

ICPO

IRISH COUNCIL FOR PRISONERS OVERSEAS

ICPO CLIENT SURVEY 2021



Government of Ireland
Emigrant Support Programme



An Boinn Gnóthaí Eacnamaíoch agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



IRISH CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
COMHAIL EASPAID CAITLÍCEACH ÉIREANN



Society of St Vincent de Paul

Executive Summary

In the last quarter of 2020 ICPO undertook a global survey of the 1,100 Irish people imprisoned overseas that ICPO supports in 30 countries around the globe. A very high response rate of 114 replies was received to the questionnaire and has provided ICPO and other interested parties with first-hand information of the experience of prison in another country.

We believe it is important that we undertake our work with as comprehensive an evidence base as possible and that we not merely provide the same supports to clients because ‘that is how we have always done it’. Rather ICPO believes it is important to engage directly with clients both on an individual basis and by means of formal surveys such as this one.

The survey asked questions under a number of different headings – ‘Life in Prison Overseas’ (including during Covid 19), Resettlement and ‘The Services and Supports you Receive from ICPO’. The responses are set out in detail in the report but the following are the key findings and conclusions:

Findings

- 60% of respondents reported experiencing mental health difficulties whilst in prison.
- A significant proportion of respondents reported feelings of isolation and having little time outside their cell (a feature exacerbated by Covid).
- More than 70% of respondents said their primary concern arising from Covid was not for their own health but for the welfare of their loved ones at home.
- A range of other difficulties and adverse impacts were identified from the pandemic, including lack of visits, 23 hour lockdown in their cells, concerns for their own health in a confined setting, delays in legal hearings and inability to access educational and offender behaviour courses.
- When it came to managing stress and anxiety a majority of respondents identified prayer and spirituality as the most helpful, followed by physical exercise and access to the gym.
- 42% of prisoner responses indicated they didn’t know what their plans were after their sentence overseas was completed.
- The majority of respondents were in regular contact with ICPO with 23% in contact at least monthly and a further 50% contacting ICPO at least a few times a year. The survey responses indicate that Irish prisoners overseas view ICPO as a trusted source of information and support.

Conclusions

Lifting of Covid 19 restrictions

Restrictions imposed in prisons during the pandemic led to considerable hardship for prisoners and should be lifted as soon as it is safe to do so. They should not be permitted to become the ‘new normal’.

Access to mental and physical health care

Prisoners experience disproportionately high levels of physical and mental health difficulties relative to the general population. These challenges are exacerbated by additional challenges associated with imprisonment in a foreign country. The lack of adequate mental and physical healthcare in prisons in some parts of the world highlight the importance of prisoners having an advocate whether it is family, ICPO or an Irish Consular official.

Release and resettlement

Our survey has shown that a significant number of Irish people in prison do not have plans for their release. This underlines the importance of dedicated resettlement services for this group of prisoners who may not be able to access offender behaviour, education or vocational skills courses or preparation for release programmes when in prison overseas. The ICPO provides resettlement supports to returning former prisoners including referral to other agencies in the sector, however additional resources would be beneficial.

Repatriation

A well-resourced, transparent, fair and expeditious repatriation system is urgently required.

ICPO support

Irish prisoners overseas seek the support of ICPO regularly for assistance with a wide variety of issues.

ICPO CLIENT SURVEY



Introduction

The Irish Council for Prisoners Overseas (ICPO) has worked with Irish people in prison overseas since 1985. Since that time, we have visited and exchanged letters, emails and calls with thousands of prisoners worldwide. Understanding our clients' experiences and providing services that meet their needs is of key importance to the ICPO. One of the strategic priorities of the ICPO Strategic Plan 2020 - 2023 is 'Undertaking further research into clients' needs to better understand the nature of the supports required.' To this end, the ICPO devised a survey and sent it to Irish people in prison in approximately 30 countries; the majority of whom are in the UK. The survey comprised three sections:

Section 1 focused on 'Life in Prison Overseas' with questions including the main difficulties respondents are experiencing in prison, what impact Covid 19 has had on their life in prison and what they do to help when they are stressed or anxious.

Section 2 asked respondents about their plans for when they are released.

Section 3 dealt with the 'Services and Supports you Receive from ICPO' it asked respondents about ICPO - how they heard about us, what services we provided to them, how often they were in contact with ICPO, how they have benefited from their contact with ICPO and how we can improve our services.

