

ICPO – 30th Anniversary Conference

Thank you for inviting me to speak at your conference – 30 years is an amazing achievement in a field which we know is filled daily with so many challenges and difficulties that have to be overcome and yet the impact we are able to make can be truly life-changing.

I will be talking about current trends and contemporary challenges but first I will tell you about Prisoners Abroad.

We started life in 1978 as the National Council for the Welfare of Prisoners Abroad which was quickly abbreviated to the name we know today. I am going to speak about how we see this intense and difficult world we work in from our side of the water. I have no doubt that you will recognise and be very familiar with some of the issues but perhaps some of it will provide you with a different perspective.

Prisoners Abroad works with British citizens imprisoned overseas and their families and supports them on their return to the UK. We are a registered charity so I am responsible to a board of volunteer trustees for the performance of the organisation. Our work costs £1.7 million a year (about 2.3 million Euros) which explains why I spend more than half my time on fundraising activities. 30% of our income comes from government – 15% from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and 15% from the National Offender Management Service. 50% of our income is from charitable trusts and foundations and the remaining 20% comes from individuals – people who believe in our humanitarian and life-saving work.

So that is the money – now more importantly let's focus on the people! Who are they?

- They are the **1,700 prisoners** we work with each year in around 100 countries.
- They are the **2,100 family members** we support.
- They are the **180 people returning** from often long prison sentences overseas who use our resettlement service, many of whom have nothing in the UK and know no-one to turn to except Prisoners Abroad. There are of course many more people who return and go straight back to their families.

- They are the **27 staff** that work at our offices in Finsbury Park providing information and practical and emotional support to our service users, raising money and ensuring our accounts and governance are all open and transparent.
- They are the **11 trustees** including 3 service users. Trustees are legally and financially responsible for the organisation and they meet quarterly.
- They are the **93 volunteer translators** who help people understand court documents or legal correspondence in 20 languages.
- They are the **5 volunteer family group coordinators** who enable families around the UK to meet regularly in a confidential and non-judgmental environment and provide peer support.
- They are the **1,500 donors** who help to support our work with a regular gift.
- They are the **hundreds of Foreign Office staff** in London and around the world who help us to gain access to the people we help and work hand in hand with us to find solutions for individuals who could otherwise be in life-threatening circumstances.

91% of our prisoner clients are male and 9% are female

The offence profile usually changes from country to country but overall the table looks like this: 40% drugs, 18% murder, 12% sexual offences, 9% unknown, 6% violence, 6% other offences, 4% theft, 2% smuggling, 2% fraud and 1% visa.

Currently our top 10 countries are:

USA, Spain, France, Australia, Thailand, Peru, Germany, Ireland, Portugal and United Arab Emirates.

British prisoner numbers are focused in the countries where traditionally Brits have emigrated – so that means the USA, Canada and Australia; also our nearest neighbours – France, Spain and Ireland; and countries people like to visit like Thailand and then there are the drug routes in South America and South East Asia.

What it means is that of our 1,700 prisoners – a third are in North America, a third in Europe and a third in the Rest of the World. Where

you are in the world indicates the sort of help you might need and in the Rest of the World our help during imprisonment is often vital and lifesaving but in North America for example you are likely to most need our help on return to the UK.

One of the things said most frequently by our clients is that our help and support saved their lives.

On the face of it that sounds quite glib – but if you are dealing with the violence and frequent use of total isolation in the USA, or the complete control of your body and mind in Japan, you begin to understand how our support and involvement saves lives.

But then you talk to people who have been in an overcrowded prison cell in searing 40 degree heat, drinking filthy unfiltered water from the river nearby that has bits of debris and mosquito larvae floating in it;

- places where people with diabetes aren't given their insulin, where asthma inhalers aren't available;
- where people have been shot by stray bullets from the inter-gang warfare within the prison;
- places where the prison guards only patrol the perimeter and the guns, knives and even hand grenades are easily visible in the possession of the prisoners – who may only be on remand but may equally be on a life sentence. These are the prisons where everyone but especially the foreign nationals continually live in fear.

Now you can really begin to see the importance of our work and its impact on the people we help and support - how we do indeed save lives.

Like ICPO, Prisoners Abroad is here for people – for as long as it takes. We support many on very long sentences and some will never be released.

We don't judge, we just care and we notice – knowing that someone on the outside is there for you is a critical part of a person's mental survival.

But there are lots of other things we do too:

We provide survival grants for people in countries where conditions are really hard of around £30 (43 euro) per month and top those up with a vitamin grant in countries where the nutritional value of the food is truly poor.

We send books, magazines, newspapers and most memorably for our prisoner clients a birthday card and Christmas cards – the two emotional low-points of the year. Our cards are often the only ones they receive.

We provide information about prison systems, criminal justice systems, and answer a myriad of questions – what happens to your flat and possessions if you aren't there to pay the rent? How to send in a clothes parcel? How to contact your loved ones? How to get or arrange a visit? We also get some odd ones such as 'where is my dog'? That was someone who had been arrested while with his dog but the one that surprised us was 'where are my trousers'? It turned out he had put them into the prison laundry just before he was transferred to another prison. We sent a grant for him to buy some new trousers.

