

PROBATION WORKS

SENTENCER NEWSLETTER

Issue 08 / October 2020



Welcome from the Chief Executive Cheryl Lamont

W elcome to Issue 8 of Probation Works, our Sentencers Newsletter.

The last six months have been challenging and throughout this pandemic our aim has been to continue to deliver our essential services while keeping staff, service users, partners and the wider public safe.

Like everyone else, probation have had to be innovative and adaptable to ensure that we continue to deliver services. We have developed a recovery plan in line with other justice organisations. All of our offices are fully operational, and we have prioritised seeing higher risk service users on a face to face basis, while contact with others is continuing using WhatsApp and telephone. Community Service has resumed and we are completing assessments and reports for Sentencers and Parole Commissioners.

During lockdown, we set in a range of additional supports for service users who suffer from poor mental health and addiction problems. Our revised operational guidance reinforced the fact that particular cognisance should be given to domestic abuse cases and cases where individuals may be vulnerable due to problems with addictions or poor mental health. A new screening tool was introduced to assess high risk cases where domestic abuse was a concern, but also cases where child protection or mental health and addiction problems may have been an issue.

At this challenging time, we are committed to developing our services further to help reduce reoffending. On page 3, you can also read about how we are developing Community Service to assist people to find employment. You can also read about how probation has been adapting the Substance Misuse Court programme to support those with addiction problems to break the cycle.

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Enhanced Combination Orders also continue to be an important community sentence that challenges and supports people who have offended to turn their lives around. You can read about updates on both these projects on page 2.

I hope you find the information in this newsletter useful and informative and if you would like any further information or indeed to visit a probation project, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Cheryl Lamont CBE
Chief Executive

"I would like to congratulate PBNI on their response to the Covid 19 pandemic and the undoubted challenges it has sent their way. The service they have continued to provide to the Judiciary in the form of Magistrate Courts Reports and the continued support they offer to defendants in terms of Probation Orders and Community Service Orders is invaluable" - District Judge Broderick (Antrim and Ballymena Courts).

COVID-19 RECOVERY UNDERWAY

All Probation Offices are open for business throughout Northern Ireland and staff are carrying out assessments and supervision with individuals to change lives for safer communities.

In March 2020, PBNI responded to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented Government restrictions by significantly adjusting our operational practice and working arrangements. Throughout this period we continued to deliver services through a blended approach of staff working in operational hubs and working remotely.

In response to the easing of restrictions our Recovery Plan became live on 20th July. We have now re-opened all 21 probation offices. Whilst it is a specific challenge, Community Service is also operational again and we continue to seek out safe and purposeful Community Service placements and opportunities.

Probation staff are available to complete Pre Sentence Reports and Magistrates' Court Reports and all reports will be completed in line with normal timescales. We have seen a steady increase in requests for reports to be completed since the start of July.

While the pandemic and subsequent restrictions have had an impact on PBNI caseload in the first quarter of this year, in particular in relation to the numbers of new Orders being made, we look forward to our caseload beginning to increase again to more normal levels.

As the public health situation continues to develop, PBNI will respond quickly and appropriately to safeguard our staff, service users, partners and wider society.

Stephen Hamilton

Assistant Director for Greater Belfast

ENHANCED COMBINATION ORDERS

As Court business returns Sentencers sitting in the following Courts (Magistrates, Crown and County level) will be aware that Enhanced Combination Orders (ECOs) are available as a challenging and effective alternative to custodial sentences of 12 months or less:

- Ards (including Ards and Downpatrick) and Armagh and South Down (Armagh, Banbridge, Newry)
- Londonderry (including Limavady, L'Derry and Strabane)

An ECO includes strict supervision by Probation staff, a restorative approach including a Community Service element, referral where appropriate to Barnardo's for parenting/family work and work with a PBNI psychologist. In the event that someone under supervision carries out another offence of a more serious nature, or similar to that which the ECO was imposed for, the Order will be returned to Court for review.

Over the next 12 months PBNI hope to expand the project to a third area (Coleraine, Ballymena and Antrim), dependent on public health and budgetary considerations.

