

Bedford Row Family Project:
Holding the Suffering



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Summary Report

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executive summary



Website: <http://www.bedfordrow.ie>



Website: <http://www.mic.ul.ie/ted/Pages/default.aspx>

What is the Bedford Row Family Project?

The Bedford Row Family Project (BRFP) was founded in 1999 by the Franciscan and Mercy Orders and offers a suite of multi-site, intergenerational and integrated services to support prisoners, former prisoners and families of prisoners.

The BRFP is committed to:

- Listening to the experience of people affected by imprisonment;
- Allowing that experience to shape the direction of the project;
- Working proactively with family members of prisoners, and former prisoners, to ease their distress and assist them in making positive life choices in particular with respect to their children;
- Providing leadership and direction in the design and implementation of programmes that work effectively with families affected by imprisonment and related matters.

The vision of the BRFP is as follows:

The Bedford Row Family Project is committed to promoting the well-being of individuals and families who struggle against disadvantage. In a spirit of openness, hospitality and respect we welcome all who come to us and value them as shapers of our vision. We endeavor to work collaboratively with other organisations both statutory and voluntary. In the tradition of compassion and solidarity of Catherine McAuley and Francis of Assisi, we will work towards building God's reign of joy and inclusion.

Bedford Row Family Project (2006, p.5)

Why was this research done?

The aim of this research was to identify the model of service delivery developed by the BRFP over time, to gain an understanding of the impact of engagement for individuals and families, to situate the research within the literature and to make recommendations for improvement.

The research was undertaken so that the experiences of the people who use the services of Bedford Row could be heard and understood and inform decision-making in the future.

Who did the research?

The Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project, Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College, was invited by the Bedford Row Family Project (BRFP) to undertake this research. This research was undertaken by Dr Ann Higgins, Co ordinator of TED and Ruth Bourke, TED Project Support Worker.

- TED is a strategic partnership between Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and the schools and agencies and organisations of the Limerick region and beyond;
- TED seeks to improve outcomes for children through harnessing the expertise of MIC in the service of children, parents and teachers, primarily in DEIS contexts;
- Through dialogue and collaboration TED endeavours to unlock children's enormous learning potential;
- TED aims to identify, develop, research and evaluate educational practices that contribute to a greater understanding of the complexities of equity of educational outcomes and to be proactive in the process of educational change and development.

How was this research done?

An Advisory Committee comprising members of the BRFP staff and Board of Management along with members of Mary Immaculate College was formed to support this study which adopted an ethnographic case study approach informed by narrative inquiry principles. A total of 54 people participated in focus groups and interviews including children and adults who use the services, members of BRFP staff and volunteers, members of the BRFP Board of Management and Irish Prison Service staff. The researchers also spent significant time in the BRFP in order to get to know people and to understand how the BRFP operated. A documentation review and literature review was undertaken. Prior to publication member checks with participants took place and draft reports were circulated.

What is the context within BRFP delivers its services?

The BRFP understands that the impact of imprisonment is experienced at an individual level, family level and societal level. The impact is complex, for individuals and their families. The BRFP ethos and services seek to recognise these complexities and offer support to all who are impacted by imprisonment.

At societal level:

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT) views crime as a “social phenomenon – both in its causes and its effects” stating that “penal policy must be seen in the context of wider social and economic marginalisation and exclusion” (2012, p.5). Prisoners, former prisoners and their families can experience stigma, poverty, shame, homelessness, fear and isolation. The link between crime, imprisonment and addiction was evident throughout the research.

The people [in prison], they're very ordinary. They're our brothers and our cousins, and our dads and our uncles and there's nothing different about them. Probably the biggest difference is addiction and that has driven most of their behaviour. There's very few of them that don't have [an addiction problem], whether it's gambling or alcohol or drugs. Nearly all of them and especially the women (External stakeholder interview).

