

# The Management of People Serving Life Sentences in Ireland: A Multidisciplinary Model

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**Summary:** Various stakeholders have identified persistent problems with the sentence management of people serving life sentences in Ireland, and they have recommended reform. In order to address these issues, the Irish Prison Service conducted a review, culminating in the 2017 report, *Examination of the Sentence Management of People Serving Life Sentences*. The report emphasised the need to implement a new model of early multidisciplinary sentence management for people serving life sentences. The model was developed by the Irish Prison Service Psychology Service and the Probation Service, and it applies to people sentenced to life imprisonment after 1 April 2017. This paper provides an overview of people serving life sentences in Ireland, with particular focus on their sentence management and engagement with services. It describes the model and its key features in detail, and discusses the recruitment of a PhD student to evaluate the model over a three-year period (2019–2022).

**Keywords:** Ireland, prison, life sentence, life imprisonment, early sentence stage, sentence management, sentence plan, engagement with services, risk assessment, parole.

## Introduction

Life imprisonment is defined as ‘a sentence following a criminal conviction, which gives the state the power to detain a person in prison for life, that is, until they die there’ (van Zyl Smit and Appleton, 2019, p. 35). Life imprisonment exists in 183 countries out of 216 worldwide; since the global decline of capital punishment, it is the maximum penalty for serious offences

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in 149 of these countries. Between 2000 and 2014, the number of people serving life sentences around the world increased by 84% from an estimated 261,000 to an estimated 479,000. Women constitute 3.7% of the number of people serving life sentences worldwide; the number of children serving life sentences is unknown (van Zyl Smit and Appleton, 2019). The proportion of people serving life sentences varies considerably from country to country. This can be attributed to a number of factors, such as differences in relation to the mandatory or discretionary nature of a life sentence, the range of offences for which a life sentence can be imposed, and the criteria and processes for release (Griffin, 2020). The proportion of people serving life sentences in Ireland is high when compared with other countries. Across the United States and Europe, Ireland has the fifth highest proportion of people serving life sentences per 100,000 of national population (7.32), following the United States (50.33), United Kingdom (13.41), Greece (9.24), and Turkey (8.63). At the lower end are France (0.73), Switzerland (0.46), Czech Republic (0.46), Denmark (0.37), and the Netherlands (0.19) (van Zyl Smit and Appleton, 2019).

## **Life sentences in Ireland**

In Ireland, a mandatory life sentence is imposed for the offence of murder. A discretionary life sentence can be imposed as the maximum penalty for a range of other serious offences, including arson, attempted murder, drug trafficking, false imprisonment, firearm offences, manslaughter, robbery, sexual offences, and syringe offences. The mandatory life sentence for the offence of murder does not apply to children (i.e. individuals under the age of 18 years). However, a discretionary life sentence can be imposed if it is justified in the circumstances (Griffin, 2018). On average, 20 people are sentenced to life imprisonment each year (Irish Prison Service, 2002–2020).

The Irish Prison Service estate comprises 12 prisons nationally: ten closed, medium- or high-security prisons, and two open, low-security prisons. The Irish Prison Service manages 3,500 to 4,000 people in custody at any one time, both men and women aged 18 years and over. There are 359 people serving life sentences (350 men, nine women) in Ireland, representing 9% of the total prison population (Irish Prison Service, 2019b, 2020c). The majority of people are serving mandatory life sentences for murder (95%), with the remainder serving discretionary life sentences for sexual offences, manslaughter, and attempted murder (Griffin, 2018). Between 2001 and

2019, the number of people serving life sentences increased dramatically by 204% (from 118 to 359), while the overall prison population increased by 28% (from 3,112 to 3,971) (Irish Prison Service, 2002, 2020c).

A life sentence is indeterminate; there is no guaranteed release date. In Ireland, the average time served by people serving life sentences prior to release has risen substantially. It averaged 7.5 years from 1975 to 1984; 12 years from 1985 to 1994; 14 years from 1995 to 2004; 18 years from 2005 to 2014; and 19 years from 2015 to 2018 (Griffin, 2018; Parole Board, 2019).<sup>1</sup> However, these figures only provide an insight into the average time served of those released. Other people serving life sentences have been in prison far beyond this average (Griffin, 2018). In 2017, 6% of people serving life sentences had been in prison for between 20 and 30 years, while 4% had been in prison for over 30 years (Irish Prison Service, 2017). Unlike people serving determinate sentences, people serving life sentences do not know when, if ever, they will be released (Griffin, 2018).

