSNI) statistics branch show that in 2013 there

were 64 such attacks. In 2017, the figure rose to 101 shootings and beatings.<sup>2</sup> There is also a perception, particularly among young people, that there is a high incidence of paramilitary activity in NI and that paramilitaries still control certain communities (McAlister et al., 2018).

In order to try to bring continuing paramilitary activity to an end, the NI Executive and the UK and Irish Governments published *A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan* in 2015. Aiming to address some of the most challenging issues facing society, the Fresh Start Agreement reaffirmed support for the rule of law and provided a framework for tackling paramilitary activity and organised crime. This framework included the appointment of an independent three-person panel to report to the Executive with recommendations for a strategy for disbanding paramilitary groups. The *Fresh Start Panel Report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland* was published in May 2016. Setting out a strategy that followed four broad objectives (A. Promoting Lawfulness; B. Support for Transition; C. Tackling Criminal Activity; D. Addressing Systemic Issues), it contained 43 recommendations. Recommendation B12 (within Support for Transition) stated:

The Executive, in conjunction with the Probation Board, should develop, fund and implement an initiative (based on the INSPIRE<sup>3</sup> model) focused on young men who are at risk of becoming involved, or further involved, in paramilitary activity. This initiative should be a collaboration between Government departments and restorative justice partners to combine restorative practices and peer mentoring with targeted support in respect of employment, training, housing, health and social services.

The Northern Ireland Executive subsequently responded to the panel’s report in July 2016 with the publication of *Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime: Executive Action Plan*. Acknowledging the valuable contribution the recommendations made, the report set out an action plan for how each would be taken forward and implemented. The plan for implementing B12 stated:

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics>

<sup>3</sup> INSPIRE is a Probation-led project that tackles female offending. It provides a women-only space for women to attend their Probation appointments and complete offence-focused programmes such as victim awareness, anger management, coping skills, alcohol and drug awareness and confidence building, which are delivered by both Probation staff and other support programme providers. Partner organisations include NIACRO, the Women’s Support Network (WSN), Start 360, EXTERN, Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Social Services, Women’s Aid, Addictions NI, Alternatives NI and Community Restorative Justice Ireland.

The Probation Board will lead on the development of a model aimed at systematically addressing the age-related specific risks, experiences and needs of young men who have offended and are at risk of being drawn into crime and paramilitarism. The model will be co-designed between Government departments and restorative justice partners to combine restorative practices and peer mentoring with targeted support in respect of employment, training, housing, health and social services.

This in turn led the PBNi to develop the Aspire initiative in September 2017.

## **Aspire Project**

PBNi established a dedicated team consisting of a manager with overall responsibility for the programme, as well as three Probation Officers (POs), three Probation Services Officers (PSOs) and a part-time Administrator to lead and implement Aspire.

The scheme takes referrals and operates with two distinct groups:

1. statutory service users (those under Probation supervision)
2. non-statutory service users (those not currently known to the criminal justice system/subject to statutory supervision).

The target group for inclusion in the Aspire Project are 16–30-year old males who fit the following criteria:

- originating from families experiencing intergenerational trauma
- originating from families living in high social deprivation
- from households where lack of parental control is an issue
- with mental health issues and low levels of self-esteem
- who may be in drug debt
- with a lack of prospects and social marginalisation
- who are unemployed, with low educational attainment
- involved in drug and/or alcohol abuse
- involved in antisocial behaviour
- who may be under threat (or previous threat) within their community
- looking to find their place, a sense of belonging.

All the criteria were based on research<sup>4</sup> that identified the characteristics that made young men more likely to be vulnerable to criminality and paramilitary influence.

### ***Statutory service users***

Statutory referrals to Aspire were made by POs and NIACRO staff, within both the prisons and the community. Referrals were also received from prison staff. The Aspire Manager then determined whether service users who were on statutory supervision fitted the eligibility criteria.

The statutory service users fitting all the criteria (known as Aspire referrals) were supervised by a dedicated Probation team made up of POs and PSOs who provide intensive interventions and focus on desistance and alternative pro-social pathways. All statutory service users who consented to the referral to Aspire received support from a dedicated NIACRO adult mentoring programme for up to 16 weeks; engagement with Aspire is voluntary.