Some of these questions you might normally expect the prison to help with – but what if you don't speak the local language and can't even ask the question? Or if you can, what if you don't understand the answer?

We send in a dictionary or language book as soon as we can because communication is so fundamental to the human condition.

Often our services can seem so simple and straight forward and yet they are vital things that we take for granted which suddenly become difficult to obtain. For example, for most of us a book is a pleasurable distraction when we have time to sit and focus on it. For a prisoner a book gives them something to do and represents the ability to lose themselves for a few minutes which can help you maintain your mental health; in your head you can enter another world away from the horrible reality of your surroundings and situation; but it is also something in your own language and helps to keep your native language current; it can also be used in helping to teach English – a positive use of time for many in prison who may want to learn the local language in return.

Sending prisoners a newspaper seems like just something to read and also has the benefits I have just mentioned. But it is also great

preparation for release – it helps to keep people up to date with what is going on close to home. Additionally we provide our clients with a newsletter four times per year and have recently introduced Rebuild which is aimed at people about to leave prison and return to the UK. Both these newsletters give prisoners a forum to express themselves and write about their own experiences.

While on the subject of reading matter, a much valued service is our letter-forwarding. We provide all our prisoners with reply-paid envelopes so that they can communicate more easily with us without having to find the cost of foreign postage. We encourage people to stuff the envelopes full of letters to their friends and loved ones and we post them on when they get to the UK. Keeping prisoners in touch with their family and friends is actually a critical part of ensuring prisoners have somewhere to return to at the end of the sentence. If communication breaks down then it is unlikely a prisoner will be accepted back into the home when he or she is released.

Supporting the family is important not just to the family members but very often the prisoners too who are desperate to be reassured about what is going on at home. When your loved one has been imprisoned in a country hundreds or thousands of miles away, it's hard to express the shock, anger, frustration, desperation and complete isolation you feel not to mention the continuing stress. You might have kept the whole thing quiet because of the stigma – it is so easy to say that someone is working overseas. Your neighbours, friends and often your family have no idea what is going on. As time goes on, the days stretch into months and months of remand. Then there is the critical point of the court process and sentencing – the family want to know what is happening, the prisoner often doesn't know much either. We can't bring prisoners home and we don't intervene in the criminal justice process – we focus on their welfare.

But to support their families and loved ones often means providing a listening ear – on the face of it, it might seem a simple thing but you can't underestimate - the importance of having someone who is supportive and non-judgmental to talk to and with whom you can share your innermost fears and nightmares when you may be extremely distressed. It's a big step for family members to take – to dare to make

that call – and our caseworkers are skilled listeners who can react appropriately and with empathy. For families who want more than a phone call, we have a confidential online chat room; we run information days up and down the country and have the regional support groups so that people in similar situations can provide understanding and support to each other.

At this point I would like to show you a video – it's a short fundraising video introduced by one of our supporters.

..... Show video

Lee and Kirsty described the impact of imprisonment both for him and for the family very effectively. They also demonstrated the impact of the help we were able to provide to both of them.

As I have already mentioned, organisations like ICPO and Prisoners Abroad are here for the long term and particularly during the crisis points in any sentence which start with arrest, then the court procedure, then sentencing and then parole and release. Each of these raises different issues for the prisoner and the family.

Throughout the prison sentence it is quite normal for both the prisoner and the family to have worn rose tinted glasses, focusing on the day of release as being the end point to the nightmare they are living through. However, our daily experience tells us that release is not an end point just the beginning of the resettlement phase. We strive to ensure people think more realistically about release and we have handbooks and material to help them do that.

Some prisoners feel that the easiest way to cope with their emotions is to cut communication with their nearest and dearest during their sentence. But the less communication there is, the less likely the family will be there to support them when they come out. Having someone to go home to not only prevents someone being immediately street homeless on their return but is also very important in keeping away from crime and following a crime-free future.

We estimate there are about 600 of our clients released at the end of their sentence each year. Between 150 and 200 are people who are deported back to the UK – away from their friends and family who live in

the country where they were imprisoned. These are usually from USA, Canada and Australia and emigrated there from the UK when they were small and having been deported, are banned with no right of return. People in this position arrive at our door with nothing but the clothes they stand in. There are no release grants from an overseas prison and any possessions and identification are often missing. Prisoners Abroad provides a resettlement programme that helps people in this position begin the long process of integration.

When they arrive in our office, we review their immediate needs and can then respond to this period of crisis. This may mean: finding them a change of clothing; emergency accommodation so they don't have to sleep on the street; money for food so that they don't have to steal to eat; and urgent medical support. People return with a myriad of medical needs – over the years we have seen unset broken limbs, late stage cancer, suspected tuberculosis and any number of other physical and mental health conditions that have gone untreated in prison.

Listening to Paul Gavin speak about the research report 'A Step at a Time' was fascinating for the similarities that face prisoners returning to both Ireland and the UK.

