Tuesday 3rd November 2026

[redacted]
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The Chairperson and Members
Committee for Justice
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
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BT4 3XX

Re: Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill - supplementary evidence on Enhanced Combination Orders and restorative justice in domestic abuse and sexual violence cases

Dear Chairperson and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide further information following Northern Ireland Alternatives' and Community Restorative Justice Ireland' oral evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill. This supplementary response is submitted jointly by Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI).

Together, we respond to the Committee's request for additional information on Enhanced Combination Orders (ECOs) and address the concerns raised by Women's Aid and Nexus regarding restorative justice in cases involving domestic abuse and sexual violence. Our evidence draws on Alternatives' ECOs End of Year Report 2022/23 and the June 2022 Evaluation of the Enhanced Combination Order, covering October 2015 to December 2021, enclosed with this response.

Enhanced Combination Orders

ECOs offer an intensive community sentence for suitable individuals who would otherwise face short-term custody. PBNI leads delivery, with Northern Ireland Alternatives and CRJI contributing restorative and victim-awareness work within a wider partnership. The June 2022 evaluation identifies both organisations, alongside PBNI, as providers of victim-focused awareness work and describes their role in providing a bridge back to the community (section 5.4, pp. 18–20).

Alternatives' accompanying 2022/23 report records support for 54 clients and approximately 730 sessions or contacts, with all referrals from PBNI ECO teams accepted. These totals cover several referral routes and order types: 16 of the 31 regional clients were recorded as receiving ECOs. These are Alternatives' service figures and should be distinguished from the programme-wide evaluation findings below.

The June 2022 evaluation identifies CRJI's contribution to ECO delivery through victim-focused awareness work and helping service users reconnect with their communities. Alongside Alternatives, CRJI provided

access to therapeutic and employment support, assistance for families, and continuing support after orders ended (pp. 18–19).

Together, Alternatives and CRJI contribute restorative expertise and community support within the PBNI-led ECO partnership. Across the programme, 81% of 96 respondents rated victim-focused work useful (p. 18), while one-year proven reoffending fell from 46.3% for the 2015/16 cohort to 31.1% for 2018/19

Separately, 95% of 102 exit-questionnaire respondents said the programme had helped them address their offending behaviour

The evaluation also records reductions in custodial sentences of 12 months or less in the pilot courts: 20.7% between 2015 and 2017 and 20.3% between 2018 and 2020, compared with reductions of 3.4% and 14.6% respectively across all Northern Ireland courts

These findings support the value of a coordinated community response while requiring care in interpretation. The evaluation reports a 28% exit-questionnaire response rate among those eligible, and question-specific sample sizes vary (section 3.2, p. 6). It also records only 22 referrals to Victim Support during the preceding year, caution about re-traumatisation, and Victim Support's concern that progress with the victim element should not be overstated publicly. Contact between victims and service users tended largely to be by letter (section 5.4, pp. 19–20).

Restorative justice in domestic abuse and sexual violence cases

Suitability of RJ for Complex and Sensitive Cases

We welcome the evidence provided by Women's Aid and Nexus and share their emphasis on survivor safety, coercive control, informed choice, and specialist competence. We wish to clarify several points and recommend how these concerns could be addressed within the Bill.

Voluntary participation and sentencing

The emphasis on participation being "an option" and on victims 'right to withdraw reflects existing restorative justice requirements. The Northern Ireland Protocol requires voluntary participation, withdrawal without adverse consequences and admission of responsibility by the person who caused harm. Restorative justice need not involve a face-to-face meeting or replace a criminal sentence.

Explicit recognition within the Bill

The discussion reinforces our view that restorative justice should be explicitly recognised within the Bill, with clear safeguards. Although clause 1(2)(e) does not itself compel participation, leaving restorative justice implicit within rehabilitation or reparation risks uncertainty about its role and boundaries.

Recognition should distinguish the court's sentencing authority from voluntary participation. Victims must not be expected to participate to support an offender's rehabilitation, secure a particular sentence or prevent a breach. Implementation should align with the Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and applicable standards, including independent victim support, scrutiny and appropriately accredited community-based provision.

Application to serious offending

The contributors referred to evidence of effectiveness in "low-level or petty crime". While they did not suggest that restorative justice works exclusively in those cases, we wish to clarify that specialist provision internationally also addresses serious offending, including sexual and family violence. Examples include provision in New Zealand and the US RESTORE programme. These demonstrate broader application and promising findings, rather than universal suitability or effectiveness. We acknowledge Women's Aid's concerns about the strength of the evidence.

Specialist competence

It was stated that the necessary expertise is not currently available in Northern Ireland. We ask the Committee to clarify the evidence supporting this assessment, as we note in our evidence that local research in this area remains very limited. The NI framework requires level three accreditation for higher-level sexual offences and domestic abuse cases, but standards alone do not establish operational capacity. Practitioner availability, specialist experience, supervision, and resources require examination. Accreditation must not be treated as automatic evidence of suitability for an individual case.

The ongoing development of Northern Ireland's Adult Restorative Justice Strategy should also shape expectations about the availability of local evidence on domestic abuse and sexual offences. A limited published evidence base does not, on its own, show that relevant practice or specialist expertise is lacking.

Safety planning

The account of a survivor being triggered by her former partner's aftershave illustrates the importance of sensory triggers, preparation, and venue arrangements. Separate rooms or venues, managed arrival and departure, and indirect participation should be considered through individual assessment.

We support rigorous, ongoing safety assessment and the discontinuation of any process where risks cannot be adequately managed. Clear statutory recognition should strengthen these protections while preserving opportunities for appropriate, voluntary restorative work informed by survivors 'wishes and demonstrable specialist competence.

We would welcome the opportunity to clarify any of these points or provide further information to assist the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill.

Yours sincerely,



CEO, Northern Ireland Alternatives CEO, CRJI Head of Policy/Development

Enclosures: Northern Ireland Alternatives ECO End of Year Report 2022/23

Evaluation of the Enhanced Combination Order October 2015 to December 2021, June 2022



ECO's End of Year Report 2022/23

Northern Ireland Alternatives

Probation Board NI

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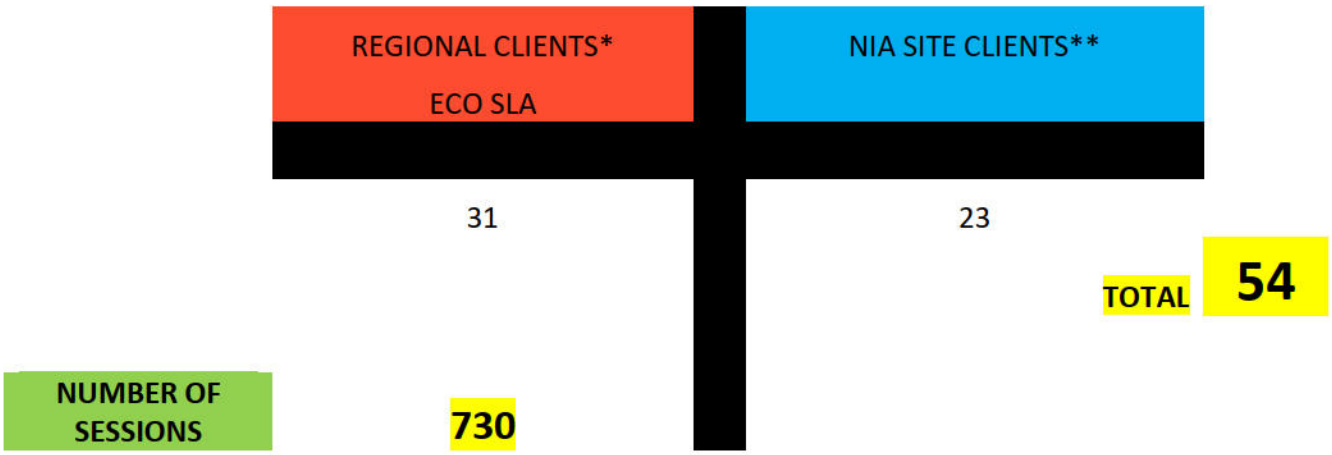
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REFERRAL BREAKDOWN

Total Caseload for PBNI



*Regional clients are those stipulated in our Service Level Agreement for Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) referrals and any other additional referrals as appropriate. These clients are supported by our regional PBNI/ECO Restorative Practitioner, Ciara Hunter.

ALL referrals made to NIA by the PBNI ECO Teams this reporting year were accepted.

**Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) site clients are those who are also clients of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). NIA are intensely supporting these clients as a direct result of other referral routes excluding PBNI such as community, self, statutory or other voluntary organisations. These clients are supported through individual sites for reasons beyond stipulations within their orders and have the opportunity to avail of NIA programmes such as START and our Counselling and Havening Service delivered by Emmett Watters.

REGIONAL CONTRACT FOR ECO'S

Context of Delivery

The delivery of this contract has taken place regionally across Northern Ireland with one lone worker completing all face-to-face sessions and travelling for any referral received from PBNI. For the third year in a row, the effects, and changes to working styles because of the global pandemic present challenges such as limited working space due to restrictions and availability within office sites and managing face to face tripartites that suit PBNI working from home patterns. Also recognising that the pandemic still causes challenges for clients such as social isolation, poverty and increased mental health issues all of which have contributed to the vulnerability of an already vulnerable cohort. The ECO referrals are consistent with the numbers from the previous two years however this year has seen a welcomed increase on referrals for other order types. Although this year has been slightly easier than the previous two, NIA has remained consistent delivering in this space and has added value in terms of counselling support where applicable to ensure clients are supported in a well-rounded manner.

Additionality

In June 2022 Debbie Watters NIA Director and Emmett Watters Counselling met with David Young and some of his team in the North West via Webex to offer a roll out of our unique counselling and havening service to ECO clients. Emmett Watters presented to the team the opportunities available for clients when working with him discussing his programmes, informing around his counselling and havening methods and discussing positive outcomes from the service.

REGIONAL CONTRACT FOR ECO'S

NIA Contract Fulfilment

As underpinned by the 2022/23 contract between PBNI and NIA, NIA are obliged to engage with a:

- minimum of 50 clients per year
- minimum of 4 sessions per client

Minimum of 50 clients per year

During the 2022/23 report period NIA fulfilled 108% of this requirement by engaging with a total of 54 clients.

Minimum of 4 sessions per client

The agreed sessions as stated above has a minimum requirement of 4 sessions per client and through normal practice NIA strive to deliver between 6-8 sessions per client over a 6–8 week period – a minimum of 200 sessions/contacts.

In totality, NIA delivered approx. 730 sessions/contacts fulfilling this requirement by 365%

For the reporting year NIA supported individual clients delivering beyond Restorative Practice and providing emotional and well-being support as well as offering counselling and havening sessions. The number of sessions delivered on ***average*** for the 2022/23 reporting year has been **12 sessions** per client fulfilling this requirement by **300%**.