A life sentence does not end following release from prison. If released, people serving life sentences continue to serve their sentence in the community. They must be supervised by the Probation Service and comply with the conditions of their release for the rest of their lives.<sup>2</sup> Conditions of release may restrict where an individual can live, work, and travel, and who they can contact or associate with. The Probation Service submits regular reports to the Irish Prison Service outlining resettlement and reintegration progress, and any risk-management concerns (Griffin, 2018). On average, the Probation Service supervises 81 people serving life sentences in the community each year (Probation Service, 2014–2019). People serving life sentences can be recalled to prison if they reoffend, breach the conditions of their release, or pose a threat to the safety and security of the public (Griffin, 2018). On average, five people serving life sentences are released from prison and one recalled to prison each year (Parole Board, 2019).

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in England and Wales, the average time served by people serving life sentences prior to release was nine years in 1979, 14 years in 1997, and 18 years in 2013. As an international comparison, the average time served by people serving life sentences prior to release in 2014 was 14 years in Finland, 19 years in Germany, 24 years in Chile, and 32 years in Japan (van Zyl Smit and Appleton, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The length of time that conditions of release remain in force varies from country to country. Of 53 countries worldwide, 85% impose conditions of release that remain in force for between five and ten years (van Zyl Smit and Appleton, 2019).

## The Parole Board

In Ireland, a non-statutory, advisory parole board is the mechanism of release for people serving life sentences.<sup>3</sup> By way of recommendations, the Parole Board advises the Minister for Justice and Equality of an individual's progress to date, and how best to proceed with the future management of their sentence. Under the current process, people serving life sentences must serve a minimum term of seven years before becoming eligible for review by the Parole Board (Parole Board, 2018).<sup>4</sup> The seven-year minimum term marks the beginning of the Parole Board process, and reviews are conducted every one to three years subsequently. People serving life sentences are typically reviewed on multiple occasions over a number of years before the Parole Board recommends their release (Griffin, 2020).

The Parole Board comprises approximately 12 part-time members who come from criminal justice and other professional backgrounds (Parole Board, 2018). Members meet on a monthly basis to discuss individuals under review and to formulate recommendations about the management of their sentences. The recommendations are primarily based on reports provided by relevant agencies and services, and an interview with the individual (Griffin and Healy, 2019). The Parole Board may also receive written submissions from victims.<sup>5</sup> When reviewing people serving life sentences, the Parole Board's paramount concern is public protection. As a result, the Parole Board considers a range of risk-related factors, including the risk of an individual reoffending on release, breaching the conditions of their release, or posing a threat to the safety and security of the public. The Parole Board also places substantial emphasis on an individual's positive engagement with the various therapeutic, educational, and vocational services in prison. The Parole Board requires people serving life sentences to engage meaningfully with services in order to address their risk-related factors and to achieve their rehabilitative goals (Parole Board, 2018). Early

<sup>3</sup> People convicted of certain offences are excluded from the Parole Board process. For example, people convicted of the murder of a member of An Garda Síochána or the Irish Prison Service must serve a minimum term of 40 years less remission of 25% (Griffin, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The minimum term that people serving life sentences must serve before becoming eligible for review varies from country to country. Across 98 countries worldwide, the most common minimum term is 15 years, and the average is 18 years (van Zyl Smit and Appleton, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Victim means: (1) A person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental, or emotional harm or economic loss, which was directly caused by an offence; or (2) A family member of a person whose death was directly caused by an offence. This does not include a family member who has been charged with, or is under investigation for, an offence in connection with the death of the victim (Department of Justice and Equality, 2020). This definition is appropriate given that the majority of people serving life sentences have been convicted of murder.

sentence management is therefore essential to help people serving life sentences to fulfil these Parole Board requirements.

After reviewing an individual, the Parole Board may make a variety of recommendations, such as advising the individual to engage with particular services or to participate in particular programmes. The aim of these recommendations is to encourage people serving life sentences to manage their sentences constructively and to maximise their prospects of progression. The Parole Board submits its recommendations to the Minister who considers them and makes the final decision. The Minister can accept the recommendations in full, in part, or conditionally, or the Minister can reject the recommendations (Parole Board, 2018). On average each year, the Minister accepts 87% of the recommendations in full and 4% in part or conditionally (Parole Board, 2003–2019).

