

15<sup>th</sup> February 2022

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Room 242  
Parliament Buildings, Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3XX

By email to: [committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk)

Dear Christine

Thank you for your letter of 4<sup>th</sup> February 2022 on behalf of the Committee requesting information, further to attendance at the meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2022 on the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) draft budget 2022-25.

I have addressed each of the three points in order below.

### **1. An estimate of the impact that the work of the Probation Board has on reoffending rates**

The work of PBNI has a clear impact on reducing reoffending: the most recent publication (2018/19 Cohort) shows the differing rates of reoffending against various Court disposals. In summary, adults released from custody had a one year reoffending rate of 44.9%, followed by non-custodial disposal with community supervision (eg a Probation Order) of 32.0%. Adults released from custody without any form of supervision had a reoffending rate of 50.4%.

Whilst reoffending rates should not be used to measure the comparative success of different disposal types in their own right (due to different offender and offence characteristics),

nevertheless it is clear that the interventions PBNI provide to those under community supervision have an impact. While this is difficult to quantify in terms of its direct impact on reoffending rates, it is clear that if less offender assessments were able to be completed by PBNI, and less interventions provided, that there would be a negative impact on overall reoffending.

In addition, it should be noted that measuring reoffending is a binary measure, and the work of PBNI in public protection will reduce the seriousness and frequency of reoffending, which cannot be measured in raw reoffending data.

## **2. Evidence that investment in Probation Board services, including Problem Solving Justice initiatives, saves costs to the wider justice system at a later stage**

PBNI is a key partner in a number of the Problem Solving Justice initiatives i.e. the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO), the Substance Misuse Court (SMC) and the Domestic Abuse Behavioural Change Programme (Promoting Positive Relationships Programme – PPRP) which is delivered in partnership with the five Health Trusts. All of these Problem Solving Justice initiatives have been subject to evaluation with very positive findings.

There has been two evaluation reports published on the ECO pilot by the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) and an Economic Assessment Impact undertaken by the Ulster University. Below is a summary of the evaluations and assessments undertaken to date including how ECOs have positively impacted on court sentencing data over a five year period and Reoffending Rates (2018/19 cohort).

### *NISRA Evaluations – ECO Pilot*

In June 2017, NISRA published its evaluation of the ECO pilot. The evaluation concluded that the qualitative and quantitative evidence showed that the initiative had been successful. The evaluation found a reduction in the reoffending rate for those who completed the order and a reduction in the number of prison sentences of 12 months or less imposed by the courts. In this evaluation the reoffending rate for a cohort of 52 ECO participants in the six months prior to being sentenced to an ECO was 57.7%. In the six months post sentencing, the reoffending rate at 17.3% was significantly lower. The number of custodial sentences of 12 months or less, imposed by the courts involved in the ECO pilot, decreased by 10.5% between 2015 and 2016. While there was also a reduction in the overall number of short term sentences across all the

NI courts, at 2.4%, this was lower than that across the pilot areas suggesting that ECO was impacting on prison numbers.

The report also highlighted that the estimated cost of an ECO was approximately £9,000, which is more cost effective than a prison sentence of 12 months, which, in 2017/18 was estimated at £55,300. In March 2019, NISRA published a further evaluation. This follow up evaluation, which was based on work up to the end of November 2018, was similarly positive and showed that the number of custodial sentences of 12 months or less, imposed by the courts involved in the ECO pilot, decreased by 20.7% between 2015 and 2017. A further evaluation is underway and to be completed before 31 March 2022.

### *Economic Impact Assessment – ECO Pilot*

In May 2019, the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) carried out an economic impact assessment of ECOs. In summary, the impact assessment identified an expected net benefit of between £5.7m to £8.3m per year in the event of rollout. This is derived from the difference in running costs of ECOs (as compared to short term prison sentences), expected changes to the rate of proven reoffending and associated costs of crime, the monetary value of unpaid work carried out as part of the sentence, and the additional tax impacts of improved employment prospects.

Furthermore, the UUEPC impact assessment of ECOs examined the qualitative impacts that ECO's may have, and indicated that ECOs may be expected to transform the lives of service users' families and, in particular, the life-chances of their children through reduced probabilities of entering poverty and intergenerational offending cycles. Finally, the economic impact assessment reported that the wider community may experience benefits as a result of improvements to the local environment as integral elements of ECOs, or over the longer term through reduced propensity for anti-social behaviour.

### *Court Sentencing Data*

Court sentencing data, which was published in December 2020 on short prison sentences imposed over the previous 5 years, indicated that ECOs continued to have an impact on the number of short prison sentences imposed. Findings also suggested that there was an overall increase in custodial sentences of 12 months or less between 2015 and 2019 of 8.4%. However, in the courts in which ECOs were available, the number of short term prison sentences of 12 months or less reduced by 13.4% between 2015 and 2019. Furthermore, the

number of short term prison sentences of 12 months or less, increased in the courts in which ECOs were not available by 17% between 2015 and 2019.