At a family level:

The impact of imprisonment of a family member can bring financial challenges, emotional and relationship stress and worry. People who use the services spoke of ‘carrying the burden’ of dealing with what is happening on the outside, sometimes not wanting to worry their family members in prison. One family member said that ‘you go to prison with them’, offering an insight into the impact of imprisonment across family members.

The BRFP staff believed that the holistic family approach adopted by the BRFP helps to keep families together by strengthening the family unit and simultaneously building trust among different family members with BRFP. They felt that by working with the parent/carer and children outside prison, and the parent while he/she was in prison, that on release he/she would be more likely to avail of the services of the BRFP. If that parent has addiction or anger management issues, the BRFP would also support them. The impact of imprisonment of a family member may also bring opportunities for the family to get supports:

When all that mayhem that dad brings when he's not in prison, when that's removed, it gives agencies a gap to get into that home and offer their services (External stakeholder interview).

(Please see main report sections 2 and 3 for further details)

At a personal level:

Prisoners:

Prisoners can feel isolated from society and sometimes from their families. They may feel lost and left behind, as their families move on with their lives. They may experience guilt and lack of connection.

You need support inside, everyone kind of needs it but you don't really show it you know. But when you get released there's not many, there's not support there for people (Individual service user).

Sometimes going to prison can be a respite for people ‘from the chaos in their own lives that can ‘save people’ and it can be an opportunity for them to ‘get their act together’ (BRFP staff member check interview).

Going to prison can also be a chance for the prisoner to reflect on his/her life and for the family to engage with support services.

Prisoners may also need supports to make successful transitions from prison.

Things can fall apart when you don't have a safe place to go and they end up back in again ... they want so much [they have aspirations] when they are leaving [prison] (BRFP staff interview).

(Please see main report sections 2 and 3 for further details)

Former Prisoners:

Former prisoners may need support to make successful transitions out of prison, help to reconnect with families and society, and support to address housing, welfare and health issues.

But I found when he came out then he wasn't the same young fella. You know they're never the same again. Something happens to them and they find it hard to cope. D'you know it is very hard for them when they come out like because there is no place proper for them to go and they haven't got work. It's hard to learn how to cope like. They have to do things for themselves then as well and they have to learn to get used to our way of life and everything, it's very hard for them (Life Skills focus group participant).

Individual family members:

Individual family members of prisoners, including children, can experience a variety of challenges while their family member is in prison, including financial, home making and relationship challenges. When the family member goes to prison it may also offer an opportunity for family members to engage with services.

When a family member is released family members may need individual support to help them manage the changes the release of the prisoner might bring.

Children:

The impact of parental imprisonment for children can be very profound. They can suffer stress, grief, anger, instability and may even have to move home.

Unless granny or an auntie, or somebody looks after them, the kids normally go into care. The accommodation is nearly always in their name, it's very rarely in one of the lads so they might lose that ... So it depends I suppose on whether it's mum or dad locked up, on what they actually need (External stakeholder interview).

(Please see main report sections 2 and 3 for further details)

Some communities won't take kids like, I know one or two who are not allowed into the [local] club because of who their fathers are. They are not saying that's why, but we all know that is why

(BRFP Staff member interview).

I have nowhere but here to come and I know that they'll listen when I say how stressed I am from the whole thing

(Individual service user interview).

Some people coming out of prison, don't ... they're lost d'you know. They don't know where to go. People aren't aware that if you 'go on the dole', you've to wait six to eight weeks and Bedford Row advise people to go to the clinics

(Men's Group interview).

Societal Level

stigma,
shame,
isolation

Family Level

finances, stress, worry about the person in prison and other family members, transitioning out of prison

Personal Level

visiting prison, transport, care of children and not wanting to discuss some matters with the parent who is in prison to protect them from worry, transitioning out of prison

Their whole life can revolve around the person in jail who is getting their three meals, they're sleeping. They [partner at home] have to get the kids dressed, they deal with solicitors, they have to travel [for visits]

(BRFP volunteer interview).