The Parole Act 2019 was enacted on 11 July 2019 and, when commenced, will have implications for the current Parole Board process.<sup>6</sup> The Act will establish a statutory parole board with the power to make final decisions independent of the Minister. The Act will also enhance the rights of people serving life sentences, and of victims, and strengthen their respective roles in the Parole Board process. A legal representative will be assigned to both parties and they will be entitled to make submissions to the Parole Board in person, in writing, or via their legal representative. Of particular relevance to this paper, the Act will increase the minimum term people serving life sentences must serve before becoming eligible for review from seven to 12 years (Griffin, 2020). At the time of writing (July 2020), the Act had not yet been commenced.

## **Problems with sentence management**

As indicated above, early sentence management is essential to help people serving life sentences to prepare for their Parole Board review. However, various stakeholders have identified persistent problems with the sentence management of people serving life sentences in Ireland, and they have recommended reform. The Parole Board has acknowledged the absence of sentence management in the early stage of a life sentence (Griffin, 2018).<sup>7</sup> Members noted that sentence management typically began only at the

<sup>6</sup> See Griffin (2020) for a detailed explanation of the Parole Act 2019 and its implications for people serving life sentences.

<sup>7</sup> The Irish Prison Service defines the early stage of a life sentence as the first seven years before the first Parole Board review (Irish Prison Service, 2017).

seven-year point of the sentence, before the first Parole Board review: 'I've seen many instances of people having no contact at all with the services within the prison until the Parole Board process kicks in' (Griffin, 2018, p. 159). People serving life sentences have also articulated this problem. They described being 'left to their own devices' (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2016, p. 3) for the first seven years of their sentence: 'In the first seven years, you have to wait. You don't do any work on your issues, your drug problem or other problems. You're just left to get on with it.... Six years have gone by and nothing is done until six months before a review.... You're left to your own survival for the first seven years' (Richardson, 2012, p. 41).

During their visit to Ireland in 2010, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT)<sup>8</sup> received complaints from a number of people serving life sentences about their sentence management. They argued that the lack of structured sentence plans made it very difficult to know what the Parole Board expected of them (Council of Europe, 2011). As a result, people serving life sentences were unsure how to manage their sentence constructively: 'There's complete and utter confusion and frustration about what you've done as a person and what you're doing now as an individual, do you know what I mean. Because you don't get anyone that stands up and says "This is what it is, this is what it means, this is what you need to do"' (Milner, 2009, pp. 58–59). The absence of clarity and guidance may make it harder for people serving life sentences to fulfil Parole Board requirements and may consequently delay their progress (Griffin and Healy, 2019). Furthermore, the sense of uncertainty and stagnation may exacerbate the indeterminate nature of the life sentence, leading to self-sabotaging behaviours: 'When you're starting a life sentence you feel like you might never get out, therefore you may get into fights and other sorts of trouble and not care. But a lifer has to realise they have more to lose, as other prisoners have a release date and you don't' (Midlands Prison, 2019, p. 20).

People serving life sentences have described periods of heightened vulnerability and emotional distress during the early stage of their sentence (Geaney, 2008; Milner, 2009; Richardson, 2012). They have frequently stated that the beginning of their sentence was the hardest and have reported feelings of shock, hopelessness, and denial: 'It was hard for the first two years yeah. I didn't think I was going to make it at that time. I thought the pressure was going to get to me' (Geaney, 2008, p. 46). Therefore, the lack of

<sup>8</sup> The CPT visits places of detention in the member states of the Council of Europe to assess how people deprived of their liberty are treated (Council of Europe, 2020).

sentence management and engagement with services in the early stage of a life sentence is particularly problematic. People serving life sentences must adjust to the realities of long-term imprisonment and come to terms with their loss of freedom (Griffin and Healy, 2019). However, with little assistance, people may resort to maladaptive coping strategies, such as use of substances and violence: 'The first seven years should be the time when the work is done with lifers, not after they have met the Parole Board. They can de-rail before that. Go off track, get involved in drugs and other stuff just to cope with life on the inside' (Richardson, 2012, p. 41). In addition, Duffy *et al.* (2006) revealed that the lifetime prevalence of psychosis (8.2%), mental illness (50%), and deliberate self-harm (41.8%) was significantly higher among people serving life sentences, compared to people serving determinate sentences (3.5%, 34.1%, and 24.4% respectively). They also noted that 48% of people serving life sentences had a current alcohol problem, and 29.6% had a current drug problem (Duffy *et al.*, 2006).

