



An Overview of the Traveller Mediation Service Peer Mediation in Prisons Programme 2016 to 2019

By Kerry Lawless and Sharron Kelliher



Introduction

Due to the highly restrictive nature of the prison environment, with large numbers of diverse personalities living in extremely close proximity to one another and some with a propensity for violent behaviour, prisons can be dangerous places. Prisons are too often places of conflict, violence, and fear (Condry and Scharff Smith, 2018), where conflict can develop and escalate rapidly. Such conflict almost always has a negative impact, both physically and mentally, on prisoners and staff. It was in this context that TMS developed a unique and innovative approach to conflict prevention and resolution within the Irish Prison Service (IPS).

Since its inception in 2016, the TMS Peer Mediation in Prisons (PMP) initiative has worked with a wide range of prisons from maximum security to open prisons and male and female only prisons, within the Irish prison system. PMP has supported prisoners from both Traveller and non-Traveller communities to develop effective conflict management and resolution skills resulting in a reduction of violence in the prison environment. Some



prisoners followed up this training, even after leaving prison, through the support of a collaborative partnership between TMS, the Edward M Kennedy Institute for Conflict, to become qualified mediators.

This article outlines how the initiative came about, how it was implemented, who participated in it, what the outcomes were and also what the hopes are for the future of this unique programme.

Mediation

Mediation is the process of resolving conflict between parties in dispute where a neutral third party, the mediator, facilitates discussions and the exploration of potential solutions by those involved. A key element of mediation is its voluntary aspect. Each party involved in the dispute chooses to engage and participate in the mediation of their own free will.

It is essential that confidentiality is maintained throughout the process and that the mediator is neutral. The mediator conducts the discussions in an impartial manner without making suggestions or proposing solutions. The key philosophy underpinning any mediation is that the participants themselves work to create their own agreement based on their own needs and with their interests being accommodated as much as possible.

Peer mediation differs from conventional mediation in that the person assuming the role of mediator is from the same peer group as the parties in dispute. Peer Mediation in Prisons (PMP), as modelled by TMS, is an evolution of the original peer mediation model started in the 1960s in American schools where students were taught that the power of



non-violence lies in justice, caring and personal integrity, (Johnson and Johnson, 2006) culminating in mediation skills training. Since then, peer mediation has expanded geographically but has kept its relatively narrow focus on the education system. Similarly, PMP is closely aligned to the project Prison of Peace (PoP) that employs a method of prison conflict resolution known as prisoner facilitated mediation (PFM), where prisoners are trained as peacemakers and mediators to help resolve conflicts within a prison. (Kaufer, L, Noll, DE and Mayer, 2015) Finally, TMS and PMP share many of the values and applications for conflict management in prisons found in the Dialogue Road Map (DRM), a communications framework rooted in the philosophy of nonviolence and currently being piloted by the Centre for Peaceful Solutionsⁱ at Dartmoor Prison.

The theory behind PMP is that people in a high stress setting such as a prison, engage better with a mediator they feel they can relate to. Prisoners trust and respect their peers because they better understand the culture and context, including the often stressful day-to-day survival of the prison environment where *“the pains associated with the depth of imprisonment are linked to prisoners’ physical, psychological and social isolation from the outside world...”*ⁱⁱ And, where conflict can present itself both physically and/or mentally. Having a mediator from the same peer group as the prisoner encourages people who often otherwise resist external support to manage their conflict.

Background

Educational services are available in all Irish prisons and are provided in partnership with a range of educational agencies to help people in custody cope with their sentence, achieve personal development, prepare for life after release and establish an appetite and capacity for life-long learning.ⁱⁱⁱ The range of educational programmes on offer are



broad and, depending on facilities available, can include practical skills (woodwork, cookery, computer-literacy), personal development (life skills, communication skills, anger management), as well as curriculum-based academic courses (2nd and 3rd level qualifications).

Since 2009, the Irish Red Cross has been running a community-based health education programme in all 14 Irish prisons. This programme, developed in collaboration with the IPS and local Education and Training Boards (ETB), includes a workshop on Violence Reduction. In 2016, a group of prisoners in Castlerea Prison, which has a significantly high population of Irish Travellers, requested more in-depth training in violence prevention and conflict resolution in order to address a growing number of issues within the prison.