We're doing it [dealing with the impact of imprisonment] a lot harder than what the men are doing. And I'll be honest with you, I know they're locked up and they're in a room and the whole lot, but we have, we're going home then doing all the ... we're doing the emotional work, we're doing the physical work

(Life Skills focus group participant).



What is the ethos and model of service delivery in the BRFP offer?

The ethos and culture of the BRFP was described by participants as:

- Deeply caring, respectful and non-judgemental;
- Relationship based. Staff spend time building high quality relationships with the people who use the services of the BRFP;
- The BRFP nurtures hope and a belief, honouring our common humanity in the belief that all of us are capable of making positive changes in our lives.

(Please see main report section 5 for further details)



The characteristics of the BRFP Model are as follows:

Organic evolution:

BRFP 'started with a kettle' and grew in response to identified needs. There were many examples in the research of how the BRFP creatively responded to identified needs, whether through the development of training programmes or the extension of its services.

Multi-site delivery of services:

Services are delivered in the city centre Bedford Row premises, Limerick Prison, the Hospitality Centre in the grounds of the prison, and through outreach to peoples' homes and through accompanying people to access services beyond the BRFP.

Family orientated and intergenerational:

The services provided by the BRFP embrace an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979) in that they see each person, not as an isolated individual but as a member of a family and of the wider community. Consequently, the BRFP seeks to offer a comprehensive range of supports not only to the person who is/was imprisoned but also to his/her family. This family orientation approach recognises the importance of supporting the family unit, and seeks to support family relationships and to prevent recidivism by nurturing connections, by 'keeping the family together' and ultimately by increasing the likelihood that the person in prison will engage with BRFP services on release.

Suite of integrated services:

The BRFP supports prisoners, former prisoners and their families before, during and after imprisonment. It also seeks to help people who have not been in prison but wish to take more control over their lives, for example, to deal with issues of addiction or with relationships under stress. The BRFP staff work both inside and outside the prison which offers continuity to the people who use the services. Services can be in the form of one to one counselling, group support, letter writing, advocacy, opening up access to other services, visiting in prison, or in homes. The suite of services include services for children, men and women in prison, family members of prisoners, former prisoners and people living with the challenges of addiction and relationship problems.

Working in partnership with other organisations:

This research found strong evidence that working strategically and respectfully in partnerships with other agencies was a fundamental principal of how the BRFP operated. This was apparent not only from staff interviews but also across participant interviews. The agencies that the BRFP work with and the approach adopted by the BRFP staff was informed by the needs of the people who used their services. There was very strong evidence of a collaborative partnership and a high degree of trust between the Irish Prison Service (IPS), Limerick Prison and the BRFP staff. This was seen as a critical relationship as the BRFP is part funded by the IPS and delivers services on site in Limerick Prison to men and women and in the Hospitality Centre on the grounds of the prison. Additionally, in particular circumstances, the prison staff facilitate family visits between prisoners and their children in the BRFP city centre premises.

Accessible:

Accessibility in the broadest sense was a key component of the BRFP model, with staff acknowledging that 'it is very easy to alienate people if you don't make it easy for them to engage'. The research found the key components to making the BRFP accessible were:

- Welcoming approach and open door policy;
- Multi-site integrated suite of services;
- Needs-led and person-centered approach;
- The immediacy of response;
- The central location of the BRFP services;
- Free services.

Strong leadership:

The BRFP leadership was seen by the BRFP staff and the people who used the service to be approachable, experienced and knowledgeable. Additionally, the leadership was seen as very hands-on and engaged in the day-to-day life of the project, and not operating at a managerial distance. The leadership was also believed to be open to, and supportive of embracing change.

Design and deliver training programmes:

The BRFP typically offers a variety of opportunities for engagement as opposed to set programmes to the people who come to use the services. However, the BRFP developed the Family Support and Crisis Intervention Course and also co delivered a parenting programme, 'Family Links' with Limerick Prison, with mothers outside and fathers inside prison.

