

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

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Kathy O'Hanlon
Clerk to the Committee for Justice
Room 242
Parliament Buildings
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05 November 2025

Dear Kathy,

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND CRNS

Thank you for your letter of 24 October following the oral evidence session with Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland on restorative justice amendments to the Justice Bill and the new accreditation process.

It is important to note the regular and ongoing engagement with both organisations, as well as wider voluntary sector partners, as part of the multi-agency Restorative Justice Working Group that is chaired by the Department. Through this Group, we have ensured that the views of statutory and voluntary sector partners have been integral to the development of the new accreditation and referral processes. It is disappointing that neither raised these concerns within that process.

The Committee asked about the adequacy of Level One accreditation, how it was determined, the potential for such abuse and the safeguards that will be in place to prevent abuse. The Restorative Justice 2023 Protocol applies to all types of formal engagement between criminal justice agencies and accredited non-statutory restorative justice schemes and accredited independent restorative practitioners. This includes work below the criminal justice threshold.

Level one accredited practitioners will work in partnership with the police and other criminal justice agencies, for example, resolving neighbourhood disputes, anti-social behaviour or reducing community tensions.

The Restorative Justice Working Group considered the role that Level one accredited practitioners could play in supporting those who have committed to undertake a range of reparative and rehabilitative activities following a formal restorative justice intervention. This practice experience will also be seen as advantageous for those who intend to advance to Level two accreditation, the level at which there is engagement with the criminal justice system. We would envisage that both Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (as well as other voluntary sector organisations) will have level one accredited practitioners associated with their organisations. The Protocol Lead also liaised with the Restorative Justice Council in the course of developing the Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework and Level one is aligned with their 'Foundation Practitioner' accreditation.

Members may also wish to note that the Framework references the need to “*operate within, and uphold, the rule of law within the provisions of Section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 and have a proven track record of working with criminal justice agencies in Northern Ireland, in particular with the Police Service of Northern Ireland*”. This is reinforced in the organisational accreditation application form, which asks for evidence of collaboration with partners in the delivery of restorative practice / justice, including PSNI, criminal justice partners and other voluntary and community organisations.

All applicants are also asked to confirm that they will operate within, and uphold, the rule of law within the provisions of Section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 in respect of crimes deemed to be relevant offences, and report any offence to the police that they become aware of; and also to uphold the rule of law based as it is on the fundamental principles of fairness, impartiality and democratic accountability, including support for policing and the courts. Where this is not being adhered to,



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accreditation will be subject to review. Organisations and practitioners must sign up to these, to ensure that we have both competent and suitable practitioners who will work collaboratively with police and other criminal justice agencies.

The information below addresses the further points raised in the Committee's letter in turn.

Whether there is sufficient capacity to have all necessary processes in place to successfully launch the pilot roll-out Expansion of Adult Restorative Justice in Spring 2026, given the current budgetary and resources pressures within the Department, and how the Department can ensure that there are no gaps or delays in the accreditation process.

The expansion of the restorative justice process is a Ministerial commitment and will be progressed on a phased basis, rolling out geographically across Northern Ireland, and also initially with diversionary disposals before moving into the court process. This is also a focus for the Department in terms of ensuring that the necessary processes and procedures are in place to provide for this. The first phase, with diversionary disposals in specific areas, is on track to be introduced at the end of March 2026. The Department has considered and identified the funding that is needed for the Restorative Justice process as part of a future funding exercise, estimating what is needed over the next four years to provide for the expansion of restorative justice.

Detailed rationale for the areas chosen as the initial locations for the roll out of the Expansion of Adult Restorative Justice provision on a phased geographical basis; and how this will impact on existing restorative justice infrastructure.

Members will be aware from previous briefing that the Restorative Justice Task and Finish Group and the Restorative Justice Working Group considered a small number of geographical locations for the initial roll out. It is not anticipated that the initial roll out will have a negative impact on existing restorative justice infrastructure, rather it will



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strengthen the existing provision and raise the profile of restorative justice more generally.