The number of responses was very high, particularly as this is the first time the ICPO has undertaken such a survey. 114 prisoners, or over 10% of our clients, completed the survey. Almost 70% of survey participants were in the UK. Respondents were not required to provide their name or address with the completed survey, therefore in the case of over 16% of respondents we do not have the country of imprisonment. The remaining respondents were located in the USA, Europe and Australia. Over 55% of respondents were aged 45 or older with 43% aged from 25-44. The vast majority of respondents were male (over 92%).

This is not a representative sample of Irish people in prison overseas and in particular we recognise that prisoners with literacy issues or visual impairments may have not been able to complete the survey. However we believe that despite

TESTIMONIALS

I am grateful to be part of the mailing list and the money sent towards hobby materials, much appreciated.

ICPO brings me closer to my heritage and so feel part of something unique/special about being Irish.

A friendly letter goes further than you know!

I did receive a hardship grant at a time when I really needed it, so thankful. I love the ICPO and all the work they do.

the limitations of the survey, the survey respondents comprise a substantial cohort of Irish prisoners overseas who have provided their views and experiences. The survey has therefore captured some important information that will inform the work of the ICPO going forward and may be of interest more widely. The survey has clearly demonstrated the hardships and challenges people in prison face including mental health issues, loneliness and isolation and having to spend long periods in their cell. These issues were exacerbated by Covid 19. However, the survey showed that despite the hardships that prisoners had to bear during the pandemic their main concern were for their loved ones on the outside. It also showed that many prisoners try to overcome the stress and anxiety of prison life by prayer and spirituality and activities including gym workouts, yoga and mindfulness.

The following describes the main findings and themes that emerged from the survey responses.

1. Life in Prison

This section of the survey (Figures 1-3 below) asked respondents about the difficulties they experience in prison, the impact of Covid 19, as well as what coping strategies they use if stressed or anxious.

1.1 Difficulties Experienced in Prison

A key finding of this survey has been the mental health difficulties experienced by participants. 60% reported that they experienced mental health difficulties in prison. Many prisoners generally have poor mental health before prison and for others the stress and pressure of prison life lead to issues with their mental health. In some cases, there is no or insufficient treatment or support in prison. People imprisoned overseas can often experience additional hardship including language and cultural differences, isolation and discrimination.

A significant proportion of respondents also reported feelings of isolation and spent little time outside their cell. Some or all of these factors contribute to poor mental health among prisoners. Almost half of respondents said that separation from family had affected them. Most people in prison have not seen their families for at least 18 months as visiting has not been permitted during the pandemic.

Repatriation and returning to Ireland on licence have been identified by 25% of respondents as difficulties they experience in prison, underlining the importance of ICPO’s ongoing work in these areas. While only 3% mentioned language as being a difficulty, this is likely to be because the majority of respondents were in prison in the UK or in other English speaking countries. Language problems can be a major barrier to communications and contribute to isolate Irish and other foreign national prisoners in European, Asian, African and South and Central American countries. Of particular concern, a quarter of respondents stated that racism/discrimination were difficulties they had experienced in prison.

