



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Reducing Offending Strategic Framework:
Consultation Responses

17 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

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| Mr Brian Grzymek | Department of Justice |
| Mr Gary Wardrop | Department of Justice |
| Detective Inspector Mark Dennison | Police Service of Northern Ireland |
| Mr Paul Doran | Probation Board for Northern Ireland |

The Chairperson: I welcome Brian Grzymek, head of the reducing offending division; Gary Wardrop, reducing offending division; Detective Inspector Mark Dennison; and Paul Doran, deputy director of the Probation Board. Again, this session will be reported by Hansard. Brian, I invite you to update the Committee on the results of the consultation and the draft strategic framework.

Mr Brian Grzymek (Department of Justice): Thank you very much, Chairman. I think that it is probably about a year since I gave the Committee an oral briefing on the Department's strategic framework on reducing offending. Following that, I or our departmental Assembly liaison officer wrote to you in, I think, April about our public consultation.

As I said back in January 2012, the whole area of reducing offending is a key priority for David Ford. The aim of the framework is to build a safer society, with fewer victims of crime. The long-term outcome that we are seeking is a sustained reduction in offending, with fewer people involved either in offending or in reoffending.

I should stress that our objective is to put in place an overarching strategic framework, not just another strategy. The framework is focused on developing a joined-up approach across government as well as within the justice system to tackle the root causes of offending behaviour and help offenders to desist from offending.

Turning to the consultation, we undertook an extensive consultation process over the summer months. We met a range of stakeholder groups from statutory agencies and the voluntary and community

sector, running events in Belfast, Antrim and Derry, and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action organised a session on our behalf.

We also spoke to young people and adult offenders involved in the justice system, visiting Woodlands and the young offenders centre, and working through Include Youth, the Youth Safety Network, Youth Action, and, of course, some of our established partners such as the Probation Board Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and Extern.

Contributions were also sought from other relevant Departments, and a number of policing and community safety partnership (PCSP) members attended the various events. In addition to that, I gave a separate presentation to the Enniskillen PCSP, because its members missed the initial event in their area.

Through that process, we found widespread support for the approach set out in our consultation document. The vast majority of respondents were very supportive and, if anything, were quite impatient that we were not getting on and doing it.

A number of clear themes emerged from the consultation. First, the need to tackle underpinning offending behaviour, with many of the respondents placing a strong emphasis on the need for early and timely intervention.

Secondly, there was widespread support for a more joined-up approach across government and certainly between the statutory and voluntary sectors. There was support for reforming the justice system, with interest in reducing delay and making better use of community sentences in many areas. There was also interest in involving the community in plans and developments relating to reducing offending. Finally, there was support for promoting much more public awareness of issues around offending behaviour, and there was also some suggestion that we should be stimulating more local research into what works.

I turn to the outcome of the consultation process. In our broad approach to the document, which we have now modified in light of the consultation, we found that it is not massively different to what we have done before, but we have refined the document to take on board many of the suggestions made during the consultation and, in essence, further sharpened the strategic framework. Where practicable, we have referred to the influence of the consultation findings throughout the document itself. I am sure that, when you read it, you found that appearing fairly frequently.

I think that as a consequence of the consultation and us taking on board what was proposed, the document now has much greater clarity. We also very much clarified that it is a strategic framework rather than a strategy. That was one of the areas where I think there was some confusion in the consultation, so we are happy to clarify that. We have also revised some key terms that we used and refined both the core principles and the strands making up the framework.

I turn to the delivery of the strategic framework. The framework is essentially refining and refocusing our approach to reducing offending. At a time of tightening budgets, I do not think that it would have been practical for us to look for substantial additional resources to bring it into being. Instead, our aim and focus has been to make better use of current resources through much more effective targeting and joined-up working.

Looking at that on a practical basis within justice, David Ford's reform agenda provides the main engine of change. It covers major strategic initiatives with which you will be very familiar; those involving prisons and youth justice reforms, the Speeding Up Justice programme and the new strategic approach to community safety. In progressing the strategic framework, the Minister and the Department recognise that punishment is an important element of the justice system. We also recognise that some offenders require long custodial sentences to reflect the seriousness of their offences or to protect the public. However, I suspect that the challenge is to ensure that all those sentenced to prison leave it with a better prospect of avoiding future offending than when they came into custody.