REGIONAL CONTRACT FOR ECO'S

End of Year: Status of Clients

	LIVE	WAITING	HOLD*	CLOSED	Gender		TOTAL
					Male	Female	
Bangor/Ards	1				2		2
North West	3			10	11	2	13
Downpatrick				1	1		1
Armagh/Dungannon	4			7	11		11
Coleraine				1	1		1
Antrim	1				1		1
Magilligan	1			1	2		2
							31

*Clients waiting for initial tripartite date to be initiated by Probation Officer

**Clients on hold as per the request of the Probation Officer, currently engaging in other programmes

New Referrals in Quarter 4

Bangor/Ards	North West	Downpatrick	Dungannon	Antrim	Total
1	1	0	4	1	**7**

REGIONAL CONTRACT FOR ECO'S (CONT)

Overview of Orders

		Type of Order Issued				
ECO	DCS	PO	CO	SENTENCED	PENDING	UNKNOWN
16	3	5	3	2	1	1

Overview of Client Offences

Drug related	19
Driving	7
Criminal Damage	6
Robbery	1
Burglary & Theft	3
Disorderly & Assault	2
Theft	2
Fraud by false representation	1
Possession of an offensive weapon	2
Assault	6
Threats to kill	1

15 of the 31 clients reported on above have committed *multiple offences.*

Assessed Risk of Re-offending

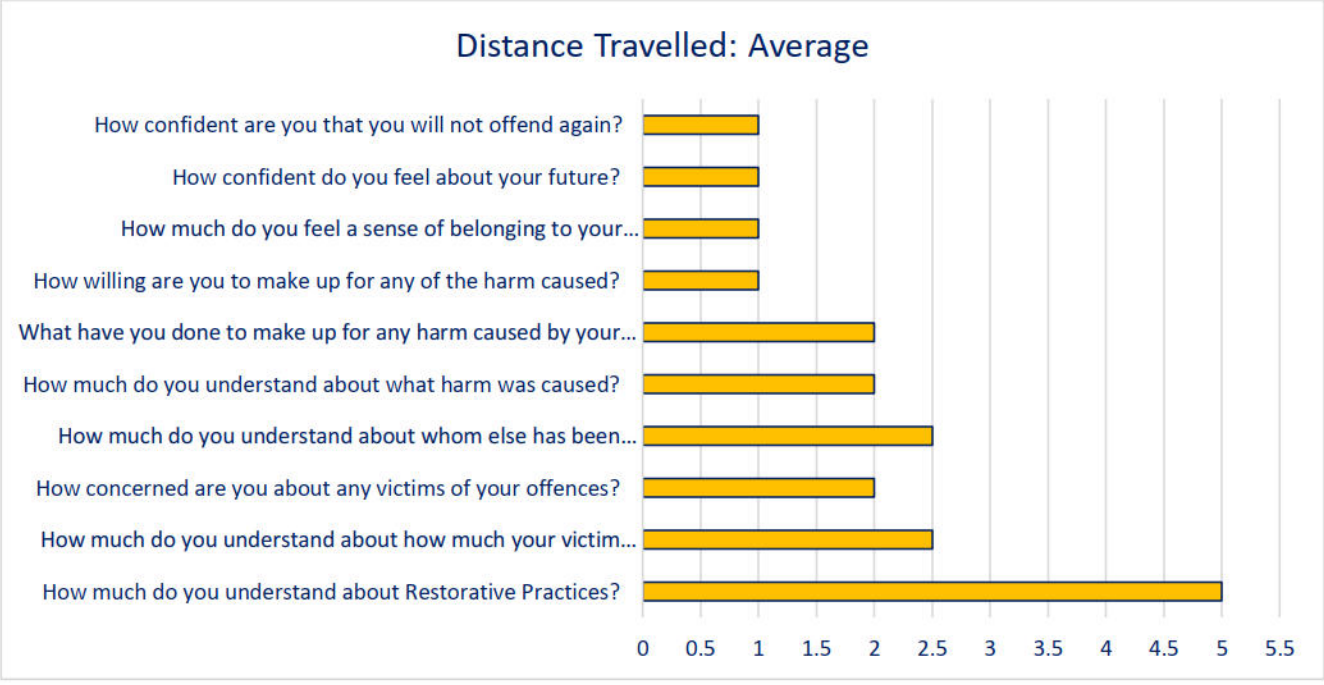
Assessed Risk of Re-Offending			
High	Medium	Low	Not Stated
6	14	4	7

REGIONAL CONTRACT FOR ECO'S (CONT)

Rickter

To help NIA measure soft outcomes, distance travelled and impact we use the Rickter Scale, a person centred assessment tool. Clients are asked to place themselves on a scale of 0-10 in ten key areas at the beginning of engagement and at the end; on completion of their Exit Rickter, the 'distance travelled' in each area is noted and discussed. Rickter is useful to the client providing them with a meaningful experience that provides choice and ownership and influences confidence to take steps towards positive life changes. While providing us the delivery agents an opportunity to capture soft outcomes and measure change in a quantitative way.

The graph below shows the ***average*** 'distance travelled' from beginning of engagement to end by clients in each area for the reporting year **2022/23**.



REGIONAL CONTRACT FOR ECO'S (CONT)

Agencies worked with this year

- PBNI
- Victim Information Unit
- Victim Support
- ASPIRE (NIA/NIACRO)
- TRANSITIONS (NIACRO)
- Disclosure (NIACRO)
- Skills for Justice
- Prison Service NI
- PSNI
- START
- Turnaround Project
- University of Ulster
- SCANNI
- Criminal Justice Inspectorate
- City Centre Initiative, Derry
- Community Restorative Justice Ireland

Available services to clients through NIA

- Mediation
- Counselling
- Havening
- Family Support Hub
- Restorative Application Workshop Training
- LINCS - Good relations, cross community activities between PUL, CNR and ethnic minorities
- Housing Advice / Support
- Benefit Advice / Support
- Education, Employment & Training
- Threat verification
- Mediation:
  Victim / Offender / Community
- STARS – Free Training; Striving Towards a Restorative Society

CONCLUSION

NIA has continued to deliver face to face to ECO clients during an ever-changing working environment. NIA continue to use their own regional offices or offices of key partner organisations to ensure that the quality of the restorative work has not been lost.

In this financial year, previous areas of innovation have continued in development with a specific focus on restorative well-being. NIA has been able to offer clients on site therapeutic counselling which has been accessed by Probation clients who have been willing to travel combined with access to an on-site gym as well as wrap around support including housing advice, benefit advice, community support etc. This restorative well-being strand of our work has been underpinned by restorative circles where clients are encouraged to begin to explore what is going on in their own lives as well as hurt and harm caused.

Moving forward in terms of enhancing the partnership between NIA and PBNI, we feel it is important to reiterate the sentiments of our conclusions in our last report in that we believe the extension of Enhanced Combination Orders, particularly to the Belfast area, would really be beneficial in terms of supporting the needs of victims and people who offend within the criminal justice system, fitting within the Adult Restorative Strategy enhancing interventions within and beyond the criminal justice system.

HUMANISING PRACTICE

Case Study 1

A 32-year-old male and father of one was referred to Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) by PBNI, to engage in a programme of restorative work exploring his journey, consequences of his actions and looking at significant life events to appreciate their impact on his outcomes thus far. His offences for this particular order were Possession of Class A and B with intent to supply. For his offences, the male received an Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) and was deemed medium likelihood of reoffending. The client misused alcohol and drugs since his late childhood/early teenage years and they became a coping mechanism from quite a young age. The client had experienced a significant amount of trauma through loss of life from those close to him through the detrimental effects of drugs and alcohol or suicide and personal experience of sexual abuse. When these traumatic events concurrently occurred, the client lacked the coping skills and inevitably continued to use the negative mechanisms which he had learned.

The initial sessions looked at the offence from the client's own perspective and some restorative reflections. As the client's trust in the Restorative Practitioner began to grow, he was able to give crucial detail around his upbringing and events which have contributed heavily and negatively on his life. The client had been to rehab before and while there he had looked at elements of Restorative Practice in terms of focusing on some of his victims. This made the victim element somewhat easier for him however this time, he was able to look beyond the 'inner circle' of who had been hurt and harmed by his actions and consider victims and consequences of his actions in a much wider context which was eye opening and beneficial for him.

It was clear through dialogue and the information being shared that the client felt safe within the environment and trusted that the practitioner would be gentle with his information and her responses. He was aware the restorative element of his order was not there to judge him, retraumatise him or question his self-worth but more of an acknowledgement of his journey thus far, backed by only facts and looking ahead to a way to move on.

The client chose not to write a letter of apology as this was a task which he had fulfilled while in rehab however he found it beneficial exploring his triggers again. He felt it gave him an opportunity to get some current and long-standing issues off his chest with a neutral ear listening and as his life had changed, it provided the space to explore newer triggers and look also at how older triggers had been overcome.

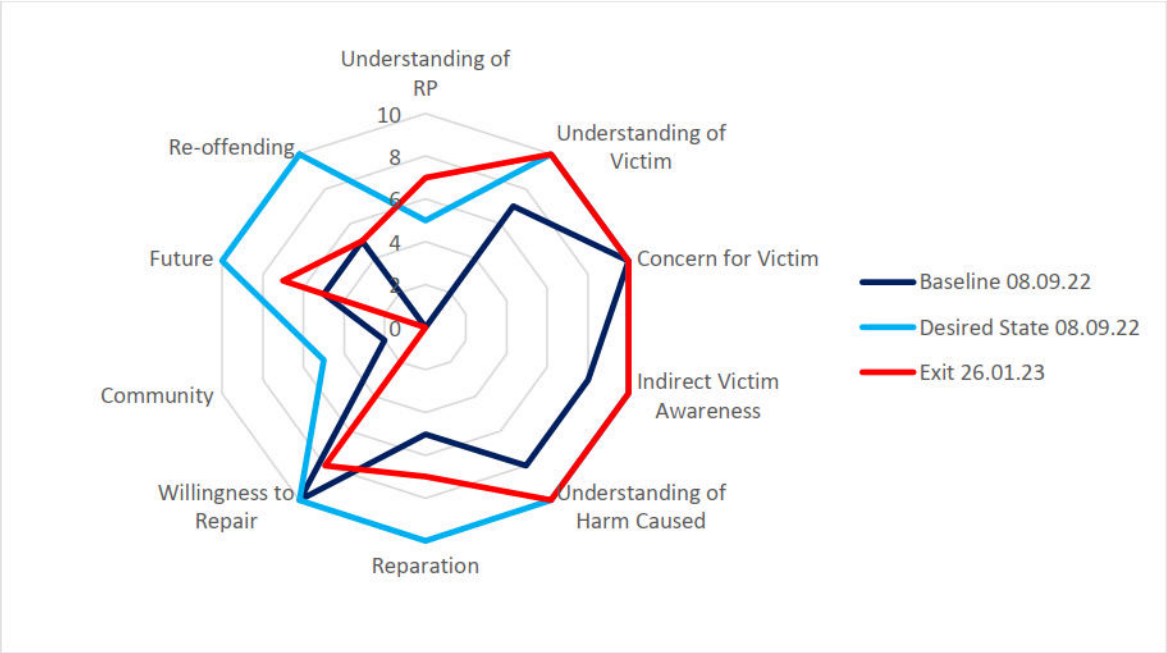
Over the months the client was engaged with NIA it was recognised by the practitioner and agreed by the client that his mental health was deteriorating. This was reported to PBNI who alongside NIA kept a close eye on and discussed with the client on a regular basis. By looking at the timeline of life events which he had compiled in earlier sessions the client was able to identify that the time of year, coinciding with deaths that had happened around the same time was contributing to his current state of mind and way of feeling. A referral was made by PBNI to a counselling service.

