

PROBATION WORKS

SENTENCER NEWSLETTER

Issue 09 / July 2021



Welcome from the Interim Chief Executive

Welcome to Issue 9 of Probation Works, our Sentencers Newsletter.

Since the last edition of Sentencers Newsletter, Cheryl Lamont CBE has retired from her position as Chief Executive of PBNI. We wish Cheryl the very best in her retirement and future endeavours.

Over the last 18 months all public services have been challenged to find new ways of working and delivering services due to the Pandemic. Probation is no different. We have a phased Recovery Plan in place, and we are currently working through the phases of that plan.

All PBNI offices are open and fully operational. Probation officers are seeing higher risk service users face to face and working with others through a blend of face to face meetings and telephone or Whatsapp conversations. Community Service continues to be operational and we are delivering small group remote delivery of Offending Behaviour Programmes and Interventions, which includes both sex offender and domestic abuse programmes.

Our work within Courts is a priority for all staff. From the outset of the pandemic, PBNI continued to prepare all court reports as required, using telephone/video call facilities, and we continue to work closely with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Courts Service to ensure electronic submission of reports.

In this edition of the Sentencer Newsletter, we feature an interview with Presiding District Judge Fiona Bagnall. We had the opportunity to speak with Judge Bagnall just as she embarks on a new challenge as County Court Judge after a 15-year tenure as the senior magistrate. Judge Bagnall highlights the contribution of PBNI within Courts, and discusses the success of the Substance Misuse Court.

You can read an update on the PBNI Aspire project on page 3. Aspire is working with marginalised young men who are at risk of becoming involved or further involved in criminality. It aims to prevent and reduce offending and enable young men to develop their full capacity. You will see some of the results and feedback from the young men in this edition.

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There is also information on PBNI's development of restorative practices, and we set out how we build victim awareness into the pre-sentence process and are responsive to victim requests.

One of the important elements of PBNI work continues to be Community Service. On page 4 you will be able to see how we have employed technology during the pandemic to maintain social distancing amongst work squads in the community, ensuring that we continue to deliver unpaid reparation and keep people safe.

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

Hugh Hamill
Interim Chief Executive

PROBATION STAFF ARE UNSUNG HEROES SAYS JUDGE BAGNALL



Gail McGreevy, Head of Communications, took some time to talk to Judge Fiona Bagnall for the Sentencers Newsletter before Judge Bagnall took up her new role as County Court Judge.

Judge Fiona Bagnall has worked in Court 10 for over a decade and in that period has also presided over the innovative Substance Misuse Court, part of the Problem Solving Justice approach introduced to Northern Ireland. Having worked closely with Probation staff during this period, PBNI Sentencers Newsletter took the opportunity to speak to Judge Bagnall before she takes up a new post as County Court Judge.

As Presiding District Judge, you had many individuals come before your court over the years. Are there cases or individuals that stand out for you and how do you approach the people that came before you?

I think Court 10 has some of the most diverse types of people coming before it. In many ways it can be quite a dark place, nobody comes to court because they've done well. They're in court because they have done something wrong. Their lives have taken a very wrong turn. I have had individuals who have come up before me time after time. They could have records of over 100 offences and you may be the most consistent person they have had in their lives. I have had some characters come before me including someone who once proposed marriage, so yes a real variety of individuals!

You have worked closely with PBNI over many years; what impact do you think Probation staff make to the lives of people within the Justice System?

I think that the Probation staff are the unsung heroes of the criminal justice system.

They work so hard with difficult clients who give very little appreciation or acknowledgement of what is given to them. Yet the staff keep going and put the work in, frequently in very difficult circumstances. Probation are working with people with mental health problems, addiction problems and personality difficulties. Most of the people who end up on Probation, have had something go drastically wrong in their lives; and Probation staff work with them with positivity, politeness and optimism. As Judges, we could not do our jobs if we did not have the Probation staff behind us and I pay tribute to the Probation service for the work they do.

The Substance Misuse Court is one of the recent innovative developments under Problem Solving Justice. How does the SMC make a difference to people with drug and alcohol problems and tell me about your experience of presiding over such an innovative project. What advice would you give to another judge considering getting involved in PSC's?

First of all, Problem Solving Courts may not work for everybody. It may not 'fix' everyone who comes through the doors.

But for those for whom it is a success and that is a significant proportion of people, it is life changing.

For example, there was one man who participated in the Substance Misuse Court. He was an older man who was spending around £1000 a week on cocaine and by the time he was finished the programme he was clean, had a job and had contact with his children. That is a remarkable turnaround. We have had several cases like that – of that level of change in lives.

Even for those people who haven't received a certificate at the end of the programme it has still been a very valuable service to them because it has given them the tools to manage an awful lot better and in many cases not go on to reoffend.

Would you like to see problem solving courts develop further in NI? How do you think this could develop over the years?

I certainly think it has the potential to be developed further. I think it needs to be done carefully. My personal opinion is that it probably needs to be in other urban centres because of the intensity of the work and the specialist services that you need available. So bigger urban areas would be the next logical steps to rolling it out.

As you now take up your new position, what are you most looking forward to in your future role?