While people serving life sentences can engage with services at any stage of their sentence, many believed that early engagement was not relevant (Irish Prison Service, 2017). They did not feel encouraged or motivated to use the early stage of their sentence productively: 'Well since every lifer thinks that the first few years don't mean anything and they decide to do nothing. This is wrong and I wish someone had told me this and I would have worked from the start' (Midlands Prison, 2019, p. 55). It is important to recognise that early engagement may have been happening on an ad hoc basis at local level.<sup>9</sup> However, there was no formal sentence management policy to ensure consistency throughout the Irish Prison Service estate (Irish Prison Service, 2017). Early sentence management is crucial in the context of the Parole Act 2019. When commenced, the Act will increase, from seven to 12 years, the minimum term people serving life sentences must serve before becoming eligible for review (Griffin, 2020). Given this five-year increase in the minimum term, it is vital that sentence management is not delayed until the 12-year point (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2019).

## **Model of early multidisciplinary sentence management**

In order to address these issues, the previous Director General of the Irish Prison Service commissioned a review of the sentence management of people serving life sentences. In 2016, a committee was established to

<sup>9</sup> For example, all people serving life sentences in Wheatfield Prison have a sentence planning meeting each year (Irish Prison Service, 2017).

conduct this review, containing representatives from the Irish Prison Service, the Probation Service, and the Prisons and Probation Policy Division of the Department of Justice and Equality. In 2017, the committee completed its report entitled *Examination of the Sentence Management of People Serving Life Sentences*. The report echoed the problems highlighted above and identified a number of key areas where improvements are necessary. Crucially, it emphasised the need to implement a new model of early multidisciplinary sentence management for people serving life sentences. This model was developed by the Irish Prison Service Psychology Service and the Probation Service in response to the review, and it applies to people sentenced to life imprisonment after 1 April 2017 (Irish Prison Service, 2017).<sup>10</sup>

The model incorporates early multidisciplinary assessment and annual governor-led reviews, in order to develop individual sentence plans. These sentence plans encourage active engagement with a range of services, including Addiction, Chaplaincy, Education, Healthcare, Probation, Psychology, Training and Employment, and Work Training. These services constitute much of the prison-based multidisciplinary team.<sup>11</sup> Critical to the model is early assessment, engagement, and sentence planning rather than delaying sentence management until the first Parole Board review (Irish Prison Service, 2017). Facilitated by the Psychology Service, the Probation Service, and prison officers designated as Integrated Sentence Management (ISM) coordinators,<sup>12</sup> the model provides a clear pathway for people sentenced to life imprisonment after 1 April 2017, and its key features are described below.

### **First Contact Assessment**

After sentencing, an ISM coordinator meets the individual to complete the First Contact Assessment. The aim of this assessment is to identify the immediate needs and goals of the individual from their own perspective. It contains a series of questions covering several areas, such as addiction, health, mental health, education, and work training. Following the assessment, the ISM coordinator refers the individual to the services relevant

<sup>10</sup> Porporino (2015) proposed a similar model following his review of the Irish Prison Service Psychology Service.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the prison-based multidisciplinary team, various community-based in-reach services operate throughout the Irish Prison Service estate, including the Irish Red Cross and the Samaritans. See Irish Prison Service (2017, pp. 22–26) for more information on the key stakeholders and services involved in sentence management.

<sup>12</sup> Integrated Sentence Management is a planned, multidisciplinary approach to managing an individual's sentence from committal to release; it encourages greater involvement of the individual in their sentence management (Irish Prison Service, 2017).



to their needs, initiating contact and engagement. In addition, the ISM coordinator refers the individual to the Senior Psychologist and Senior Probation Officer in the prison (Irish Prison Service, 2017). The Senior Psychologist and Senior Probation Officer allocate the individual to either themselves or a member of their team for the joint introductory meeting, respective assessments, and sentence planning (Irish Prison Service, 2019a).