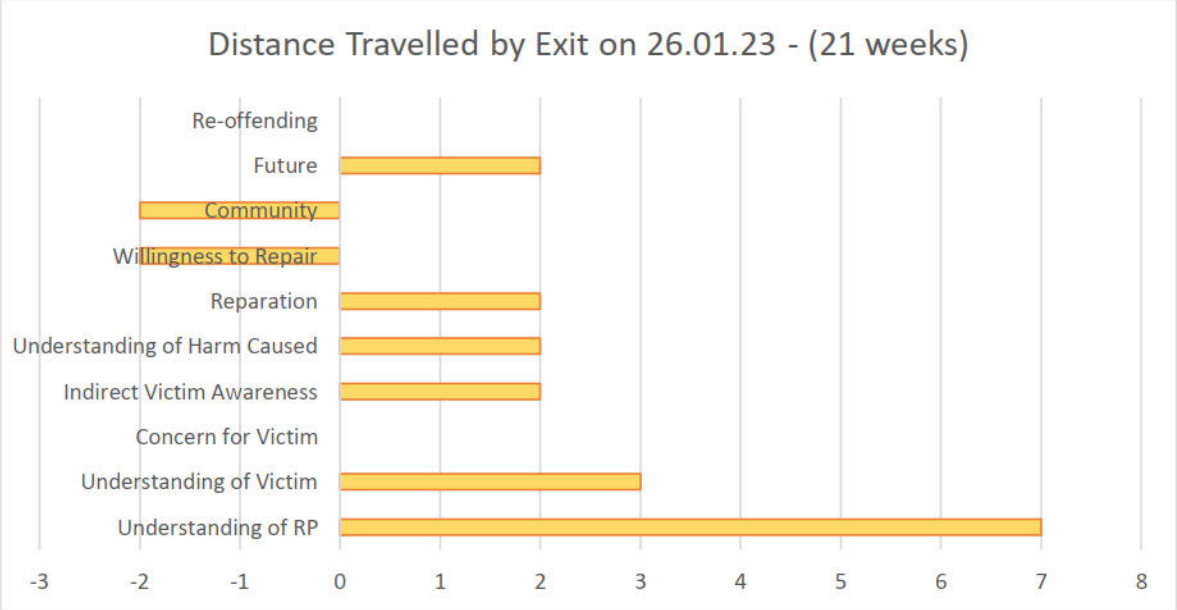
At initial meetings this client was quite tough on himself however by completion it was clear that he had learned to be a bit gentler with himself, appreciating the journey he was on and the influence that this had had on his life and behaviours. He recognized that there were some traumas that were beyond his control and that he simply could not take responsibility for and other events in life which outcomes and consequences were wholly controllable by him. He learned that the events within his control could no longer be changed but that the experiences that come with them have the opportunity to shape better choices in his future.

After completion he sent the Restorative Practitioner a message of thanks saying: "*I just felt I wanted to text you to say thanks for your time over the last few months. It never bothered me coming to your sessions. You always made it easy to talk and open up. Honestly, I could have just bullsh****d my way through the sessions and say what I thought was wanted to be heard from me but that's not me. I always wanted to be honest about anything we were talking about. You're really good at your job and you made it really easy to talk about difficult issues about my life and I just want to thank you and wish you and your loved ones the best. I actually will miss our Thursday morning chats. I'm glad I was assigned to you and I won't hesitate to contact you if I ever feel I need to. You've opened my eyes and I've learned/gained a lot over the past few months from you and I just want to say thank you very much*".

Case Study 1 (cont.)

Rickter Analysis





'*Reoffending*' and '*Concern for Victim*' were scored 10 at initial assessment and exit therefore no change being made.

'*Community*' is a negative score as the client feels Paramilitarism plays a big role in what he identified as Community and therefore his attitudes around this changed therefore making him score it lower than he did initially.

'*Willingness to repair*' has a negative score because of realisiation that not everything to be mended was within his control.

HUMANISING PRACTICE

Case Study 2

A 33-year-old male, father of one was referred to Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) by PBNI, to address the risks, hurt and harm caused by his offences, with the intention of reflecting upon the consequences of his actions while exploring victim awareness. His offences for this order were dangerous driving and driving while unfit through drink or drugs. While in company, the client was the driver of a vehicle that caused a serious car collision. The client and another individual in his company had to undergo surgery and the client spent a significant amount of time in hospital recovering from his injuries. When he appeared in court, he was sentenced to an Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) and was considered medium likelihood of reoffending. The client's misuse of drugs for all of his adult life up until this point played a significant part in his daily living.

Initially the client was weary of engagement and talking 'too much' to the Restorative Practitioner and 'giving too much away'. The process was explained to him again but naturally it took some weeks for the relationship to build to a point where the client realised that the sessions were not a means to gather more information on what had happened to penalise him further. It was explained to him that he had been processed through the criminal justice system and sentenced and that this element of work was put in place to help him move forward. The sessions built the relationships between the client and practitioner while exploring his journey to the current point in his life and looking at triggers, significant life events and victims along the way.

The client particularly found the sessions which looked at significant life events and indirect triggers beneficial as he hadn't before taken the time to look at how events and reactions went hand in hand, this was a significant moment for him.

Further to that the client and practitioner explored victims, direct and indirect and after his realization through the significant life events sessions this became somewhat easier for him in identifying the victims. The victim sessions initially and surprisingly didn't focus on direct victims, such as the passengers in the car as he felt like he had already dealt with in the immediate aftermath and that it was put behind him and he had moved on.

When the sessions began and the idea of a letter of apology or a mediation with any victim of his offences was a possibility, the client had declined as this wasn't something he felt was necessary or that he wanted to do however approaching closure he decided that writing a letter of apology was something he was now interested in and so the process began. The client hardly required any direction or assistance in the writing of his letter and although the preparation for the letters and expectations of them were discussed in session he wrote the letter solely by himself and in his own time. His eagerness to do so and his genuine regret, apology and detail to thought about the harm which he had caused shone through.

The client completed his engagement and this requirement of his order successfully. He attended every session arranged with him, was open and honest and showed bravery in his vulnerability.

Case Study 2 (cont.)

Letter of Reflection

I am in March I was driving my own car under the influence of alcohol and drugs and caused a serious accident on main street.

I understand I should under no circumstances have been driving the car however due to personal issues which I know is no excuse, I made a very bad decision

I do not know the full extent of the misery my actions have caused you through damage of your vehicle however I cannot apologise enough of any inconveniece, caused through having to get your car fixed, the cost, loss of earnings through not be able to / from work, making family life more complicated, rise in insurance and potentially any trauma caused by having to witness it.

I know its no consolation and might be meaningless to you but until 1 March 2021 I had no previous offences and no criminal record. As a result of my poor choices and my own mental turmoil that has now changed. I now have a criminal record and my future, and my health affected.

As a result of the crash that I caused, I sustained significant injuries and spent a lengthy time in hospital I caused damage to my body that will never be the same and that will continue to have an impact on my life forever.

Understandably I appeared in court and was sentenced to an enhanced combination order

which means I have to attend probation weekly and engage in programmes for two years. I know that my history of not offending in the past played a part in the sentence I was given because I appreciate I could have gone to prison for 16 months.

Instead I was given the ECO for 2 years with 75 hours community service also.

With the order so far I have had to work with NIA which has been educational to me, keeps me on my toes and has me thinking in depth about the consequences of my actions which I wouldnt have done otherwise and given me the opportunity to write this letter.

My community service is now completed, and it was with a local charity which I throroughly enjoyed. It gave me a purpose where I have felt a part of a community and felt needed and welcomed. Even though I have completed the hours requested of me I have chosen to stay on and volunteer on my time.

Before March 2021 my life wasnt in good place and I felt worthless with no real purpose. Since the accident and as awful as everything I caused was, the positive outcome is that it shook me and put things into perspective.

The accident pushed me be a better person and to work harder at relationships that are important to me.

I am feeling a lot better and stronger than I was in 2021 and I am feeling more

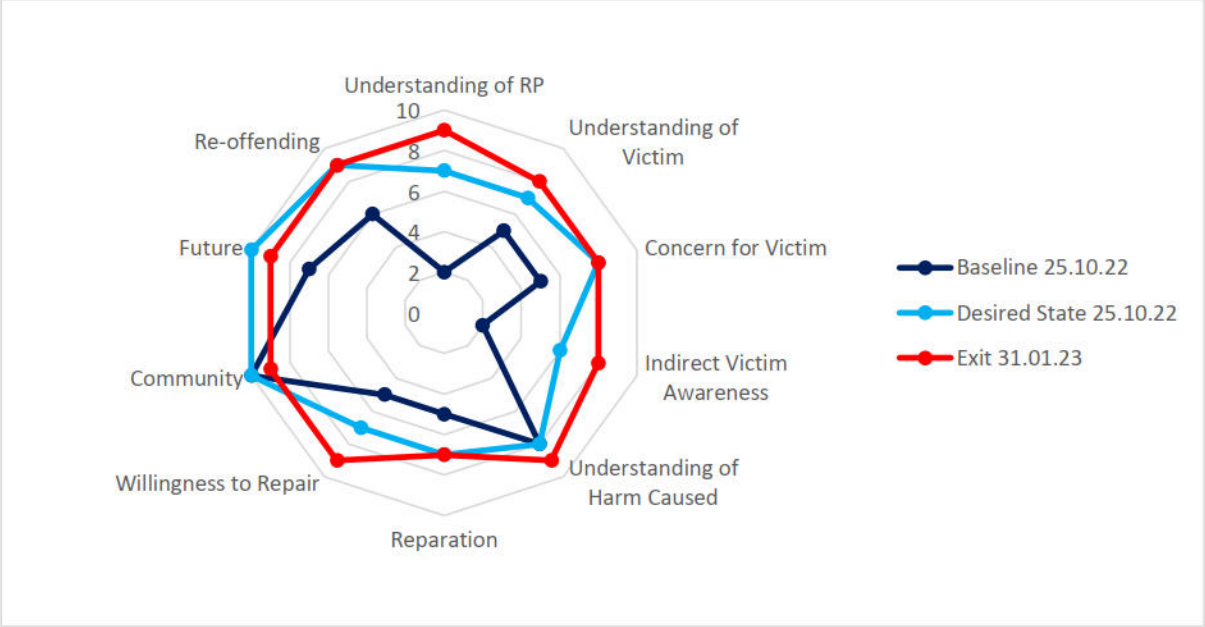
comfortable in life.

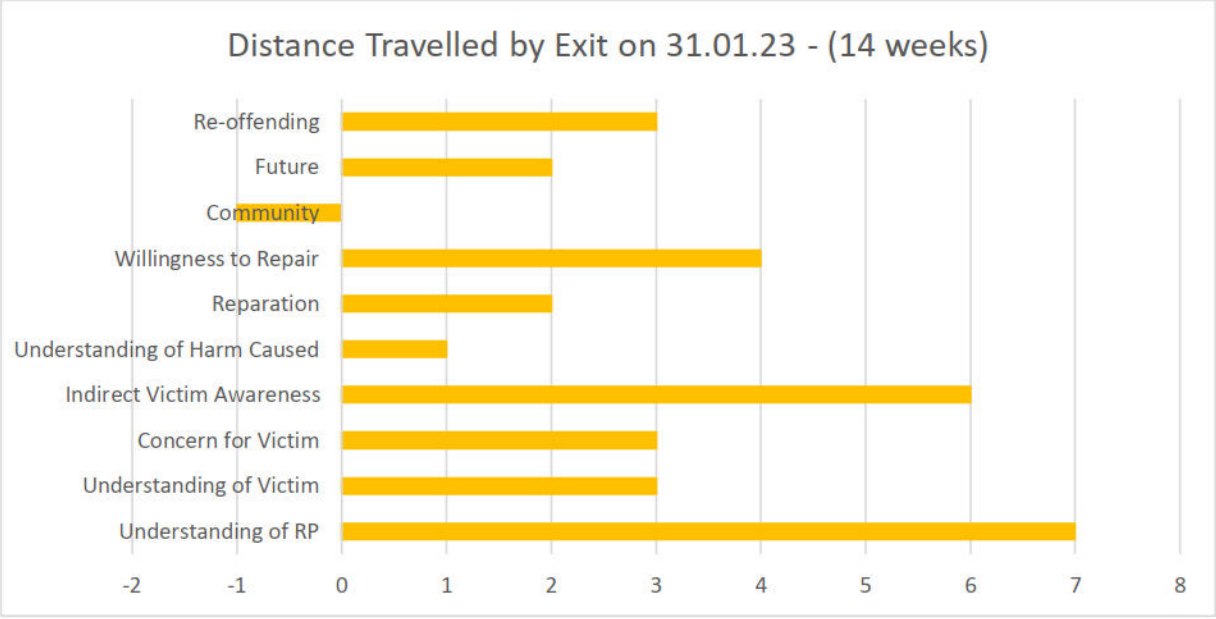
I hope if you were wanting closure that this letter fulfils that for you and hope that you have been or can, move forward and are able to accept my sincere apology.