Committed staff and volunteers:

This research found that the staff working within the BRFP were both professionally and personally invested in the work they were undertaking. They brought a combination of both professional skills and life experience to bear on their work. They were committed to investing in positive relationships with each other and with the people who use the service. The volunteers were found to be a group of committed people who wanted to make a positive difference in the lives of people.

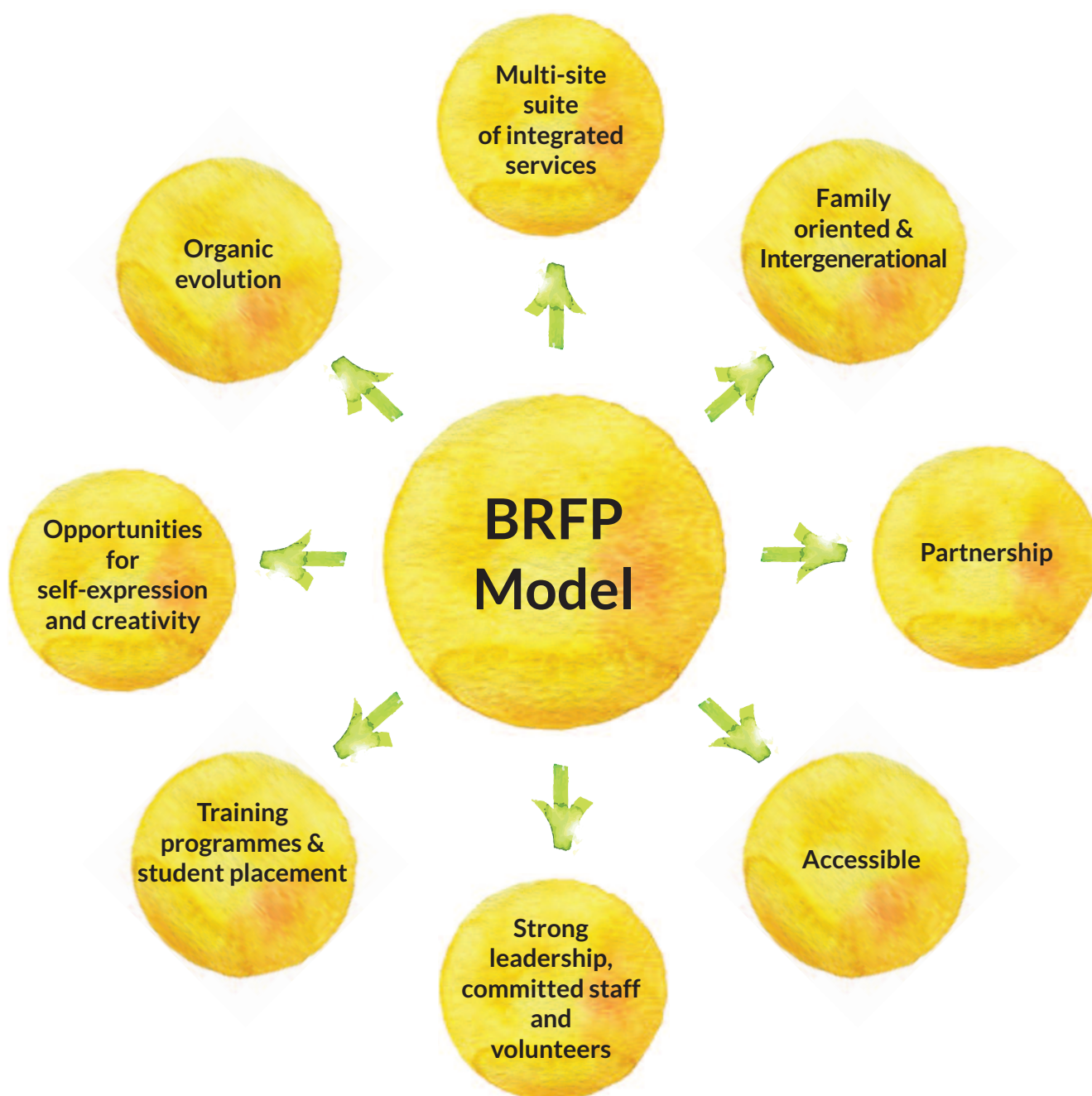
Student placement:

The BRFP facilitate student placement from a number of third level courses including the Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT) Applied Social Care course, the University College Cork (UCC) Diploma in Youth and Community Studies, the Limerick College of Further Education (LCFE) Certificate in Applied Social Care and students studying Counselling with the Irish College of Humanities and Applied Studies (ICHAS).

