



Public Accounts Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Reducing Adult Reoffending in
Northern Ireland: Department of Justice;
Probation Board for Northern Ireland; Northern
Ireland Audit Office; Department of Finance

3 April 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Cheryl Brownlee (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Tom Buchanan
Mr Colin Crawford
Mr Pádraig Delargy
Ms Diane Forsythe
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr David Honeyford

Witnesses:

Mr Stuart Stevenson	Department of Finance
Mr Seán Holland	Department of Justice
Ms Beverley Wall	Department of Justice
Mr Hugh Widdis	Department of Justice
Ms Dorinnia Carville	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Ms Amanda Stewart	Probation Board for Northern Ireland

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): I welcome Hugh Widdis, accounting officer, Department of Justice; Beverley Wall, director of reducing offending division and director general of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS); Seán Holland, director of access to justice, Department of Justice; Amanda Stewart, chief executive, Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI); Stuart Stevenson, Treasury Officer of Accounts (TOA), Department of Finance; and Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)

Mr Widdis, Ms Wall, Mr Holland and Ms Stewart, you are all welcome to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). Thank you for agreeing to attend today. Before we start, let me say that the Committee wants to make a real difference in Northern Ireland, and we want to get the best evidence possible from our PAC meetings. Will you provide the Committee with a brief overview and introduction? We will then ask questions. We ask that you answer the questions honestly and to the point. We will try to get the most for everyone out of the session.

Mr Hugh Widdis (Department of Justice): That is really helpful, Chair. Thank you for having us at the Committee. It is nice to be back in the Senate Chamber — it seems like a while since I was here.

You have introduced my colleagues, and we are grateful for the opportunity to update the Committee on our work to address reoffending. I will keep my remarks brief, as suggested, but I will highlight key areas and give a quick update on the individual recommendations.

We very much welcome the report on reducing adult reoffending. I was speaking to the C&AG outside about how useful it has been. Reducing reoffending has long been and continues to be a priority area for the Department, as you will see from the information. That reflects the serious impact that offending has on victims, communities, families and the individuals themselves. We very much want to reduce reoffending and its impact. Key to all of our work in the Department and, indeed, with partners in the wider criminal justice system is the aim of making the community safer through the rehabilitative and preventative work of the Prison Service, Probation Board and Department of Justice, in this case, creating better outcomes and, where we can, trying to break the offending cycle or help people to break it themselves.

Importantly, as is evidenced in the Audit Office report, we know that a range of societal factors can lead to offending behaviour. As you will know, those include poor mental health, addictions and a lack of suitable accommodation, financial security or stable employment. I think that everybody is agreed that, if more could be done upstream from a policy perspective to support individuals, fewer would come into contact with the justice system — research clearly shows that — and we would have fewer victims and less harm.

Secondly, I think that the Audit Office and most participants in the system recognise that Justice cannot reduce reoffending on its own. We have charge of the criminal justice system and are responsible for people when they come to us, but reducing those factors in society and helping people with support throughout their life is a whole-of-government and whole-of-society issue. Part of the strategic approach is to make sure that we maximise the commitment and buy-in to that.

A third point is that the Department and the wider criminal justice system continue to operate, as do all Departments and sectors at the moment, in a very challenging financial climate. We can discuss the detail of that later. That is as well as operating against a backdrop of a rising prison population and, because of the financial constraints, staffing pressures across the criminal justice system, including our partners here and partners that are not represented here today. For example, between 2022 and 2025, our total prison population has gone up by 20%. That is a very heavy challenge, and it provides some of the context in which we provide our services. The number of orders and licences that the Probation Board supervises increased from just under 5,000 in 2022 to pushing 6,000 in 2024. That was by way of illustration, but facts such as those affect our ability to deliver on investing to save. I suspect that some of today's discussion will be about that. Our interest and that of the Audit Office is very much in investing in the future, but our ability to do that is inevitably constrained by having to deal with the pressures of the present.

I will touch on each of the recommendations. Recommendation 1 is all about the Programme for Government (PFG) and the strategic approach. We have now secured a Programme for Government commitment, thanks to the Minister's involvement with the Executive, that there will be a new cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending. We have reviewed our existing strategies in order to lead up to that moment and input into what will go into that proposed strategy. We have already commenced engagement in a detailed way with colleagues across all the other Departments and arm's-length bodies (ALBs) in order to begin the work on what might be in that and strengthen our commitment to it.

On recommendation 2, we have updated the annual cost of crime report. We have also, in the past few weeks, finished our work on the cost of reoffending, which is referred to in the recommendation. We are happy to get into that with you today.

Recommendation 3 is about rehabilitation and support for short-term prisoners. We have, for example, a bespoke short-sentence programme in Maghaberry that supports individuals in custody and when they are transitioning back into the community.

On recommendation 4, we are progressing legislation that will come to the House in the autumn. It has already been approved in principle by the Executive Committee. We will come with an expansion of community alternatives to custodial sentences. Recommendation 4 is also about what we are doing on enhanced combination orders (ECOs). We are pleased to say that we will be able to roll those out yet further this year.

On recommendation 5, we are progressing the development of a bail support scheme as a pilot for women, initially. We have secured funding to pilot that scheme again this year, starting just after the summer.

Recommendation 6 is about engagement with other jurisdictions. We have established a five-nations policy group. It was very much Northern Ireland that pushed for that, but it has turned into a useful intervention for all the participants. It allows for the sharing of lessons learned and best practice on a range of issues.

Recommendation 7 is about management information. We have reviewed the management information that is available to us and continue to develop what we do in that regard.

On recommendation 8, we have progressed some, perhaps not all, of the problem-solving justice initiatives: for example, substance misuse courts and ECOs were in that bag.

Finally, recommendation 9 is about wider data collection and assistance pathways. We have been working with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), for example, and have carried out reviews of the ECO programme. We have also reviewed the assessment, case management and evaluation (ACE) methodology, with which NISRA helped. We are working towards better linkages of data from the criminal justice system but also outside it, because we need the collaboration of partners on that.

That was a really quick rundown of the progress so far on the recommendations in the little more than a year and a half since the publication of the report and a summary of what we have done to date. I am really happy to get into a discussion with the Committee about the issues and their complexity.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): No problem. Thank you very much for that overview.

Before we get into the Audit Office report, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) published its report on PSNI effectiveness and efficiency this week. You may have listened to the recent Policing Board discussion about that. The PSNI obviously requires improvement in managing offenders and suspects, and the report highlights several areas of concern in offender management, particularly in respect of those involved in violence, sexual offences or child abuse. It details things such as delays in processing records on the violent and sex offender register; the lack of effective management of offenders on the violent and sex offender register; and delays in the processing of child abuse images on electronic devices. What risk does that present in respect of managing adult reoffending? Given the well-publicised financial and resourcing pressures on the PSNI, how does the Department plan to address those recommendations?

Mr Widdis: That was really helpful, Chair. Thank you very much. The report is part of a rolling programme that the inspectorate does in relation to policing in Northern Ireland. It looked at a couple of particular areas of policing activity and is based on the national standard of performance that is expected of police throughout the UK.