Aspire supervision entailed weekly contact with POs/PSOs providing intensive interventions, focusing on desistance and encouraging access to alternative pro-social pathways including employment or training, stable housing and a focus on personal development, health and wellbeing. POs with support from PSOs co-ordinated referrals to, and worked collaboratively with, relevant community and voluntary sector groups to address substance related/mental health issues and other offending-related factors. In addition to the intensive support provided by the PBNi Aspire team, these individuals availed of a mentoring programme provided by a dedicated team within NIACRO for 16 weeks and also had the opportunity to be referred to the Barnardo’s Project to focus on parenting issues.

At the end of the six-month period the Aspire Manager, in conjunction with the PO and PSO, decided whether the service user should transfer back to the local community team. This was, however, flexible and if there were particular difficulties at the time of transfer or the service user’s period of supervision was due to end in the near future, the Aspire team retained case management responsibility.

A number of statutory service users who did not necessarily meet the threshold to be considered in the Aspire referrals element of the project met the criteria to be referred into the Adult Mentoring Services provided by NIACRO. This service was provided over 16 weeks, focused on support with housing, access to a general practitioner (GP) following release from prison,

<sup>4</sup> Research was conducted by Data Analytics Labs on behalf of the PBNi.

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assistance with benefits, etc. PBNI supervision was by the assigned community PO rather than an Aspire PO.

### *Non-statutory referrals*

NIACRO took the lead in the element of Aspire known as Aspire Community Engagement. This involved a range of community-based interventions, including restorative justice approaches for young men who were not subject to statutory supervision. Working in partnership with NI Alternatives and CRJI, referrals were largely identified by the three organisations with some involvement from other community and voluntary sector partners, local community groups, youth/educational welfare services, PSNI and prison staff. In some cases, referrals to Alternatives and CRJI came directly from family members or from schools. The same 11-point criteria for accepting referrals were used for non-statutory and statutory referrals.

Many of the non-statutory service users working with NIACRO had just been released from prison, where they had been serving short-term sentences but without statutory PBNI involvement on release. All availed of the mentoring element of the initiative for 16 weeks.

## **Evaluation**

The purpose of the independent evaluation conducted by NISRA was to assess the effectiveness of Aspire in meeting its aims, as set out by the Northern Ireland Executive (2016), namely 'combining peer mentoring with targeted support in respect of employment, training, housing, health and social services'. The evaluation also aimed to determine Aspire's impact on the lives of participants and wider society.

## **Methodology**

The evaluation used a mixed methodological approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques.

### ***Quantitative data sources***

The evaluation used the following.

- Data collected and held by the PBNI Aspire team for the 252 statutory service users who accessed the service between 1 September 2017 and

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1st September 2018, including demographic information, Assessment, Case Management & Evaluation (ACE) system scores and information regarding risk, recall and focus of interventions (Cooper and Whitten, 2013).

- Data collected and held by NIACRO for 242 statutory service users and 250 non-statutory service users who accessed the service between 1 September 2017 and 1 September 2018, including demographic information.

### *Interviews and focus groups*

The qualitative elements of the evaluation involved:

- semi-structured interviews with Probation Managers (3) and stakeholders (6)
- focus groups with service users (17), mentors (12), and POs (6).

### *Questionnaires*

- Entry ( $n = 265$ ) and Exit Questionnaires ( $n = 129$ ).

Service users completed an entry questionnaire at the start of the programme and an exit questionnaire when it finished. The entry questionnaire gathered data regarding service user background, safety within the area they live and problems that had resulted in their referral to Aspire.

### ***Data limitations***

Participation on Aspire was on a voluntary basis. It is possible therefore that the cohort consists of a more motivated group of individuals with a greater desire to stop reoffending.

## **Findings**

### ***Referrals***

A total of 171 referrals were made to the Aspire team (i.e. statutory service users supervised by an Aspire PO). A total of 148 service users were accepted, 141 of whom participated during the first year of the initiative. By 1 September 2018, 28 had successfully completed the programme and a further 28 had breached or were recalled; 85 were categorised as still live or waiting. A total

of 111 referrals were made by the Aspire team to the adult mentoring element of the initiative (i.e. statutory service users supervised by a community PO). A total of 104 were accepted. The community engagement element received an overall total of 270 referrals, of which 250 were accepted.