Provide opportunities expression and creativity:

People who attended the services were provided with opportunities to express themselves creatively in the broadest sense. Opportunities for creativity were provided through art, music, poetry, cooking and baking, drama and creative writing and also through opportunities for creative expression in ceremonies and celebrations.

(Please see main report section 5 for further details)



What does the literature say about best practice?

The findings from literature in relation to best practice strongly endorsed the findings of this study. The literature describes the needs and challenges facing families of prisoners strongly mirroring the findings from this research. A number of models of supporting prisoners were identified along with the key characteristics of best practice in family support. The principles of best practice strongly echoed the culture and service design of the BRFP.

Principles of best practice in family support include:

1. **Child-centred:** Family support requires a clear focus on the wishes, feelings, safety and wellbeing of children;
2. **Needs-led:** Family support interventions are needs-led and strive for the minimum intervention required;
3. **Strengths-based:** Family support services reflect a strengths-based perspective that is mindful of resilience as a characteristic of many children and families' lives;
4. **Socially inclusive:** Services aim to promote social inclusion, addressing issues around ethnicity, disability and rural/urban communities;
5. **Partnership-based:** Working in partnership is an integral part of family support. Partnership includes children, families, professionals and communities;
6. **Informal:** Family support promotes the view that effective interventions are those that strengthen network-focused: informal support networks;
7. **Easily accessed:** Families are encouraged to self-refer, and multi-access referral paths will be facilitated;
8. **Responsive and flexible:** Family support is responsive and flexible in respect of location, timing, setting and changing needs, and can incorporate both child protection and out of home care;
9. **Collaborative in development:** Involvement of service users and providers in the planning, delivery and evaluation of family support services is promoted on an ongoing basis;
10. **Evidence-informed:** Measures of success are routinely built into provision so as to facilitate evaluation based on attention to the outcomes for service users, and thereby to facilitate ongoing support for quality services based on best practice.

(Canavan et al., 2016, p 21-22).

(Please see main report section 3 for further details)

Did the BRFP make a difference to peoples' lives?

The fundamental finding of this study is that the BRFP fulfils its Vision Statement as we found that it was committed to, and effective in promoting the well-being of individuals and families. It was seen to achieve this in the spirit of openness, hospitality and respect as the BRFP welcomed all who come and valued them as partners along with its staff in shaping the BRFP vision. It achieved this through its own dedicated work and through working in partnership with others. It struck us each time we visited the BRFP in the city centre that walking up the nine steps from street level to ring the door bell was so symbolic of the invitation to people who come to the service to rise up and claim and reclaim their lives.

The research found that the BRFP had a profound impact on the quality of lives of people who used the services. The supports offered to prisoners, former prisoners and to families of prisoners to manage the prison sentences and to prepare for transition out of prison and back into family and society was deeply appreciated by the people we interviewed. Essentially, engagement with the BRFP nurtured hope, built resilience and helped individuals and families to believe that a better future was possible.

What difference did the BRFP make to the lives of children?

The children, along with adults who use the services, members of the BRFP staff and external interviewees believed that the BRFP made a significant impact on the quality of children's lives.

Children said that being in the Children's Club offered them opportunities to do lots of activities, was a place to have fun and to have a say in what they want to do while they were in the Children's Club. The relationships they had with staff were very important to them. Additionally it offered a safe nurturing space to support their emotional well-being.

