

## **PROBATION BOARD FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

**BOARD MEETING – Friday 13 December 2024**

**9.30 am PBNI Headquarters, Conference room**

### **ATTENDANCE**

#### **BOARD MEMBERS**

Mr M Murray, Chair  
Ms E Patterson, Deputy Chair  
Mrs M Brunt  
Mr B Ingram  
Mr J Johnston  
Ms A Lloyd-Stevens  
Ms B Mongan

#### **OFFICIALS**

Ms A Stewart, Chief Executive  
Mr S Hamilton, Director of Operations  
Ms G Montgomery, Director of Operations  
Mr P King, Head of Finance & Estates (via MS Teams)  
Ms C Sweeney, Head of HR and L&OD  
Ms G McGreevy, Head of Communications  
Ms J Fitzsimons, Board Secretary  
Mrs A Abraham, Business Support Manager (minutes)

#### **GUEST**

Hugh Widdis, DoJ Permanent Secretary

### **PRESENTATION FROM HUGH WIDDIS, PERMANENT SECRETARY, DOJ**

The Board Chair welcomed Hugh Widdis, Permanent Secretary, DoJ to the meeting and thanked him for taking the time to attend. Board Members and Officials were introduced and the Chair then invited Mr Widdis to provide an update on key challenges and priorities for Justice. Mr Widdis thanked the Chair for the opportunity to meet with Members and find out more about the work of PBNI. He began by providing an update on the Programme for Government consultation advising Members that it was well received with over 1000 responses, the common theme being the lack of targets / indicators. He welcomed the priority to end Violence Against Women and Girls, the inclusion of the cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending and the commitment to embed Trauma Informed Practice across the Executive. Mr Widdis also outlined the current Budgetary position with a £4bn pressure reported across the Executive and while the DoJ is getting a fairer share in 2025/26 there is still a £300m pressure going into the next financial year.

Members questioned Mr Widdis on the progress on the Transformation Fund and specifically the bid to roll out Enhanced Combination Orders across more Court areas. He confirmed that it will be a multiphase approach with funding for £237m over a five year period. The selection process was continuing and a paper is to be presented to the Executive shortly. There was a comprehensive discussion on the increasing prison population and Mr Widdis advised that the Minister supports a rehabilitative and restorative approach as opposed to building more prisons. He acknowledged the ineffectiveness of short sentences and the need for a cross-executive approach to tackle the serious lack of housing which is key to tackling re-offending. Discussions also included the relationship with the Judiciary; managing the shortfall in Social Workers; the Justice sector's understanding of PBNI, the need for better collaboration at a strategic level; and the potential for a more coordinated approach to communications across the Justice Sector for maximum impact.

The Board Chair thanked Mr Widdis for his time and encouraged him to take the opportunity to visit PBNI teams and Community Service Projects when possible.

**1. WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The Board Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and set out the schedule for the day. A quorum was confirmed. There were no conflicts of interest.

**2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were recorded from Mr Donaghy and Mrs Magee.

**3. MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – FRIDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2024 (PAPER)**

The minutes of the Board Meeting held on Friday 22 November 2024 were approved as a true and accurate record.

The minutes were approved by the Board.

**4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES – FRIDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2024 (PAPER)**

There was one action from the previous meeting. The letter to the Director General NIPS was amended and sent, as agreed. See response at agenda item 7.1.

The Board noted the paper.

**BOARD BUSINESS**

**5. CHAIR’S REPORT (VERBAL)**

The Board Chair gave a brief summary of meetings and engagements since the last meeting. Three visits to teams had taken place – Ballymena, West Belfast and a Community Service Project at Kiltonga, Bangor. Members were encouraged by the openness of conversations with staff during these visits and acknowledged that senior management were aware of the issues raised and were responding. It was agreed that future notes of team visits should be kept to brief bullet points around key highlights/issues raised. Mr Hamilton welcomed all comments from the visits and acknowledged the shortcomings of the Workforce Management Tool. He confirmed that it needed to be simplified and would be reviewed by operational staff and included as a future item for the new Board.

The Board Chair had attended a meeting hosted by Voicing the Void and facilitated by PBNI in Headquarters on 11 December 2024. This was an opportunity to hear the experiences of victims and refugee groups and families who had relocated to Northern Ireland.

The Board Chair reminded Members of the Closed Session to be held at the end of the meeting.

The Board noted the update.