Within the community, a big initiative that, I think, will support the framework's progression is that the policing and community safety partnerships are coming into being. As I noted, a number of their members had participated very positively in the consultation process, and we see them as having an important role to play at the local level. I should also emphasise the importance of building effective partnerships within the community to address offending. We have found examples in the new

reducing offending in partnership arrangements, which bring together the police, probation and youth justice to target local offenders, and collaborative initiatives such as the Inspire project.

My colleagues here may touch on some of those aspects when we move on to the question-and-answer element of this session.

I turn to what may happen across government. Many vulnerable individuals who drift into offending behaviour bring with them their personal deficits, which long predate their first offence. Too many of those in custody have significant shortcomings in their health, education, family support, early development, etc. These are problems, which, had they been addressed much earlier, could have had the potential to change the life chances of those people and send them on pathways away from justice.

The strategic framework recognises that other Departments have a valuable contribution to make in addressing the root causes of offending. That can be through either the work that they are currently doing, which is focused on disadvantage, or work that can be enhanced through more joined-up approaches. Examples here include a number of Department for Social Development and Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure programmes that are now in development, the whole Delivering Social Change agenda and its flagship projects on literacy and numeracy; family support, hubs, NEETs — not in education, employment or training — and nurture units.

In the consultation, there were very clear calls for a clear mechanism to secure joined-up working across government, and suggestions included a steering group, a task force or a statutory duty to co-operate. We propose to use existing arrangements rather than invent additional bureaucratic mechanisms. Current arrangements include the Delivering Social Change officials group and ministerial group, and the Reducing Offending programme board, which covers all the justice agencies.

In looking forward, I shall mention the importance of partnership working with the voluntary and community sector. We recognise the key contribution that the sector makes and very much welcome a number of key organisations' direct engagement in developing the strategic framework. Their role is, of course, central to community safety and to the community safety strategy.

In conclusion, the strategic framework seeks to build a cross-government approach to reducing offending that can generate a real and sustained benefit to our society. By building and progressing a coherent and joined-up approach across government, we can make a real difference by setting vulnerable people on to better and more productive trajectories than those that lead to offending. However, we must also ensure that we make space for former offenders in our communities and support them in their efforts to desist from offending.

I and my colleagues are very happy to answer any questions on the document that we have sent to you, and, of course, we welcome any suggestions now or over the coming weeks on how we can further improve and sharpen the strategic framework. It is still a work in progress, and we look forward to the Committee working with us to make sure that the document is as good as it can be and makes a real difference.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Brian. We do not have too many questions because we know that you have to get it through the Executive anyway. You have recognised the importance of tackling the behavioural problems that contribute to people ending up in the criminal justice system, such as educational underachievement, health inequalities and social deprivation. Although that is one of the key areas of the document, we have no direct responsibility to make direct interventions. Does that present a real threat to the success of the document? If you recognise something as fundamental but have no real remit to make a direct intervention, you are depending very much on others to do something that you believe is key to success.

Mr Grzymek: Your summary is a fair comment. The truth is that the Department could have been less ambitious and just focused on what we can do, narrowly, to stop reoffending. That will make a difference. As I said when I was last here, when we come into work the next day, new recruits will come in off the production line, and all the problems will have predated their arrival. If we are to make a real difference to society, we need a much broader ambition than just stopping people who have gone down the offending route from reoffending. That is an important component. We have control over that, and the Department is working, I hope, in a much more coherent way now to deliver real change. However, if we are to make a real difference to society, we will have to try to turn off the tap as regards new offenders.

So, to that degree, we do not have the levers of power. However, we do have influence, and there have been very positive developments such as the Delivering Social Change mechanism. That is an expression of willingness across government of Ministers and Departments to work together to deliver cross-cutting social changes. That offers a real opportunity. In addition, David Ford and I have been talking to our counterparts in other relevant Departments about where our agendas coincide or converge, and we are seeing much more convergence across a number of Departments. Our interests are more common, and one of the challenges for us is to draw more strategic alliances to run alongside the Delivering Social Change agenda. Between those two mechanisms, there is a real prospect for us to bring about change. We have to do it by persuasion and influence. I do not have any powers to direct other Departments to do what we would like them to do.