I wish you the best in life,

Case Study 2 (cont.)

Rickter Analysis





'*Community*' had a negative outcome as the client felt at beginning, he was a ten, however working with NIA made him realise the depth of community and therefore on exit felt that he needs to work a bit harder therefore scoring lower than initial assessment.



EVALUATION OF THE ENHANCED COMBINATION ORDER OCTOBER 2015 TO DECEMBER 2021

Department of Justice
An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt
Männystrie O tha Laa

NISRA
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
Gníomhaireacht Thuaisceart Éireann um Staitistící agus Taighde

June 2022

Acronyms

ACE	Assessment, Case management and Evaluation
CRJI	Community Restorative Justice Ireland
HRCS	Human Resource Consultancy Services
NIACRO	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
ORS	Offending Related Score
PBNI	Probation Board for Northern Ireland
PO	Probation Officer
PS	Problem Score
PSO	Probation Service Officer
ROP	Reducing Offending in Partnership

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Acknowledgements
We would like to record our thanks to all of the participants who gave us their views in a frank and genuine manner. This report is based on what they told us.

1 Executive Summary

The Lord Chief Justice requested that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), develop a community sentence as an alternative to the high number of prison sentences lasting less than 12 months. Known as the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO), ECOs commenced in the Ards, and Armagh and South Down court divisions in October 2015 and were extended to the North West in October 2018. Focussing on restorative practice, desistance and victims, service users also complete community service. Where appropriate access to a PBNI psychologist, parenting/family support work and accredited programmes are also part of the order. This report provides an overview of the findings of an evaluation undertaken for the years that the order has been operational.

Key Findings

The key findings from the research are summarised below -

1) Delivery

- By 31st December 2021, 682 individuals had received an ECO; 83 went on to receive a subsequent one on at least one other occasion (855 separate ECOs). Over 30% were sentenced in the Ards court division, over 31% in Armagh and South Down and 29% in the North West. The average length of an order was 20 months.
- By 31st December 2021, of the 740 ECO referrals made to PBNI, 368 service users had successfully completed their order, 253 were still actively engaged and 119 had either breached, had their order revoked or a warrant issued.
- Service users were mainly male (89%) and had a median age of 29 years; the majority were medium or high risk of reoffending.

1 Executive Summary

2) Impact

- The completion of unpaid work within local communities was one of the main requirements of ECOs with 70,400 hours sentenced by the courts between October 2015 and December 2021. Service users completed an average of 82 hours and the majority (77%) said they found this element of the order useful.
- The psychology element was one of the most highly valued aspects of ECOs for both PBNI staff and service users, many of whom had mental health and addiction issues. The fact that no waiting lists meant a faster intervention was viewed as one of the main benefits. The majority of service users said they found the psychological intervention useful (86%) and that ECOs helped them address addiction issues (92%).
- Support with parenting/family relationships was available from Barnardos for those who required it. There were 314 referrals since October 2015 with improved scores for the majority of service users in the four outcomes of focus. Findings from the exit survey showed 79% of service users said ECO had helped with family relationships.
- Over 80% of service users rated the discussion and work on victim issues as useful. Specific benefits identified by stakeholders included raised awareness of the impact of behaviour on victims, their own families and the wider community. Challenges relating to Victim Support referrals were reported to be largely due to the number of cases with no identifiable victim along with caution not to re-traumatise. A strong desire for a more restorative conference style approach was highlighted by a number of stakeholders.
- The one year proven reoffending rate has shown a year on year decrease since 2015/16. The vast majority of service users agreed that ECOs had helped them address their offending behaviour (95%), PBNI staff's support had helped them avoid/reduce re-offending (92%) and they were unlikely to commit a further similar offence (99%).

1 Executive Summary

- There was a statistically significant decrease between ACE scores at the start and end of the order, overall and when broken down into high, medium and low risk categories with average reductions of 6.3, 3.4 and 2.5 points respectively.
- Between 2015 and 2017 the number of custodial sentences of 12 months or less, awarded by courts involved in the Armagh/South Down/Ards pilot, decreased by 20.7%. Between 2018 and 2020, when the North West came on board, there was a 20.3% decrease. While there were reductions in the overall number of short term sentences across all the NI courts, at 3.4% between 2015 and 2017 and 14.6% between 2018 and 2020 these were lower than across the pilot areas.
- The impact of provision of support with employment, particularly that from NIACRO, was also highlighted during the qualitative phase of the research, as was improvements in service user confidence.

3) Overall

- The evidence highlighted in this review shows that ECOs provide a well rounded holistic service for complex and chaotic service users. The associated wrap around services are now well embedded and excellent working relationships have developed between stakeholders with continued commitment between partner organisations evident. Challenges, relating mainly to the pandemic, homelessness, securing restorative placements/victim input and unavailable on a province wide basis were identified with suggestions for improvements focussing on restorative conference style work, incorporating a housing element, mainstreaming and roll out.
- Input from service users themselves has also been positive with the vast majority satisfied with the support they received (98%) and a range of benefits identified. The wider value that ECOs have brought to service users, including the provision of psychological support and help with avoiding re-offending should not be under-estimated.

2 Context

2.1 Enhanced Combination Orders

Research shows that more than 50% of offenders sentenced to a short prison term will re-offend and that as there is little that can be done in practical terms to rehabilitate them during a short prison stay, short-term prison sentences are less effective in addressing offending behaviours than community-based disposals. The Lord Chief Justice therefore requested that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), develop a community sentence as an alternative to the high number of prison sentences lasting less than 12 months. Based on existing legislation and known as the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO), they offered Judges a community option in a more intensive format.

Following consultation and agreement with the then Justice Minister, the Chief Constable, and the Director of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), it was agreed that PBNI would pilot ECOs in the Ards, and Armagh and South Down court divisions for 18 months, from October 2015; this was extended to court divisions in the North West in October 2018 and has been operational across both areas since then.

ECOs fall within the Department of Justice's (DoJ) Problem-Solving Justice (PSJ) initiative which aims to tackle the root causes of offending, and reduce harmful behaviour. Further information about PSJ initiatives is available on the NI Direct website.

ECOs focus on restorative practice, desistance and victims, with service users also required to complete unpaid work within their local communities. Those with mental health issues are assessed by PBNI psychologists, with a treatment plan or referral to an appropriate health provider then forming part of the intervention. Where appropriate parenting/family support work and accredited programmes are also part of the order.

2 Context

ECOs use a multiagency, multidisciplinary, collaborative approach, with PBNI leading on the order, and support provided by a range of organisations including Barnardos, Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI), Northern Ireland Alternatives and Victim Support. Within PBNI, ECOs involve Probation Officers (POs), Probation Service Officers (PSOs), Community Service Officers (CSOs) and PBNI Psychologists providing greater flexibility and choice.

2.2 The Review

Several evaluations of the ECO initiative have been undertaken over the last number of years. They have shown, that while demanding for both staff and service users, the orders have been successful in achieving their aims. This current review was undertaken during February and March 2022 by Analytical Services Group (ASG), statisticians on loan to DoJ from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). It examines how much has been done between October 2015 and December 2021, how well it has been done and the impact that it has had on service users. This report provides an overview of the findings.







3 Approach

About this Chapter

This chapter provides an overview of the data collection techniques used.

3.1 Data Collection

The evaluation used the following quantitative and qualitative sources –

- Administrative data held by Barnardos, PBNI and DoJ's Causeway Data System.

- Semi-structured interviews with representatives from PBNI (1 Director, 3 Assistant Directors, 4 area managers, 1 PO), Alternatives (2), Barnardos (2), CRJI (2) and Victim Support (1).

- Questionnaires -

✓ Exit questionnaires completed by participants at the end of their order to gather data relating to ECO expectations and experiences. By March 2022, 104 completed questionnaires were available from participants involved with ECO between April 2017 and January 2022.

✓ All POs, PSOs, CSOs and psychologists working with ECO service users were invited to complete a questionnaire to gather their views on how the order was working and its impact on service users; 13 individuals responded.

✓ Judges working in the pilot areas were invited to complete a questionnaire to gather their views on the order; 2 individuals responded.



3.2 Data Limitations

The following limitations should be kept in mind when reading this report:

- While 740 participants were subject to an ECO from 1st October 2015, 368 had completed the order by 31st December 2021 and were eligible to complete the exit questionnaire; responses were obtained for 103 (response rate, 28%).

4 Orders and Service Users

About this Chapter

This chapter provides an overview of the number of ECOs imposed between 1st October 2015 and 31st December 2021, along with a profile of participating service users.

4.1 Orders Imposed

By 31st December 2021, 682 individuals had received an ECO; 83 of these individuals received a subsequent ECO on at least one other occasion (855 separate ECOs).

Approximately two thirds were imposed through the Magistrates and a third through the Crown Courts (Figure 1). Over 31% of ECOs were sentenced in the Armagh and South Down court division, over 30% in Ards and 29% in the North West (Figure 2). Just under 10% of ECOs were recorded within other non pilot courts. A breakdown by individual court office is available in Appendix 1.

The majority of orders lasted for 12, 18 or 24 months (Figure 3). The average length of an order was 20 months.

Figure 1 – Number of orders by court type (n=855)
(Source: Causeway System)

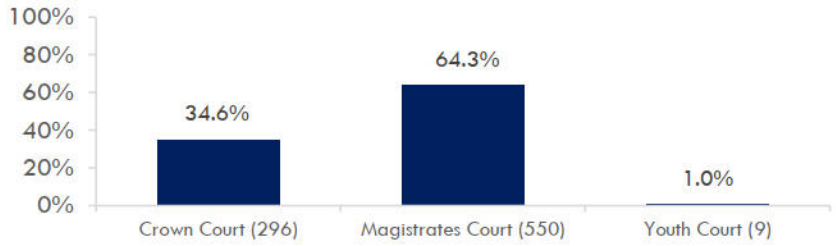


Figure 2 – Number of orders by court location (n=855)
(Source: Causeway System)

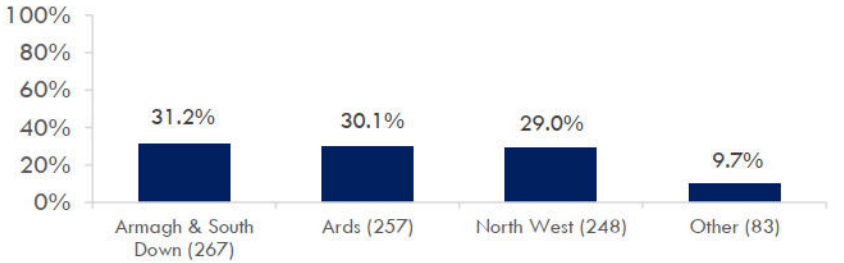
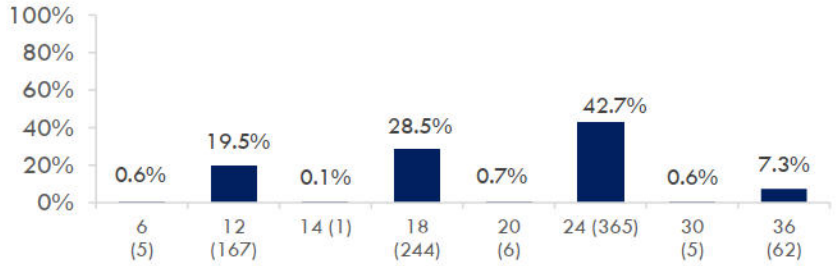


Figure 3 – Proportion of service users by length of ECO in months (n=855) (Source: Causeway System)



4 Orders and Service Users

4.2 User Profile

Participants were largely male and ranged in age from 17 to 70 with a median of 29 years; the majority were medium or high risk (Table 1).

