

Submitted November 2024

## Draft Programme for Government Response

### Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most

#### Introduction

The draft Programme for Government (PfG) [Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most \(northernireland.gov.uk\)](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk) sets out the Executive's priorities and commitments. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement requires agreement by the Executive of a PfG and Budget, and Assembly approval on a cross-community basis. Once approved, all Ministers are obligated to deliver the PfG's contents. Northern Ireland has not had a PfG since 2015. Following the return of the Assembly and Executive in February 2024, a draft PfG was published for consultation. The consultation was launched in September 2024 and will close on 4 November 2024.

The programme's priorities and commitments are divided into 3 main sections:

- (1) Doing What Matters Most** which focuses on the immediate priorities which the Executive will work to;
- (2) Building New Foundations** commits to upgrading infrastructure and improving services; and
- (3) Shaping a Better Tomorrow** which focuses on three main missions People, Planet, and Prosperity, all rooted in a commitment to Peace.

Doing What Matters Most sets out nine immediate priorities for the duration of this mandate and is the main area for consideration of response. The nine priorities include:

- Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy
- Deliver more affordable childcare
- Cut health waiting times
- Ending violence against women and girls
- Better support for children and young people with special educational needs
- Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing
- Safer communities
- Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment
- Reform and transformation of the public services.

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## **PBNI Response**

PBNI has provided detailed feedback in respect of seven of the nine priorities that are relevant to our work.

### **1. Grow a globally competitive and sustainable economy**

**How much do you agree that the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy' should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority 'Grow a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy'. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

## **Comments**

We agree that to create an economy that works for everyone, there is a need to address productivity, good jobs, decarbonisation, and regional balance. We would however state that there is very little mention within the plan about eradicating poverty. Many of those who offend are not in employment, have inadequate skills and training and are living in poverty. Eradicating poverty is critical in order to reduce offending. The creation of good jobs is one way of eradicating poverty, and it is important that this link is made within the plan.

Many businesses currently face a skill shortage. We note the reference to a new *Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund* and the establishment of a new *Skills Fund* to assist sectors struggling to recruit into vital roles. There is an opportunity for those leaving prison and critically, those subject to community-based sentences who are without employment to be included and supported through these funds. Stable and secure employment can reduce the likelihood of an individual committing a further offence and receiving a custodial sentence. Supporting those who have offended into employment can assist employers to resolve skills shortages, as well as helping those who have offended to desist from offending and get their lives back on track thereby reducing reoffending and preventing future victims of crime.

Within this priority we would also want to note that there is currently a shortage of social workers within Northern Ireland. As all probation officers must be social work qualified, we believe there is an opportunity under the Apprenticeship Fund to develop trainee social workers as a means of addressing the current gap in provision. This is congruent with the work of the Social Work Workforce Implementation Board.

Finally, we agree with the introduction of new Employment Rights Legislation and a Good Work Charter. We would advocate for the introduction of a payment for victims and survivors of domestic abuse who need to avail of 'safe leave' from work.

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## **2. Deliver More Affordable Childcare**

**How much do you agree that the priority Deliver More Affordable Childcare should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority Deliver More Affordable Childcare. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

### **Comments**

We agree that early year's intervention provides the best long-term outcomes for our children, particularly those facing disadvantage, and that this intervention can make a long-term difference to a child's communication skills and their educational and health outcome. Within probation many of those people on supervision have experienced significant childhood adversity including neglect and poor early educational opportunities. Some of those we supervise have poor emotional wellbeing and a lack of coping skills which can be traced back to childhood. We would therefore support the commitment to early years programmes, such as Sure Start which assist both parents and children.

As an organisation whose workforce is made up on over 75% women, we also agree with the measures that are in place to provide support for parents, particularly mothers, to remain in the workforce.

## **3. Cut Health Waiting Times**

**How much do you agree that the priority Cut Health Waiting Times should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority Cut Health Waiting Times. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

### **Comments**

We are extremely concerned about the fact that NI has the longest hospital waiting times in the UK, with people struggling to get the treatment they need. Every service user we work with is first and foremost a citizen who is entitled to receive a good standard of service from the NHS. Our staff see at first hand the impact and consequences of people not being able to access timely assessments, and treatment for both physical and mental health conditions. Indeed, probation are left in the unenviable position of trying to access support and treatment for individuals who cannot get that support they need from the health service, particularly in respect of mental ill health. As an organisation we are providing funding to assist service users access treatment from voluntary and community organisations such as Ascertainment, Start 360 and Addictions NI. These are services they should be able to access from the health service. Probation staff spend considerable time and resources trying to assist service users to get access, for example, to primary health care. The backlogs and pressures on the health system are directly impacting the work of probation and our ability to safely manage people and prevent them reoffending. When people do not get the assessment and treatment they need, the

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consequences can be dire including leading to further offending. We would ask that this priority contains specific mention of both physical and mental ill health and that it includes an action to reduce waiting times of assessment and treatment of mental ill health conditions.