**6. CHIEF EXECUTIVE’S REPORT (VERBAL)**

The Chief Executive advised that her report had been detailed in the Management Information Paper at agenda item 8.

The Board noted the update.

**7. CORRESPONDENCE (PAPER)**

There were three items of correspondence to note.

**7.1 Director General NIPS to Board Chair on the Review of the Prisoner Development Model**

The Board Chair referred Members and Officials to his letter of 25 November 2024 and the response dated 27 November from the Director General NIPS. Further details on the review of the Prisoner Development Model will follow.

### **7.2 DOJ Permanent Secretary to Board Chair on Criminal Justice Board Membership**

The Board had the opportunity to meet and discuss issues with the DOJ Permanent Secretary prior to the meeting.

### **7.3 Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry – Request for Evidence pursuant to Rule 9 Inquiry Rules 2006**

Ms McGreevy updated Members on the response required to the letter dated 4 December 2024 from the UK Covid-19 Inquiry in relation to children and young people (under 25). At the time, neither PBNI nor NIPS had considered the impact of Covid specifically on young people focussing however on the impact on service users and staff. To note, 16% of PBNI's caseload is under 25. The response team (the Head of Communications and three staff) with inputs from the Directors, an Operational Assistant Director and the Crown Solicitor's Office are working on PBNI's response for submission by 20 December 2024. PBNI has been granted an extension to the end of February 2025, for further information to the inquiry to be provided.

The Board noted the correspondence.

## **8. Q2 MANAGEMENT INFORMATION (PAPER)**

The Chief Executive referred Members to the Chief Executive's Foreword section of the paper which covered the first 6 months of the 2024-25 reporting period, highlighting the work being undertaken in relation to implementation of pay modernisation, organisational resilience, staff engagement, the Probation Practice Inspection and developing a trauma informed approach. Members were asked to note the Minister's commitment to the work of probation, unwavering support in attending PBNI events and the additional funding from DoJ at the outset of 2024 and again in October monitoring.

Mrs Sweeney talked through the key areas of the Our People section. FTE attrition rates had fallen but the absence rate had increased in Q2. The Board Chair requested that future absence rates be detailed as days lost, not as percentages. Some appointments from the recruitment campaign in September/October had been made though some positions had been turned down due to location. The Chief Executive suggested that younger people may have different expectations of the workplace, and the views of newly appointed staff should be sought through the Staff Engagement Forum and feedback from them directly.

Mr Hamilton and Ms Montgomery summarised the Our Services section of the paper. The caseload statistics showed an increase of 3.3% in terms of people on probation but it was noted that any increases may be slowing down in terms of pace of growth. There had been a decrease in court reports in Q2 but Q3 is to date showing a reversal of the downward trajectory. 14% of relevant reports are now completed as short adjournment reports which is a significant time saving for staff whilst maintaining safe practice. The number of registered victims is increasing. Three teams are still working with up to 40% Deviations from Standards with another office recently having moved to 60% when a temporary transfer of a staff member was not successful and resulted in sickness absence. Concerned at the increase, the Board Chair requested that an updated report on Deviation from Standards across teams be brought to the January Board meeting with a focus on solutions to reduce the percentages.

**Action: The Director of Operations (CC) to provide an update report on Deviation from Standards across teams with a focus on solutions to reduce percentages at the January Board meeting**

The go live date for Causeway Onboarding is anticipated in November 2025.

Ms McGreevy gave a brief update on the Communications and Engagement section. External engagement is ongoing since the launch of the PBNI video in June 2024. In Q2, the number of complaints and subject access requests had increased.

The Board noted the Paper

### **Q2 BUSINESS PLAN 2024-25 PERFORMANCE (PAPER)**

In relation to the Q2 Business Plan 2024-25, Mr Hamilton took Members through the key points in the Performance Section and the Q2 Business Plan Quarterly Report of the Paper. At the end of the second quarter 2024-25 of the 22 actions, 19 had an Amber (in progress) rating, 2 are delayed/not achieved and one is not yet due to be completed in Q2.

Though not in Q2, Mr Hamilton informed the meeting of the Principal Psychologist's attendance at the Justice Committee to give evidence on PBNI's trauma informed work.

The outcome of the bid for Transformation Fund monies to enable the rollout of Enhanced Combination Orders across further court areas is still unknown. The Board will be updated in due course.

The Board approved the Q2 Business Plan Performance 2024-25.