I have to be careful, because there are operational issues on which the PSNI very much needs to report and respond. There is always fair criticism, in the same way as there is in Audit Office reports, Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) reports or His Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) reports on us. There is some overlap between offenders in the community and reducing reoffending in the community, but I am content that the police have the actions in hand to address those things. They will have some of them in hand already, and I am sure that, having had the benefit of the full report, they will push on the others. I think that the Chief Constable — maybe it was the Deputy Chief Constable — said, not unreasonably, that, as is the case with all other criminal justice organisations, the police are operating in a really constrained financial environment. The Police Service has had to make choices about where it disposes its resources. You will know that the Chief Constable and the Minister have a shared commitment to increasing policing numbers. We have a business case that is well developed in order to provide some opportunity to rebuild the numbers in the police force and deal with other issues.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): The report found that practices in the management of offenders under the public protection arrangements Northern Ireland (PPANI) do not meet national standards and that information relating to the risk assessments of those offenders is not easily accessible. Given that those arrangements are intended to reduce the immediate and long-term risk of sexual or violent reoffending, what governance arrangements are in place to address those concerns and ensure that improvements can be made?

Mr Widdis: The report has only just landed, so we are happy to come back with more detail on it. The existing PPANI are about dealing with the highest-risk offenders once they are in the community and so on. I am content that that structure is sound. It involves all of the partners and operates at multiple levels. It does that on an operational basis in relation to individuals, but it can also elevate and escalate issues, if something policy-wise or strategy-wise needs to be changed. I am happy for the PSNI to take operational decisions to respond to the recommendation and strengthen whatever it is that it does in that area. If the Chief Constable needs to talk to us about further finances for that, we are open to that, but our problem will be that the Department is allocated an amount for the whole sector. As I understand it, the Executive are today considering the Budget for the year to come. Once those decisions have been taken, we will do what we can to support the PSNI and all the rest of the sector to keep people safe.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Thank you. The report relates directly to that, so it is important and something that we should take into account.

It is now nearly two years since the Audit Office produced its report on adult reoffending. To set the scene for the Committee, will you give us an update on how the figures on prison numbers and reoffending have changed since the Audit Office report? Are there any improvements or initiatives that you have introduced to reduce reoffending since that time?

Mr Widdis: No problem at all, Chair. I might ask Beverley to help me with the absolute detail on prison numbers, but the prison population has continued to rise since the report was done in June 2023. The current population the last time that I saw the figures is 1,922 in the total estate.

Ms Beverley Wall (Department of Justice): Today, that population is 1,968. The prison population continues to rise.

Mr Widdis: The population has definitely continued to rise. We have also seen a rise in the female prison population. That number as part of the population is unusually high.

Forgive me, Chair, there was another part of the question that was about the numbers.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Yes, that was about the relationship between prison numbers and reoffending. How have those numbers changed since the Audit Office report? That was two years ago.

Mr Widdis: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Are you seeing an increase in reoffending, an increase in the population or a change in the demographics of the prison population?

Mr Widdis: The total number in the adult reoffending cohort is 3,184. That is the most recent figure that I have, which is from 2021-22. There is a natural lag in reporting on such things because it is about reoffending, so you have to map it afterwards and so on. From recollection, that is a slight but, I suspect, not statistically significant increase since the date of the report. The total adult offending cohort is at 18,335. Taking the COVID years out of consideration, that is not a dramatic change, although the whole thing is representative of an ongoing downward trend. A decade ago, the first figure was 4,875, and we have got the total number of the adult reoffending cohort down from something like 4,900 to 3,184. While there has not been much change in that cohort in the past couple of years, there is a downward trend overall. Similarly, the total cohort of adult offenders has reduced from 30,000 to that 18,000 figure. We can give you more precise figures, Chair, but the general trend for the overall cohort continues to be downward.

I am sure that the Committee is also interested in the reoffending rate, on which there is some focus in the Audit Office report. That figure is a proportion, representing the relationship between the two figures that I have given. It is at 17.4%. It dropped to something like 16% during COVID, but, generally, it has fluctuated at around 16% or 17%. The high point was 18.4%. That rate, which is a comparison of the total cohort of offenders and the amount of reoffending, is proving stubborn, but, overall, the number of reoffenders in the system has noticeably reduced over the period that we are tracking, which is 2010 to 2021-22.

You asked about initiatives that we have done since the report.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Yes, any improvements or initiatives that you have introduced since then to reduce reoffending.

Mr Widdis: I could probably speak all afternoon on that, but I will pick examples. We have introduced a bespoke short-sentence programme. We recognise that short-sentence prisoners are rather hard to reach, so we have revised what we do on that. We have boosted learning and skills by securing a substantial increase in the number of people who get qualifications while they are inside the prison estate. We have put an awful lot of people through our approach of having housing advisers from the Housing Executive help to solve accommodation problems as people leave prison — lack of stable accommodation is known to be a factor that contributes to reoffending — and 50 homelessness decisions have been made by the Housing Executive as a result of those initiatives. Similarly, we have had work coaches go into prisons, which helps people with employability and skills beyond the pure education piece. Since February 2023, 1,600 appointments — a substantial number — have happened in prison. Although that is not quite from the date of the report, it is a useful figure.

A lot of initiatives have happened since then. I could probably mention the further roll-out of ECOs; we can talk to you about that. A bail support pilot programme will be ready to go this year. It is not as though the Department has sat on its hands with the report and waited for PAC to reach it in its rota of consideration and invite us to talk about it; we have continued to make progress on it.

At a more strategic level, the Probation Board has been advancing its general agenda, and the Prison Service has been advancing its Prisons 25by25 programme, which is the latest iteration of change and transformation in the Prison Service. A substantial proportion of that programme is targeted at looking after people when they are with us, trying to prevent reoffending and helping them to transition properly back into the community environment once they are finished with us.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Thank you. I want to touch on the statistics. As a Department, do you benchmark or look at comparisons with other jurisdictions? Where do you look, and how do you see that comparison?

Mr Widdis: We definitely benchmark in all sorts of ways. I mentioned the establishment of the five-nations group, for example, which is intended to do that. It is difficult to benchmark things such as the reoffending rate and the cost of reoffending. On the feasibility of direct comparison, the Audit Office report accepts, I think, that, because of the way crime, offending and reoffending are measured in the different jurisdictions across the UK and Ireland, direct comparison can be difficult. Where we can, we continue to measure. For example, the straight prison population per 100,000 in Northern Ireland is noticeably lower than it is in England, Wales and Scotland. We have 98 persons per 100,000 in the prison population, whereas the Scottish figure, as well as, I think, that in England and Wales, is more like 140. Where we can, we measure and benchmark ourselves against others, but direct read-across is not always possible because of the differences in the data and how it is measured.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Thank you.

Mr Gildernew: I have prior knowledge of the area from some of the social work that I did. I rapidly gained an awareness of the desire and need for and absolute dependence of many of our sectors, including schools, the PSNI, social services and families, on diversionary supports to deal with reoffending and, indeed, offending. I am conscious of the pressure that the PSNI is under, given its numbers, but it is almost the case that, the fewer police you have, the more resource you need to put into addressing offending and reoffending, and I understand that that can be difficult.

I have a couple of specific questions. It appears that two long-standing key strategic documents are used when it comes to the issue of managing reoffending: 'Strategic Framework for Reducing Offending' from 2013, and a desistance strategy from 2015. Given that those were never formally evaluated and both were already quite dated at the time — more so now — will you explain why you consider that they remain fit for purpose?

Mr Widdis: Absolutely. The first of those — the strategic framework — is from 2013, and the desistance strategy is from 2015. We recognise that a considerable time has passed since then. We also recognise that a lot of the context has changed since. For example, we discussed the change in the prison population. There is a high number in the remand population. The driving factors that lead to crime are also a lot more complex, as are the lives of the people who come our way and go into the system. We see a lot more complex mental health issues, addiction issues, accommodation issues and familial issues as people come in, perhaps in society more generally as well.