### ***Joint introductory meeting***

Within six months of sentencing, the individual attends a joint introductory meeting with the allocated psychologist and Probation Officer. The psychologist and Probation Officer introduce themselves, provide information about their services, and explain the model of early multidisciplinary sentence management. If the individual consents to participate in the model, the psychologist and Probation Officer will complete their respective assessments, which will inform the individual's sentence plan. The individual is encouraged to participate even if they are appealing their conviction or sentence.<sup>13</sup> In such cases, the index offence will not be discussed or included in the assessments (Irish Prison Service, 2019a). It may be necessary to conduct a further assessment, focused on the index offence, once any appeal process has been finalised (Irish Prison Service, 2017).

### ***Historical-Clinical-Risk Management-20, Version 3***

Within 12 months of sentencing, the psychologist meets the individual to complete the Historical-Clinical-Risk Management-20, Version 3 (HCR-20<sup>v3</sup>). Based on the structured professional judgement approach, the HCR-20<sup>v3</sup> is a comprehensive set of guidelines for the assessment and management of violence risk. It is important to note that the HCR-20<sup>v3</sup> does not quantify or predict the risk posed by an individual. Rather, its fundamental purpose is to facilitate the management of risk in order to minimise the likelihood of future violence (Douglas *et al.*, 2013).

The psychologist determines the presence and relevance of 20 risk factors, grouped into historical, clinical, and risk management factors, by gathering the necessary information from multiple sources (e.g. clinical interviews, Books of Evidence, previous reports, multidisciplinary discussions). The psychologist generally meets the individual for between six and 12 clinical interview

<sup>13</sup> Appeals were lodged in the Court of Appeal in respect of 22 murder convictions in 2018; 18 murder convictions in 2017; 23 murder convictions in 2016; and 15 murder convictions in 2015 (Courts Service, 2016–2019).

sessions, depending on the complexity of the case. Historical factors include history of problems with violence, other antisocial behaviour, relationships, employment, substance use, major mental disorder, personality disorder, traumatic experiences, violent attitudes, and treatment or supervision response. Clinical factors include recent problems with insight, violent ideation or intent, major mental disorder, instability, and treatment or supervision response. Risk management factors include future problems with professional services and plans, living situation, personal support, treatment or supervision response, and stress or coping (Douglas *et al.*, 2013). The aim is to identify the factors that promote desistance (strengths), the vulnerabilities of the individual (needs), and the factors that support violence (risks) (Irish Prison Service, 2018). These factors are critical for the mitigation of risk, and inform the development of risk management plans. Risk management plans incorporate a combination of strategies to manage an individual's risk of future violence, including monitoring, treatment, supervision, and victim safety planning (Douglas *et al.*, 2013). The findings of the HCR-20<sup>v3</sup> will be shared with the individual, and subsequently with the ISM coordinator and the Probation Officer in an initial sentence planning meeting (Irish Prison Service, 2019a).

### ***Social Circumstances Report***

Within 12 months of sentencing, the Probation Officer visits the individual's home to complete the Social Circumstances Report.<sup>14</sup> The Probation Officer generally meets the individual's family twice to gather the necessary information. These meetings also provide an opportunity for the Probation Officer to clarify the roles and contact details of relevant agencies, and to manage expectations early in the sentence. This begins the important and enduring relationship between the Probation Service, the individual themselves, and the individual's family (Irish Prison Service, 2019a).

The Social Circumstances Report is an assessment of an individual's family and community environment, and contributes to the identification of their strengths, needs, and risks. The report explores the individual's family background and history, including composition, significant relationships, and any experiences of trauma, loss, or neglect. The report outlines the events leading to imprisonment, as understood by the family, such as the individual's lifestyle and behaviour prior to the offence. It captures the family's view of

<sup>14</sup> If the home address is over 100km from the prison, the report is completed by a local community-based Probation Officer. If it is not possible to meet the individual's family (e.g. if the victim was within the family), the report is completed from a file review (Irish Prison Service, 2019a).

the offence, and their willingness and capacity to support the individual during their sentence. The report considers the community's response to the individual and their offence, including the level of local reaction, the type of media coverage, and any hostility towards the individual and their family and friends. Finally, it is important that the Social Circumstances Report accurately reflects the impact of the offence from the perspective of the victim. The report highlights all relevant victim issues, including the consequences of the offence, attitudes towards the individual, and concerns about the individual's possible release from prison in the future (The Probation Service, 2018). The findings of the Social Circumstances Report will be shared with the individual, and subsequently with the ISM coordinator and the psychologist in an initial sentence planning meeting (Irish Prison Service, 2019a).