There is strong evidence to demonstrate that community sentences are a more effective and indeed a more cost effective alternative to prison. They allow for an opportunity to address the root causes of offending behaviour while an individual remains in the community.

In relation to the **Substance Misuse Court**, the independent evaluation published in March 2020 demonstrated that the individuals who completed the programme showed a significant reduction in both drug and alcohol misuse, and a significant reduction in the risk of reoffending. There have been a number of evaluations of the cost effectiveness of drug courts compared to traditional court processing. These have shown that the higher costs of drug courts, compared to traditional court processing, are paid back through reductions in crime and in prison time (Barnoski, R. & Aos, S. (2003) cited in Bowden and Whitehead (2016) Problem Solving Justice: and evidence review [Problem-solving courts: an evidence review | Centre for Justice Innovation](#)).

The most recent evaluation of the domestic abuse non-adjudicated programme published in November 2020, reported that the **Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP)** greatly assisted in developing the necessary skills for men to address their abusive behaviour and build healthy positive relationships. Initial long-term data supplied by the PSNI Public Protection Branch one year post programme for the 2018/19 cohort showed that one incident had resulted in prosecution and had been brought before the court. While seven of the other 24 participants had been involved in domestic abuse incidents, these had not resulted in any prosecution saving costs in terms of court processing and potential prison time.

### **3. Details of services that the Probation Board provides which deliver health and social care outcomes for service users and whether they are fully funded by the Probation Board or in conjunction with other Departments.**

PBNI undertakes a number of projects to deliver outcomes for service users. Some services are delivered directly in conjunction with the Health trusts and others provide referral mechanisms to users that take demand out of the health and social care system. Details of the initiatives are set out below.

### *Promoting Positive Relationships Programme*

This programme is funded through DOJ and delivered by PBNI. This programme provides direct outcomes for health and social care through the delivery of interventions based on referrals directly from the Health Trusts. PBNI staff will complete early interventions with individuals through domestic abuse behavioural change programmes, to reduce the possibility of future offending. . Funding is also granted to women's aid to as a 'partner support provider'. Currently DOJ is providing £376k of funding to support this initiative.

### *Enhanced Combination Orders*

The ECO pilot was developed in 2015 as a result of a request from the Lord Chief Justice for PBNI to provide an intensive alternative to short prison sentences. Enhanced Combination Orders (ECO's) have been available in two pilot areas (Ards and Armagh/South Down) since October 2015 and in the Northwest (Londonderry, Limavady and Strabane Courts) since October 2018. The focus is on addressing risk factors such as substance misuse and poor mental health. The service users have complex needs and often require interventions which are delivered by PBNI and community and voluntary sector partners; for example ASCERT. The ECO programme has been is funded directly by PBNI with £1.2m currently being spent on delivering outcomes.

### *Secondary Services Programme*

This service provides a Regional Rapid Response Addictions Service and mental health support to individuals supervised by PBNI in the community. This is funded directly by PBNI for service users presenting in crisis to be referred to a support service for counselling within 24 hours (1-2 working days) for initial support/ assessment. This service will also be offered to those who are current on a waiting lists for referral to Health and those who present with drug related issues. This programme not only assists users in dealing with some of the major issues around re-offending but takes direct demand out of the Health and social care system. Currently £300k is provided by PBNI to the community and voluntary sector partner ASCERT to deliver this programme.

### *ASPIRE project*

This is a collaborative initiative delivered by PBNI, NIACRO and restorative justice partners to focus on diverting young men at risk of becoming involved, or further involved, in paramilitary

and criminal behaviour. This service provides support for young males aged between 18-30 with a focus on addressing risk factors such as substance misuse and poor mental health. There is significant psychology input to the Aspire Project, providing assessment and specialist mental health interventions and therapies. The cohort of individuals engaged in the Aspire project have historically reported difficulties accessing mental health support in the community, thus PBNI Psychologists have provided mental health assessments and interventions to date. Recent evaluations have indicated that this intervention has contributed significantly to the successful completion and positive outcomes of the many service users involved in the Aspire project.

### *Engage Programme*

This service supports women in contact with the criminal justice system, and provides one-to-one interventions and group work to address mental health and wellbeing. The Engage initiative directly links to Department of Health outcomes as it improves mental health and wellbeing, and promotes resilience for women released from custody to the community. Individuals have reported difficulties accessing GP/mental health support in the community and as such, PBNI Psychology has provided additional support and interventions to our service users.

### *Protect Life*

This is a Belfast based service providing individual mentoring support to service users who are at risk of suicide/self-harm. This is a time-limited intervention for individuals on Probation. PBNI fund 'Start 360' £50k to deliver this programme. This project links to health and social care outcomes as it works with individuals to reduce the risk of suicide and selfharm and also improves their mental health and wellbeing.

I trust this additional information is helpful, if I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely

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Amanda Stewart  
**Chief Executive**