#### **4. Ending Violence Against Women and Girls**

**How much do you agree that the priority Ending Violence Against Women and Girls should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

#### **Comments**

PBNI welcomes the specific priority in relation to tackling violence against women and girls. In terms of our caseload there is an increase in the number of people on supervision who have committed domestic abuse and there is an increase in the number of victims of domestic abuse registering with our Victim Information Scheme. In particular we acknowledge the commitment in the strategic framework on ending violence against women and girls to supporting general frontline services, so they are effective in identifying violence against women and girls, able to provide responsive services, and make appropriate referrals. It is important to note that like police, probation is a frontline service that should be included within this area of work. We welcome that the statement that as well as ensuring that the needs of victims and survivors are effectively addressed, it is important to focus on the perpetrator to ensure that they are held accountable, supported and challenged to change their behaviour including for abuse carried out online and through devices. This is probation's core work, and we are developing and evaluating our programmes to ensure they are effective in tackling domestic abuse. With additional resources probation could enhance this area of work particularly in the field of early intervention.

#### **5. Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing**

**How much do you agree that the priority Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

#### **Comments**

Having a safe, secure and suitable home is one of the basic human needs of all people in our society and is a prerequisite for achieving improved health, economic, educational and community safety outcomes. PBNI is not a direct accommodation provider, but we work closely in partnership with housing and support providers to identify and address the needs of those under our supervision. There is well documented evidence that the greatest risk to public harm caused by re-offending is the lack of suitable permanent accommodation from which individuals can be supported to address and change their behaviour. One of the biggest challenges PBNI

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staff face, is the challenge of securing such stable accommodation for the people we supervise who have been released from prison or who are serving a community sentence.

PBNI welcomes that the Provision of Social and Affordable Housing has been determined as a key area of Priority. We welcome the Actions included in the PfG to increase the supply of homes across all tenures and particularly in social housing. We welcome the proposed 'focus on preventing homelessness, making it brief, rare and non-recurrent by working collaboratively, prioritising housing solutions for those most in need' and we believe that in this area PBNI could be more involved in determining what those housing solutions should be.

PBNI service users are some of the most vulnerable people in our society and therefore should be considered as those most in need. Any initiatives being considered as potential solutions for the prevention of homelessness, provision of temporary accommodation, provision of secure accommodation and the delivery of housing support services should be informed by the needs of the PBNI service users. It is our view that the needs of these people are not adequately reflected in the systems currently used to assess the need for and the allocation of accommodation (temporary and permanent). Examples of this would include specific needs around the types of support needed, ability to access support programmes: medical interventions; family/community support; employment support and meeting the needs of victims. We note and welcome the initiative 'to embed permanent systems change to prevent homelessness among young people coming out of care' and we believe that this should be extended to include people coming out of prison.

We believe that the provision of temporary and permanent housing and housing support could be much more cost effective than the outcomes currently being achieved as we witness so many housing options failing. This is not only costly in financial terms but can also increase risk of reoffending, risk to community safety and an increase in victims. We would welcome a real fundamental review of the current supply and types of housing, how social housing need is assessed and allocated and how the Supporting People Programme for funding housing support could be better integrated when an individual is allocated a home. Providing the accommodation alone will not ensure a successful tenancy and the provision of the support services required by the individual is essential, otherwise the tenancy is likely to fail.

## **6. Safer Communities**

**How much do you agree that the priority Safer Communities should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority Safer Communities. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

### **Comments**

Probation is a central part of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. We are primarily responsible for the management of people on probation (those serving a community sentence or who have been released from prison subject to licence) and for preparing pre-sentence reports for judges and magistrates in the courts to enable them to choose the most appropriate

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sentence. Probation staff also work in prisons preparing people for release into the community and we provide an information service for victims of crime and restorative interventions where appropriate. The landscape within which Probation operates is constantly evolving and becoming increasingly complex. Our caseload has increased by 7.3% between March 2023 and March 2024. More people are presenting with significant mental health conditions, addictions and trauma. At the same time our resources are finite, and we are dealing with significant workforce pressures.