### ***Engagement with the Psychology Service and the Probation Service***

Following completion of the HCR-20<sup>v3</sup> and the Social Circumstances Report, the individual attends an initial sentence planning meeting with the ISM coordinator, the psychologist, and the Probation Officer. The assessments are discussed with the individual and are used to underpin their sentence plan (Irish Prison Service, 2019a). The aim is to tailor the sentence plan to the individual in order to reinforce their strengths, address their needs, and manage their risks (Irish Prison Service, 2018). In line with their sentence plan, the individual engages with the Psychology Service, the Probation Service, and other services as appropriate (Irish Prison Service, 2019a). As highlighted below, the Psychology Service and the Probation Service provide a range of individual and group interventions to people serving life sentences.

To address mental health and offence-related needs, the Psychology Service delivers individual and group treatments within a stepped care model. This means that, as the first treatment option, psychologists offer the most accessible and least intensive intervention that is likely to be effective. As required, individuals can 'step up' to more intensive treatments (e.g. Mentalisation Based Therapy<sup>15</sup>), 'step down' to less intensive treatments (e.g. workshops for depression, anxiety, and sleep), 'step across' to another treatment at the same level, or 'step out' when an alternative treatment or no treatment becomes appropriate. If necessary, multiple forms of treatment can be provided simultaneously. This stepped care model provides people serving life sentences

<sup>15</sup> Mentalisation Based Therapy improves an individual's capacity to understand their own and other people's thoughts and feelings, and to recognise how one's mental state influences behaviour. This can help individuals to control their emotions and impulses, and to manage their behaviour (The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, 2020).

with the appropriate level of treatment for their mental health and offence-related needs (Irish Prison Service, 2020a).

The Probation Service provides individual and group interventions to help people serving life sentences to cope with their imprisonment, to address their offending behaviour and, if appropriate, to prepare for life after release. The Probation Service developed the Living with Life programme specifically for people serving life sentences. This six-week group intervention encourages individuals to take greater responsibility for their lives, including their past offending behaviour and their future actions. It aims to equip individuals with the information and skills required to serve a life sentence in a productive and constructive manner (The Probation Service, 2013).

Through various interventions, the Psychology Service and the Probation Service motivate, challenge, and support people serving life sentences to adopt a pro-social lifestyle. They help individuals to understand the factors that contributed to their offence, and to develop positive strategies for meaningful change. The aim is to reduce the risk of reoffending, in order to minimise the number of potential future victims. Interventions also promote victim awareness and victim empathy, encouraging individuals to accept responsibility for the hurt, damage, and suffering they have caused (Department of Justice and Equality, 2020).

### ***Governor-led reviews***

Within 12 months of sentencing, the individual's sentence plan is discussed at a governor-led review. This is a round-table meeting chaired by a governor and attended by the individual, the ISM coordinator, and a representative of each prison-based service. During the meeting, each service representative speaks to the individual in turn, discussing the individual's engagement, progress, and plans for the future. The individual is encouraged to share their views, to highlight any challenges they may be facing, and to ask the multidisciplinary team any questions (Irish Prison Service, 2020b). Following the meeting, the ISM coordinator meets the individual to finalise their sentence plan for the coming year. Sentence plans contain recommended actions for the individual to complete, and the ISM coordinator liaises with the individual throughout the year to monitor implementation. Ownership of the plan is essential, as the aim is to motivate people serving life sentences to take greater responsibility for their personal development. The individual attends a governor-led review annually, to discuss their progress during the previous year and to update their sentence plan for the coming year.

Sentence plans and governor-led reviews guide the individual's sentence management up to their first Parole Board review. After this, the Parole Board also contributes to the individual's sentence management (Irish Prison Service, 2017).