In expanding service provision, it was agreed that it would not be viable to initially move into regions with little or no current service provision and where future accreditation levels are currently unknown (i.e. West of the Bann). However, the Department will keep the locations under review post introduction, with a view to further expansion as soon as is practically possible. It is hoped that practitioners in underrepresented areas will apply for accreditation.

Clarification of how the Department considers that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland is sufficiently independent to fulfil the role of the Independent Referrals Body, given its own role in restorative justice.

The Department considers that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) is sufficiently independent to fulfil the role of the Independent Referrals Body, given that it deals with both offenders and victims through a variety of its work (including restorative justice). PBNI's restorative work involves working with both victims who are registered with its Victim Information Scheme and service users subject to orders and licences (adjudicated offenders). PBNI's work, including its restorative practice, is subject to inspection by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) and His Majesty's Inspection of Probation (HMIP). PBNI, as a statutory body, will not have cases allocated through this accreditation process; these will be taken forward by voluntary sector partners.

The Department's view on the potential for whole organisations to appear to be legitimately accredited with only a single person or a small number of employees out of a larger workforce being accredited, and what the potential risks of this might be.

To mitigate this risk, organisational practitioners will not be able to secure accreditation unless their parent organisation/employer is also formally accredited. It might be the case

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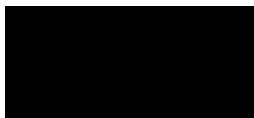
that practitioners could apply for accreditation as an independent practitioner. Practitioners could also be subcontracted by an accredited organisation (paragraph 45 in the Restorative Justice Protocol 2023). They will not be allocated criminal justice referrals upon return to their non-accredited organisation.

Information on why community resolution notices (CRNs) are being referred to non-accredited community restorative justice organisations above those received by the currently accredited organisations.

This is an operational matter for the PSNI. Having engaged with PSNI colleagues we are not aware of this being an issue.

I trust this addresses all the queries raised. Officials will be happy to provide any further clarification required.

Yours sincerely,



**DAVID GRAHAM
DALO**



**Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Justice**

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24 October 2025

Restorative Justice

Dear David

At its meeting on Thursday 16 October 2025, the Committee for Justice took oral evidence from Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland on the planned restorative justice amendment to the Justice Bill and in relation to your correspondence of 26 September 2025 (JCP\25\211) on the Adult Restorative Justice Standards and Accreditation Framework 2025 and the role of the Interim Protocol Lead.

During the session, concerns were raised about Level One in the Accreditation Framework. Views were expressed that it could potentially be abused by organisations or practitioners, for example, those who may not want to engage with the PSNI, or could enable organisations to become gatekeepers within certain communities. The Committee agreed to ask the Department about the adequacy of Level One and how it was determined, the potential for such abuse and the safeguards that will be in place to prevent abuse.

The Committee also requested clarification on the following issues:

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- whether there is sufficient capacity to have all necessary processes in place to successfully launch the pilot roll-out Expansion of Adult Restorative Justice in Spring 2026, given the current budgetary and resources pressures within the Department, and how the Department can ensure that there are no gaps or delays in the accreditation process;
- detailed rationale for the areas chosen as the initial locations for the roll out of the Expansion of Adult Restorative Justice provision on a phased geographical basis; and how this will impact on existing restorative justice infrastructure;
- clarification of how the Department considers that the Probation Board for Northern Ireland is sufficiently independent to fulfil the role of the Independent Referrals Body, given its own role in restorative justice;
- the Department's view on the potential for whole organisations to appear to be legitimately accredited with only a single person or a small number of employees out of a larger workforce being accredited, and what the potential risks of this might be;
- information on why community resolution notices (CRNs) are being referred to non-accredited community restorative justice organisations above those received by the currently accredited organisations.

I would be grateful for a response by 10 November 2025.

Yours sincerely,

Kathy O'Hanlon

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