It takes the pressure off your chest (Children's focus group interview);

We always come here and we never fight. We're all like family together (Children's focus group interview);

It makes me feel like, the people, especially like the people, that people love me and everyone, everyone kind of thinks I'm really nice and kind (Child focus group interview).

Parents and carers whose children had engaged with the BRFP and members of the BRFP staff identified a preventative impact in terms of promoting children's positive behaviour. They linked this outcome to the immediate and timely response provided by the BRFP to meet children's needs. They said that the children benefited from meeting other children who were in similar circumstances as this helped them to understand that they were not alone in experiencing the imprisonment of a parent.

What difference did the BRFP make to the lives of families?

The people who participated in the research strongly acknowledged the powerful impact of the BRFP on lives of their families, stating that the BRFP 'helps to keep families together'.

They said that the BRFP:

- Promoted family well-being and cohesion through working simultaneously with family members in prison and at home;

But I think every week that I've ever come in the door with a fear, I've taken away something, you know that I could transfer onto my own family at home. I felt it kept us all together because I had the help here because I've other members of my family that are all hugely affected by [a family member's imprisonment] (Life Skills Groups focus group interview).

- Built connections and knowledge by sharing information about children with their parents in prison in order to support parental relationships;
- Enabled families to access to a variety of supports including play therapy for children, one to one support for adults, parenting and grand parenting support free of charge;

They helped some of the lads getting access to their kids and stuff like that like and if the boys need any kind of counselling for problems they'll do that for them as well. So in this respect families come out happier as well (Men's Group interview).

- Supported families to make 'good visits' between parents in prison and their children in order to minimise the impact and build and sustain relationships and prepare for the transition of the parent from prison;
- Helped families to deal with the reality of having a family member in prison and to be proactive in planning for the future;

It's helping us where we were going wrong and our mistakes and to fix them mistakes before he comes home. Myself and with the children and us coming here to the parenting course with Bedford Row and the Life Skills. Its building us up to be stronger women today as well and fathers there. It's made us a lot stronger so that we don't go back into that rut, into that bad circle (Life Skills Groups focus group interview).

- Built family members' individual skills, confidence and capacity and this had a ripple effect into family life;
- Negotiated access between parents and children;
- Supported families to manage the changes brought about by imprisonment and the transition of a family member from prison back into the family.

Bedford Row actually helps to keep families together and not just separating and destroying families. They try and work through the problems and get through the problems. The main one is, you are actually a family unit and try and work through this because separation is just as hard on the kids. You can work through it step by step (Life Skills focus group participant).

What difference did the BRFP make to the lives of individual adults?

Adults who attended the BRFP spoke about transformative impact the BRFP made to their lives as follows:

They said that:

- The BRFP helped to build their confidence, well-being, self-belief and skills to deal with challenges of imprisonment either for themselves as prisoners, or for as family members;

What it did provide me with was tools to cope with the situation. I have certainly grown stronger as an individual. I had thought I was reasonably strong up until then but I wasn't (Life Skills Groups focus group interview).

- People build their sense of self as they did not feel judged – rather they felt nurtured and cared for within an ethos of hope and respect;
- People developed a sense of belonging as they were enabled to participate in lots of activities which were made accessible to them. They said attending the BRFP offered peer support, friendship, and solidarity;

Coming to the group and listening to the lads talk themselves about their own experiences and losses and that, this might sound bad, but it kind of gives you a little bit of a boost when you hear it, that you're not that bad yet, you still can change (Men's Group interview).

We're all from the same backgrounds and it's nice to know that you're not isolated out there and that we can relate to each other. You're able to talk to these people (Life Skills focus group participant).

- People build enriching relationships with staff and with each other;
- People acknowledged that the BRFP offered them support when needed and pathways to additional services;

It's nice because sometimes you can't ask a family member [to go to the courthouse]. Bedford Row don't judge, they'll listen ... They don't ask you why you're there they just accompany you (Life skills focus group participant).