Based on our unique experience and successful track record of mediating complex and often inter-generational Traveller conflicts outside of prison, including those with the settled community, the Traveller Mediation Service (TMS)^{iv} was approached to develop and deliver a skills-based conflict resolution programme. Following a noteworthy pilot programme which focused on conflict resolution, Traveller culture and the 5-step mediation model of managing disputes, violence within the prison was significantly

“No one is born knowing how to resolve conflicts. These are skills that one typically picks up from observing family and friends. Unfortunately, prison inmates often come from violent, abusive, or neglectful backgrounds. As such, many have not been exposed to examples of healthy communication and conflict resolution. This lack of experience does not, however, indicate a lack of ability. PFM (Prisoner Facilitated Mediation) training gives people the opportunity to develop these skills by teaching them a variety of techniques designed to help keep conversations constructive, minimise misunderstandings, and shift the discussion from the parties’ positions to their underlying needs.”

Kauffer, L., Noll, D.E. and Mayer, J. (2015) p195



reduced and many existing and long standing prison conflicts, including with some of the prison staff, ceased completely. As a result of the pilot's impact and, following a number of multi-stakeholder discussions between the ETB, TMS, the Travellers in Prison Initiative (TPI) and senior Castlerea prison staff, it was agreed that the prison would benefit from ongoing conflict management and violence prevention skills based programmes.

Pilot Programme – Castlerea Prison

The first PMP programme was run in Castlerea Prison in the autumn of 2016 and involved 21 participants, 11 of whom were from the Traveller community. This high number of Traveller participants reflects the high number of Travellers in Castlerea's population.

Topics covered in this pilot included:

- Listening and communication exercises
- The meaning of conflict
- Exploring Irish Traveller culture
- Exploring Traveller-related conflict and how it is different from other conflict
- Group work using questions to explore the nature of conflict and its impact and consequences
- Role play and exercises
- Personal responses to conflict, individual conflict styles and triggers
- How conflict escalates and de-escalation techniques
- Restorative practices in managing conflict, building relationships and role play exercises

Feedback from course participants was very positive, with a 100% completion rate amongst Traveller participants on the pilot programme. That the programme was



developed and led by a Traveller organisation (TMS) and partly facilitated by Travellers led to a considerable amount of enthusiasm, engagement and commitment from participants. A second more in depth mediation-focused PMP programme was requested by the prisoners and staff of Castlerea. Topics covered in part 2 included:

- Understanding the skills of a mediator and co-mediator
- The 5-Step Diamond Model of Mediation
- Framing and re-framing
- Exploring needs and interests
- Developing and practicing role play exercises

The first six-week (part 2) PMP Programme, run in February 2017, resulted in six participants passing the Mediation Institute of Ireland (MII) independent assessment. As a result of the success of the programme and the continued support of stakeholders, prison staff and prisoners themselves, the prison authorities requested TMS to continue, on an ongoing basis, the Peer Mediation in Prisons Initiative in Castlerea Prison. Between its inception in 2016 and December 2019 a total of 42 prisoners passed the Part 1 training programme with almost half of the graduates, 17, going on to successfully complete part 2 of the training.

Evaluation of the programme: findings

An external evaluation was carried out that documented the process of the training and follow-up as it unfolded. The evaluation assessed and documented the set-up and implementation of the programme and also reported the impact it had on the participants. The evaluation found that amongst the key strengths of the pilot were:



- **The delivery of the training by Travellers:** this enabled a focus on Traveller identity and how conflict impacts on the Traveller community. Participants noted that this resulted in high levels of Traveller participation in the training.
- **The oversight structure** in the form of the advisory group which included, crucially, two representatives of peer mediator trainees. This served to acknowledge their importance in the design and implementation of the programme.

Following the evaluation of this programme, and in light of the positive response of stakeholders and participants, it was decided to develop a follow-on programme for Castlerea prisoners who had completed the first 6-week module. Part 2 of the PMP programme involved a focus on practical mediation and conflict coaching skills with a view to developing a pool of prisoners who would be able to provide effective conflict resolution interventions amongst their peers in the prison setting. This was also run as a six-week module at the end of which a MII accredited external mediator independently assessed the participants on their mediation skills and passed or failed them as qualified mediators accordingly.

Impacts on the participants

The evaluation found that there were notable impacts in three distinct areas:

1. the **personal impact** on participants,
2. the impact **within the prison** itself, and
3. the wider impact **in the community outside** of the prison.

Personal impacts included changes in how conflict was both viewed and addressed – for example, how talking through issues led to a reduced level of violence in the prison.



Some participants felt motivated as a result of the initial training to pursue further accredited mediation training, and continuing to make use of their skills after release from prison.

The process of participating in and completing the course had a very positive impact on the men and many spoke about how it gave them a better awareness of their own past behaviours as well as giving them practical skills and tools for managing potential conflict in the future.

