



NIACRO'S 5 POLICY ASKS AT 50 2021-23



WHO WE ARE

Making a difference to criminal justice

Constituted in 1969, NIACRO began delivering services in 1971, not an easy time for NIACRO to establish itself within Northern Ireland's criminal justice system, yet we soon became a trusted service deliverer.

In 1972, NIACRO's founders set out a vision for a charitable organisation which would reduce crime and the impact it has on people and communities.

In our 50th year, we celebrate achievements in pursuit of our mission: reducing crime and its impact on people and communities across Northern Ireland.

We have remained true to those values and to that vision in what is a contentious, demanding field of work. It is, however, hugely rewarding. Ours is a story of transformation. We know we have made a difference to the lives of thousands of men, women and children, of all ages and life experiences.

We have contributed to building strong and positive community life in Northern Ireland. And we have played our part

in shaping public policy and helping to make change – for the better- to the criminal justice system.

Yet there is more to be done.

Pivotal to the work of NIACRO is listening to the people we support and consulting with our stakeholders across all areas of our work. As a result we have reviewed our policy asks and have produced our 5 Asks at 50, which will set the agenda for the coming years.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fiona Greene".

Fiona Greene
NIACRO Chief Executive

RESOURCE EARLY INTERVENTION

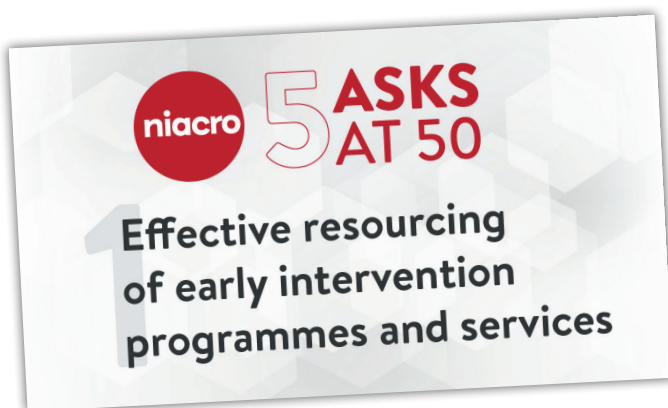
Early intervention works on the principle of intervening at an early age to help individuals develop the skills they need to live happy, healthy and successful lives.

These interventions, at an early stage, work to reduce the negative impacts of disadvantage. Evaluation of EITP's contribution indicated that, overall, it is making a significant contribution to children and family life.

The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2023 references its success and the need for early intervention. Children and young people living in poverty are highlighted within several of its areas of greatest focus. Yet no explicit commitment has been made within this, or other Executive publications, to resourcing a comprehensive early intervention programme over future years.

On the principles of justice re-investment, that safe societies are formed by stronger families and communities, we want to see an Executive led, inter-departmental commitment to the resourcing of a comprehensive early intervention programme over future years, as well as resourcing to tackle educational underachievement.

This is vital to enable children and young people and whole families to thrive, and in turn, the wider community.



RAISE THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY

Northern Ireland's Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility (MACR) is set at 10 years old and, shockingly, is one of the lowest in Europe.

The recommendation to raise the age is one of the key elements of the Youth Justice Review of 2011 that remains unimplemented.

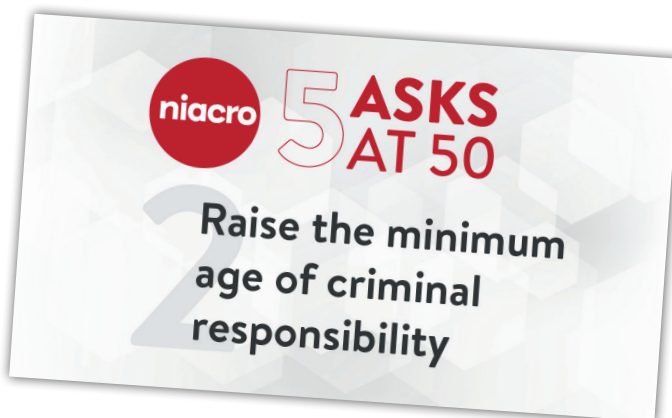
All three of Northern Ireland's Justice Ministers have publicly supported raising MACR in line with international standards. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be up to 16 years.

Movement on the minimum age in some jurisdictions is evident. However, despite the UNCRC recommendation, MACR in NI has remained unchanged and is in clear contravention of children's rights standards.

Raising MACR would:

- Remove significant numbers of children entering the criminal justice system
- Support the expansion of evidence-based Early Intervention Services and programmes
- Ensure children and young people are supported and not punished-that behaviour is addressed
- Demonstrate a commitment to trauma informed practice

We need to see movement on this key issue.



ADDRESS DELAYS IN THE SYSTEM

When criminal justice does not perform effectively it can have a significant adverse impact on the lives of those involved: victims, defendants, witnesses, and their families. It also wastes significant amounts of public monies and impacts upon the confidence of the public in the system's effectiveness.