We have done a review. Part of recommendation 1 was that we review those two documents as a kind of overarching framework. We have done that. That review has been completed, and, while it recognises that the core approach or vision of identifying the criminogenic factors, such as accommodation, health, mental health and education, that are societal drivers and generate a certain amount of crime is still sound — we recognise that, and all the research tells us that — we think that the approach of the strategic framework, which did not have an associated action plan, needs to be revised. The desistance framework had an action plan but did not, perhaps, have clear measurement of targets and so on. We are very much using the review that we have already done of those two initiatives to feed into the draft overarching new strategy for reducing offending and reoffending that is in the PFG. It is not that we think that those initiatives are still absolutely fit for purpose and do not need to be changed. We absolutely recognise that they need to be changed, and the learning from our review will feed into the new draft that will be worked up with all of our partners and brought to the Minister and, eventually, to the Executive.

It is worth my saying that, even though those initiatives are from some time ago, we have continued with other strategic interventions that define what we are doing, all of which try to take that same approach of identifying the criminogenic factors and going at them. I mentioned 'Prisons 2020', and we have a strategic framework for youth justice, which adopted a similar approach and has shown good successes in relation to reoffending in the youth sphere. We have done similar things in relation to the probation approach. It is not as though we have sat back, let those things expire and done nothing for 10 years. We have used the general approach that they espoused to inform a lot of our activity. I recognise that this is the right moment, with a new Minister and an Executive, to garner the all-of-government collaborative approach that would make that truly successful and reduce offending and reoffending.

Mr Gildernew: In best practice more widely, what other reports are you looking at? Where does this better? Which country is the global exemplar when it comes to offending and reoffending rates?

Mr Widdis: I might ask Beverley to come in on that in a second. We have done some initial scoping work on good markers elsewhere. As I mentioned, we have the five-nations policy group, which involves us, Scotland, England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland all pooling knowledge and skills and showing what has worked well and not worked well. We will use all of that to inform really good examples.

Mr Gildernew: I am thinking beyond that to a wider, more global look.

Mr Widdis: I will ask Beverley to speak to that.

Ms Wall: In developing the new strategy, we are not looking just at the positive impact of the youth justice framework, which focused very much on early intervention and diversionary work. We know that, when it comes to an adult strategy for reducing offending and reoffending, we need to work with other Departments. We have already started that engagement with other Departments on what, they consider, should be included in the new strategy.

Mr Gildernew: Where in the world has better offending or reoffending rates? With which other nations could we compare ourselves?

Ms Wall: In the prison space, we always look to the Nordic countries.

Mr Gildernew: I suspected that.

Ms Wall: However, there is significant investment there, and we are working within constrained budgets. In developing the strategy, we are looking at research from other countries and engaging through our five-nations group — us and the four nations closest to us. Within that research, we look at other countries, but there will always be those constraints.

Mr Gildernew: It appears that investment pays off. OK, thank you.

The Audit Office report states that the reducing reoffending strategic outcomes group, which the DOJ established in May 2017, decided:

"a formal strategy for reducing reoffending was not required."

Can you explain why that opportunity to place the management of reoffending on a more strategic footing was not taken? Have lessons been learnt from that?

Mr Widdis: I suppose that the decision was taken with the knowledge of what I have just said in mind, which is that we had identified, as all the research continues to confirm, that we are on the right general trajectory for what you do to reduce offending and reoffending. That has informed any amount of work in prisons, probation practice and elsewhere in order to continue that drive and get the cohort down. Whether or not a new strategic framework was needed at that time, that was the decision taken.

We totally recognise now that we need to revise the framework and think again about how we would apply the learning that we have, continue to validate it, think about what it means at present and what has changed in that science. As you say, there is the example of Nordic countries and elsewhere. We must also apply it to the fairly substantial changes in context that we have: an increase in the prison population, an increase in complexity and, I am really sorry to say, for the moment, restrained financial circumstances. It will be used to do that at the moment, and we are beginning to do all that solid preliminary work in order to put out a call for evidence, which will allow all sorts of people to come forward with good ideas for how we can make this as effective as we can.

Mr Gildernew: Yes. The financial constraints are real — no question about it — so you have to look at what else you can do better. Across various topics, the Committee has looked at cross-departmental working and how that can be improved. In the context of the new Programme for Government and the previous draft PFG, what progress has been made on developing a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending?

Mr Widdis: As I said in relation to the previous strategy and the previous PFG, which was some time ago, we continue to roll out programmes: for example, the Prisons 25by25 work in the probation sector and ECOs have been done since the last Programme for Government. We now have this brand-new Programme for Government. Not only does it clearly speak to the world at large about better collaboration across all sorts of activity in government — not just reoffending or justice issues but everything — but, specifically, the Executive have put a pin in it and said that they are giving a commitment that one of the actions under their "Safer Communities" priority, will be Executive approval of a cross-departmental strategy on reducing offending and reoffending. The developmental work is exactly as Beverley described, and we are already engaged on it.

Mr Gildernew: Can I check with you? You mentioned housing, which is one of the factors that I have here, mental health and addiction. You also mentioned financial security: is that poverty?

Mr Widdis: Forgive me; I do not know if I said financial security. However, poverty is definitely a criminogenic factor which is known to increase the probability of crime occurring.

Mr Gildernew: Maybe it was just a phrase you used, but, if we describe the same thing in different terms, does that make it more difficult to map across Departments? Often, we find that there are simple solutions to working better, and sometimes there are just misunderstandings or misalignments as a result of descriptions. So that is poverty: financial security.

Can you give examples of where you work with other Departments on housing, mental health or addiction to reduce reoffending?

Mr Widdis: Absolutely. We work in the sphere of homelessness, and we fed into the anti-poverty strategy.

Ms Wall: Since the report was published and prior to that, we have focused on enhanced rehabilitation support in and out of custody. To do that, we have worked with other Departments. We work closely with colleagues in the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive and with our voluntary and community sector partners to do that. We bring housing advisers into the prison setting. We bring work coaches and Make the Call benefit advisers into the prison setting to provide advice and support to prisoners before they leave us. We also provide debt and benefit advice to their families while they are with us. We focus on the factors that, we know, impact on reoffending, which are accommodation, employment and access to benefits or financial security.

In the employment space, we have reviewed and revised our education curriculum in the prison setting to take account of labour market needs. We have worked closely with colleagues in the

Department for Communities to provide work coaches in prisons, and that has led to 59 people leaving prison and going straight into employment. We are working to build our relationships with the private sector, extend the Ban the Box campaign and set up an employers' forum to support people to find jobs and secure employment post release.

Mr Gildernew: Briefly, it is clear that you understand the need for other Departments to play their part, and I agree with that. Do those Departments fully understand the role that they can play to reduce reoffending and offending?

Ms Wall: We have already started the conversations with those Departments and primarily with the Departments we already work closely with — for example, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy. We have also met colleagues in the Department of Education and the Executive Office to have those early conversations as we start to scope out the content of a strategy. We are also looking at the strategies that the Departments already have in place, such as the anti-poverty strategy. We know that over 90% of the people who come into a prison setting come from one of the top 10% of the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. We know that there is a direct link with poverty.

Mr Widdis: Briefly, to Mr Gildernew's question, the answer is yes. Every Department absolutely knows. They probably do not understand all the details of what we will bring in front of them in each case, but everybody gets the core idea of cooperating to make a change that will drive out the factors that lead people into offending. Everyone is utterly committed to doing that. The task and challenge for us will be translating that into a coordinated series of actions that will make the change and persuade not just the Departments but the Ministers and the Executive as a whole to commit and buy into it, and then we will be able to deliver it. The absolute commitment is there on this and pretty much every other large problem in society. Where there is an interconnection across sectors, you will find that all the Departments understand it, but it is about translating that into an advance on digging into the issue, undermining it and getting rid of it. That is the challenge that lies ahead.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you. I probably should have declared an interest in advance of that question, as I am the Chair of the Communities Committee, but I do so now.