Prison impacts included a view that there was a reduction in sanctions for breaches of prison discipline, and that there were improved relationships between prison staff and prisoners arising from the co-operation in the delivery of the programme. At the start of March 2017, it was reported that at least 32 incidents were averted as a result of informal peer mediation undertaken by the prisoner peer mediators; 31 conflict coaching sessions were undertaken and one formal referral to peer mediation was made, which resulted in a mediation session successfully undertaken by two peer mediators and two participants.

The informal nature of peer mediation meant it was difficult to fully quantify exactly how many ‘mediations’ took place as a result of the programme but there was strong anecdotal evidence from prison staff and prisoners that the skills were being applied in the general prison population to good effect.

In terms of **community impacts**, participants noted that, just as conflict in the prison environment spilled over into the wider community, reduced conflict in prison similarly

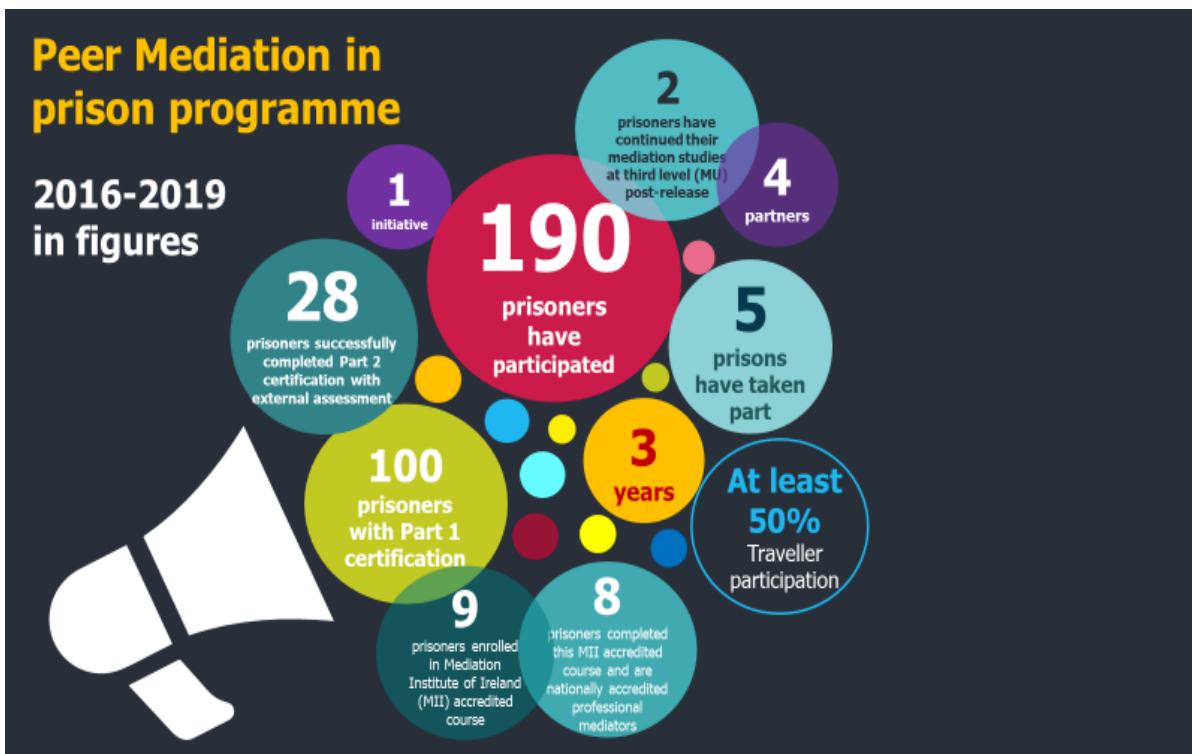


impacted on the wider community. The participants were sharing some of their new learning with family members outside of the prison and in some cases were trying to actively reduce external conflicts. Many spoke about how they were keen to utilise their conflict resolution skills once they were released from prison and had re-joined the wider community.

Expansion and development of the Peer Mediation in Prisons initiative

The success of and awareness raising brought about by the pilot PMP programme in Castlerea led to interest from other prisons in the programme. This resulted in TMS being asked to expand PMP to other prisons in Ireland. From 2018-2019 Part 1 and Part 2 of the PMP programme was rolled out in a further four prisons nationally:

- **Loughan House** open prison in Co Cavan
- **The Dochas Centre** women's prison in Dublin
- **Cork Prison** in Cork city
- **Midlands Prison** in Co Laois



Loughan House

- PMP Programme part 1 training commenced in September 2018.
- PMP Programme part 2 training commenced in January 2019, and an external accreditor completed assessments for four participants in February 2019. All four qualified as accredited MII mediators.
- A certificate presentation event for those receiving their Peer Mediation certificates was held in March 2019, with the IPS Director General presenting the awards.
- PMP part 1 training started in November 2019 and was completed in December 2019. 12 students completed the programme and were presented with their certificates by the Prison Governor.