I'm most looking forward to the new challenge which is both exciting and daunting in equal measure. I can honestly say that I have enjoyed every single day that I sat in Court 10. I've enjoyed the interaction with people, the profession, the work and the challenges of being President. But I am now looking forward to mastering a completely new environment in my new role.

SERVICE USERS WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH THE SUBSTANCE MISUSE COURT

“ I have been in the worst places imaginable because of drinking cider. My family didn't want to know me and I ended up near dead after I moved into hostels. Until I looked at the real reasons I drank I would never have been able to come off it.

“ After having completed the Substance Misuse Court, I now have an insight into the triggers that lead to me drinking, so I can continue to avoid these situations. I know there is continued help and support available.

SERVICE USERS WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH THE ASPIRE PROJECT

“Aspire staff were very helpful and believed in me, I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for them.”

“Aspire has been extremely helpful to me. I've accepted the help offered by Aspire and taken it all on board.”

“Aspire was great for me. The weekly appointments and support I got, helped me get through my licence. I even managed to get off cannabis which I thought I couldn't do.”

ASPIRE - “I WOULDN'T BE ALIVE IF IT WASN'T FOR THEM.”

Probation set up the Aspire Young Men's Project in September 2017 in response to recommendations in The Fresh Start Agreement of November 2015.

The Aspire project provides an intensive wraparound support service, working with marginalized young men presenting with significant risk, a history of substance misuse, experienced trauma and who are under threat. These young men frequently live chaotic lives. They have trouble accessing suitable accommodation and mental health services due to dual diagnosis. This prevents them achieving any stability within their local communities.

Engagement with service users involves one to one work in goal setting, victim awareness, anger management, and coping skills. This approach has produced positive outcomes evidenced through entry and exit questionnaires and the use of the Justice Outcomes Star. The Justice Outcome Star is an evidence based assessment tool assessing areas such as accommodation, living skills and self-care, mental health and wellbeing, relationships, parenting and caring, drugs and alcohol, positive use of time, and managing strong feelings.

A “Back On Track” programme is also currently being piloted to assist young men to explore issues of understanding self, masculinity, relationships, being solution focused, drugs/alcohol, goal setting and health. This pilot will be evaluated after the completion of the first programme.

During 2020-2021, 459 people have been referred to the Aspire project and the grand total of referrals so far is 864. Feedback from service users has indicated that Aspire is having a positive impact and is helping them develop insight into the triggers to their involvement in offending.



59%

REPORT MAKING POSITIVE PROGRESS IN DEALING WITH ALCOHOL/ DRUG PROBLEMS AND IMPROVING THEIR SELF-CONFIDENCE.



64%

REPORT MAKING POSITIVE PROGRESS WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.



ALL WHO HAVE COMPLETED ASPIRE WERE SATISFIED WITH THE SUPPORT THEY RECEIVED.

PBNI RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: A FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE

Restorative Justice seeks to repair the damage to social values and relationships caused by crime and whilst there are a number of definitions of Restorative Justice which are used to describe this approach, the primary aim is victim-focused and to repair harm wherever this has occurred.

PBNI has a Restorative Interventions Strategy in place to ensure that victim needs and restorative principles are further integrated as components of PBNI's practice with adults who offend. Work arising from this Strategy has focused on restorative training for PBNI staff, and embedding restorative interventions within everyday practice, including case

management supervision, custody and programmes. As part of this work PBNI Psychology and Programmes Teams designed the Victim Awareness intervention which all staff are now trained in.

PBNI has developed a strong practice base for the delivery of Restorative Practices and our staff have delivered restorative interventions in response to direct victim requests, particularly in more serious cases including those resulting in a death or serious violence. In line with victim choice, the majority of these cases have resulted in an indirect restorative intervention, however, a number have included a victim offender meeting.

In tandem with the work being taken forward by DOJ to establish an Adult Restorative Justice Strategy, PBNI have refreshed and developed our Framework for Practice to enable restorative practices to be undertaken at all stages of PBNI involvement. At the Pre-sentence stage it will involve greater exploration with the service user to consider the harm caused by their offence and the impact on the victim. When undertaking Probation supervision, Probation Officers will continue to place victims at the heart of their practice with those who have offended. A PBNI practice forum will assist in developing this work.

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SOCIAL DISTANCING DEVICE HELPS US DELIVER COMMUNITY SERVICE

PBNI has been continuing to deliver services throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic. One of the most important elements of our work is supervising community service orders. People subject to these orders have an opportunity to give back to their local communities by carrying out unpaid work.

Niall McEvoy, Temporary Assistant Director for Rural, said:

“Throughout the last year community service squads have continued to operate in local communities. To help keep people safe, squads have been operating outdoors only and have been involved in environmental work and graffiti removal. Maintaining safe social distancing in squads is vital. For that reason PBNI has acquired a number of ‘safe distancing assistants’.



These are small electronic devices worn on a lanyard or clipped to clothing which help people keep a safe distance from each other.

When another wearer is too close, the devices emit a short audible or vibrating alert, advising both parties to increase their distancing.

It has been so important for us to be able to continue to supervise community service throughout the pandemic.”



PBNI Probation Board
for Northern Ireland