VICTIM REGISTRATION INCREASING

During the summer months there has been a month on month increase in the number of victims registered with PBNI VIS when compared to 2019 (this follows an overall increase of 13% registrations April 2018 – March 2019 and 8% April 2019 – March 2020).

This is very positive and we hope this trend continues.

2019	June	15	2020	June	16	↑ 7%
2019	July	14	2020	July	28	↑ 100%
2019	August	11	2020	August	16	↑ 45%

SERVICE USER QUOTES

“The regular contact was a good point of contact when feeling isolated – someone who understands me. Good knowing there is someone I can trust and tell how I am feeling. Someone who took action when I was at my lowest stage in my life and got me the help I needed.”

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“I had just come out of prison and appreciated all the phone calls and appointments – I would not have been able to cope without the telephone support from my Probation Officer and Probation Service Officer.”

SUBSTANCE MISUSE COURT

The Substance Misuse Court continues to operate at Laganside Court and has been in its second pilot phase since June 2019.

The initial outcomes of the phase 1 evaluation were positive and the pilot is considered to be a very good foundation to build upon. Some of the feedback received from evaluation participants has been implemented in Phase 2 of the pilot which is running from June 2019 until December 2020, extending the programme from 12 to 18 months to allow defendants with complex needs to receive the comprehensive treatment they need. Service users continue to experience the benefits of working in a

way which addresses the underlying reasons for offending as to minimise future contact with the Criminal Justice System.

From March 2020, the Substance Misuse Court experienced a brief operational pause in light of COVID -19. Both Court appearances and drug testing were postponed in light of the lockdown. The SMC team consisting of Probation Officers, Counsellors, Psychology and Social Support responded collectively to ensure that service users received additional support via creative and innovative means, to afford them a level of stability during this difficult period. The Presiding District Judge continued to

consider the progress of all service users on the programme throughout this period.

Since August 2020, court hearings, face to face contact and drug testing with service users has been resumed. Further referrals and assessment of new service users considered for the programme have also recommenced. New and existing service users are able to avail of the assistance from partnership organisations such as Drug Outreach Teams, Substitute Prescribing Teams, Community Addiction Teams as well as access medical detox/ rehabilitation and receive assistance from homeless support.

ENHANCING COMMUNITY SERVICE TO HELP PEOPLE FIND EMPLOYMENT

There is a large body of research suggesting employment can reduce the likelihood of re-offending, however people who have offended face significant barriers to finding and staying in work.

In order to help people subject to community service overcome the challenges of finding employment, Probation is exploring ways of enhancing that Order to provide formal skills to individuals. For example, this could include courses in construction skills, courses to support work in catering, or other skills focused courses, taking up no more than 20% of the sentenced hours. The remainder of the sentence will be carried out in the normal way, namely unpaid work in community-based placements or projects. It will, of course, be subject to strict governance, and will be provided through partner organisations who deliver accredited employability programmes.

We have written to the Lord Chief Justice and the Presiding District Judge, and our Area Managers have been in touch with Sentencers to discuss this and other relevant issues over recent weeks.

COMMUNITY SERVICE PRAISED BY BELFAST SCHOOL

I would just like to express our gratitude for the outstanding job your service has provided to our school under the supervision of Paul Best and Billy Stewart. Both Paul and Billy were amazing: professional, creative, diligent, respectful, hardworking and both encouraged those under their supervision to adopt the same approach when working on our premises.

The guys worked so hard and the difference to our school grounds is phenomenal. Some of those on community service said they enjoyed working in the school as they knew the children would benefit and felt they were really making a difference and giving back to the community.

Both Paul and Billy were great motivators for those under their supervision and ensured all jobs were carried out to the highest standard. We are so pleased and appreciative. We will definitely be in contact soon as there are so many projects ongoing in school that we always seek assistance with.

Kind Regards

Mrs Ríoghach Hall
Principal, St Peter's Nursery School, Belfast

“ The contact has been good. For someone struggling with mental health or other issues they are reassuring and helpful. It has also been good to be reminded how well you have been doing, particularly in the difficult times through lockdown. ”

“ It was good that safety plans were put in place when I felt low. I know what to do if I am in crisis out of hours or during work time. ”

OPERATIONAL SENIOR TEAM



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