Ms Forsythe: I have a brief one. Colm talked about the cross-governmental strategy. I noticed that you made a bid under the transformation project, and the lack of integrated data systems to transform public services has been mentioned. Although the bid was rejected in this round of transformation, do you plan to take that forward as a cross-departmental programme?

Mr Widdis: We put in bids and were quite successful, because we had two bids supported out of the total of six that were supported. I pay tribute to colleagues in the Department who prepared the bids, those who pushed them through and those on the transformation board, who selected them. An awful lot of work was done.

We had one that related specifically to reducing reoffending, which is probably what the Committee is most interested in. It comprised a number of things of which the data analysis piece was just one. Even though we did not get the bid and therefore could not use bid money to drive it forward, we have identified and prioritised some resource in the Department to deliver the ECO part of it and, separately, to deliver bail support as well. From memory, there was a relatively small portion of the bid relating to two data analysts. Is that correct?

Ms Wall: Yes.

Mr Widdis: We have not currently been able to fund that, but we are doing everything that we can with the resources that we have to push forward better use of data and information; indeed — I am happy to get onto this later — we have been pushing for and working with colleagues in NISRA on cross-departmental use of data and strategy.

Ms Wall: We are engaging with NISRA colleagues on those data linkages, because, when people leave prison, it is difficult for us to trace their journey unless they reoffend and come back into prison custody. We have engaged with colleagues in NISRA on how to improve the data linkages across Departments.

Mr Widdis: Forgive me, Beverley, I should have added that you have developed an outcomes dashboard for at least three of the factors. Is that right?

Ms Wall: We have, yes. We are already working with NISRA on developing outcomes dashboards around those key factors of accommodation, addictions and learning and skills. We have already worked to improve our management information in respect of the prison population — both remand and sentenced — and the reoffending rates.

Mr Boylan: Hugh, you and your team are welcome. Thanks very much for your answers so far. I have a number of questions.

Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) has repeatedly highlighted the need for improved performance measures that look at longer-term outcomes. The Audit Office report states:

"there is insufficient clarity on which measures"

taken by the Department "are achieving greatest impact". Has there been any tangible improvement in outcome measurement in recent years?

Mr Widdis: There absolutely has. I take the point that there was less of that in the 2013 and 2015 strategic framework documents than we might have envisaged, but we have applied that learning point since then, and it will be taken into the new strategy. There were something like 282 actions in the Prisons 2020 programme, along with a set of outcomes that we were trying to achieve as a result. By my recollection — Beverley can correct me, if I am wrong — 95% of those were achieved and delivered. Over a period of time when some may become a bit irrelevant or whatever, 95% achievement is pretty high. Prisons 25by25 is the name that we have given to the next iteration of that; we have not quite closed on it yet — is that right?

Ms Wall: Yes.

Mr Widdis: We are nearly there. I know that you are working on the next iteration, Beverley.

Ms Wall: We are working to develop it for the next year. We will link that with any new strategy that is being developed.

Mr Boylan: The Audit Office also highlighted gaps in management information, particularly with regard to the proportion of short-term prisoners who receive rehabilitative support before release and the monitoring of reoffending rates amongst remand prisoners. Is that basic information available yet?

Ms Wall: We have improved our management information. We publish monthly prison population dashboards for remand and sentenced prisoners now, as well as reoffending data. We have key performance indicators (KPIs) for each prison establishment and management information around drug testing in each of the prison establishments. As I said, we were also improving our outcomes measurement in respect of wider interventions such as accommodation, addictions and learning and skills/employment. We will use those insights to inform the rehabilitation model.

Mr Boylan: Thank you. The Audit Office highlighted the fact that, whilst the total annual economic and social cost of adult reoffending in England has been estimated at £16.7 billion, little is known about the extent of that cost in the North. Have you done any work to estimate that?

Mr Widdis: We absolutely have. Members may be aware of an earlier report, 'Cost of Crime in Northern Ireland' — it was not specifically on reoffending — which we have updated since the Audit Office report. That estimated the cost of crime as a whole to Northern Ireland society and is a gateway project to work on the cost of reoffending as a subset of that. We have also completed that bit of work. The 'Cost of Crime' report has been signed off internally. From recollection, it is for publication very rapidly. It has come out with a figure of £3.4 billion as the cost of crime to Northern Ireland society and government in 2021-22.

As a result of another really useful recommendation in the report, we now have a figure for the cost of reoffending in Northern Ireland, which is £374 million. As Beverley said, we will use that knowledge to design interventions and identify the scale of the problem and, in an ideal world, the correct amount of money to put into avoiding it and to be spent in a value-for-money way to the satisfaction of the

Committee and everybody else. The straight answer is yes; I am just trying to give you more detail than the fact that we have done it and the amounts.

Mr Boylan: You have answered my next question. Thank you.

Mr Honeyford: The next bit is looking at short-term prisoners. There is preparation for the release of long-term prisoners, and work goes into that. How does that compare with the release of short-term prisoners?

Ms Wall: We are conscious that the remand population in prisons is higher in Northern Ireland than in any other jurisdiction. We have reviewed and revised our rehabilitation model to take account of that. Our education provision includes short courses for those held on remand or on short sentences. There are 12-week programmes on things such as essential skills and health and safety in the workplace. We worked with the voluntary and community sector organisation Extern to develop a prisoner support project for prisoners on short sentences prior to their release and for six months post exit. That is a two-year programme, and early indications are that it has been successful. We will have an interim evaluation of that shortly.

We have put in place other measures such as peer mentoring to provide support in prison. We are working with voluntary and community sector organisations and have put in a funding bid to extend that support for people after they leave us. We have put in structured release planning, with exit passports for all prisoners to ensure that they have identification, access to a GP and housing advice before they leave us. We have a directory of services for short-sentence and remand prisoners that explains the services that are available to them while they are in prison. We have also focused on family support, because we know that that is key. We work with voluntary and community sector partners on maintaining the family links of individuals while they are with us. Those are just some of the programmes; we have a range of programmes that are targeted at short-sentence and remand prisoners.

Mr Widdis: As well as what we do once they are with us, we are conscious that the population is high, so we look at interventions that can provide alternatives to a short sentence. As has been mentioned, we think that, as an alternative, the ECO is a great success. I do not know whether Amanda will want to speak briefly to that. We are doing what we can to legislate to provide the judiciary with options. One of the outcomes of a sentencing review a number of years ago will feature in the sentencing Bill that will be introduced reasonably shortly. That is about adding a community element to a suspended sentence, so it increases the judiciary's armoury of options for penalising people and getting some payback into the community rather than feeling limited to giving a short sentence. Amanda, do you want to speak briefly on ECOs?

Ms Amanda Stewart (Probation Board for Northern Ireland): Yes. Thanks, Hugh.

An ECO is an alternative to a short prison sentence, and it is directed by a judge when they are minded to give a sentence of less than 12 months. It was developed in 2016 in response to some of the addiction and mental health issues that were coming before judges when people were faced with short prison sentences. It did not require a change in legislation, and it was developed alongside the judiciary and with the Criminal Justice Board (CJB). It is really an enhancement to what we have already, so it is wrap-around support. At the minute, a combination order is a combination of community service and a probation order, which will be supervision and community service. It is an enhancement to a combination order with further wrap-around support.