A key feature of how the system in NI has operated has been a failure to complete cases within reasonable timescales. In 2019/2020 the median time taken for cases to be dealt with from the date of the offence is **72 days** for Magistrates' Court Case, **410 days** for a Crown Court case and **698 days** where the case involved a sexual offence.

The key causes of delay are weaknesses in the early stages of investigations.

The progress of cases through the system is punctuated by practices and processes that are not efficient and work against timely delivery of justice. This has a significant impact on the quality of service to citizens and impacts upon the confidence in the system's effectiveness.

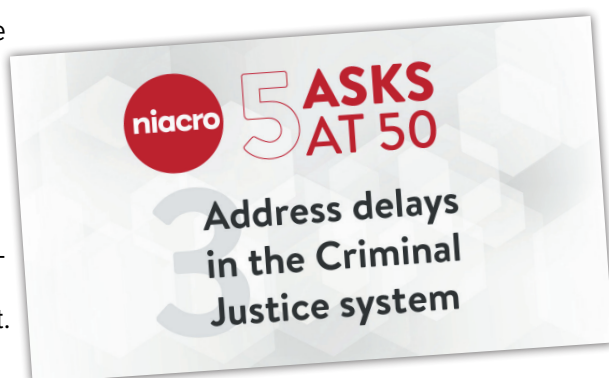
In England and Wales, custody time limits were introduced on the statute book in 1991. Custody time limits set out the maximum time a person can be held in custody during the pre-trial stage of criminal proceedings. If the time limit expires the person must be released on bail unless the prosecution applies to extend the time limit. The time limits vary depending

on the type of the offence and the court dealing with the matter.

The issue of delays has been highlighted by several reviews. To date no such reform has been introduced while delays remain unchecked.

NIACRO believes the time has come to introduce legislation to implement custodial time limits. In parallel with this, specific reform projects should be initiated to reduce unnecessary adjournments and delays in processing cases.

It is reassuring that the issue is the focus of attention for many, and we want to contribute as we have in the past to take a solution focused approach to this issue.



REDUCE THE USE OF REMAND

The number and percentage of people in prison is rising. In 2020/21 nearly half of women prisoners were on remand, while men on remand made up over a third.

Being remanded into custody before trial can have many negative consequences for the individual, their household, and employers. It has consequences for finances, employment, housing, and family relationships. It is also challenging for the Prison Service to offer suitable meaningful activity for people on remand.

NIACRO is aware of instances in which Magistrates remand defendants (particularly women) into custody rather than release on bail because there are no suitable or safe options for accommodation and support of the person in the community. This tendency to use prison as a 'place of safety' is of particular concern, further traumatising,

criminalising and stigmatising people and leading to considerable personal and family, economic and practical upheaval.

Without better accommodation and bail support options for men and women, NIACRO is concerned that magistrates will have no option other than to continue the current practice of remanding people into custody before trial.

We need to see significant focus on this issue.



REFORM OF REHABILITATION OF OFFENDERS LEGISLATION

Helping people with convictions to contribute to and feel included in society is key to reducing reoffending.

Employment is just one way to achieve this and a considerable proportion of NIACRO's work involves supporting people to gain qualifications and prepare for employment.

The Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978 was introduced to give people a chance to 'make a fresh start' allowing for certain convictions to become 'spent' after a given period; and not needing to be declared when applying for employment, further and higher education, insurance, travel visas etc.

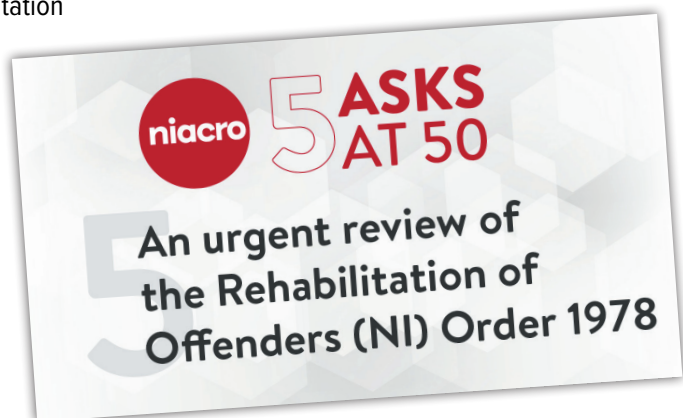
The 1978 Order was based on equivalent legislation passed in 1974 in England and Wales which was reviewed in 2014, with many rehabilitation periods there being reduced.

The NI legislation has never had a substantial review. Instead, amendments over the years have resulted in

an increasing number of job sectors and roles being subject to disclosure of criminal records.

The concept of spent convictions has been effectively removed from roles requiring more than a Basic Access NI check.

The current Minister for Justice has just published her intention to reform the legislation, we look forward to working with the Minister and her Department in the implementation of the reforms.



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