The Chairperson: I agree with the analysis that what is outlined in the document is the key to reducing offending. I am worried that, if you are not able to bring more than influence and persuasion to the table, the Public Health Agency, the education boards and other people will say that they not accountable to the Department of Justice (DOJ) and that it is they who are bringing the money to the table and who are putting in people to engage in early intervention projects. If you cannot put a chip on the table, will you really be successful? The Department needs to look at that. Although you may not have the power to compel, you need to bring some type of resource to the table.

Mr Grzymek: This is not a case of pass the parcel. If it were, I think that other Departments would quite rightly be nervous. It is not in our interest just to pass problems from the Department of Justice to elsewhere. What we are in fact saying is that the problems are such that the solutions have to be on a cross-government approach. I think that there are very positive elements. The Delivering Social Change agenda is not focusing on early intervention. My Department sits around that table and we will make our contribution to that, as will other Departments. We are not trying to pass the problem to someone else. We are saying that this is a shared approach; we have to work in a joined-up way. In Delivering Social Change, there are a number of flagship developments, some of which will have direct relevance to DOJ, others indirect. Where we see other initiatives that are not directly related to DOJ but which we can see will have a benefit, it would certainly be in our strategic interest to support those when it comes to the debate on how central resources are spent.

The Chairperson: Where would you see that support happening? Would it be in a co-ordination role? In my constituency, it is the Public Health Agency that is pushing an early intervention project in our working-class, loyalist estates. It is the one pushing that and doing the central admin and co-ordination to bring in the education boards and others. An element of policing is coming on board now to look at antisocial behaviour issues and all that. The Public Health Agency is central to trying to pull everybody else together. Although the project is community-led, it is the one giving admin support to it.

Mr Grzymek: That is perhaps a bottom-up approach. Early intervention is a good example, because Delivering Social Change is looking at putting much more resource into early intervention. Certainly, some flagship approaches are coming from that. Alongside that, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety leads on the children and young person's strategic partnership. Colleagues of mine from the Youth Justice Agency and other agencies are involved in the steering of the children and young person's strategic partnership. We have talked to them quite regularly about how early intervention can be developed in a way that generates benefits for health, justice, education and welfare. Some of the schemes being developed are genuinely cross-cutting, and we are working at a local and departmental level to try to give those schemes support and promote them.

So, I cannot give you an easy answer that I can just click my fingers and people will do what we would like. What I can say is that we are working with them. We are certainly not backing away; where it makes sense for us to put some resource in, we will do that. For example, I sat on the steering group for the public health strategic framework. I think that we had a degree of influence in shaping that health agenda. Bear in mind that the public health strategic framework is trying to improve public health and the health of individuals. The truth is that the things it would do to improve health would also reduce the risk of a number of those people offending. There is a clear commonality of interest. We sit on a number of forums where some of those major strategies are being developed, and are helping to contribute towards shaping them. So, I am fairly optimistic. I cannot say that it is going to be easy. I cannot pretend that everything will fall into place automatically. What I can say is that we are trying to address that issue. It is not an easy one, but, at the same time, I think that there are some very positive signs of that convergence of agendas across Departments.

Mr McCartney: You talked about persuasion and influence and the idea of passing the parcel, as you put it. To a degree, will Departments and agencies be pointing out weaknesses and what other Departments are not living up to, or is it all going to be done behind closed doors?

Mr Grzymek: I am sorry; pointing out weaknesses that Departments are —

Mr McCartney: For instance, if your strategy is failing because one Department or agency does not come to the table, would there be some sort of sense that that would become part of a public commentary or would it remain behind closed doors?