### ***Service user profile***

Service users were asked about the difficulties that had resulted in their referral to Aspire. The vast majority said it had been because of their drug and/or alcohol use (70%) or they had nothing else to do (65%). Approximately six out of 10 said they had got caught up with the wrong people. Just over half said they didn't care about life and they had always been getting into trouble; 44% said they had difficult relationships with family members. Three out of every 10 service users said they didn't have anyone else to turn to or they owed money for drugs and 28% said they felt under pressure/threatened.

The majority of service users (65%) said they had been threatened or attacked. In contrast, only 21% said they felt unsafe and approximately half agreed there was a strong sense of community in their area. The focus groups identified that, while contradictory, this was most likely because service users tended to live in the 'here and now'. It was also suggested that some of the service users were fearless: their willingness to take risks, low self-esteem/confidence and poor decision-making coupled with deep-rooted anger towards the paramilitaries or other gang influences within their local community meant they were not allowing themselves to be intimidated by these negative influences.

Maybe it's an age thing but some of our boys don't really care. Feeling safe isn't important and they stick two fingers up at the paramilitaries. (Stakeholder)

They will all say they feel safe because they have moved out of the area where there was trouble a few weeks ago. They are not in West Belfast any more. They answer in the here and now. They don't think of a few weeks ago. They may not realise they are threatened because this is just part of normal life. They are doing wee things for money and don't realise the seriousness of it all. (Mentor)

It's awful that you can't live in the community that you were born in because people are going to put a bullet in your head. (Service user)



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I got put out of my flat last time and had eight death threats. Now the cops have to agree that you've been threatened to get points and the two stories have to match. (Service user: comment relating to the evidence of threat required to obtain priority housing)

In line with the issues identified in the service user entry questionnaires, the main focus of engagement/intervention was drug/alcohol addiction (79% of service users). This was followed by training/employment/Duke of Edinburgh Award/sport activity (75%) and mental health/trauma work (67%).

Approximately six out of 10 service users needed support with self-esteem, accommodation and relationship/family issues. Under threat/community issues was the focus of engagement for 56%. Around half needed support with peer/gang influences and 40% with social isolation. PSOs engaged service users in addressing issues such as developing coping/thinking and problem-solving skills. Developing healthy relationships/peer influences was also a focus of intervention. Restorative justice agencies and mentors also responded to issues and adapted their focus of engagement to specific needs. Debt/finances and restorative work were the focus for 37% and 31% of service users respectively. Parenting services and sectarian attitudes were the focus for one-fifth and 13% of service users respectively.

### ***Impact on service users***

The provision of practical support by mentors was identified as a major benefit of the Aspire initiative, particularly for vulnerable service users just released from prison and dealing with the challenges of adapting to life outside. Accessing critical services, particularly those relating to benefits, housing and health care, was challenging. The research showed that POs/PSOs were aware of the challenges faced by many of the service users and regularly liaised with the Community Forensic Mental Health Teams alongside consultation with PBNI forensic psychologists to enable service users to access appropriate services. Accessing critical services with the support of the mentors and their good working knowledge of these systems enabled service users to obtain ID, register with a GP, apply for housing and access benefits. PSOs and mentors acted as advocates, helping service users with communication, explaining information and helping them prepare what they had to say before an appointment.

They can kick off at the GP, get barred and get criminal charges brought, in a very short time. Mentors can prevent this. (Mentor)

The mentor's role helps the service user with communication. Many service users wouldn't make it to the benefits office. (PBNi)

There was a perception that professionals were more likely to listen to service users when POs/PSOs and mentors were present.

Doctors will listen more when we are there. We help them to prepare what they have to say, explain things before they go to appointments. Help with their confidence. (Mentor)

In addition to support with the service providers, Aspire equipped service users with time management skills, enabling them to keep appointments and with practical issues like visiting food banks or helping with transport both from the prison gate on day of release and to appointments, particularly when these were a considerable distance from the service user's home.

In terms of engagement/interventions, drug/alcohol addiction was the main focus for the vast majority of service users (79%) and mental health/trauma for 67%. Findings from the focus groups and interviews showed that Aspire was impacting on both these areas. POs made referrals to local addiction and counselling services in addition to accessing GP services to enable appropriate referrals to the Community Addiction and Community Mental Health Teams.