In a sense, the reason why they have been so effective and why we are keen to make sure that they are rolled out across all court areas is that they do not disrupt the positive influences in somebody's life when they go into prison for a short time — losing their job, potentially losing their accommodation, family links and some of the issues that are associated with prison and coming out in a very short time and having to deal with all that again. They are robust sentences, and they involve probation supervision. There is an assessment by a psychologist to deal with some of the mental health issues. There is a number of hours of community service that an offender is required to do, and there will be other aspects added to the licence condition. In a sense, for us, the attractiveness is that reparation to the community and giving back through that community sentence. Often, I say that people go back into the community once they come out of prison, and there is a place for the community to put that support in place. Community service is valuable in doing that.

I will give you some of the data on the effectiveness. We have done two pilots. The first one was in 2015 in the Ards and Armagh court areas, and the second one was in the north-west. There was an evaluation of those. While the reoffending rates for people coming out of prison are sitting at around 50%, with ECOs we have seen a reduction across each of the years from 41% in 2017-18, which is when the first ECO cohort was introduced, to 28% in 2021. It then went up to 31%. There was a slight rise in the most recent cohort that we received. Interestingly, it also showed a reduction in those two court areas, with short prison sentences reduced by 20%. That is why we are really keen; it is an effective order in reducing reoffending. It is also better value for money and deals with long-term issues around reoffending and the societal impact of people coming out of prison.

Mr Honeyford: You have answered a bit of my next question. I looked at the evaluation from 2019. I am trying to see when the changes happened. In 2019, the positive outcomes for short-term prisoners (POST) project found that it was lacking in many respects. What is the current rehabilitation programme? Are you saying that it has changed since that? Is the current rehabilitation programme for short-term prisoners? How do we ensure that it is being effective as we move forward?

Ms Wall: That is the challenge for us in measuring the impact through the gate. We can measure the outcomes for an individual while they are with us in areas such as, for example, improved educational qualifications and support for substance misuse. The challenge is measuring that impact when they leave us. That is where we are focusing on better data linkages, and we will also focus on a cross-Executive strategy.

Mr Honeyford: Are you talking with other Departments?

Ms Wall: We are working with other Departments on linking our data, yes. For example, colleagues in the Department for Communities have data on benefit uptake, and the Department for the Economy has data on employment. We can make better use of that data to track people before they arrive with us and after they leave us.

Mr Honeyford: I am trying to work this out. When somebody leaves, are they still under your — when you are tracking data and statistics on that, are they still under your care, or does that become —?

Ms Wall: When someone leaves prison, our ability to know anything about that prisoner is strictly limited, unless we can access any engagement that they have had with another Department. We do not have that ability at the moment.

Mr Honeyford: Are you saying that you track that through?

Ms Wall: We cannot do that at the moment

Mr Honeyford: You cannot?

Ms Wall: We are doing that through the prisoner support project that we are piloting, which allows us to track a prisoner before they leave us and for six months after. At the end of that two-year pilot programme, we will know what impact it has had on reoffending among the cohort that went through it.

Mr Honeyford: OK. My last question is on short-term prisoners who are not subject to post-custody supervision on release. You used the term "through the gate", which was new to me when I read it in the pack. The support seems to be far more advanced in the rest of the UK. Is that the case? The way that you are looking at me says no.

Ms Wall: My view, from our engagement through the five-nations group, is that Northern Ireland is not doing anything different. Nothing is being done in other jurisdictions that we are not already doing or seeking to do. For example, we have seen bail support delivered as an alternative to custody in other jurisdictions, and we are developing that as a pilot in Northern Ireland. That is one of the key things that we see in other jurisdictions that we are not currently delivering. When it comes to the support that we provide by way of rehabilitation, however, we do not see other jurisdictions doing anything significant that we are not doing.

Mr Widdis: When people come into our system, we can work with them. Then, depending on how they are released — whether they are on licence and whether there is any kind of community

supervision — we, as a sector, can continue to work with them. Long after that, however, after they have gone from our bit of the system, they are still in the much bigger government system, where, as government, we are all obliged and expected to assist. We would love to get to the point in the strategy of making sure that, from the data and service design points of view, we can identify whether there is a cohort of people — without talking about individuals — that has been through prison and done a lot of rehabilitation work with us and not lose all that data just for the sake of, for example, some additional actions from Communities for the next two years or provision to them from Health for the period after that or whatever. There is work to do on that, and we very much hope that the strategy will guide what we all do on it.

Mr Honeyford: You have said, a couple of times now, things like, "We've started discussions," "There's a piece of work to do," or, "It's about that piece when they leave". Ultimately, you need buy-in from the Departments of Health, Communities and Education. I suppose it wraps around Economy and all the Departments. Are you getting buy-in from the other Departments?

Mr Widdis: Absolutely, in the sense of everybody understanding what the problem is, albeit not all the detail — we are the masters of that at the moment, although we are trying to help everybody to understand it. I tried to indicate that to Mr Gildernew: in any discussions that we have with partners in this sphere, everybody is content to assist and to play their part, but the task will be to turn that willingness into hard actions and investment in the right areas. Some of that might not even be through the gate; it might be much earlier in people's lives in order to generate circumstances in which they end up not being in the criminal justice system at all, as victims — from the overall perspective of what we are trying to achieve — or as individuals who have committed a crime.

Mr Honeyford: Our first inquiry was into mental health services. As you were saying that, you reminded me of the evidence given at that inquiry about having early intervention rather than firefighting at the end of the process. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): On the data and analysis piece, the report mentions there being a hardcore group of reoffenders. Do you analyse that, understand the rationale of it and understand their make-up and how best to help them? Have you ever looked at that?

Mr Widdis: Certainly, in relation to the general factors that lead people towards crime. You can identify it when people come into our system. We do a prisoner needs assessment for each person who comes into our system, so we know, for example, that something like 75% left school at age 16, something like 37% have no qualifications by the time they come to us, and about 63% have used drugs. The answer is yes, we know a lot about that cohort. Clearly, the interventions that might hold people in school longer would be likely to have a policy impact on the cohort of people who come to us, possibly years after their school leaving age. We know quite a lot about that cohort, and we are trying to apply that learning.

Do not get me wrong: it is not that we have a long way to go and nothing is happening at the moment. We do loads with other Departments and partners at the moment. Beverley and colleagues do release planning for each individual prisoner before they go out. There is a lot of collaboration with the voluntary and community sector on that. We have a lot of individual programmes and specified support. The agenda is to make sure that everybody leaves with an exit passport, which essentially identifies the GP, accommodation, social security etc. That is all readied with the prisoner and the services as much as we can before they go. Then we do an awful lot with Extern, which has a short-sentence prisoner programme that very much crosses before the gate and through the gate. Extern delivers a lot beyond our technical responsibility and ability to act. It has stepped into that space and helps short-sentence prisoners transition back into the environment.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): How does the exit passport work in Northern Ireland in comparison with elsewhere? Is it to the same standard, or do we lag behind in that regard?

Mr Widdis: I do not know the answer to that, Deputy Chair, but perhaps Beverley —.

Ms Wall: What I say about all our rehabilitation work is that the increasing and continued growth and complexity of our prison population really puts our rehabilitation efforts under strain, just as other jurisdictions are experiencing in their rehabilitation programme delivery. In recognition of that increase in prison population and complexity, we are undertaking a review of our prisoner development model,

which is the rehabilitation model that we use in prisons, to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and can respond fully to the needs and complexities of the prisoners we see today.