Mr Grzymek: I suspect I may need to try to help. David Ford and I are trying to shape and influence other Departments. I am not sure that having a list of people who we do not think are working with us would necessarily be that productive. We have had quite good engagement across all the relevant Departments. I am conscious that we are in a time when resources are tight and Departments are looking to their own agendas. So, it is not the easiest time to build new strategic alliances. At the same time, there are real and genuine commonalities of interest. Consider literacy and numeracy. The big problem is that about 70% of people in prison cannot read and write or they have such low levels of literacy and numeracy skills that they are, effectively, disabled. You are not going to solve that problem overnight. The Prison Service does very good work to try to address that, but, at the same time, those people have had years of being functionally illiterate. You cannot turn that round overnight. The truth is that if we are going to make real progress, we need to support education when it makes cases for doing more. We were very supportive of that in the Delivering Social Change agenda. I would not say that we were instrumental in some of the policy changes that came about, but we have been very supportive of the need to do something to tackle issues of literacy and numeracy. That will produce products in the medium to long run in respect of offending. We can do things working with people, but, at the same time, naming and shaming is not the solution; it is about looking at practical ways of working collaboratively.

Mr McCartney: I am not talking about naming and shaming, for obvious reasons. You are talking about numeracy and literacy in prisons. Prison managers will tell you that until education is put on a statutory footing, they are constantly fighting an uphill battle. If education were on a statutory provision, as it is in England and Wales, the gaps in the education system through absenteeism would be addressed more quickly. I am not saying that you should name and shame. Some people's objective is to improve literacy and numeracy in prisons so that reoffending is stopped. However, if you do not put education on a statutory footing, our chances of success are being undermined. It is not naming and shaming. There is no point in us doing that if we are deluding ourselves that continuing to do what we have done in the past will get us to where we want to go to when there is a measure that will help us to realise our goal. You then have to put it to the person who is responsible for not putting it on a statutory footing and say that they have to do it.

Mr Grzymek: We have tried to create a framework. It means that we will get greater alignment; we will reach across different parts. Perhaps offending will stop if prisoners see themselves as part of the system rather than as part of a system to contain people in custody. As we all know, there is a major reform of the prison system that will change the culture and approach. As part of that, this will be very important. Education and how we give appropriate support to those who have the capacity to reform and not offend again is very important.

The other side is looking upstream and asking about the degree to which the fact that people have been functionally illiterate contributed to them becoming offenders. There is no doubt that that is an element behind offending in a number of cases. If we can encourage other bits of government to take remedial action at an appropriate stage, that will also contribute to reducing offending. You are quite right: we need to work in a very collaborative way.

Mr Paul Doran (Probation Board for Northern Ireland): Women make up 10% of the population of people who are under supervision by the Probation Board. We have introduced the Inspire project, which treats women offenders as women first, citizens second and offenders third, so that you are not putting the stamp of "offender" on their forehead. You are encouraging the women to move away from offending while holding them to account.

Those women work in a network of community women's groups that is well developed, particularly in the greater Belfast area. We are now rolling that out throughout Northern Ireland. We have been able to get the Department for Employment and Learning and other agencies across government involved in working with that group. They recognise that working with the group will help women to move away

from offending and can help the aims of the Departments as well. The other benefit is that women who come to the end of a prison sentence have an opportunity to come into the community to practice positive work that will help them to move away from offending. The Inspire model encompasses the five key themes of the strategic framework.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cathaoirleach. I agree with the issues raised by the members who spoke previously, but I also accept that the only way to tackle that huge problem is in a multiagency, multi-departmental and long-term way that focuses on early intervention. The early intervention needs to be long term. Having accepted all that and having been involved in a district policing partnership in west Belfast, with all the associated problems with different hot spots, there was a huge problem with prolific offenders. There is general agreement from a lot of people that prolific offenders rarely respond to these types of initiatives. In fact, in the lower Falls area, the only time that genuine respite was felt by the community was when big resources were put into operation Street Safe to deal with prolific offenders and people out on bail. That level of resources is what it took to allow the community to feel safe for a few months, but once that was over, things went back to the way they were. How do you propose to deal with prolific offenders?

Mr Grzymek: I will start off briefly, and then pass on to Mark Dennison from the Police Service who will give you a full answer. A lot of it is going to be about how we work on a more partnership-based approach across the justice system to make sure that different components work together effectively. One area where we are moving forward on that is the reducing offending in partnership model, which was piloted in Ballymena and is about to move out. Mark, perhaps you want to say a bit more about that and how it relates to prolific offenders.