I thought it was good. Sometimes I didn't want to come when I was in the wrong, taking drugs/drink but you came out to see me and held me to account. (Service user)

Boredom and drugs are a big thing. I arrange to meet service users mid-day, that way I know they won't take drugs in the morning. (Mentor)

Mentors and Probation staff worked hard to maintain stability through the use of various strategies. These strategies were critical given the lengthy waiting times for support services and the challenge of obtaining a dual diagnosis, with mental health service providers willing to deal with service users only once addiction issues were addressed and vice versa.

Most are turned down as they abuse substances. It's the chicken and the egg. I suspect many are victims of sexual abuse. They self-harm. (Stakeholder)

Service users lived mainly in rental accommodation (62%), hostels (16%) or their own houses (16%); under 1% were homeless. Accommodation, however, was a focus for 59%. The qualitative research showed that service users appreciated the support that Aspire provided, particularly during complex and challenging interactions with the Housing Executive; 44% agreed it had helped them get a better place to live. Those living in hostels tended to be less positive about their accommodation experiences than those residing in other types of accommodation, and stakeholders across the research reported mixed experiences.

The majority of service users (85%) were unemployed and the focus for engagement/intervention for 75% was training/employment. The qualitative research suggested, however, that many had never had a job or did not or had not regularly attended school, making this a difficult area to address. Support with training and employment was welcomed by some service users and there was evidence of a number finding employment. In addition, 71% agreed that Aspire had helped them in this area. While access to Level 1 courses was good, a lack of available courses to progress to was raised as a concern. There was also a perception that some very capable service users had the potential to be 'pigeonholed' either by a lack of confidence in themselves or by a society that perceived them as 'only for a building site', when educationally they were capable of achieving much more.

Just over a quarter of service users had at least one child, although focus group discussions suggested that the vast majority did not have contact. Those keen to obtain access were encouraged to complete the Barnardo's Parenting Matters programme, an initiative focusing on the child and the impact of offending on their development. In total 17 service users were referred to Barnardo's. While this may seem low, many had already completed the course while in prison or had undertaken the 'Dads Project', a Parenting NI initiative. Others, focused on other resettlement issues, did not see the course as a priority and consequently were unwilling to engage. Overall, almost three-quarters of service users agreed that Aspire had helped them to get on better with their family.

One particular service user did have a lot of work done with his family. They helped communicate where the specific difficulties were. This improved his family and social networks enormously. This can be difficult if someone is under threat and the service user thinks that their family want nothing to do with them. (Stakeholder)

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They helped me get on with my family more. I got put out of Ballymena. They helped me get back to my family. I want to get a job and start working. They are helping me go down a different road.' (Service user)

The responsive and flexible service provided by both PBNI and NIACRO and the impact of the 'pro-social role' provided by mentors was identified by stakeholders across the research as supporting service users to stay out of trouble. The majority of individuals who successfully completed the initiative said that Aspire had helped them take a better path in life (83%) and avoid/reduce reoffending (78%). Most believed that they would be able to resist negative pressure to become involved in criminality in the future (83%).

Approximately nine out of 10 said they were unlikely to commit an offence in the future and 72% said they were unlikely to associate with people who might encourage them to.

Aspire helps because they [mentors] are constantly with you. They ring to make an appointment and you haven't the time to get in with the wrong crowd. I have to say 'No lads, I can't see you today my mentor is coming over.' (Service user)

I used to be a one-man crime spree but now I'm more chilled. I have a wee daughter and my goal is to pick her up from school. I'm not allowed access but my mum has access one day a week. I'm staying away from prison for my family. (Service user)

Stakeholders generally felt, however, that the high-risk, chaotic nature of service users meant that reoffending should not be the only significant marker of the success of the programme, but rather this should also include how service users had improved across the areas that the initiative spanned. While it was inevitable that there would be some returns to prison, recognising the significance of small but positive steps was important.

Interestingly, throughout the evaluation an increased risk of recall or breach proceedings was not a factor highlighted by service users as a difficulty with the project. The value of the project seemed to outweigh any issues about compliance.

