

PBNI Response to VSNI consultation strategy 2020-2024

Introduction

The aim of PBNI is to ‘change lives for safer communities’. We are involved at all stages of the criminal justice process. We work in Courts providing pre-sentence reports to assist Judges to make decisions. We work in communities supervising sentences that must be served in the community. We work in prisons, preparing prisoners for release subject to licences. We also works directly with victims of crime.

Indeed everything Probation does is about preventing victims of crime. We work directly and indirectly with victims of crime. In supervising those who have offended, we challenge them to look at the impact their crime has had. Pre-sentence reports and reports for the Parole Commissioners address the impact of the crime on the victims and the wider circles of victimisation. Many of our programmes and interventions challenge offending behaviour, often for the first time, confronting the individual who has offended with the impact of the harm that has been caused. Through schemes like community service, victims can have a say in what type of work an individual completes as part of their court order, and we have developed a partnership with Victim Support Northern Ireland (VSNI) in relation to delivering a problem-solving approach to justice. Furthermore, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) has developed service user involvement forums that give victims a further voice.

We believe that the victims’ perspective is central to our work with people who have offended.

Victim Information Scheme

Our statutory victim information scheme, which was established under the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, provides information to victims about what it means when someone is sentenced to an order or licence, supervised by PBNI.

The PBNI Victim Information Scheme provides opportunity for the victim to:

- Participate in the preparation of a Victim Report for the Parole Commissioners where the offender is in prison.
- receive information about the specific sentence made in Court and general information about PBNI’s supervision of offenders.

- discuss concerns, which may inform the supervision of the offender.
- Individuals can choose to receive information in writing, by phone or in a face-to-face meeting with a Victim Liaison Officer (VLO)
- Information can be provided, if appropriate, about other organisations who may be able to offer specific support to the victim.
- be involved in direct or indirect restorative contact with the offender if this would help address issues resulting from the offence.

As well as providing that information, we listen to victims' concerns. That informs our work with service users. To date the Victim Information scheme has worked with approximately 2232 victims. Of these registered victims, 78% were victims of sexual or other violence or families who have suffered a bereavement. Approximately 66% of those who register, knew the person who committed the crime in their case.

We deliver the Victim Information Scheme through the Victims Unit, based in our PBNI Lisburn Office, which is co-located and managed by PBNI on behalf of the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the Department of Justice. Of those who received a service from the Victim Information Service and completed an evaluation, 96% indicated they were satisfied with the service.

Since 2007 PBNI staff have, in response to victim requests, facilitated approximately 89 restorative interventions, including cases of death by dangerous driving, manslaughter, murder, attempted murder, rape, hijacking, robbery, intimidation and grievous bodily harm. We are keen to develop our restorative work and believe that there are opportunities to have restorative work enhanced through problem solving justice.

Restorative work through Problem Solving justice

Problem-solving justice is a new approach in Northern Ireland aimed at tackling the root causes of offending behaviour and reducing harmful behaviour within families and the community. Within Northern Ireland, the Department of Justice leads on problem solving justice. Five problem-solving pilots are currently operating and PBNI leads on the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) and is centrally involved in the Substance Misuse Court and Domestic Abuse programmes.

Restorative work is undertaken through partnerships with organisations such as Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) and Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) as well as by Probation Officers who have completed university based training in restorative practice.

While supporting participants, CRJI applies restorative practice, values and processes and assisted participants to make good in the community. NIA helped participants develop a restorative plan and provided victim awareness. A key focus of their work is to help to integrate participants in positive ways into community life through volunteering and training.

An additional feature, developed to increase victim input in the ECO, has been designed in conjunction with Victim Support NI. PBNI always recognise the importance and value of the views of victims at the earliest stage of the process, but has no legislative authority to contact victims of offences prior to the individual who has offended being sentenced at court. Therefore, in partnership with Victim Support NI, PBNI is able to gain the views of victims by Probation Officers making referrals to Victim Support NI at the pre-sentence stage in cases where an ECO is being recommended as a sentence (where there is an identifiable victim). Victims are contacted by Victim Support NI, with which in many cases, they already have a working relationship. The content of the order is explained and their views on a potential sentence are sought.

Furthermore, victims are asked for their input regarding the type of community service the person who has offended should complete and if they would be interested in working restoratively with them. In the 2017 evaluation of ECOs, all but one of the victims contacted supported an ECO as a sentencing option and said they would be willing to work restoratively with their offender.

The establishment of PBNI victims' user groups

The establishment of a Service User Forum that incorporates the perspectives of victims as well as those who have offended is further evidence of PBNI's commitment to engaging more effectively with victims. The benefits of service user involvement are well documented, and include promoting social inclusion and ensuring that services better meet the needs of those who use them. PBNI launched the Service User Strategy in 2017, which recognises that service user involvement can play. All those registered with PBNI's VIS are also invited to join a victim service

user group. The service user groups enable victims of crime to have a say in how services are delivered. PBNI view the victims' voices as critical and we want victims to be able to tell us how we can continue to improve our services. We know that being listened to and contributing to a more effective system can be valuable to the rehabilitation process and, for victims, can give back an element of control.

PBNI Corporate Plan 2020-23

PBNI has drafted its Corporate Plan for 2020–2023. Under strategic Priority 1 PBNI commits to 'developing restorative practices with adults who have offended' and prioritising victims. This is work that we will carry out in partnership with the accredited restorative schemes and Victims Support NI. We look forward to this continued partnership work over the life span of our Corporate Plan.

Response to specific questions in consultation

- 1. From your understanding of the needs of victims and witnesses and from your own professional opinion are there any gaps in service that we should be trying to address and are you aware of any external developments that would impact our strategy?**

Victim's partners and their children are also impacted by crime. VSNI could have a role in supporting victims, partners and children separately to address their needs. Offering a more holistic approach to families is likely to have a greater positive impact on recovery and assist victims and their family to move on from the offence.

- 2 Is there anything that we are doing or proposing to do that you think we should reconsider?**

Yes over the next four years, VSNI plan to enhance the client support model to improve well-being and recovery outcomes, the development of a distance support model to increase accessibility and respond to the evolving needs should aid victims greatly. The plan

covers a range of areas for consideration, IT improvements and having a voice for regional strategy development, all of which we hope will assist the needs of victims of crime.

3 Do you see any opportunities for partnership working with VSNI?

PBNI are committed to our effective partnership work with VSNI and indeed strengthen it as we move forward. As noted above, PBNI have an important partnership with VSNI in respect of ECO's and continue to review and develop our working practice.

PBNI are also committed to working with VSNI and others in a public facing communications drive, to increase our number of registrations to the Victim Information Scheme. The Victim Information Scheme is an 'opt in' scheme in that victims have to register before they can be provided with any information. The PSNI sends a copy of our leaflet to every victim in cases where we are involved in the supervision of a sentence. We are committed to increasing these registrations, and would therefore wish to work with VSNI and others to further promote the scheme and increase registrations.