Detective Inspector Mark Dennison (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Yes. Reduced offending in partnership is a Northern Ireland approach to the management of priority and prolific offenders. Really, it is about the right agencies identifying the right individuals and working with them at the right time. We have now established reducing offending units in each district throughout Northern Ireland. Officers are dedicated to the management of around 400 individuals. Those individuals are managed in partnership with the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency, the Prison Service, a range of other agencies and the community.

In the pilot area, we have seen a significant impact on reducing offending. Some 68% of those in the programme reduced their offending. In other areas, we have seen a significant reduction in acquisitive crime. We have seen an increase in community confidence. It is something that has three strands. We look at the prevent-and-deter strand, which focuses on antisocial behaviour involving young people through early identification and effective intervention strategies. We look at catch-and-control, which is a proactive approach against those individuals who are determined to cause as much havoc as they can in the community by way of offending. We also look at providing a pathway out of crime for those priority and prolific offenders through rehabilitation and resettlement. That is where our partners in the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency and the community take that forward.

Ms McCorley: OK. That sounds positive and is good to hear. What sort of review and monitoring mechanisms do you have in place to make sure that you continue to have levels of efficiency and effectiveness and that you deliver on targets?

Detective Inspector Dennison: We have performance-based benefits for the whole programme. We have governance of the programme. We have a selection process whereby individuals are selected by way of their offending behaviour or input from the community, and also an agreement with the partner agency. We review those selection processes every six months. We also have processes in place to work with cross-district priority offenders. Governance and performance are key to the whole process, and are very important.

Mr Doran: I will pick up on that. In the longer term, the second key output of the strategic framework is reduced reoffending. We recognise that there needs to be local research, so I would like to see some clear evidence about the effectiveness, not just of the reducing offending partnership but of the whole strategic framework. Along with fewer first time offenders entering the system, those are the two key outputs of the overarching strategic framework.

Ms McCorley: Can I ask one more question on a different note? In speeding up the court processes, when should we expect to see an improvement in the process that people go through in the criminal justice system? I have had issues raised to me by people who have been victims of crimes about the delays in bringing to justice the people who are responsible for what they suffered. One person, who

is brain-damaged as the result of an attack, raised the issue with me. They feel that they cannot move on, as the case keeps getting delayed and they do not know where it is going.

Mr Grzymek: There are perhaps two elements to that. First, you will have heard separately that the Minister has agreed to statutory time limits for juvenile offenders. I do not want to say too much about that other than that the aim is to try to get a much more co-ordinated approach to reduce the levels of delay. I have lost track of the date that it will start, but that will be going ahead. Depending on how it pans out, the aim is to roll it out to the adult group as well. It is starting with the smaller population of juveniles, who, in some ways, are more sensitive to delay. A delay of a year or more is clearly an awful lot of time out of any youngster's life. I take your point that we need to deal with that.

Secondly, on reducing offending in partnership, there is certainly much more co-ordination in respect of prolific offenders who commit multiple offences, which can sometimes make the system slower. Mark may want to say a bit about that.

Detective Inspector Dennison: We have dedicated officers who basically own a set number of those individuals. The measures that have been taken throughout the criminal justice process have certainly reduced the number of days that it takes from the day of the offence until it gets to court. Take the example of a young person who is quite prolific, where we may have had several different investigating officers trying to bring those cases together. We now have one investigative officer who concentrates on all those cases. That means that they know the individual very well, and the court process moves an awful lot more quickly. We work with the Public Prosecution Service and the courts to try to make the process as smooth as possible and to benefit the victim of crime.

Mr Grzymek: There is no quick solution to this one. It is a very complex process. The statutory time limits approach that the Minister has agreed to is about our turning the system around and changing how it works. Our aim is to reduce delay progressively. Delay is an issue. It came up in the consultation, and I had great concerns about it. However, we are trying to work through this to bring about a real improvement.

The Chairperson: No one else has indicated that they wish to ask a question. Thank you very much.