Mr Delargy: Thank you for your presentation and answers so far. I want to touch on short-term custodial sentences. There will be an overlap with some of the answers that you have already provided, but I would not mind if you could provide any more detail on that. We obviously have a higher rate of short-term sentences than England, Scotland, Wales and all the five nations that you mentioned. What is the Department doing to address that? Can you give me any information on the fact that short-term prisoners obviously receive a lot less rehabilitation support? Does that impact on their likelihood of reoffending?

Mr Widdis: That is really helpful, Mr Delargy. Thank you. I reiterate that we are doing a lot. Every prisoner, short- or long-term or remand, has access to rehabilitation and resettlement initiatives under the prisoner development model. That applies to everybody who comes into the prisons estate in all three prisons. We have done an external review of that model — we have not completed it yet, but it is under way — to make sure that it is as sound and adequate as it can be. It will apply to short-term prisoners and try to deal with the fact that there is a rising number of short-sentence prisoners in the system. It is also intended to take account of the high proportion of remand prisoners.

As Beverley has indicated, we have done things about our education curriculum. For example, we have introduced shorter and quicker programmes. The average time on remand — forgive me; that is not quite what you asked about — is only 58 days. That is an average, but it is a really short time to meaningfully help people examine their life and what they are doing. However, we have done what we can to introduce shorter programmes. A short-sentence directory of services and initiatives has been made available to all prisoners. As Beverley said, we are also doing things such as helping with housing, employability and skills development while prisoners are with us. Those are all there. The exit passport, which we have just discussed, is a mechanism there as well.

That is all inside the prison. Outside, it is very much about trying to provide alternatives. We have already discussed ECOs, but we are looking at, for example, a community sentence element being added to a suspended sentence. The purpose of that is to assist the judiciary in feeling that they have another option available, rather than giving a short sentence. Seán, do you want to say a few words about it?

Mr Seán Holland (Department of Justice): Yes, absolutely. As the permanent secretary mentioned earlier, that stemmed from the sentencing review work. Work was done to look at what options could be developed that might reduce the number of short sentences being given. Three options were considered. We looked at whether we could add community provisions to conditional discharges, deferred sentences and suspended sentences. After consideration, it was felt that doing so with conditional discharges might lead to increased criminalisation of people who were not really at the threshold of receiving a custodial sentence. In a sense, deferred sentences already have a community condition, because the sentence is normally deferred while the person is required to do something. Therefore, we focused on suspended sentences because we thought that that was probably where the biggest payback — the biggest return on investment — would be and because people who are likely to get a suspended sentence are on the threshold of getting a custodial sentence.

There is a challenge in that. Over the past 10 years, I think, the average has been between 3,500 and 4,000 suspended sentences a year. If we were to add community provisions to all of those, we would need to double the size of the probation agency. That is not practical or necessary. We have provisions in the legislation that will, hopefully, come before the Assembly in the autumn that will allow for community conditions to be added to suspended sentences. It will be introduced through a phased approach. The thinking is that it should initially focus on cases in the Crown Court that are at the higher end of the seriousness-of-offence spectrum. To people who would otherwise stand a very significant chance of going into custody, the judiciary will have the option of giving a suspended sentence with a community dimension added to it. That is significant.

We have been asked a few times today about benchmarking. We look carefully at what happens in other jurisdictions. We looked closely at what happened in Scotland when it introduced legislation with a presumption against a short sentence. In effect, the legislation said that, if a sentence is going to be three months or under, it should not be issued. What appears to have happened is that judges began what they call "uptariffing", so, where they might have given a three-month sentence, they gave a six-month sentence. That legislation has now been amended to make it less than a 12-month sentence. That has not been commenced yet.

England was considering a similar provision, but that fell at the general election, and there are currently no plans for England to introduce such a provision. England has commissioned another sentencing review, and one focus of that will be how to address short sentences. It should be making its recommendations known in the coming months, and we will look closely at that, because, to be frank, England has much more policy capacity than we have to look at the issues. We are anxious to learn by benchmarking against those other jurisdictions.

Mr Delargy: OK. Thanks for that. That is helpful.

I want to probe the ECOs a bit. In your previous comments, you went into some detail on those and some of the other short-term alternatives that you are looking at. From your evidence and that of others, those measures have been effective. The evidence points that way — that they have been effective — but they also have the potential to be even more effective when they are rolled out more widely. What is rationale for not rolling them out as fully? Is it purely financial? If so, surely there is a net saving by doing so. Does the fact that we fund things on an annual cycle rather than a three-year cycle have a huge impact on that? What is the impact, and why?

Mr Widdis: That is really helpful, Mr Delargy. I might ask Amanda to fill in the details, but, broadly speaking, the answer is yes. We have evaluated ECOs on a number of occasions, and that evaluation has clearly shown that they are effective in meeting policy objectives. They are also effective from an economic perspective. For example, the average cost per life of an ECO is around £10,000, and the average benefit to society is £15,000 per order. Those are 2019 figures — sorry, that £15,000 is a 2019 figure. There is clearly, from a PAC perspective, value for money in that. However, it is also simply a better outcome in meeting the general policy objective of preventing reoffending. As Amanda indicated, where we piloted that initiative, it had the impact of reducing short sentences, and it leads to lower reoffending rates than custodial sentences, insofar as they are comparable.

The answer is yes. The case has essentially been made to have ECOs. The obstacle has entirely been the absence of funding to roll them out fully across Northern Ireland. Those evaluations are done in a number of areas. We submitted a transformation bid in that regard, but it was not successful. The Minister has proposed allocations inside the Department and the sector this year and has agreed to prioritise some money for them. It is a relatively small amount of money — from memory, it is about £500,000 — but it allows us to roll them out in Ballymena, Antrim and Coleraine.

I will ask Amanda to take it from there and provide more detail on how effective they are.

Ms Stewart: Hugh, I think that you have more or less covered it.

I have talked about their effectiveness. Your question was about what has prevented them. It is absolutely because of financial constraints. One-year funding makes it difficult. I have to recruit staff, and, when you start to bring staff into the organisation, it is not just a one-year process. I would like to get to a position where we have a planned roll-out of ECOs across all court areas. I am absolutely certain that the Department would support me if it had the money. It has, largely, been an issue with funding; it has not been about the will to do it either in the Probation Board or the Department.

ECOs were due to be rolled out into the third court area at the onset of COVID. That was then stood down, and the priority was on COVID, after which, there was a focus on COVID recovery. In this financial year, we are looking to move into the north Antrim court area. We should be able to scale that up fairly quickly and make ECOs available. We in probation also have work to do with the judiciary to provide confidence about the effectiveness of ECOs. We need to bring an emphasis to them again. There has been a pilot for so long, and there is a question mark about whether it will continue. I engage at a senior level with the Lady Chief Justice and her office to keep her informed of our plans. Our local probation officers link with the district judges in those areas to make sure that they are aware that ECOs are available in that third court area.

Mr Delargy: Before I move on to my last question, I will home in a wee bit on that. I am really interested in how those areas are selected. What metrics are used? What metrics are used to measure success?

Ms Stewart: I will answer the second question first. A fairly robust economic appraisal was undertaken by Ulster University, NISRA and the Department of Justice in 2021. Hugh talked about the wider fiscal benefit, which is referenced in the Audit Office report: it is between £5.7 million and £8.3 million per year on a full roll-out. It looked at the full cost of an ECO and calculated the savings to prison; the

benefits of unpaid work — obviously, there is an unpaid work element to it — and the benefits to wider society, such as the tax income from people in work.

Seán talked about best practice. The House of Lords inquiry into community sentences looked at ECOs. They are really effective community sentences. They have also been looked at in those jurisdictions with a view to their being rolled out.