### **9. DRAFT CONFLICT OF INTEREST POLICY (PAPER)**

Mr King gave a summary of the key areas in the Conflict of Interest Policy. This is a new PBNI policy, drafted at the request of the DoJ and in line with PBNI's Corporate Governance Framework and combines the requirements set out in the PBNI Code of Conduct and Standing Orders. It will apply to all staff although the Senior Management Team and Board Members will be required to disclose all significant private interests in order to inform the Related Party Transactions section of the PBNI Annual Report and Accounts.

The Board approved the paper.

### **10. PBNI ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE UPDATE (PAPER)**

It was agreed to defer this paper to the January 2025 Board.

The Board noted the decision to defer the paper.

### **11. BOARD SECRETARY'S BUSINESS**

#### **11.1 Board Work Plan 2024-25 (Paper)**

The Board Secretary referred Members and Officials to the paper.

The Board noted the paper.

#### **11.2 February 2025 Board Meeting (Verbal)**

The February meeting will be the last of the current Board and it was agreed at the CCWG that the agenda would include a position paper on the roadmap for the way forward for PBNI.

The Board Chair advised that he would not be applying for the position of Chair for the next term.

The Board noted the updated.

## **AUDIT & RISK ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE (ARAC)**

### **12. COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE (PAPER)**

Mr Ingram talked through the paper, highlighting the items covered at the ARAC meeting held on 8 November 2024.

The Board noted the paper.

#### **12.1 Risk Management Quarterly Update 2024-25 (Paper)**

The Board Secretary presented the updated paper including the Q3 Strategic Risk Register (SRR) 2024-25.

She advised that since the November ARAC meeting changes have been made to the SRR, primarily to Risk 2 (Operational); to reflect the increased levels of Deviations from Standards recorded in three teams.

The Board noted the update.

#### **12.2 Draft Risk Management Framework 2025-26 (Paper)**

The Board Secretary summarised the paper. She explained that to be consistent with the DoJ and ALB approach, the Chief Executive had agreed that the PBNI Risk Management Policy be replaced with a Risk Management Framework. A short consultation with the Senior Leadership Team, Unions and the ARAC Board Members had taken place prior to review at the ARAC meeting on 8 November 2024. The Committee recommended the framework be brought to the Board for approval.

Mr Johnston enquired if alignment with the Corporate Plan had been considered when developing the Framework.

ARAC Members advised that the Framework does not focus solely on the Corporate Plan but could readily align with it the four key priority areas in the Corporate Plan.

The Board approved the paper.

## **CORPORATE RESOURCES COMMITTEE**

### **13. COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE (PAPER)**

The Committee Chair referred to the paper and updated Members and Officials on the recent CRC-led workshop on Sick Absence, a detailed report of which will be brought to the January 2025 Board meeting.

The Board noted the paper.

#### **13.1 Financial Outturn Report November 2024 (Paper)**

Mr King reported that PBNI was on target to keep within budget but would require monitoring of some recruitment campaigns for Probation Services Officers and Psychology Assistants in order to spend before year end. Capital expenditure should break even. An update on Causeway monies is expected. Lease extensions have been agreed for Headquarters and Duncairn Gardens.

The Board noted the paper.

## **POLICY AND PRACTICE COMMITTEE**

### **14. COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE (PAPER)**

The Committee Chair referred to the key areas in the paper, in particular the work on Trauma Informed Practice. It was agreed that it would be timely to evaluate the work of the PPRU team as it had now been in place for 3 years. In response to a question on the Victims Unit if it would be useful to capture data on not only offence types, but age profile and location and the impact of crime on churches and businesses, Ms Montgomery confirmed that work was ongoing in this area to ascertain what information is currently available, is possible to gather and report on. Links are being made with PPS who are responsible for providing details of victims to PBNI, to ensure that PBNI are receiving details of businesses / churches for the victim unit to link with.

The Board noted the paper.

**14.1 Quarterly Caseload Statistics Q2 2024/25 (Paper)**

The Committee Chair commended Naomi Mill, Deputy Principal Statistician, and her colleague for their work on the new format of the caseload reports and outcomes framework.

The Board noted the paper.

**OTHER BUSINESS**

**15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business other than the Chair wishing everyone a very Happy Christmas and a happy new year.

The next scheduled Board meeting will be on Friday 24 January 2025, PBNI Conference Room, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor Headquarters at 9.30 am.

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm.

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Mr Max Murray CBE  
Board Chair

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Date