As Loughan House is an open prison with a relatively small population and considerably more freedoms and autonomy available to its prisoners than in closed prisons, there is



traditionally less conflict and violence. The desire to remain in the open prison and avoid being transferred to a stricter regime in one of the bigger prisons means that inmates are generally good at managing issues which might arise within the prison. Nevertheless, it was felt that there was value in running Peer Mediation training in order to provide good conflict resolution skills to equip prisoners for life back in the community post-release.

The Dóchas Centre Women's Prison

- In autumn 2018, PMP part 1 training was delivered in the Dóchas Centre Women's Prison. Six prisoners successfully completed the programme.
- In July 2019 the TMS ran a Conflict-Awareness training workshop in the prison with a view to the possibility of running further Peer Mediation in the future.

Some inmates in Dóchas were new mothers; there was also some timetabling challenges and thus TMS needed to adapt and be more flexible than in Castlerea about how the PMP training was rolled out. Nevertheless, consistent attendance and engagement by participants was always a challenge. TMS is exploring how the Programme might further adapt to these challenges in the future so the women in Dóchas can avail of the skills and opportunities PMP brings to them, the prison and their external communities.

Cork Prison

- The PMP part 1 programme started in February 2019 and was completed in April 2019.
- TMS ran part two of the PMP Programme between April and June 2019.
- In July TMS ran a Peer Mediation role play session for the group of prisoners who passed the assessment in order to continue to upskill the group.



- A second programme commenced in late September 2019 and 11 men completed part 1 of the Peer Mediation in December 2019.

Roll-out of Peer Mediation Service in Cork Prison

- Despite COVID 19, and in line with government guidelines, in late 2019, TMS representatives met with the Governor and ETB staff regarding the roll out of a peer mediation service run by prisoners who had completed parts 1 and 2 of the PMP programme earlier in the year.
- The prisoners began working on designing posters for the service and the proposal was that they would also design t-shirts for the peer mediators.

There has been considerable support and engagement at all levels within Cork Prison for the PMP programme. Staff and management are keen to develop the programme within the prison and ensure that a Peer Mediation service is made available to prisoners. Prisoners were facilitated to design and produce special t-shirts for mediators to use.

Midlands Prison

- The Peer Mediation part 1 course started in September 2019 with 15 prisoners attending. The course was completed in November 2019, and certificates were presented to the 13 prisoners who completed.
- The PMP part two programme commenced in January 2020.

Expansion of the Peer Mediation Programme

The PMP programme was introduced to the Midlands Prison as a direct result of the feedback and impact from other prisons in Ireland. Given the large number of prisoners



within the Midlands Prison it is projected that the training will be offered on an ongoing basis into the future.

In the Midland programmes PMP was facilitated by a combination of TMS core staff and TMS external panel members who were qualified mediators contracted in to support the delivery of the programme. The programmes were predominantly Traveller-led, resulting in positive support and engagement amongst the Traveller prison population in all of the prisons where the programmes were made available. This was particularly noteworthy because Travellers traditionally do not engage with prison education services due to a myriad of issues. These include low literacy rates and bad experiences in formal education. PMP also found traction within the non-Traveller prison population.

In the autumn of 2019 TMS was approached to explore the possibility of running PMP in Portlaoise Prison. This was as a result of both prisoners and prison staff in the prison's education department becoming aware of the successful introduction of the programme in the Midlands prison nearby, and in Cork prison. It is anticipated that this new location will be added to the list of existing locations where the programme is delivered by the end of 2020.

Mediators Institute of Ireland accreditation

Due to the ongoing success and consistent prisoner engagement of the original Castlerea Prison PMP programme, a number of the prisoners who successfully completed both parts 1 and 2 of the programme requested the opportunity to gain fully-accredited status as mediators with the MII. In collaboration with the Kennedy Institute in Maynooth University, Castlerea Prison management and staff and the ETB it was agreed that the



prisoners would be offered a 12-week training programme which would enable them to become fully qualified mediators upon successful completion and assessment.

There was substantial take-up by the prisoners and the programme was run over two half-days per week between October 2019 and December 2019. One half day was spent learning the in-depth theories and processes involved in mediation and the other half day was entirely devoted to role play practice and skills development exercises. The programme was led by TMS staff and a lecturer from the Kennedy Institute, supported by staff from Castlerea Prison's educational department.

