

STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY ON INTER-GOVERNMENTAL AGREEMENT ON CO-OPERATION ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS

Tuesday 19 June 2012

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding a meeting under the auspices of the Inter-Governmental Agreement on Co-operation on Criminal Justice Matters, held in Dublin Castle on Thursday 24 May. The meeting was hosted by Alan Shatter TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, and I represented the Executive.

This was the fifth formal Ministerial meeting under the Inter-Governmental Agreement since the devolution of justice over two years ago. As I have said in previous statements to the House, I am committed to keeping the Assembly informed of meetings held under the auspices of the Agreement on the same basis as NSMC meetings.

The meeting provided us both with an opportunity to review progress against the 2011/12 joint work programme that we agreed at our meeting in June last year. The period of the work programme is coming to an end and it was pleasing to note the positive progress that has been made and the objectives that have been met. I previously shared a copy of the 2011/12 work programme with members as part of the oral statement last June.

Let me give three specific examples of the work under last year's programme. First has been the establishment of a joint Probation / Prison / Police / Garda group which is contributing to the development of robust systems for the management of dangerous offenders on release for prison.

Second has been the opportunity to consider together the implications for both jurisdictions of the proposed EU Victims Directive. This has been particularly relevant given the Justice Committee's inquiry into victims' issues and our commitment to refresh our victims' strategy.

Third was the organisation of the second annual joint public protection seminar which was successfully held in Antrim at the end of November. It provided an opportunity for representatives of both probation services, alongside other agencies, to discuss a number of key public protection issues including assessing risk regarding sex offenders; offender management; the strategy for management of women offenders and drug and alcohol misuse.

Other agreed actions included exploring the potential for fast track probation reports to help speed up justice; maximising opportunities for cooperation on forensic science; and sharing best practice on justice initiatives as well as learning on how we can best support victims of crime.

The 2011/12 work programme has provided the foundation for building on and taking further forward related and emerging actions in the 2012/13 work programme, which I agreed with Alan Shatter on 24 May. The new work programme sets out priorities for continued cross-border cooperation over the

next twelve months and I have attached a copy to my statement for the information of Members.

It includes opportunities for joint training and peer review; the production of a document on best practice in policing diverse communities; helping us jointly consider the role of advocacy services for victims of crime; further extending information sharing arrangements to support public protection; and exploring how best to work with those young people at risk of offending who are affected by speech and language difficulties.

Progress against all of the actions within the 2012/13 work programme will be monitored by the Working Group of officials who will report to Alan Shatter and me at our next Ministerial meeting. It would be my intention that I would update the Assembly following that meeting.

Alan Shatter and I were also updated on the progress of the six Project Advisory Groups which focus on areas including public protection, registered offenders, youth justice, forensic science, support for victims of crime and social diversity.

Each of the Project Advisory Groups has continued to promote and support cooperation between officials across the broad spectrum of criminal justice agencies on both sides of the border. The Public Protection Group, for example, has continued to lead on the preparation of common statistics which support the comparison of key indicators across the two jurisdictions.

In relation to the management of sex offenders, there is excellent ongoing cooperation between the PSNI and An Garda Síochána at an operational level.

As members are aware, ensuring that victims of crime receive the necessary support when they come into contact with the criminal justice system is a priority for me. I previously advised Mr Shatter about the work being done in Northern Ireland, including the inquiry being conducted by the Justice Committee. The outcome of that inquiry will be of interest to the Project Advisory Group that focuses on victims' issues.

We were also updated on the work being taken forward around youth justice, particularly joint work on the development of a toolkit to help young people at risk of offending to develop empathy, where that is lacking.

The cooperation between the two forensic science services continues with collaboration on sharing of expertise. The importance of cooperation in this vital area of the criminal justice system was underpinned as I accepted Alan Shatter's invitation to address (along with him) the European Network of Forensic Science Institutes Annual Conference in Dublin Castle on 24 May.