A lot of how we pick the areas is to do with being able to do something at pace because we have the staffing capacity and because judges are willing and able to do it. Obviously, Belfast is enormous for us, and significant costs would be involved, which has prevented a focus on it at this stage. We need a firm commitment on the cost of rolling it out in Belfast, given the scale of what would be involved and some of the challenges that we have had in probation to do with the availability of social workers and the recruitment and attrition of staff. It is not about the willingness in the area; it is about having the resources to scale it up.

Mr Widdis: Mr Delargy also asked about annual budget cycles. That feeds very much into the planning as well. It is indubitably the case that most people will say that, with a multi-year settlement, you know what you are going to get, and you can plan for the long term, which allows for the more consistent embedding and roll-out of ECOs or anything else. The assumption is that the comprehensive spending review at UK level will lead to multi-year Budgets for the Executive. I think that the Finance Minister said yesterday that that would be a game changer. That, essentially, is what we all think as well, in terms of how you plan and deliver sensible developments and activity.

Mr Delargy: That is useful, gives clarity and helps my understanding. Thank you for providing the details. I imagine that longevity is more difficult to measure. While you can measure the essential economic impact in the short term, it is harder to measure in the longer term. I am sure that will be part of the planning.

My final point is on electronic tagging. When tagging is used effectively, it can have good results. I imagine that the answer may be similar, but is there a reason why electronic tagging has not been rolled out in specific circumstances?

Mr Widdis: Resources will play into that. We put in a successful transformation bid to fund electronic monitoring tagging. It is a relatively small amount of money. Our existing contract with a provider has just come to an end. The previous contract with the provider was, essentially, based on older technology. We can now move to the new technology, subject to ministerial approval, and there will be human rights and data protection issues to think through. However, we think it will help judges to be confident in bailing people into the community, rather than remanding them into custody, because there will be more precise information about where they are or the bail conditions can be designed more specifically. Similarly, for prisoners who have been released on licence or for people who are under various constraints and probation orders, there is huge scope to be more innovative and do things differently to provide judges with the confidence to reduce the population in the prisons, which helps Beverley and colleagues do more with the people in prison.

It is more likely to lead to less of the disruption, which Amanda described, that happens to people's lives when they have a short sentence. They are not soft or easy options; they are tough community orders that people are required to comply with. Tagging is physical location monitoring. However, it decreases the chances of reoffending, because research shows that keeping people in the community is a better solution than imposing a short sentence.

Mr Delargy: You touched on the human rights consequences and those concerns. The Committee is looking at the financial side, which is important, but human rights compliance and upholding those rights is paramount and will take precedence over anything else. What engagement have you had with human rights organisations about tagging? What is their opinion of tagging? I am conscious that your role is wider than what is being discussed today, but it is important for the Committee to be aware that, although we are looking at this from the point of view of finances, there are human rights implications. Can you assure the Committee that the methods are human rights-compliant?

Mr Widdis: I confess that I cannot immediately answer your question on engagement. I assume that you mean the NI Human Rights Commission (NIHRC), and I do not know about that, but I am happy to write to the Committee. I can assure the Committee, the Assembly, members of the Justice Committee and everybody else that everything the Department of Justice does has human rights in mind. We hold victims first and foremost. We are there to protect victims and society. We do everything that we can to

vindicate the rights of victims. We regularly deal with the victims' commissioner and others about those issues.

Rights apply to perpetrators as well. The Department, like every other bit of the public sector, can lawfully act only in accordance with the convention rights. I assure the Committee that we do everything necessary as we roll out any intervention — for example, ECOs — and the Bill can come before the Assembly only once it has been signed off by the Speaker as being within competence, which includes convention rights, and we will do our piece on that. The Minister and the Department have no intention of breaching people's human rights, even to provide value for money. There are limits. We will do what we can to balance those things. People's rights will be protected by the Department, the courts, the PSNI, the probation service and everyone else who acts in that area.

Mr Delargy: I asked just to get clarity on what engagement had taken place. You gave me that assurance, and I appreciate it.

Thank you very much for your answers. They have given me clarity on some of the issues.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): I will bring in Colm, but, just before I do, Amanda, you mentioned social workers in Belfast, and I want to ask about the difficulties in recruiting new, additional social workers, particularly onto the likes of the Probation Board. What impact is the lower number of social workers or the number of vacancies having on reoffending? Is that being measured, monitored and addressed?

Ms Stewart: Thank you, Deputy Chair. I appreciate the question. It has been a challenge for us. I have spoken to the Justice Committee fairly regularly and with political leaders, when I am out visiting offices or doing local engagements, on some of the challenges we have had.

Fortunately, last year, the Department gave us the investment to enable us to modernise our pay. That has been implemented, and we have seen a significant reduction in our attrition rates. The difficulty that that creates for us at present is that we do not have a huge number of vacancies, but we are stopping people leaving, which is what we were trying to do. We have positive indications that, when we implemented pay modernisation, people began to stay. They did not leave to take a similar job elsewhere in the public sector.

The difficulty that we have at the minute is that we have a huge cohort of really inexperienced staff. We lost a number of experienced staff. We had a 22-point pay scale, which now has been reduced to a six-point pay scale, so the leaving has stopped. However, we have a huge amount of investment in and pressure on our experienced social workers to manage what Beverley referred to as an increasingly challenging, complex caseload in probation.

Thankfully, the attrition has been sorted, and I am happy to report that I have very few vacancies at the minute. However, in considering scaling-up any projects, we would need to look at the impact, for example, on children's services and other aspects that are struggling at the minute. It takes three or four years for social workers to come through the system, and some of the other initiatives and areas are under significant pressure.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Thank you. I appreciate that.

Sorry, Colm.

Mr Gildernew: My question in this section is about adult restorative justice. I declare that I recently met Community Restorative Justice (CRJ) Ireland, based in Newry and south Armagh. I heard at first hand about some of the invaluable work that it does. Your Department launched a strategy on that in 2022. In her forward, the Minister set out that:

"Experience from" —

the North —

"and elsewhere has proven the benefits of a restorative approach across a range of applications."

The strategy then sets out some of the benefits of restorative justice, which include victims having their voice heard and the impact on desistance, which we referenced earlier. The strategy states:

In addition to these, there is evidence that facing up to the consequences of your crime and restorative engagement with your victim can actually reduce future reoffending. The Home Office research conducted by Shapland et al demonstrated a 27% drop in the frequency of re-offending following a restorative conference.

My question is this: can you outline the measures from the strategy that have been implemented so far and summarise the role that restorative justice plays in addressing adult reoffending in the North?

Mr Widdis: That is really helpful, Mr Gildernew. The strategy that was published is the first strategic approach to restorative justice in Northern Ireland. The idea is that it improves engagement with and outcomes for victims and develops positive restorative alternatives to traditional justice disposals and so on. The youth justice framework experience in this regard has been really telling. Youth conferences and other interventions in that sphere can be seen to have all sorts of positive benefits — not least in reoffending but in all sorts of ways — for victims and society as a whole.

It is monitored. A restorative justice working group reports to the reducing reoffending group that Beverley chairs. It monitors the actions and the plan. There are actions in the plan for us to work through, but we have already published two annual progress reports, and I am happy to forward those to the Committee to show how far we have got.

Below the level of the strategy, we published a restorative justice protocol in 2023. Our work to revise our interim protocol is ongoing, and we are heading towards an accreditation framework. The idea behind that is to allow more organisations to perform the work for us; we will provide practice standards for them. We need legislation to devolve powers for that from the UK Government to the Department, and, as I understand it, that means an amendment to the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. We are progressing all those things. We are also developing a strategic approach to restorative justice in the prisons establishment, and NIPS is working on a restorative practice framework. I hope that that gives some reassurance about the activities that we are driving.