There were statistically significant decreases between pre- and post-Aspire ACE scores (i.e. the likelihood of reoffending score) among those who successfully completed the programme and were supervised by an Aspire

PO. The average ACE score was 33 pre-Aspire intervention, indicating that the average service user presented with a high likelihood of reoffending. The average score post-Aspire intervention (26 weeks later) was 25, which is in the medium category. This indicates the individual is less likely to offend.

### ***Impact on others***

The research identified a number of benefits for other stakeholders. This included the children of service users who indirectly benefited from the Barnardo’s and Parenting NI programmes through the development of service user parenting skills and increased awareness of the impact of their actions on their children. The intensive nature of support from all the services impacted positively on service users’ parents and hostel staff, relieving some of the pressures experienced by both.

The research also identified several benefits for PBNI, including increased stability when service users returned to community POs. While PBNI was responsible for risk management, mentors on occasion acted as a buffer between service users and POs, encouraging meaningful compliance with the supervision process and adherence to licence conditions.

### ***Next steps***

Evidence has shown that the Aspire programme is working very effectively. A small number of recommendations have been made, as follows.

- Explore whether more follow-up post-Level 1 courses are available to enable service user progression.
- Explore the possibility of cross-over between NIACRO statutory and non-statutory mentors to allow wider and more efficient geographical coverage.
- The high-risk, chaotic nature of service users means that reoffending should not be the only significant marker of progress; ‘distance travelled’ in relation to reoffending may be a better marker.
- Explore whether offending profiles for statutory service users are available from DOJ’s Analytical Services Unit. In addition, both PBNI and NIACRO have recently started using the Outcome Star System, specifically the Justice Star. Once sufficient information has been collected, it should be analysed to gauge progression.

- Quantitative data are an important source of evidence for applications for further funding streams. These supporting data are currently collected and held across a number of sources/organisations, making it difficult to obtain overall participant numbers. Explore whether it is possible to have one central repository.
- PBNI staff are trained in restorative work. This should be explored in relation to delivering a service for those on statutory supervision.

## Conclusion

At the time of writing, the Aspire Project has been running for 18 months. The evaluation has shown that the project is effective and is having an impact on service users and others, including their children and parents. Service user comments include:

It's the best programme I've ever been on in 12 years. My Probation Officer introduced me to [named mentor]. I'm only out of prison. She has taken me to the Royal and Dungeness. She has helped me fill in all my forms.

The support, you have no structure, and it's someone who is willing to support you. You just pick up the phone and they are there.

Mentors are top notch at what they do.

Comments from mentors working on the programme include:

The programme is a relief for families and parents. It's a support for parents when I say 'I can take him to this appointment.' It can be a buffer between parents and children. We can help them each to see the other side. Sometimes there is only so much a parent/family can take on. I can help them not worry. I can communicate with them about how he's getting on. It's a support for mums and dads as well as service users.

It is clear from the evaluation that the right service users are being targeted and that the aims of Aspire, including support with employment, training, housing, health and social services, are being met. Participants are also receiving support with family relationships and staying out of trouble.

The mentor's role was seen as essential and they were held in very high regard by service users, PBNI and stakeholders. Seen as pro-social role

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models, the impact they made on service users’ lives was evident in the examples provided across the research.

The mentoring aspect is so essential. Service users leave prison in a heightened state. They are extremely vulnerable in the first six to eight weeks, needing the GP, accommodation, etc. (PBNI)

The Aspire POs and PSOs were very well thought of across all the research groups, with stakeholders feeling very well supported.

More long-suffering, more prepared to give them a chance. It’s like the Aspire Probation Officer has found their heart. (Mentor)

If we are looking for a response we will get one within a few hours. (Stakeholder)

Stakeholders across all the research groups highlighted the benefit that the high level of flexibility (from PBNI and NIACRO) offered, including greater capability to respond to a crisis situation and better management of service user risk and needs.

In October 2018 the Independent Reporting Commission published its first in a series of reports on progress in relation to the progress on tackling paramilitarism. It stated:

We met with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and those providing the Aspire mentoring services. We also met with a small number of young men on the programme who outlined the many challenges they face. We endorse the programme and commend those who are delivering it. We welcome the wider involvement of organisations in the provision of mentoring services, including those involved in restorative justice and the targeted approach towards those most at risk.

This endorsement and the findings of the evaluation provide direction and important information to help shape and develop Aspire in the coming months.

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