Drug related crimes and crimes defined as 'violence against the person' were the most common offence types committed (Table 2).

Table 1 – ECO participant profile
(Source: Age and gender, Causeway System; ACE, PBNI)

		Count	%
Age when ECO imposed (n=682)	17 to 29	347	50.9
	30+	335	49.1
Gender (n=682)	Male	606	88.9
	Female	76	11.1
ACE Risk of re-offending at start of ECO (n=666)	High	232	34.8
	Medium	360	54.1
	Low	74	11.1

Table 2 – Offence type by age group (Individuals may have committed more than one offence type and consequently will be counted in more than one offence category) (Source: Causeway System)

Offence Type	% 17-29	% 30+	% Total
Violence against the person	23.9	23.8	23.9
Drugs	24.2	22.1	23.2
Motoring	12.8	17.4	15.0
Theft	8.5	9.1	8.8
Criminal Damage	4.9	4.4	4.7
Public Order	9.8	7.1	8.5
Burglary	5.1	2.0	3.6
Possession of Weapons	3.4	2.5	2.9
Sexual	2.2	2.0	2.1
Fraud	0.9	1.2	1.1
Robbery	0.7	0.2	0.5
Miscellaneous crimes against society	3.6	8.3	5.8

4 Orders and Service Users

4.3 PBNI Service User Numbers

By 31st December 2021, of the 740 ECO referrals made to PBNI, 368 had successfully completed their order, 253 were still under supervision and 119 had either breached their order, had their order revoked (47) or had a warrant issued.

4.4 Problems Faced by Service Users

The challenges faced by service users, many of whom led chaotic lifestyles, were highlighted across the research activities. Many were reported to have complex mental health and/or addiction issues; others were homeless and had no family support. Others had been in contact with Criminal Justice organisations in the past and had unsuccessful outcomes, consequently motivation and belief that 'change' for the better was possible, was low.

ACE risk and needs profile scores were available for 273 service users. The scores reflect the problems and needs they faced for various factors within the social, personal and offending domains. Factors within all three domains are given an Offending Related Score (ORS); factors within the social and personal domains are also given a Problem Score (PS). The ORS reflects the extent to which the factor is relevant to the person's recent and/or potential offending while the PS reflects the extent of the problem for the client, regardless of any link with their offending. The ORS and PS prevalence rates are the proportion of those assessed as having a small, medium or large problem with each factor.

Table 3 on the following page lists the factors where more than half of service users were assessed as having a problem. It shows that 94% had difficulties with reasoning/thinking and almost 90% with responsibility/control and impulsive/risk taking. These three factors were relevant to recent and/or potential offending for almost all ECO service users.

Approximately three quarters of service users were assessed as having problems with employment, education, training, family/personal relationships, alcohol and emotional well being. Just over 60% had

problems with drugs and stress management. Appendix 2 provides prevalence rates for additional social, personal and offending related factors.

Table 3 – Factors where more than half of service users were deemed to have a small, medium or large problem

Domain		ACE Factor	Prevalence Rate (%) ORS	PS
Social		Employment, Education & Training	59	76
		Community	53	57
		Family & Personal Relationships	53	74
Personal	Substance Misuse & Addictions	Alcohol	68	71
		Drugs	55	61
	Health	Emotional Well Being	68	76
	Personal Skills	Reasoning/Thinking	98	94
	Individual Characteristics	Impulsive/Risk Taking	97	89
		Responsibility/Control	93	88
		Stress Management	56	62
		Aggression/Temper	53	53
Offending	Lifestyle & Associates	Does the offender's lifestyle put him/her at risk of reoffending?	84	n/a
		Do friends/ associates put him/her at risk of reoffending?	68	
	Attitudes	Does the offender deny responsibility for his/her offending?	50	n/a
		Does the offender disregard harm to his/her victim(s)	56	

5 How Much and How Well?

About this Chapter

The requirements on offenders subject to ECOs were to:

1. Undergo assessment and, if appropriate, mental health interventions with PBNI psychology staff;
2. Complete unpaid work within local communities;
3. Participate in parenting/family support work if appropriate;
4. Participate in victim focussed work, and if possible, a restorative intervention; and
5. Complete an accredited programme, if appropriate.

Views relating to how each element was working were gathered through exit questionnaires with service users (103 available), surveys with the Judiciary/PBNI staff, and face to face interviews with stakeholders. This chapter provides an overview of the findings.





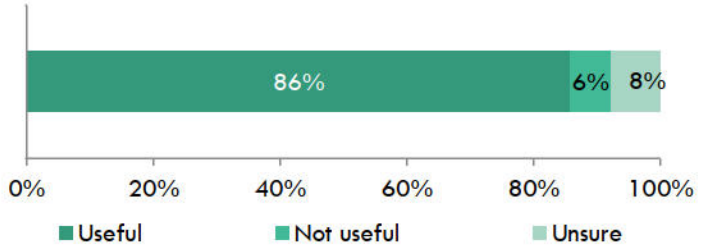


5 How Much and How Well?

5.1 Psychological Intervention

When ECOs first commenced all participants were offered an assessment with a PBNI psychologist and then, where appropriate, mental health interventions. This changed at the end of the first eighteen months and from then on the usual psychology consultation and referral process has applied, with participants seen based on need.

Figure 4 – How useful did you find the referral to the PBNI psychologist? *(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=63)*



Providing a personalised programme of work, the psychological intervention looks at service users behaviours, triggers and backgrounds, giving them support to explore that. Where appropriate it can also involve linking in with family members, who are able to provide further insight into service user needs. While not all service users are ready to engage with the psychologist initially, this can be revisited at a later stage and it was reported, that most service users were willing to engage once relationships had been established and trust had been built.

The psychology element is one of the most highly valued aspects of the order for both PBNI staff and service users. Described by one PBNI interviewee as 'phenomenal' and 'critical to the success' of the order, almost all PBNI staff who responded to the survey agreed that it was operating well and beneficial to service users (Tables 2 and 3, Appendix 3). From a service user perspective, the exit questionnaire showed that the vast majority found the referral useful (Figure 4).

5 How Much and How Well?

A number of benefits of the psychological element of the order were identified during the research and included -

- No waiting lists so service users get help straight away, something that makes a huge difference for those with mental health issues, addictions and learning difficulties;
- Provides a quicker intervention for service users who don't meet the threshold for other mental health or addiction services, who don't have a diagnosed mental health issue or who don't meet the criteria of a diagnosed learning difficulty;
- Gives POs greater insight on how best to work with service users, enabling them to build a bespoke plan; and
- Psychologists able to advocate to GPs on service users behalf, with GPs more likely to listen to another medical professional.

"Psychology is key to this order. I feel the rest are just sticking plasters. Need to get to bottom of issue. Not skim the surface." PBNI



"If you were waiting in the community for a referral it would be maybe six months to two years now with covid. With probation we have no waiting lists." PBNI

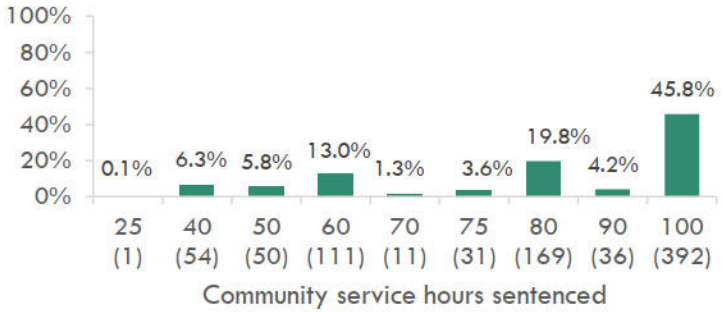


5 How Much and How Well?

5.2 Community Service

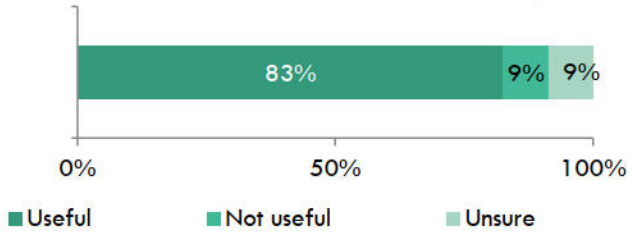
The completion of unpaid work within local communities was one of the main requirements of ECOs. By 31st December 2021, the mean number of community service hours sentenced was 82 with a total of 70,400 hours sentenced by the courts from October 2015. Based on the 2022 national living wage of £9.50 per hour this was equivalent to almost £670,000 worth of work provided to communities in the Ards, Armagh/South Down and North West areas.

Figure 5 – Proportion of service users by community service hours sentenced (n=855) (Source: Causeway System)



All 13 respondents to the PBNI staff survey agreed that the community service element of the order was operating well and almost all agreed community service benefitted service users (Tables 2 and 3, Appendix 3). This was reiterated further during the interviews when PBNI representatives highlighted the commitment of the CSOs and PSOs and provided examples of the positive impact that community service had on both the local area and service users themselves. For some service users it provided structure, a purpose and increased their confidence, with a small number getting so much from their placement that they had opted to continue once their allocated hours were completed. For others it was their first job and provided a work like atmosphere, helping them understand the potential benefits of working. Input from service users showed that over 80% found the community service useful (Figure 6).

Figure 6 – How useful did you find the community service?
(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=103)



5 How Much and How Well?

A number of challenges relating to the community service element of the order were identified during the research and included -

- The chaotic nature of many service users' lives and the complexities of addictions and mental health issues made full engagement difficult for some;
- A small number of individuals were reported not to be physically capable of completing community service hours;

"Majority of ECO clients lead chaotic lifestyles. Trying to get them to the community service element and attend consistently with appointments can be difficult when also managing other factors such as addiction." PBNI



"The community service element is massive, they are involved with community projects and really adding value. Covid has shut down a lot of the voluntary sector, but having people coming in and maintaining grounds, or dealing with graffiti, that's a great benefit to the community." PBNI



- While PBNI aimed to make placements restorative, and specific examples of this were provided across the research, securing such placements was reported to be challenging, particularly when there was no identifiable victim or in areas where there were fewer restorative placement options; and
- While the onset of the pandemic meant that community service stalled for a short time, the focus had to move towards outdoor work placements. Interviewees noted that staff had worked hard to ensure community service continued with investment in social distancing alarm devices, worn by service users, to help ensure social distancing was maintained. During the pandemic, community service was reported as being a 'lifeline' for some service users struggling with mental health issues.

5 How Much and How Well?

5.3 Parenting/Family Support

Participation in parenting/family work, where appropriate was a requirement of ECOs with POs able to refer service users to Barnardos for support. Initially offered on a four session basis there was capacity to extend if additional work was required. An initial assessment was undertaken at the first session to determine individual needs with identified areas addressed during subsequent sessions. Delivery was in person in PBNI accommodation until the onset of the pandemic in March 2020; since then sessions have been delivered remotely, due mainly to restrictions on visitors to PBNI premises.

The current target for service delivery is 100 parents and 400 individual or group sessions available annually. As expected, numbers were impacted due to the closure of the courts at the start of the pandemic and during this time additional sessions were offered to those already engaged.

From October 2015 until January 2022, approximately 314 individuals, have engaged with Barnardos - 73 recorded in the ECO evaluation report covering October 2015 to November 2018 and 241 recorded by Barnardos during October 2018 and January 2022. Since October 2018, 1,402 individual sessions have been completed; the number of non-completers was reported to be low.

Feedback across all stakeholder groups regarding support and the resultant benefits to service users was extremely positive, as were views on working relationships between Barnardos and PBNI.

Specific benefits identified included –

- Raising awareness of the impact of behaviour on children, helping the person move away from offending lifestyle;
- Improved knowledge of own needs as a parent and the needs

"It shows them what impact their offending or the potential impact of their future offending would have on their children, and that helps that person move away from that lifestyle."