I am pleased to report that there continues to be good progress in supporting and promoting North/South cooperation to make Northern Ireland, and the island of Ireland, a safer place. The meeting was a good opportunity to be

updated on a Policy Seminar attended by the co-Chairs of the Project Advisory Groups and other lead policy officials from both jurisdictions held in Armagh on 24 April.

Delegates heard about, discussed and considered the work being done in Northern Ireland on the development of a reducing offending strategy, and the development of the White Paper on Crime being taken forward by the Department of Justice and Equality. It is clear that we have many similar challenges on both sides of the border and consideration is being given to a proposal to establish an ad hoc crime strategy group which would report to the Working Group of Officials.

The Inter-Governmental Agreement provides a helpful framework for supporting North/South cooperation on criminal justice matters but we are seeing the real benefits of cooperation when individuals within the criminal justice agencies have developed good working relationships with their respective counterparts. It is that type of practical cooperation that Alan Shatter and I are both committed to promoting and supporting.

Finally, the Agreement was not designed to provide for discussion of cross-border security issues. However, I have cause to discuss such matters regularly with Mr Shatter and I used the opportunity of us being together to discuss some wider cross-border security related issues. These included the work being done to combat fuel laundering and related fraud, including its environmental impacts.

NORTH/SOUTH COOPERATION ON CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS: WORK PROGRAMME 2012-2013

Introduction

An Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) on Cooperation on Criminal Justice Matters provides the framework for North/South cooperation in this area. It provides for meetings between the Justice Ministers North and South, who receive reports from a Working Group made up of officials from both jurisdictions.

The Working Group is supported by a number of Project Advisory Groups which take forward work strands across a range of areas including youth justice, forensic science, public protection and support for victims. The Working Group is responsible for preparing an annual work programme which is presented to Ministers for their approval.

Work Programme

The work programme has been prepared under the terms of the IGA and has been approved by Ministers. It is not the intention, however, to capture the extensive day-to-day cooperation between criminal justice agencies on both sides of the border. This includes, for example, cooperation around the management of sex offenders as well as regular cooperation between the Police Service of Northern Ireland and An Garda Síochána in tackling cross-border crime. However, a number of priority areas have been agreed for action by summer 2013 as follows.

Objective	Target
<i>Enhancing justice delivery</i>	
To support work with Sentencers and others to speed up justice by sharing best practice on the production of short/fast-track reports for Courts.	March 2013
To explore further opportunities for cooperation in the area of forensic science between Northern Ireland and Ireland – to include: examining the potential for peer review resource sharing, especially in “problematic” cases; identifying opportunities for joint training; and convening a meeting in Dublin to include Scottish counterparts.	October 2012

To develop a joint PSNI/AGS document aimed at sharing best practices in the area of policing in partnership with diverse communities; and explore the possibility of staging a joint PSNI/AGS (Multi Agency) Hate Crime Conference.	April 2013
<i>Support for victims and witnesses of crime</i>	
To share learning on models for the provision of advocacy services for victims of crime.	September 2012
To assess current compliance with the provisions in the new EU Directive on victims of crime and consider options for the implementation of the Directive.	March 2013
<i>Management of offenders</i>	
To co-operate and work on the development and approval of interventions to address offending behaviour in agreed areas.	March 2013
To host the third annual seminar on public protection issues on the island of Ireland – venue to be Dublin.	December 2012
To further explore the potential of extending information sharing to include related areas of public protection police work such as child abuse, domestic abuse and missing persons and to consider any necessary amendments to the current Information Sharing Agreement between the PSNI and AGS.	March 2013
To explore and share information resulting from the speech, language and communication project and the pilot e-learning tool and assessment for young people in the justice system - to assist in early identification and assessment of young people with communication difficulties entering the system and ensuring that the appropriate support is sought.	April 2013

Reporting arrangements

Progress against the key priorities will be monitored by the Working Group who will report on progress to Ministers in November and May.

June 2012