The assessment of this programme involved a role-play of a mediation session which was videoed and assessed by MII-accredited examiners. It also involved assignments and self-reflection exercises by all of the participants. The 12-week programme was attended in full by nine prisoners and was successfully completed and passed by eight. These eight prisoners received full accreditation as mediators with the MII. This was the first time in Ireland that any prisoners had attained this level of accredited training and certification in mediation practice and was a remarkable outcome for all involved. For all of the prisoners it also represented the highest level of educational qualification that they had achieved in their lives to date.

Challenges and lessons learned

Each prison in Ireland is its own unique environment with its own dynamics, population and challenges. All of these factors must be considered when deciding to develop and implement a peer mediation service. Staff and prisoner safety and security are paramount at all times and any peer mediation service must complement and stand



alongside existing internal prison procedures for managing conflict. Some prisons have higher levels of conflict than others due to larger populations or the types of prisoners which are incarcerated there. For example, Loughan House has relatively low incidences of conflict due to it being an open prison and therefore the prisoners place a particular emphasis on maintaining the peace and avoiding getting transferred back to a more regimented and secure facility.

As prisoners receive training in peer mediation, it is also crucial that staff in the prisons are made aware of how the process works. It is important that staff and prison officers feel supported by the service being made available rather than feeling that it in some way undermines or interferes with their authority. The demanding nature of any role within a prison means it can be challenging to incorporate any new initiative. To this end it is essential that all prisons interested in developing a peer mediation service take the time to effectively communicate to staff and prison officers how the service works and what the benefits are to them in their respective roles.

One of the ways that TMS has been working to raise awareness with Prison Officers since the beginning of 2019 is through running Traveller information and awareness raising sessions for new Recruit Prison Officers in the Irish Prison Service Training College. In 2019 TMS ran a total of eight sessions in the IPS Training College with the aim of raising awareness of Traveller culture, and particularly regarding issues arising for Travellers in prison.

The sessions were run by TMS, with co-facilitation assistance from panel members and Traveller ex-prisoners.



Plans for the future

The experience of introducing and running the PMP Programme to a number of Irish prisons since 2016 means TMS has a depth of learning and knowledge about how the different prisons operate and the need to adapt the programme accordingly. The next steps for each prison in terms of progressing the programme, maintaining the momentum, and ensuring sustainability, will therefore also need to be individualised. A key factor is awareness raising within the prisons so that both staff and prisoners have the opportunity to understand what is involved.

As the implementation of an ongoing peer mediation service within any prison is a complex undertaking which can take time to embed fully, it is essential that prisoners who have completed their peer mediation training continue with role play practice so that they can regularly use and develop their skills. TMS is actively involved in ensuring that opportunities to develop and improve their skills is provided to all trainees.

TMS consults with each of the prison authorities to explore a key considerations when setting up any peer mediation service within a prison. These include:

- Where will the mediation take place within the prison setting?
- When will mediations take place?
- Which types of disputes are suitable for mediation?
- What will be the referral process for cases?
- Will prison staff be involved in the referral process?
- How can peer mediators be supported in their work? What opportunities for supervision will be available to them?



- How will peer mediators be identified and recognised within the prison population?
For example, will they wear specially designed t-shirts?

In the four years since the TMS PMP programme piloted training in Castlerea Prison, it has been encouraging to see the interest in peer mediation spread to other prisons. TMS is committed to providing ongoing support to prisons where training has already taken place, while also offering the necessary skills and expertise to prisons which are interested in running the training for the first time. It has been encouraging to see how an initial pilot programme in one prison has subsequently expanded to include further prisons around the country and it is hoped that this will continue into the future.

As a way of supplementing existing procedures for managing prisoner behaviour and maintaining a safe environment for prisoners and staff alike, peer mediation has been proven to have enormous potential as an additional resource within the Irish prison system. TMS is constantly exploring ways to develop and expand the PMP programme, in collaboration with stakeholders and the IPS, in order to provide an additional and effective means of managing conflicts and disputes within Irish prisons. By empowering prisoners to take more responsibility for managing their disputes safely, and supporting prison staff in their already challenging roles, TMS is committed to its ongoing role in developing this innovative initiative within the national prison system.



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Kerry Lawless is a qualified mediator with over a decade of conflict and mediation-based training, group facilitation. Kerry has practiced as a mediator with the Family Mediation Service and in private practice in both Dublin and Portlaoise. He also worked as a mediator and trainer with Traveller Mediation Service, a national, traveller led conflict prevention and intervention service. Kerry has trained in and brings a strong ethos of Restorative Practice to all of his work.

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