- People felt supported to deal with a variety of addictions;
- People felt their resilience to deal with life's challenges was nurtured. They said that membership of BRFP was empowering and transformative;

I'd be locked up [in prison] or dead if I wasn't coming down here like (Men's Group interview).

- People felt supported in prison and during transitions from prison back into family life, and engaging with the BRFP had a preventative impact;

Yeah it [support in prison] is [important] because some people might feel suicidal over first being locked up (Individual service user interview).

And there's aftercare support for them, they're not leaving them at the gate they'll continue engaging with them. I know it's all up to the individual but they are there like (Individual service user interview).

Only for them I would have went off the rails like ... Well they put me on the right road or else I would have gone down the wrong road you know ... They taught me the right way to go about things (Men's Group interview).

And that's when you really need the help, it's when they come out (Life Skills focus group participant).

- People felt that engaging with the BRFP nurtures hope;

There's hope when you come in here.

Interviewer - Talk to me about hope.

Hope that you'd be valued as a person. Hope that you'll have a place where you can just be. It keeps your sanity the hope that you, do you know, when I came in first, when I think about it I was looking for a totally different set of things to what I got here. I was looking for, I want this, I want that, I want the other, I want to know how to do this, this, this. They were all things. But what I got most importantly was a totally different thing. But when I was coming in, I didn't know I needed it, d'you know? (Individual service user interview).

- Support for people with a loved one in prison and with the transition phase when the former prisoner comes home.

(Please see main report section 7 for further details)

Recommendations



How can the BRFP be improved?

The recommendations below are a compilation of recommendations from the research participants and the researchers.

Research participants' recommendations

Recommendations in relation to improving services for children included:

- Extension of the Children's Club to include new activities and meet more frequently;
- Greater inclusion of children in planning activities;
- Development of supports for teenagers and adolescents;
- Expansion of mental health/ counselling services for children;
- Additional family trips;
- Development of a dedicated children's space in the city centre premises;
- Refurbishment of the Hospitality Centre with particular attention to developing a child-friendly environment;
- Dedicated staff to work with children in the Hospitality Centre;
- Build in an on-going evaluation element to all children's programmes;
- Support for parents to help their children with specific needs, e.g., Speech and Language support.

Recommendations in relation to improving services for adults included:

- Provision of additional one to one sessions;
- Extension of Life Skills group;
- Additional activities, programmes and trips;
- Childcare support to promote attendance of parents;
- Develop provision to target young offenders;
- Build in an on-going evaluation element for all adult opportunities and programmes;
- Review current information sharing strategies with the people who use the services e.g., ensure people are informed of the start/finish/closure of initiatives;
- Additional art therapy options for prisoners.

Recommendations to support the BRFP staff and volunteers:

- Training to deal with the emotional challenges of the work;
- Training on mental health issues and learning about play therapy;
- Training on best practice approaches to dealing with addiction;
- Extend the present supports to nurture the team through training and supervision;
- Offering staff CPD opportunities identified through a process of consultation in order to build capacity of the team;
- Creating opportunities for staff to spend some 'down time' together in order to build on the existing team spirit and bond.

Research team recommendations

In relation to supporting families we recommend:

- Exploring the possibility of developing a child and imprisoned parent programme;
- Developing a resource for parents to help them to communicate the imprisonment of a parent to their child.

In relation to creating a greater awareness of the needs the BRFP seeks to address and the services it offers we recommend:

- Developing links with primary and post primary schools to increase awareness of the impact of imprisonment on children and families and explore opportunities for collaboration;
- Advertising the BRFP services through leaflets and visual displays in the Hospitality Centre and in partner organisations;
- Exploring the use of social media to educate the public about the realities of imprisonment for families of prisoners and the services of the BRFP.

(Please see main report section 7 for further details)

Acknowledgements

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- Members of the Irish Prison Service staff who supported this research;
- Midlands Prison Visitor Centre staff and volunteers who kindly welcomed the researchers for a visit.

For further information please see [\[insert link to full report\]](#)