PBNI

"It's about them seeing the impact of their own behaviour, and understanding the impact of their behaviour on their children. Helping them understand how their choices affect their children."

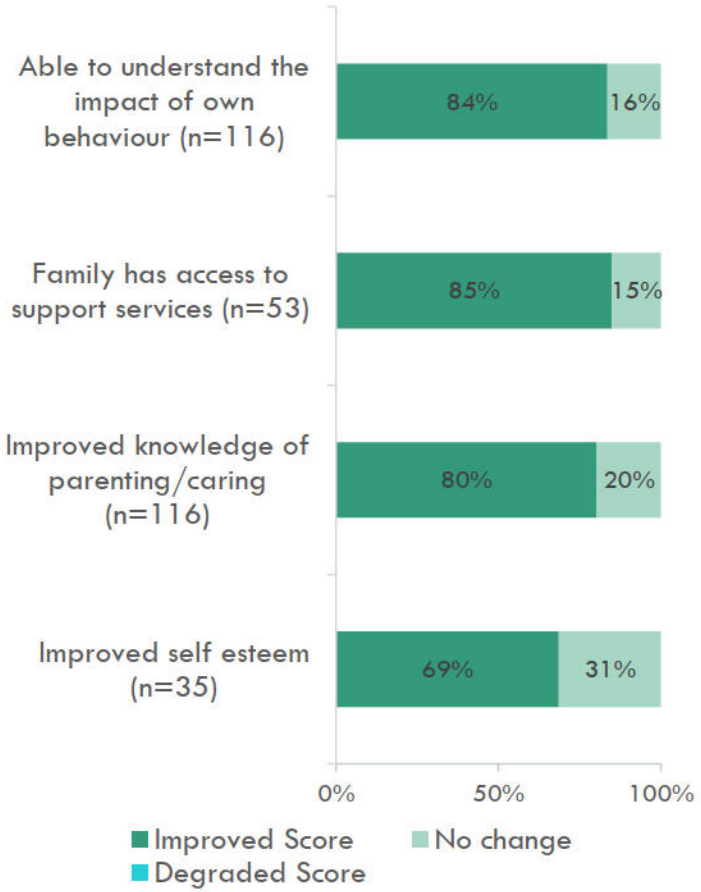
Stakeholder

of the child;

- Available for all parents (including expectant parents and those without access) and not just those experiencing parenting problems;
- Compliments the health and social care system and 'carries weight' for service users involved with social workers;
- Provides service users with a perspective, outside PBNI and the criminal justice system;
- Ability to respond to individual need, including accommodating sessions around working hours for those in employment; and
- Sign posting to other support services.

Service users were asked to rate their level of need, when they started and finished working with Barnardos. Figure 7 shows that by the time they had completed the programme the majority had improved their scores in all four outcomes and no scores were degraded.

Figure 7 – Outcome Progress Scores for Service users working with Barnardos (Source: Barnardos)



5 How Much and How Well?

5.4 Victim Element

The victim element of the order involved –

- Victim focussed, awareness work, undertaken with service users, by PBNI, CRJI and Alternatives; and
- Where an ECO was being considered and there was an identifiable, registered victim, PBNI would make a referral to Victim Support asking them to contact the victim so their views could be considered.

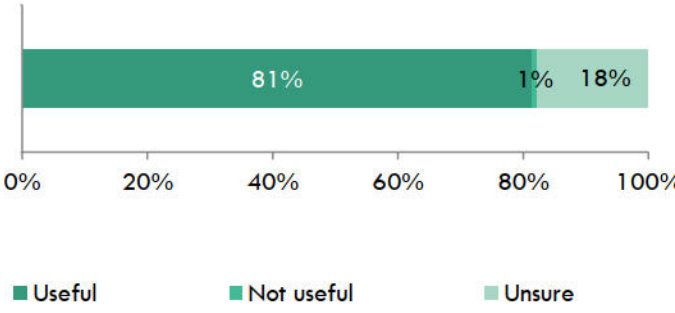
Over 80% of service users rated the discussion and work on victim issues as useful or very useful (Figure 8). Almost all respondents to the staff survey agreed this element was operating well and benefitting service users (Tables 2 and 3, Appendix 3). Specific benefits identified across the stakeholder groups included –

- Raised awareness of the impact of behaviour on victims and the wider community;
- Where the offence was 'victimless', shows service users the impact of their behaviour on their own families; and
- CRJI and Alternatives provide a bridge back to the community where the person has committed the offence.

"Interventions such as victim awareness highlights reflection and allows the service user to become more aware of their actions and the consequences. Helps to see how their offending effects their family/friends but also the victim as well." PBNI



Figure 8 – How useful did you find the discussion and work on victim issues? - *(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=96)*



5 How Much and How Well?

Aside from the benefits relating to raised awareness of impact on others, engagement with Alternatives and CRJI provided service users with the following –

- Availability of therapeutic support with no waiting lists;
- Gym provision;
- Employment support;
- Support available outside scheduled appointments, including on a 'first responder' basis to crises outside of office hours;
- Provision of support to family members such as help with benefit applications;
- More likely to 'open up' as community based;
- Support available after ECO has ended and for as long as required; and
- Practical support during pandemic, including food parcels and help with gas/electric.

Challenges relating to this element of the order, identified during the research included –

- Where possible victims wishes were taken into account for the community service element of the order but with placements limited, particularly during the pandemic, this was often challenging.
- Referrals to Victim Support averaged one to two a month with a total of 22 during the previous year. PBNI reported this was largely due to the number of cases with no identifiable victim along with caution not to re-traumatise the victims involved in some cases. While supportive of the overall aims of ECOs, Victim Support felt that it was important that progress with the victim element of the order wasn't overstated publicly.

"I would like the victim to be able to say if they would like to support a specific charity to make it more meaningful for the victim but I suppose within Probation we are looking at ways we can improve the restorative justice aspect." PBNI



5 How Much and How Well?

- Some examples were provided of incorrect referrals to Victim Support, thought in part to be related to high PBNI staff turnover.
- Establishing contact between victim and service user required both parties to be ready and getting the timing right could be difficult. For example some service users needed to deal with their own issues before being able to understand the impact of their actions on others. Contact therefore tended to be largely via letter. Several interviewees across the stakeholder organisations reported a strong desire for a more restorative conference style approach.

"If we are doing restorative justice in a case that we could all agree that if the offender and the victim agrees that we could work to get them together. There is sometimes a bit of a culture of going for letters over in person meetings."
Stakeholder

"We help clients through a process, dealing with victims, the community and the family. It's a holistic approach. Offenders are not in touch with their emotions, restorative intervention helps them take control of their emotions again. It humanises them again and they are seen as humans by others in their life."
Stakeholder

5.5 Accredited Programmes



The completion of an accredited programme, if appropriate, was a requirement of the ECO pilot. In the 2019 evaluation over one third (108) of participants had additional requirements attached to their order, mainly Drug/Alcohol Counselling, Thinking Skills and Treatment Programmes or a combination of these. While updated information was unavailable for the current evaluation these courses were touched on during the interviews. Almost all respondents to the staff survey agreed this element was operating well and benefitting service users (Tables 2 and 3, Appendix 3).

5 How Much and How Well?

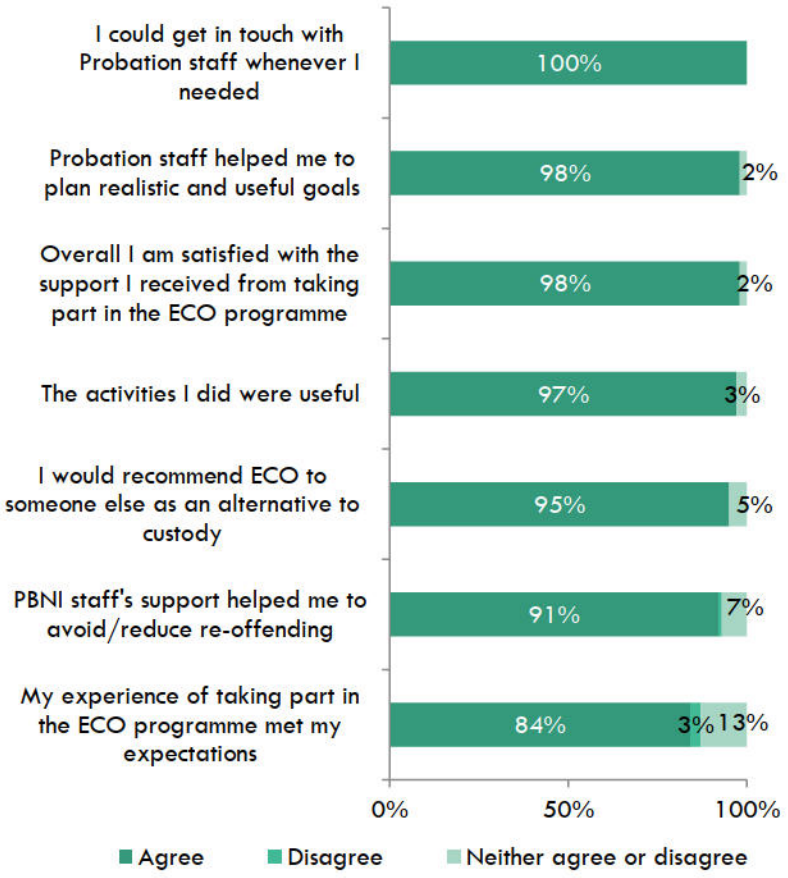
5.6 Service User Views Overall

The exit questionnaire showed that the main things that service users hoped to achieve by taking part in ECO were to avoid prison (49%) or to stay out of trouble (23%). Additional factors included support with mental health and addiction issues, getting their lives back on track, general support and help finding work.

At an overall level, figure 9 shows that all service users agreed they could get in touch with PBNI staff when needed. The vast majority agreed that -

- PBNI staff helped them to plan realistic and useful goals (98%);
- They were satisfied with the support they received (98%);
- The activities they did were useful (97%);
- They would recommend ECO to someone else (95%);
- PBNI support had helped them to avoid/reduce re-offending (91%); and
- Overall their experience of taking part met their expectations (84%).

Figure 9 – Service users' experience of being on the ECO programme *(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=102)*



6 Impact

About this Chapter

The previous chapter looked at ECO delivery, identifying how much had been done, how well it had been done along with benefits and challenges. This chapter looks at the impact of that work on both service users and wider society.

6.1 Addressing Re-offending Behaviour

Interviewees felt that given the chaotic lifestyles of many of the service users and the history of their re-offending, harm reduction and distanced travelled, rather than re-offending, might be a more appropriate measure. That said, figure 10 shows that the one year proven reoffending rate has decreased year on year, with subsequent ECO cohorts since 2015/16. In addition and as already highlighted in figure 9 in section 5, the majority of service users who completed the exit questionnaire agreed that PBNI staff's support helped them avoid/reduce re-offending (91%). The majority also said that -

- The help received addressing problems in their lifestyle and the way they thought about future offending was useful (94%, Figure 11);

Figure 10 – One year proven reoffending rate for ECO cohorts 2015/16 to 2018/19
(Data Source: Causeway Data Sharing Mechanism)

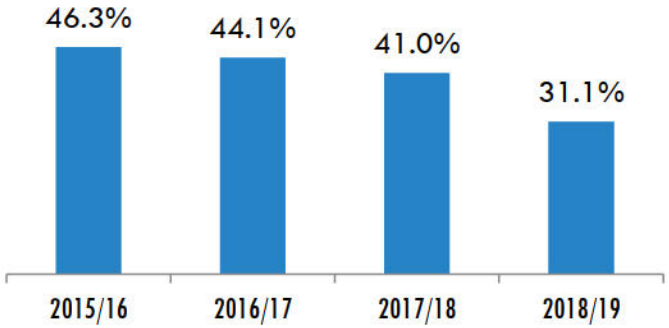
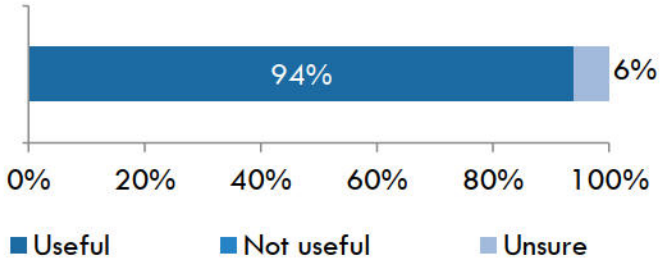


Figure 11 – How useful did you find the help addressing problems in your lifestyle and the way you think about future offending?
(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=99)



6 Impact

- The programme had helped them address their offending behaviour (95%, Figure 12); and
- They were unlikely to commit a further similar offence (99%, Figure 13).