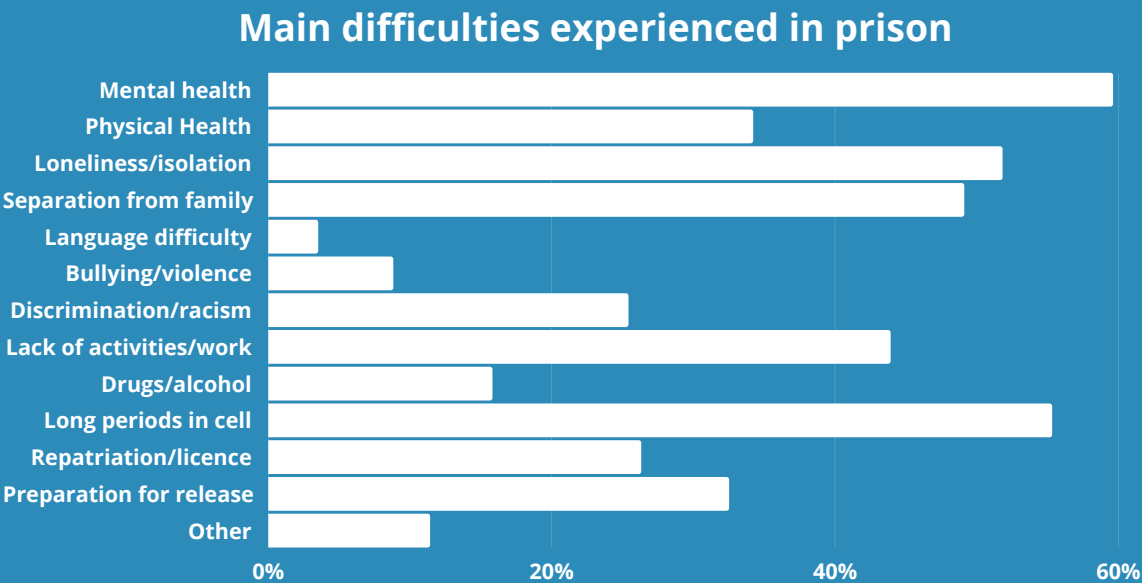


Figure 1: Main difficulties experienced in prison



"Your letter has been the only one that I've received during this whole sentence. It's the first time in 4 months that I've been able to make a phone call as well. The posters and prayers have brightened up the cell and really lifted my depressed mood."

1.2 Impact of Covid 19

The outbreak of the pandemic was a particularly anxious time for people in prison and this was clearly demonstrated in our survey findings. It is widely accepted that people in prison are at greater risk of getting Covid 19 due to the inability to social distance, lack of adequate hygiene and overcrowding in many prisons. A majority of prisoners were also worried about their own health, particularly those who were directly affected by Covid 19 or feared contracting it. Some respondents reported that they had contracted Covid 19 and while all had recovered some had been very ill. One respondent told us "I was directly affected by the Covid 19 virus. I spent 15 days sick, very sick." Some respondents were also anxious about other medical treatments being postponed. A prisoner with underlying health conditions told us of "Difficulties in getting medical treatment and getting in and out of facility hospitals. The appointments keep getting cancelled."

However, despite the issues faced in prison, the main worry for more than 70% of respondents was their family. The worries prisoners had about their families were compounded by the lack of family visits during the pandemic. It was a particularly worrying time for those with vulnerable or older family members. "I have children; it's a scary time and my older family members are a major concern."

Over a quarter of respondents were concerned about the impact of Covid 19 on their legal case with trials being postponed and not knowing when they would now take place. "My trial should have started in March 2020, then again in January 2021, delays big time." Progression within the prison system was also impacted by Covid 19 as clients could not get access to offender behaviour courses. This could well delay their progression and even their release.

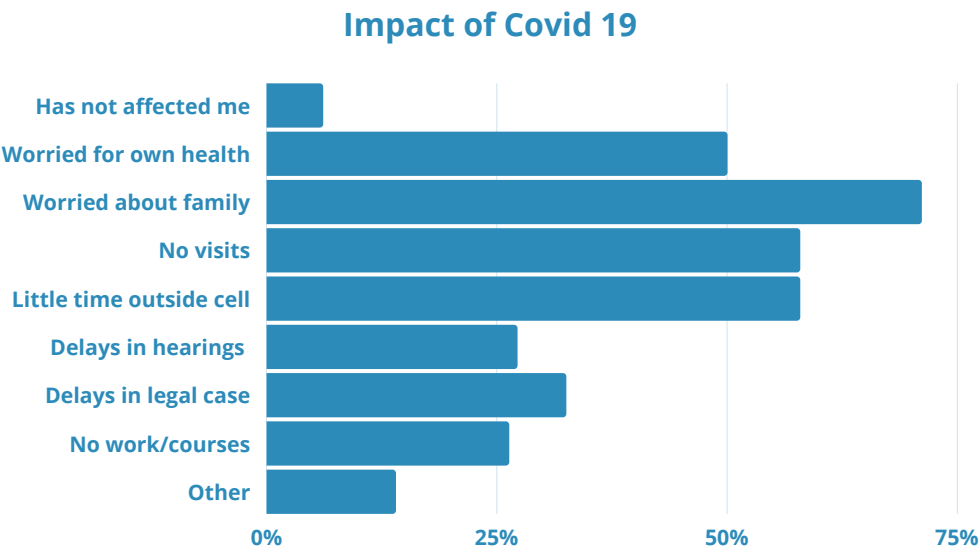
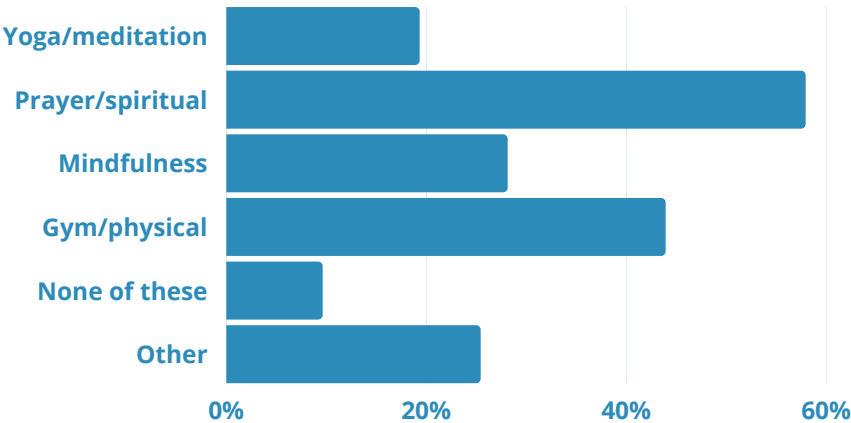