The criminal justice system is an interconnected set of institutions. Changes in one part has knock-on effects elsewhere. If there is an increase in police numbers, this will have an impact in terms of an increased number of prosecutions, more court disposals - both prison sentences and community sentences. If there is a commitment to increasing police numbers, then there must be a parallel commitment to increase the numbers of probation officers to deal with the increase in workload in terms of supervising more community sentences and working with people leaving prison on licence. We have already outlined publicly that we need investment to ensure we can meet the increasing demands, however increased police numbers will mean there is further pressures on our already stretched workforce.

We therefore welcome the action to ensure adequate resources are available within our justice agencies to respond to and deal with crime. That includes actively seeking to achieve a sufficient number of police officers in line with NDNA commitments, the necessary prosecution resources, and capacity within the courts and Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) to process cases and capacity in prisons to hold people safely and securely and support their rehabilitation. We would however contend that there must be a proportionate increase in probation staff numbers to respond and deal with the outworking of more police numbers.

We also welcome the draft Programme's commitment to the use of community sentencing. We would like to see an increase in the number of community sentences being imposed as they provide better outcomes for many individuals and can provide an effective and cheaper alternative to short term prison sentences. There is local and international evidence that shows community sentences are more effective than short prison sentences at reducing reoffending. Increasing the use of community sentencing will mean there is a need for increased probation staff to supervise and manage those subjects to community sentences. Enhanced community sentencing can however lead to longer term savings across the wider justice system. This is an example of investing to save in the longer term.

We would also welcome further public debate and conversation across government to build awareness and confidence in the use of community sentencing. There remains a significant issue around the public perception of what effective sentencing is. In order to tackle the myths around community sentencing and help build public understanding about the benefits and positive impacts of community sentencing we need to take a co-ordinated approach across the justice system to our engagement and public awareness work.

We very much welcome the commitment to work collectively to develop a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending which includes the development and implementation of initiatives to tackle some of the wider societal issues that contribute to offending behaviour. Many of those we supervise have complex needs and challenging histories, and the causes of offending behaviour are rooted in socio economic disparities including poverty, mental health issues, addiction issues and accommodation problems which

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sit outside the scope of the justice system. Access to sustainable and appropriate housing for those on probation and those leaving custody is a growing issue and this links to the strategic priority to “Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing”. Tackling these wider social issues requires a joined up and collective approach across government to tackle these issues. The NI Audit Office Report ‘Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland’ highlighted the need for increased cross-government working along with a more clearly defined strategic direction to focus on the systemic issues which are making it more difficult to rehabilitate ‘hard-to-reach’ prolific offenders trapped in a cycle of offending and reoffending. It called for a better-defined strategic approach, which takes account of the particular challenges associated with rehabilitating short-term and remand prisoners. PBNI have piloted an alternative to short term prison sentences ‘The Enhanced Combination Order which has been successfully rolled out and evaluated in number of court areas but without further investment it will not be possible to continue with this model.

We also support the draft Programme’s commitment to focus on preventing people from entering the justice system. This however needs initial investment which will result in long term savings for the justice sector and across wider government. Currently due to funding challenges PBNI is in a position to provide only very limited early intervention, most notably the Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP) which provides men alleged to be abusive towards their partners with the opportunity to engage in an intervention programme aimed at developing knowledge and skills in which to develop healthy, non-abusive relationships. This is an area that could be further developed to yield long term savings across government.

#### **7. Reform and Transformation of Public Services**

**How much do you agree that the priority Reform and Transformation of Public Services should be included in the Programme for Government? Strongly Agree**

**The draft Programme for Government has set out actions that we plan to take under the priority Reform and Transformation of Public Service. How much do you agree that these are the right actions to take? Strongly Agree**

#### **Comments**

The justice system is in critical need of investment and reform to ensure the quality and efficiency of services people expect. After years of underinvestment the probation service has moved from an organisation that was able to provide several early intervention and upstream programmes to one which, in the main, uses its resources to provide statutory services to deal with inescapable demand. The Public Sector Transformation Board has the potential to assist probation and other public services to provide better outcomes for individuals, families and wider society and think outside the box for innovative solutions to long standing problems. We welcome its establishment and support its objectives.

The plan references the importance of collaboration and partnership however for this to be successful it needs to be driven from the top of government departments and must include arm’s length bodies.

Finally, to be able to make long term strategic decisions there is a need for multi-year budgets. Those budgets should support the timeframe of this Programme for Government.

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