When asked to explain how the programme had helped them, the most commonly cited responses related to –

- the focus on behaviours that led to their offending;
- the support provided by staff;
- the psychological intervention;
- help with addictions; and
- awareness of the impact on others (family and victims).

A small number said that it provided structure, helped with employment and improved confidence/self worth.

Figure 12 – Overall, how helpful do you think this programme has been in helping you to address your offending behaviour?
(Source: Exit Questionnaire, n=102)

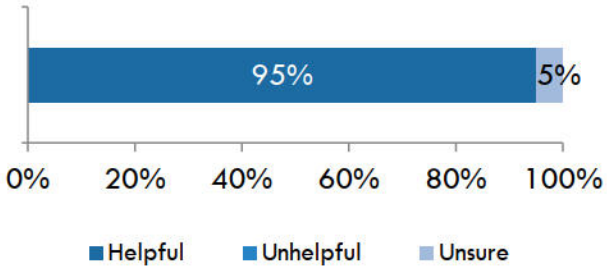
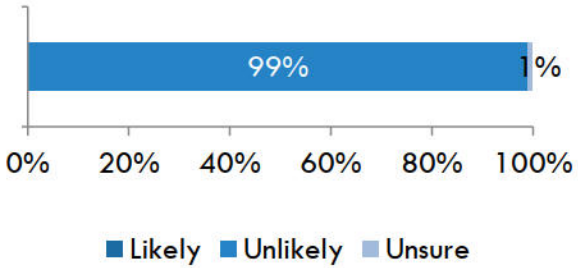


Figure 13 – At this point, how likely is it that you would commit a further similar offence?
(Source: Exit Questionnaire, n=101)



"Because it helped me with everything going on and relationships and how I think. I am less anxious and feel more confident and have found it helpful speaking to others."
Service User

"Looked at my criminal record and seen it was all drink related, talked about how I feel about police, family experiences, and past reflective work."
Service User

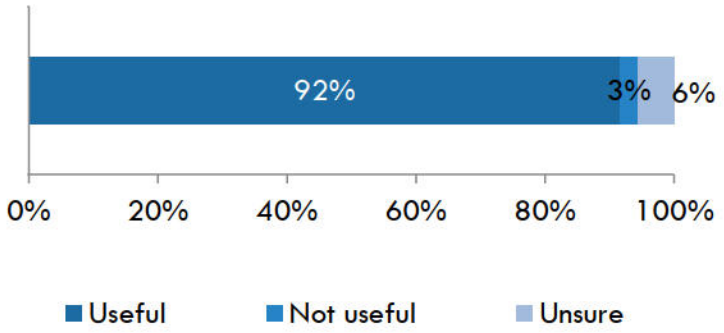
6 Impact

6.2 Support with Addiction and Mental Health

Issues with alcohol/substance misuse and mental health were identified in both the data (section 4.4) and interviews as being significant problems for service users. The vast majority (92%) found the help they received with drinking/drug use useful (Figure 14) –

"It helped me get off drink and drugs and away from the people I was with." Service User

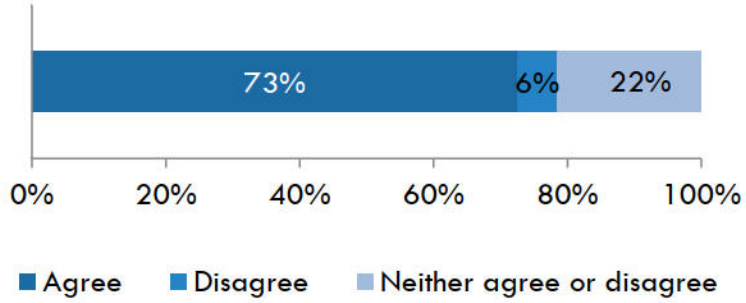
Figure 14 – How useful did you find the help with your drinking/drug use?
(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=71)



6.3 Support with Confidence

Just under three quarters of service users agreed that taking part in ECO had increased their confidence (Figure 15). Specific examples highlighted during the stakeholder interviews included individuals who had gone on to get promoted at work, and how a service user, who hadn't entered a shop in four years because of shame resulting from their offence, had been able to do so again following ECO support.

Figure 15 – Service users' agreement that taking part in ECO has increased my confidence
(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=102)



6 Impact

6.4 Support with Family and Community Integration

Over 40% of service users agreed ECO had helped them integrate back with their community and their family (Figure 16); 79% found the help with family/relationships useful (Figure 17). The benefit to families of service users not going to prison was also highlighted during the interviews and in the surveys. This enabled them to remain in employment and provide for and maintain close relationships with family members.

The parenting/family support work undertaken by Barnardos and its benefits have been highlighted already in section 5.3.



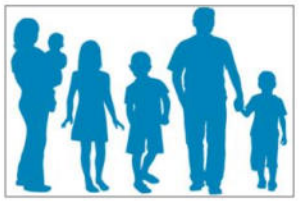


Figure 16 – Service users' experience of being on the ECO programme *(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=102)*

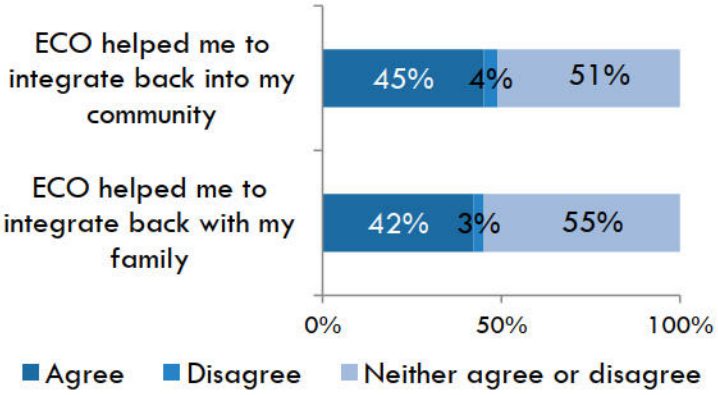
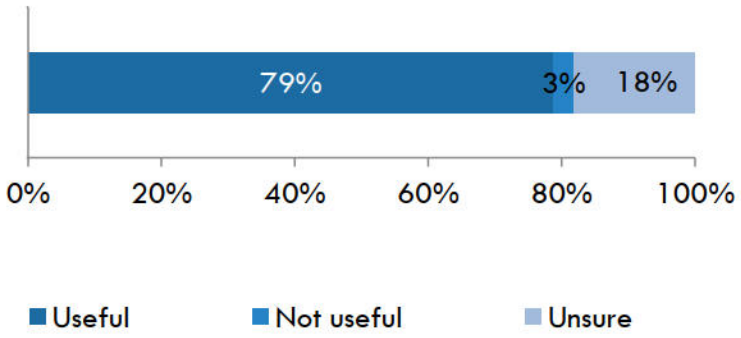


Figure 17 – How useful did you find the help with family/ relationships? *(Source: Service User Exit Questionnaire, n=66)*



6 Impact

6.5 Support with Employment

As already highlighted in Section 5.2 the community service element of the order helped those who had never worked before to understand the potential benefits of employment.

Several interviewees also highlighted the benefit of the support provided to service users by NIACRO, particularly for those who were 'work ready'. As well as having access to a mentor, their Working Well Scheme helped service users to prepare CVs and get into work.

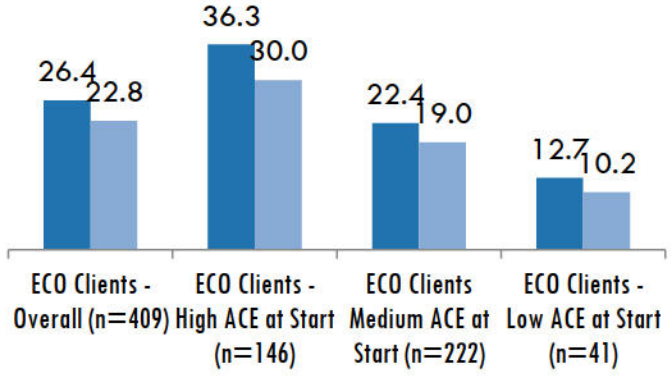
Additional examples highlighted across the research included help with obtaining CSCS cards to enable service users to be building site ready, something they couldn't normally afford to do themselves. Further examples included service users who had gone on to university, secured employment (eliminating the need for benefits) or had been promoted in their jobs.



6.6 Reducing Risk

There was a statistically significant decrease between ACE scores recorded closest to the start and end of their order at an overall level (n=407, $p<0.05$) and when broken down into high, medium and low with average reductions of 6.3, 3.4 and 2.5 points respectively.

Figure 18 – Difference between ACE Score recorded closest to start and end of order. Note that a statistically significant decrease ($p<0.05$) was evident overall and for each of the three individual categories



6 Impact

6.7 Reducing Short Term Prison Sentences

The number of custodial sentences of 12 months or less, awarded by courts involved in the Armagh/South Down/Ards pilot between 2015 and 2017, decreased by 20.7%. Similarly there was a decrease of 20.3% between 2018 and 2020 (Table 4) when the North West became part of the pilot. While there was also a reduction in the overall number of short term sentences across all the NI courts, at 3.4% between 2015 and 2017 and 14.6% between 2018 and 2020 this was lower than that across the pilot areas.

Table 4 – Number of Custodial Sentences of 12 months or less

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Downpatrick	102	102	81	57	62	35
Newtownards	178	120	130	138	163	93
Armagh	30	53	35	31	64	26
Banbridge	19	16	14	20	19	17
Newry	110	102	88	56	73	72
Limavady	N/A	N/A	N/A	24	30	15
Londonderry	N/A	N/A	N/A	305	228	245
Total	**439**	**393**	**348**	**631**	**639**	**503**

6.8 Work Provided to Communities

As already discussed in section 5.2, 70,400 community service hours were sentenced by the courts from October 2015, equivalent to almost £670,000 worth of work provided to communities in the Ards, Armagh/South Down and North West areas.

"The community service element is massive, they are involved with community projects and really adding value."
PBNI



7 Overall

About this Chapter

This chapter provides an overview of aspects of the initiative that have worked well, the challenges that have been faced and suggestions for improvement from evaluation participants. Many of these aspects have been documented in previous sections; those that have not are covered in more detail.

8.1 Aspects Working Well

Previously highlighted in the report -

- Psychological support with no waiting lists (Sections 5.1 & 6.1)
- Support with parenting/family relationships (Sections 5.3 & 6.4)
- Support with alcohol/drug use (Section 6.2)
- Support with addressing offending behaviour (Section 5.4 & 6.1)
- Reduction in reoffending rate (Section 6.1)
- Restorative work provided by CRJI, NI Alternatives and PBNI (Section 5.4, 5.5 & 6.1)
- Increased client confidence (Section 6.3)
- Significant reduction in ACE scores (Section 6.4)
- Reduction in number of short custodial sentences (Section 6.7)
- Provision of 70,400 hours worth of work to communities (Section 5.2)

Additional factors -

- **Well rounded holistic service**

Stakeholders felt that ECOs worked well because the resources were available to provide complex and chaotic service users with a well rounded holistic service. Described as the *'platinum product of probation'* by one interviewee, it was recognised that service users received a *'Rolls Royce service compared to those on generic orders'* because they were most in need of it. Stakeholders felt that it was likely for many that ECOs provided them with more support than they had ever had.