### ***Parole Board reviews and sentence progression***

To inform their recommendations, the Parole Board requests reports from the governor, the Prison Review Committee, the Psychology Service or the Probation Service, and An Garda Síochána (Parole Board, 2018). Previously, both the Psychology Service and the Probation Service completed a risk assessment and report for an individual's Parole Board review. This led to the duplication of work and information. However, the model now provides a clear division of roles and responsibilities for the Psychology Service and the Probation Service (Irish Prison Service, 2017). Assuming the role of lead agency, the Psychology Service completes the risk assessment and report for an individual's first and second Parole Board reviews. After the second Parole Board review, a transfer meeting with the Psychology Service, the Probation Service, and the individual is convened. The Probation Service assumes the role of lead agency and completes the risk assessment and report for the individual's subsequent Parole Board reviews. The Psychology Service still supports the individual, providing annual appointments to assess their mental health, and accepting referrals for any emerging psychological needs (Irish Prison Service, 2019a).

The individual continues to attend annual governor-led reviews, with a focus on progressing from closed to more open conditions (Irish Prison Service, 2019a). At this later stage, if deemed appropriate, the Parole Board may make recommendations to prepare the individual for the transition from life in prison to life in the community (Parole Board, 2018). To support the individual's resocialisation and reintegration, the Parole Board may recommend periods of temporary release (e.g. for educational or work purposes) and/or transfer to an Independent Living Skills Unit (ILSU)<sup>16</sup> or open centre. These recommendations provide people serving life sentences with the opportunity to live more independently and to develop skills for normal daily living, such as budgeting, shopping, cooking, and laundry (Irish Prison Service, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> An Independent Living Skills Unit is a specific area within a closed prison that aims to replicate community living in so far as is practicable (Irish Prison Service, 2017).

## **Evaluating the model of early multidisciplinary sentence management**

In September 2019, the Irish Prison Service Psychology Service, in conjunction with the University of Limerick School of Law, recruited a PhD student to evaluate the model over a three-year period (2019–2022). The aim of the research is to explore the sentence management of people sentenced to life imprisonment before and after the implementation of the model on 1 April 2017. This will involve interviewing people about their experiences of serving a life sentence, with particular focus on their sentence management, engagement with services, sentence plans, and sentence progression. The researcher will interview: (1) People sentenced to life imprisonment before 1 April 2017, in different stages of their sentence (e.g. early, middle, and late sentence stages); and (2) People sentenced to life imprisonment after 1 April 2017. In addition, the researcher will analyse data collected from the files of people serving life sentences, on the Prisoner Information Management System (PIMS). The primary objectives are to identify changes in experiences due to the implementation of the model, and to determine factors that are significant in different sentence stages. This will facilitate further development of the model and its customisation to the early, middle, and late stages of a life sentence. The small number of women serving life sentences renders them extremely identifiable, especially if categorised according to sentence stage. Consequently, this research will explore only the experiences of men serving life sentences. Although beyond the parameters of this research, it is important to note that women serving life sentences have clear gender-specific needs, and therefore distinct research is necessary to consider those needs. The researcher will disseminate findings to key stakeholders within the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service (including people serving life sentences), and to a wider audience via presentations, publications, reports, online materials, and the final PhD thesis. The collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of this research will facilitate the development of evidence-based policy and practice, and will support the successful implementation and further development of the model.

## **Conclusion**

The model of early multidisciplinary sentence management provides a clear pathway for people sentenced to life imprisonment after 1 April 2017, and aims to ensure consistency throughout the Irish Prison Service estate. The key

features of the model (i.e. early assessment, individual sentence plans, active engagement with services, regular reviews, and progressive movement) reflect international human rights standards (e.g. Council of Europe, 2003) and have been endorsed by various stakeholders in Ireland (e.g. Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2016). Although this paper focuses on the sentence management of people serving life sentences, it is important to acknowledge the serious nature of the offences committed by these individuals and the devastating impact of their actions on victims, families, and communities. In line with the Victims Charter, the model promotes victim awareness and victim empathy, encouraging individuals to accept responsibility for the hurt, damage, and suffering they have caused (Department of Justice and Equality, 2020). The ultimate aims of the model are to achieve meaningful outcomes for people serving life sentences and, crucially, to promote safer custody and subsequently safer communities. The model endeavours to motivate, challenge, and support people serving life sentences to adopt a pro-social lifestyle. It anticipates that, if released, people serving life sentences will be more likely to reintegrate successfully and to lead law-abiding and self-supporting lives. The recruitment of a PhD student to evaluate the model is an important mechanism of accountability. Forthcoming research will explore the sentence management of people serving life sentences in Ireland, inform the development of evidence-based policy and practice, and contribute to attaining the fundamental goals of the model.

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