Figure 2: Impact of Covid 19

1.3 What Helps with Stress and Anxiety

When asked what they find helpful if feeling stressed or anxious, the majority of respondents (almost 60%) said prayer or reading spiritual materials. This shows the importance of religious faith to people in prison. Other prisoners engaged in physical exercise and attended the prison gym. Yoga and mindfulness were also seen as helpful by respondents. The ‘Other’ category included reading, watching TV, listening to music, DVDs and doing puzzles/in-cell activities. ICPO currently provides resources to clients in each of these areas.

What is helpful if stressed/anxious



"I love the in-cell resource pack and wonderful to hear an Irish voice on the meditation CD. I listen to it every day sometimes twice. I enjoyed the pocket history of Ireland and will re-read it. I do the word search puzzle everyday."

Figure 3: What is helpful if stressed/anxious

2. Resettlement

Over a quarter of respondents indicated that they intended to return to Ireland on completion of their sentence. A further 22% of those who responded indicated that they intended to remain in the sentencing country. However 42% did not have any plans after prison. This is unsurprising for a number of reasons. The majority of survey respondents were over 45 (55%) with 13% of these being over 65. Many of these prisoners especially in the older age group will have been out of Ireland for a considerable period of time and may have few if any family members living here now, in particular immediate family members. Returning to resettle in Ireland in such circumstances can be a daunting prospect.

Another factor which contributes to the lack of post-release plans is that foreign national prisoners in many countries are prevented from engaging in preparation for release programmes. In some countries, the rehabilitation of foreign national prisoners is neglected, especially if the person will be deported after release. In addition, prisons in some countries do not provide training, education or work opportunities to foreign national prisoners.

Intentions after Sentence

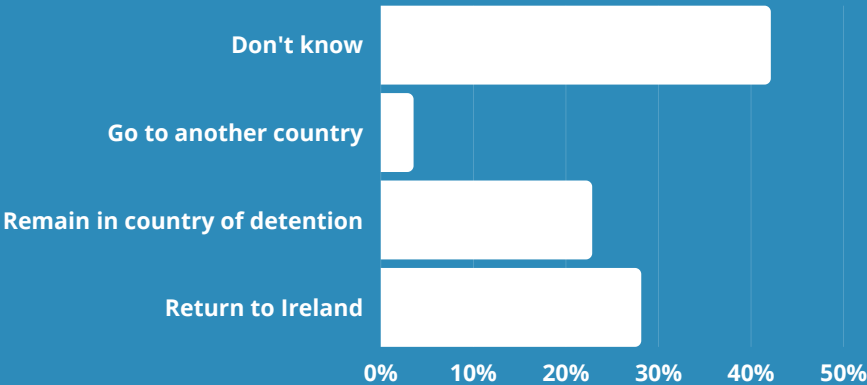


Figure 4: Intentions after sentence



3. The Services and Supports you Receive from ICPO

The importance of ICPO and our work to prisoners throughout the world has been clearly shown in this survey. Prison is often a lonely, isolating and stressful experience and ICPO’s support is vital to many respondents. As one respondent noted "In my darkest hour my caseworker was there for me." Other respondents added that the ICPO "helps me overcome my loneliness better. Feeling someone cares for me and knowing that you are there helps very much."