> *"We try to address every aspect of a user's life, like how we link into family and the pathways we have into the different services. If we are contributing to people not going to prison, that has to be making a difference."*
> *PBNI*

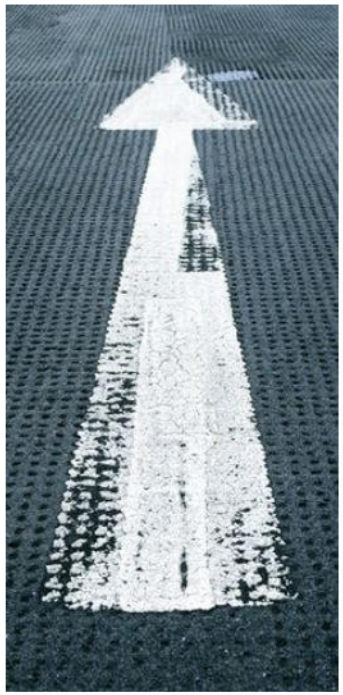
7 Overall

- **Good collaborative approach between all partner organisations**

Working relationships across all the stakeholder organisations were reported to be very good with responsibility shared. There was a perception that partnerships with the community/voluntary sector were stronger with ECOs than standard orders because it was *'hardwired into the order itself'*. Links to the additional services elicited positive results.

- **Ability to spend time building relationships with service users**

The ability to spend time building relationships with service users was seen as a strength of the order, letting staff get to know and really invest in them. While it was recognised that standards were applied as with any order, there was greater flexibility and even a year down the line contact for some might still be weekly. In addition case numbers for POs supervising ECOs were reported to be lower, allowing a higher level of individual support.



- **The PSO role**

The support provided by the PSO was seen by PBNI interviewees as critical. Along with restorative work they also delivered coping skills programmes, provided interventions and worked with service users on addiction and relationship issues. PSOs also provided practical support including daily check ins, text reminders of what service users needed to do that day, ensuring attendance at medical appointments and help with budgeting, including ensuring service users bought food.

7 Overall

"ECOs don't work for everybody, and some people may need to return to court, but we are very clear about that."
PBNI

- **Enforcement**

Interviewees reported that service users were held accountable and if they did not keep up with the ECO there was a swifter return to court. Having this written into the order meant that service users knew they had to engage and if not there were court sanctions as a consequence, something that was seen as helpful. On the flipside however, interviewees recognised that a balance needed to be struck and that it was important not to be too rigid as there would always be personal circumstances that could impact on ability to engage.

- **Services well embedded**

Given that ECOs have been operational since 2015, the associated wrap around services were reported to be well embedded at this stage.

- **Targeting the right people**

Interviewees felt that the right people were generally being targeted.

- **Continues to be embraced by the Judiciary**

- **Keeping people out of prison**

- **Highly committed staff across all partner organisations**

7.2 Challenges

Previously mentioned in the report -

- Complex and chaotic service users (Section 4.4)
- Securing restorative community service placements challenging at times (Sections 5.2 and 5.4)
- Appetite towards more restorative conference style approach (Section 5.4)
- Challenges related to securing victim input (Section 5.4)



7 Overall

Additional factors -

- **ECOs not available on a province wide basis**

Stakeholders felt that ECOs needed to be made available province wide as individuals who could potentially benefit were missing out as they did not reside in a pilot area.

- **Enforcement**

While enforcement was reported to work well, some interviewees highlighted that the chaotic lifestyle of many service users had the potential to cause a dilemma for POs, balancing enforcement and allowing time for service users to meaningfully engage.

- **Homelessness**

A number of interviewees highlighted that homelessness impacted some service users and given that research showed it to be a major factor in criminality, felt that accommodation needed to be addressed in some way as part of the ECO. Difficulties with securing essential services without an address were highlighted as was the fact that many service users were single and therefore not viewed as a priority in the housing arena.

- **Numbers referred getting smaller**

While interviewees felt that ECOs had been embraced by the Judiciary and were generally targeting the right people, numbers sentenced to an ECO had reduced in recent times. Discussions with sentencers were reported to be ongoing to understand why.

"It's not fair that someone who is sentenced in Ards can get an ECO, but someone who is sentenced in Belfast won't."
Stakeholder



"You can set all these services up but if people aren't willing to meaningfully engage, there's no more you can do but they know if they end up in court again after an ECO has already been tried, they are looking at bigger sentences."
PBNI



7 Overall

- **Staffing**

A number of staffing related challenges were highlighted during the research, including staff turnover/PO recruitment difficulties, potential for the 'ECO specialism' to cause division between teams, the perception that ECO resources are prioritised and complications when service users move to non-pilot areas.

- **Managing expectations**

Interviewees highlighted that while many service users benefitted significantly from ECO support, expectations on impact on longer term and serial offenders needed to be managed with recognition that for some a positive result might be a reduction in number of reoffences. There was also recognition that there would always be some individuals who would not be willing to meaningfully engage.

- **The pandemic**

The pandemic resulted in changes to how ECOs were able to operate and the impact on the community service element of the order has already been discussed in Section 5.2.

The format of contact with service users was also impacted, changing from face to face to telephone and resulting in difficulties gauging how well service users were looking after themselves. Engaging, particularly with those who staff hadn't previously met, was also difficult and while PBNI encouraged a video call for the initial meeting, not all clients were comfortable with this. The less formal nature of a call also meant that some service users did not view it as an appointment, asking staff to call back; for others, children or partners were at home and the lack of privacy hampered discussion. Concerns were also raised about the impact on mental health for those service users whose only contact that week might have been the call with PBNI.

That said some positives were also identified as a result of the pandemic, including better and more honest engagement by phone than in person for some service users and contact by WebEx/Zoom/WhatsApp being more appealing to younger service users.

7 Overall

7.3 Stakeholder Suggestions for Changes to ECO

Service users, stakeholders and PBNI staff were asked in the questionnaires and during the interviews what they would change about the ECO programme. A number of suggestions were made and are listed below. Note however that suggestions may represent the views of a small number of individuals so should be considered in perspective -

Roll Out

- Mainstream and make ECOs province wide

Thresholds

- Raise the threshold to sentences up to two years
- Cap orders at two years as doing 'meaningful' work over three years is difficult
- If eligible for a short term sentence should be automatically eligible for an ECO

Delivery

- More restorative conference work
- More restorative counselling and addiction services
- More generic and trauma based counselling
- Make ECOs a part of the generic PBNI team rather than a specialist team
- Designated ECO supervising officer at each location (1)
- Review enforcement (1)

Partner Related

- Incorporate a housing element into the order e.g. include a service level agreement with partner agencies such as NI Housing Executive and Housing Associations
- Co-location with partner organisations to help manage complex needs of service users
- Inclusion of DoH as a partner
- Simplify Barnardos referral process

8 Appendix 1

Table 1 - Number of orders by Armagh & South Down court location (Source: Causeway System)

Armagh & South Down Courts	Count	%
Armagh	88	10.3
Banbridge	45	5.3
Newry	134	15.7
Total	**267**	**31.2**

Table 2 - Number of orders by Ards court location (Source: Causeway System)

Ards Courts	Count	%
Downpatrick	146	17.1
Newtownards	111	13.0
Total	**257**	**30.1**

Table 3 - Number of orders by North West court location (Source: Causeway System)

North West Courts	Count	%
Limavady	28	3.3
Londonderry	220	25.7
Total	**248**	**29.0**

Table 4 - Number of orders by non pilot court location (Source: Causeway System)

Other Courts	Count	%
Antrim	3	0.4
Coleraine	16	1.9
Craigavon	2	0.2
Dungannon	9	1.1
Laganside	37	4.3
Magherafelt	1	0.1
Strabane	15	1.8
Total	**83**	**9.7**

8 Appendix 2

Table 1 – ACE Risk and Need Profile Scores - Factors where less than half of service users were deemed to have a small, medium or large problem

Domain		ACE Factor	Prevalence Rate (%) ORS	PS
Social		Accommodation	33	44
		Finance	44	51
Personal	Health	Mental	35	45
	Personal Skills	Interpersonal/Social Skills	17	26
	Individual Characteristics	Boredom/Need for Excitement	40	47
		Self-Esteem/Self Image	27	47
		Sexuality/Sexual Behaviour	6	5
		Discriminatory Attitudes	12	12
Offending	Motivation/Attitude to Supervision	Does the offender appear unmotivated to avoid re-offending?	43	n/a
		Does the offender appear unmotivated to deal with relevant problems?	49	
		Does the offender appear to not accept being under supervision?	23	
	Attitudes	Does the offender disregard effects of his/ her offending on people to whom they are close?	32	n/a
		Does the offender have anti-social and/ or pro-criminal attitudes?	45	
		Does the offender have beliefs which enable him/ her to deny the facts about their offending?	48	
		Does the offender view the benefits from crime as outweighing the costs?	22	

8 Appendix 3

Table 1 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements (Source: PBNI Staff Survey, n=13)

Aspect	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
I am satisfied with ECO and how it is operating	38.5	61.5	0	0	0
I have access to all resources needed to make an ECO successful	38.5	38.5	15.4	7.7	0
The right people are being given ECOs	15.4	38.5	30.8	15.4	0
ECOs work well when defendants are willing to engage	84.6	15.4	0	0	0
I have sufficient contact with ECO clients	69.2	30.8	0	0	0
ECOs focus on all necessary contributors of offending	53.8	46.2	0	0	0

8 Appendix 3

Table 2 - The following aspects of ECO are operating well (Source: PBNI Staff Survey, n=13)

Aspect	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
The referral to the PBNI Psychologist	53.8	38.5	7.7	0	0
Work on victim issues	61.5	30.8	7.7	0	0
The community service element	61.5	38.5	0	0	0
The parenting/ family related work	30.8	53.8	15.4	0	0
Programmes that service users take part in e.g. Thinking skills, Anger Management	23.1	61.5	15.4	0	0

8 Appendix 3

Table 3 - The following aspects of ECO benefit clients (Source: PBNI Staff Survey, n=13)

Aspect	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
The referral to the PBNI Psychologist	76.9	13.4	7.7	0	0
Work on victim issues	61.5	30.8	7.7	0	0
The community service element	46.2	46.2	0	7.7	0
The parenting/ family related work	38.5	53.8	7.7	0	0
Intensive offending focussed work	53.8	38.5	7.7	0	0
Programmes that service users take part in e.g. Thinking skills, Anger Management	46.2	46.2	7.7	0	0

8 Appendix 3

Table 4 - What do you see as the main benefits to service users of taking part in ECOs (Source: PBNI Staff Survey, n=13)

Benefit	Count	%
Help with preventing reoffending	12	92.3
Help with drink/drugs	11	84.6
Self-esteem/confidence	11	84.6
Employment	10	76.9
Training/education	9	69.2
Community integration	7	53.8
Parenting/family relationships	6	46.2
Accommodation	5	38.5

Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Justice

[redacted]
NI Alternatives
By email: [redacted]

07 October 2026

Dear [redacted]

Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill –oral evidence

On behalf of the Committee for Justice, I wish to thank you and your colleagues for attending the meeting on 29 September 2026 to give oral evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

During the meeting, you agreed to provide the Committee with further information on case studies and outcomes in relation to Enhanced Combinations Orders (ECO).

I would appreciate a response by 16 October 2026.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Kathy O'Hanlon
Clerk to the Committee for Justice

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Telephone: (028) 905 21033

E-mail: committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk