



Penal and Policing Applied Policy  
Department of Justice & Equality  
51 St Stephen's Green  
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The Cork Alliance Centre was established as a charity in 2003. The Centre works with both men and women on release from prison. With the overarching view of desistance from crime, the Centre facilitates the process of personal recovery and empowerment as people seek to become better equipped to manage their lives more positively. Our service is based in the community with in-reach work in the prisons. *'To desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves'*<sup>i</sup>, within this building self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-respect and self-determination is fundamental to our work. Therein we strive to facilitate people who use our services, to restore positive relationships with their family, friends, community, society and most importantly with themselves. Those who choose to access the services of the Centre do so voluntarily. The Centre's core funding is from the Department of Justice and Equality through the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service.

### **Spent Convictions Legislation**

Any legislation is first and foremost about people, community and society. This legislation needs to recognise that people are more than the sum of their convictions and most definitely better than that same sum. Spent convictions can play an important part in recognising that people have changed and are better able to participate in society.

No child is born bad, it is our society, our community and our family that form us. While life events can result in people doing bad things, so too can life events influence and change that for the positive. When we support our people, out of difficulties and challenges we support ourselves to live in a happier, more inclusive and cohesive society. Inclusion and cohesion are not built on negative labelling, on holding people who have been accountable for their behaviours to continue to pay the price for events that happened years ago as if they happened today. Without hope the journey from crime is an arduous task, we erode the hope and belief in a better life by not allowing people to shake off the shackles of past convictions. The long-term label of offender is destructive and helps nobody affected by crime. If we want to effect change, we need to proactively embrace spent convictions in a constructive and comprehensive way that reflects the reality of lives lived. Currently, many of the people we work with have multiple convictions and the current spent convictions legislation is so far removed from their lives that it is ineffective for them.

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Seirbhís Phríosúin na hÉireann  
**IRISH PRISON SERVICE**



Restorative justice demonstrates that it is often more constructive to know that somebody has improved themselves and their life rather than to know what convictions were amassed during that time. We as a society know that often those who have offended have been offended by society - we let go of them along the way. Be it that we were not there to support them in their families, in their education, in themselves, and we ignored the traumas and blamed them for their wrongs. When that same person does pull themselves out of the turmoil and chaos of their lives, while acknowledging the pain and anguish they have caused too, we as a society have a responsibility to acknowledge their change. In so doing, we must also free ourselves of the old, outdated information we hold about someone and change our mind-set about how we choose to label people.

We appreciate that in the Cork Alliance Centre, we are in the enviable position of knowing people who want to, and who do, change their lives for the better. We know what work and effort that takes. We know the healing and recovery that has to be journeyed to make that a sustainable process. We know the anger, the fear, the upset, and the false personas that need to be worked on and addressed. Yet we see people do this every day. We know change happens; we need a legislative system that can respond to and reflect such change.

From the anecdotal evidence, from both the James Leonard's interview on the Tommy Tiernan Show in January 2020 (facilitated via the Department of Justice and Equality) and the subsequent *Two Norries* Podcast, we can clearly see that the general public support people who have sought to change their lives. When given the opportunity to see, feel and understand people's journey into and out of addiction and crime; our society wants to embrace and support people. People see them as the honourable and well-grounded people they are today, and it is the legislation that is not on a par with it. In desistance work, the person moves away from old behaviours and we as a society, through this legislation, can also move away from these old behaviours, of continuously judging people for past events, by spending convictions.

Arguably, if we take a strengths based viewpoint, given the deep-seated knowledge that the pain causing, and caused by crime, is part of some peoples lived experience, they are less likely to offend again when personal recovery work is done. As they know the personal and familial cost of such actions, they are less likely to risk it happening, and they are more conscious of their triggers and understanding their feelings, all of which lowers risk.

If we continue to do what we have always done we will continue to get the same results. We need a means by which change can be recognised and valued. A radically forward thinking spent convictions bill can do so for many with multiple convictions if we so choose. We can choose to celebrate good connected recovery, where people are welcome to engage in society without their past mistakes constantly being held in their present lives.

Sincerely yours

Sheila Connolly

Chief Executive

Cork Alliance Centre

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<sup>i</sup> Maruna S (2001) *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*, American Psychological Association Books: Washington DC, p7