3.1 Services Received

The vast majority of respondents receive the newsletters and cards from ICPO. Over 40% of prisoners received advice and/or information from ICPO. It is clear that ICPO is seen by prisoners as a source of accurate and up-to-date information and a trusted source of advice. Over one third of respondents received a hardship grant from the ICPO. Such grants are invaluable for prisoners particularly during the pandemic, enabling them to remain in contact with loved ones on the outside and in some cases to buy basic necessities as well as to engage in hobbies such as art and crafts. 40% of respondents also received in-cell activities or books and magazines from ICPO in the last year.

There was a significant reduction in the number of visits carried out by ICPO caseworkers last year due to pandemic restrictions. In 2019, approximately 1,200 Irish prisoners received a visit from an ICPO caseworker. Prison visits provides the best way of ascertaining the mental and physical health needs of prisoners and helps to alleviate feelings of isolation for prisoners who are far from home.

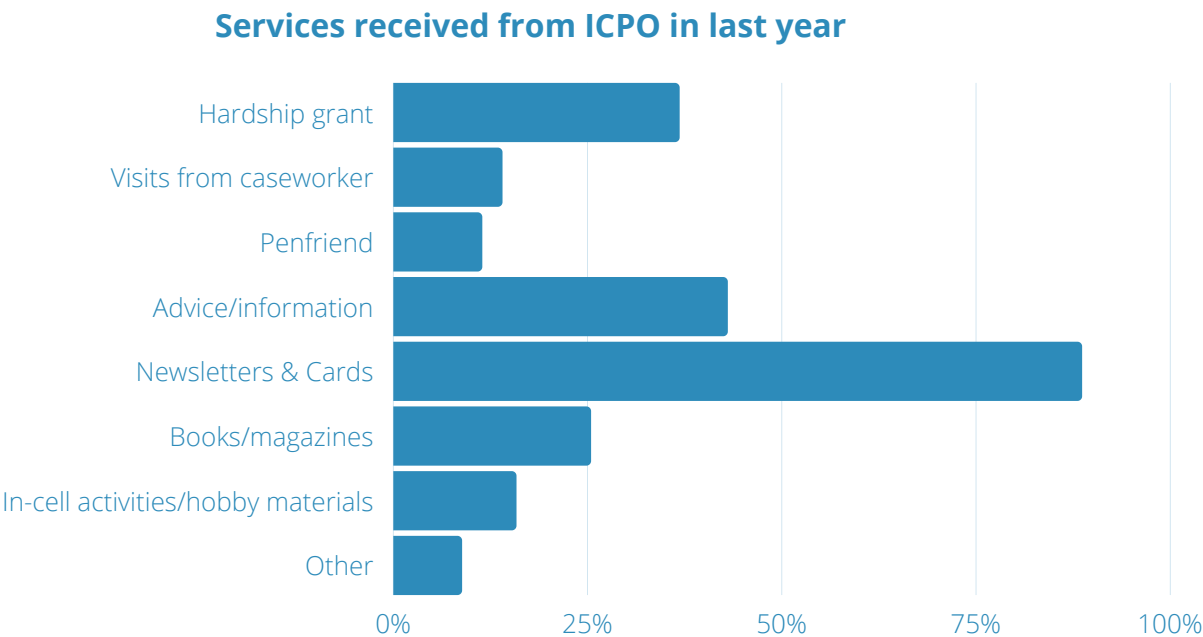


Figure 5: Services received from ICPO in last year

3.2 Frequency and Benefits of Contact with ICPO

The majority of respondents were in regular contact with ICPO with 23% in contact at least monthly and a further almost 50% being in contact with ICPO at least a few times a year. ICPO responded to prisoners’ increased isolation during Covid 19 by maintaining regular contact especially by email and also supporting prisoners with small grants for phone calls.

How often do you contact ICPO

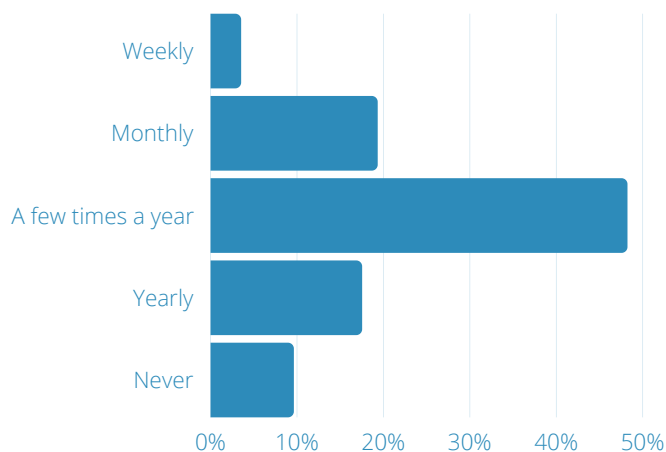


Figure 6: Contact with ICPO



One of many mail outs from ICPO each year ready for collection

The ICPO is a trusted source of advice and information for many Irish people in prison and prisoners also depend on the ICPO to advocate for them in relation to a range of issues. A survey respondent noted "To date their help/advice on getting an Irish passport has been very helpful, also working towards getting me back to Ireland and ensuring I have the support I need." Hardship grants to assist with calls home is important to many prisoners. "When my [relative] died, I received £20 which helped me speak to my family on the phone which really helped at my lowest point." For some prisoners, contact with ICPO reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation. "A friendly letter goes further than you will know." Due to the pandemic, the ICPO was unable to carry out prison visits which is a major part of our work and which many prisoners told us they were looking forward to "More visits from caseworker when Covid 19 hopefully ends."

Survey respondents told us that they benefited from engagement with ICPO in a wide range of ways from receiving Christmas and St Patrick's Day Cards and newsletters to phone credit and hardship grants. The largest category responded that they benefitted from ICPO 'being there' for them. One prisoner said he benefited from "The fact that they are there to help you. I've known [Caseworker] since I've been in prison." Another respondent said that he benefitted from his engagement with ICPO by "Knowing that there is always someone there to help you and always someone there to talk to." As has been mentioned above, many respondents said that they experienced loneliness and isolation in prison and some may have little contact with the outside world, therefore as one respondent put it "It is uplifting to know that there are people who care about prisoners."

Conclusions

Lifting of Covid 19 restrictions

Restrictions imposed in prisons during the pandemic led to considerable hardship for prisoners. Whilst some restrictions may remain necessary on a country by country or prison by prison basis, access to physical, educational and certain social activities should be provided to the greatest extent possible within national health guidelines. Covid-related restrictions should be lifted as soon as it is safe to do so. They should not be permitted to become the 'new normal'. For example, access to video calls should continue to be permitted when restrictions are lifted but should not be used as a replacement for physical visits from family and friends.

Access to mental and physical health care

It is well understood that prison impacts negatively on the mental and physical health of prisoners and this was confirmed by the findings of our survey. The negative impacts on prisoners' health were exacerbated during the pandemic as many prisoners were kept in almost constant lockdown, with no visits and few if any activities including access to the gym and other forms of exercise.

Prison authorities must ensure that appropriate supports are in place for prisoners who are experiencing mental health difficulties and be aware that the impact of Covid 19 on mental health may be long term. The lack of adequate mental and physical healthcare in prisons in some parts of the world highlights the importance of prisoners having an advocate whether it is family, ICPO or an Irish Consular official.

In addition to the recommendation above, prisoners' engagement with family and friends through video calls, emails and phone calls as well as visits (when safe to do so) should be facilitated to the greatest extent possible.

Release and resettlement

Our survey has shown that a significant number of Irish people in prison do not have plans for their release. This underlines the importance of dedicated resettlement services for this group of prisoners who may not be able to access offender behaviour, education or vocational skills courses, or preparation for release programmes when in prison overseas. Some former prisoners will no longer have family members or networks in Ireland and may not have lived here for many years. Appropriate support is vital to ensure successful resettlement and reintegration into society. Whilst ICPO provides resettlement support to returning former prisoners (something that took on added import during the pandemic), and refers them to third party organisations in the sector also, additional resources in this area would be beneficial.

Repatriation

A well-resourced, transparent, fair and expeditious repatriation system should be put in place as a matter of urgency. This will ensure that those prisoners who wish to do so can, if eligible, return to Ireland to serve the remainder of their sentence in Ireland close to their families and be supported in preparing for release. While long awaited draft legislation has now been published in relation to prisoners in EU states, it will be insufficient without further amendments to existing and proposed legislation and adequate resources to process applications efficiently.

ICPO support

ICPO has supported Irish people in prison overseas and their families for over 35 years. The findings of this survey validate our work in supporting prisoners and emphasises the need for ICPO's services. The findings of this survey will inform our work going forward and enable us to respond more effectively to the needs of our clients.