One of the key features of Prisoners Abroad's work over the last few years has been the need to be nimble-footed and responsive to changes in our environment. For example: changes to UK welfare benefits mean that emergency grants are no longer available to those in crisis, the move to localisation means that those who have no roots in the UK find it a huge challenge to access housing or even basic medical care.

Our key aim is to deal with the person's urgent and immediate needs, get them into the benefit system and begin to help them onto their own two feet. But this can take time and because of the UK's policy of localisation – what used to be 2-3 weeks can now easily take 6 weeks and sometimes much longer for people without any local connections who desperately need accommodation, medical care for their physical and mental health and then how to get employment, education or training. We are immensely fortunate that a charitable fund for the City of London recognises the importance of helping people who have nowhere to resettle but in London and its support means we are able to

assist with rent deposits for housing, and all the necessities – sheets, pillows and a duvet, a plate, bowl and cup, knife, fork and spoon and even in some cases a microwave to ensure they can have hot food.

Clearly your experience of change here in Ireland is no different – what we might before have described as an ‘uphill struggle’ is often now a major shift in the tectonic plates beneath us – the earthquakes and fissures that appear so rapidly mean having to reassess what we do and how we do it, how can we remain effective and how much can we afford to do when government has stepped back from so much that it did before.

Like all charities, we are always preoccupied with raising enough money to not only provide existing services but also to raise money for development of programmes and to ensure that as an organisation we don’t stand still, that our services evolve to remain effective – our beneficiaries – people in prison and released from it, plus their families and friends - need more and more from us especially when there is less and less from any other source for example the medical profession or other charities which may have closed.

In recent times other challenges we need to respond to include:

- We anticipated big changes following the introduction of the EU law on the transfer of sentenced prisoners which was designed to let prisoners serve their sentences close to home, but the reality is that few countries are operating these enforced transfers and we have had fewer than 10 people transferred back to the UK from other European States.
- What we didn’t anticipate was that as a result of the enormous movement of refugees towards northern Europe that many Brits would be arrested for people smuggling in lorries and cars either knowingly or unknowingly
- What we do know is that the economic misery inflicted on our general populations by the global banking crisis which has resulted in so many government cuts around the world, has meant a further deterioration in prison conditions in countries where you hardly thought that could be possible. The saddest and most appalling consequence is the increase in deaths in custody. The deaths

have occurred in different prisons and in different countries so there is no clear pattern but what we do know is that: when medical support is very difficult to access; a good diet is almost impossible to maintain; the hygiene in the prison and for the water supply is totally compromised in an overcrowded and closed environment, it's only a matter of time before disease is rife and the squalid conditions accelerate the death in custody numbers.

To try and respond to this, Prisoners Abroad created an Emergency Response Fund – it is only 6 months old to date but it has already shown its value for a severely disabled prisoner who relied on cell-mates to carry him to the toilet risking injury for him and indeed them and they were totally relied on to bring him food and water too. We have now purchased a wheelchair for him and we have been told it has transformed his mobility and his life within the prison. For the longer term impact of this Emergency Response Fund and especially on the numbers of deaths in custody, we will have to wait and see.

- Like ICPO, the law change in Australia means an increase in the number of people being deported to a country they left as children. This is a situation we are very familiar with – as this has been the case with the USA for almost twenty years. For the ex-prisoners involved it is a double punishment. The law says that the punishment is the deprivation of liberty but USA and Australia are punishing people further by deporting them away from their families and livelihoods with no ability to return. To be banned so that you cannot go back to see your brother or sister married, christen your niece or nephew or even to bury your parents is a punishment with devastating emotional consequences for individuals. But as a UK citizen – I acknowledge that the UK government is little better.

So for us – for ICPO and Prisoners Abroad - how do we face the future? What does the next 30 years hold?

- People will always find themselves on the wrong side of the law in other countries – either knowingly or unknowingly. They and their families will continue to need our help both in prison and outside it and often for many years.

- Families will continue to need information and support to get through the isolation, fear and anxiety of what some describe as their own sentence.
- Prison conditions are unlikely to improve in any great way with so many impoverished nations around the world and an economic climate that is by no means rosy.
- And people leaving prison will continue to need and deserve a second chance. Organisations like ours can offer people the opportunity to lead a crime-free life – to turn over a new leaf but they need help with fundamental human essentials such as accommodation, medical care, jobs and creating a footprint in a place that is their home and their future.

To do all this ICPO and Prisoners Abroad and other groups like us, need ensure we are here for the long term. Our natural focus is on our beneficiaries – the people we help. But we also need to make sure that our organisations are in good shape financially and getting the governance right and make sure we monitor and evaluate our work so that we are absolutely sure we are providing the services that people need and in the way that they need them. The people we help are all but hidden until a specific case hits the headlines, so there is an ever increasing need for us to be their advocates, to give a voice to the individuals we help and ensure our governments do all they can to protect vulnerable prisoners.

Thousands of people each year, whether they are prisoners, families or friends, need our help and we can transform their lives through services which range from protecting life and health to the simple act of human kindness like sending birthday greetings. For Prisoners Abroad - throughout all of this, our vision will remain the same:

‘To ensure people survive overseas imprisonment with dignity and hope’.

Thank you.