Beverley, do you want to add to that?

Ms Wall: I have just one thing to add. Our intention is to have the new practice standards and processes in place by the end of the year. That would allow organisations to register to be accredited restorative justice practitioners and deliverers, and that would allow us to roll out that work more widely across communities and in prisons. While we currently partner with two organisations in prisons to deliver some work, it is fair to say that we have a way to go on that. Once the standards and the framework are in place, we will seek to roll that out and extend it in prisons.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you for the answers. That is welcome. That will all have huge benefits for housing, education and health, and, in financially constrained times, there is huge benefit in that. I look forward to receiving the further information that you have offered to send.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you for your responses so far. A sentencing policy review in 2016 led to recommendations being published in April 2021 that advocated the development of community disposals as an alternative to short-term sentences. Nine years have passed since the review was announced. What progress has been made on implementing the review recommendations?

Mr Widdis: I appreciate the fact that the policy review commenced in 2016, but it concluded in 2021. As an example of where we are going with it, we have considered alternatives for the judges, which is part of the recommendation in the Audit Office report. As Seán mentioned, we are looking at adding a community element to suspended sentences — I am happy to give more detail on that — that will be worked into the Bill that will come to the House this autumn.

We have looked, as Seán said, at another aspect that is also in the Audit Office recommendation, which is about the use of prison as a last resort and not having sentences of less than 12 months. Again, I am happy to give more detail on that. We have considered that, and we think that there is still learning to be had from Scotland and Wales. As Seán indicated, when Scotland did something similar, albeit with three-month sentences, there seemed to be an unanticipated outcome, which was that judges handed out four-month sentences as opposed to looking to alternatives; so, we have moved on in relation to those things. From recollection, enhanced combination orders were also part of that review. As discussed, we have already rolled those out in two court areas and are pushing them out in a third.

Forgive me, as, I think, I have already mentioned this element, but, with the agreement of the Minister and House, there will be legislation on suspended sentences and adding a community element to them. All those things flow from the sentencing review, and all that work is in place already, as the ECOs are, or will be brought to the Assembly at, effectively, the earliest opportunity.

As members will be aware, because of the world that we work in and the things that we need to deal with, the Department of Justice is usually a busy user of Assembly time when it comes to legislation. The Minister has relatively limited slots for that in this mandate. She has agreed a programme that includes sentencing, but she is trying to work in a general Justice Bill, which is before the House at the moment, and trying to bring in a victims Bill before the end of the mandate to put the victims commissioner on a statutory footing. It has been tight. She has had to make choices about what she wants to put in, and the Justice Committee and the Assembly will have their view. It also means competing with all the other Ministers who want to put their legislation in front of you and your colleagues.

Mr T Buchanan: Given the high ratio of short-term prisoners in Northern Ireland and the associated reoffending risks, do you envisage legislation to address that being brought forward in this Assembly term?

Mr Widdis: Very much so. The Minister has already agreed her view on what the content will be. She has already gone to the Executive. As the member will be aware, you need Executive approval for the policy content of a Bill before it can be drafted. We are at the stage of getting it drafted with colleagues who are specialists in that area. The Bill will have to go back to the Executive for approval, but, on the assumption that the Executive will continue to be content with it, you will see it introduced in the House in the autumn. That will contain those sentencing elements.

We have a heavy legislative agenda in the Department as a whole, and this is only one aspect of it. If the member is interested, I will say that a lot of other issues would go into the sentencing Bill. For example, we will talk about the general principles of sentencing. Seán is more expert in that than me. Do you want to add anything, Seán?

Mr Holland: It is important to realise that this is a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, the Minister is keen to take forward measures that will address the challenge of short sentences but, equally, in the same legislation, is seeking to address the real concerns that the public have about protection and appropriate punishment for crimes. There will be a chapter in the legislation that is specifically about community disposals, with a focus on being able to add more community components to sentences. The main focus will be on suspended sentences. The intention is that, where someone might previously have received a custodial sentence, the legislation will give a judge the confidence to instead impose a suspended sentence because he or she can add a community component to it.

There are other areas where sentences will be increased. There is a chapter looking at tariffs for murder, for example, which will set out clearer guidelines for the commencement of the tariff at the lower end and the maximum. There are also areas where new offences are being created. When it comes to attacks on public front-line workers, new offences are being created that carry custodial sentences. Aggravators will be introduced. For example, with crimes against vulnerable people and elderly people, the fact that the person was elderly or vulnerable — or elderly and vulnerable — can be taken into account by the judge when sentencing. It is about getting a balance and making sure that, where people can be safely disposed of in the community — as the permanent secretary mentioned, it is not a soft option — we promote that and give the judges more options in that space, while recognising that the public are concerned and are entitled to be concerned about their safety and protection, and, therefore, for other sentences, tariffs will increase.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you.

Ms Forsythe: Thank you, all, for your evidence so far. The next section that we have questions on involves the specific issues associated with remand prisoners. It is shocking to hear that 47% of prisoners who were committed to remand in 2020 did not ultimately receive a prison sentence. Do you agree that that confirms how unsatisfactory the current arrangements for the judiciary are when determining whether bail can be granted?

Mr Widdis: It is worth stepping back for a moment to remind ourselves that the basic principle is that somebody is innocent until proven guilty. If someone is brought before a court on a charge and is

heading towards trial, the judge will be asked to decide whether that person is to be remanded into custody or is safe to bail into the community. There are set common law grounds on which remanding into custody will be justified. Clearly, it is an infringement of the liberty of the individual who is put into custody. None of this is about the guilt of the individual for the charge at hand, but there are tests. Is there a likelihood that there will be interference with evidence or with a witness that might prejudice the outcome of a trial? Is there a likelihood of that person committing further offences? Is there a likelihood of harm to the individual and/or others? Is there a likelihood of disruption to public order? Those are the tests that the judge will consider in each case to decide whether the person is remanded into custody.

We try to provide the opportunity whereby, if a judge is thinking of remanding into custody, he or she might be minded to instead bail the person into the community with tagging, a curfew or other constraints. The judge might be satisfied that the tests can be met in a slightly different way by allowing the person into the community. Absconding is another risk, so, if the judge thinks that the person might abscond before facing trial, the judge is entitled to remand the person into prison.

Once the person is in prison, we work with them. We provide opportunities to people who are remanded. As mentioned, the average remand length, from recollection, is only 58 days, although I appreciate that there will be longer and shorter periods. Remand prisoners do not always engage with us as much as we would like them to. If we offer behavioural change programmes or education, remand prisoners will sometimes think, "If I go on to that, I am effectively admitting that there is something wrong with my behaviour and that I'm guilty". There is, naturally, resistance to that. However, we work with those remand prisoners and provide an offering for them. Beverley, do you want to give more data on that?

Ms Wall: The challenge is that, when someone is on remand, we do not know how long they will be with us. That is why we focused on enhancing the provision for those who are with us for short periods: providing shorter education programmes and employability programmes and working with the 55% of people who come into prison and tell us that they have an addiction issue in order to provide them with support on those issues in partnership with colleagues in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which delivers the healthcare in prison programme. We focus on tailored support for those who are on remand.

Ms Forsythe: To repeat the substance of my question, are you saying that you are satisfied with the current arrangements that have put us in a position in which 47% of prisoners who are committed on remand do not go on to get a prison sentence?

Mr Widdis: Ultimately, the decision to remand somebody into custody is taken by a judge. That is an independent judicial decision, and it is not for me or any part of the Executive to challenge or disagree with it. Logically speaking, some of the people who are remanded into custody are tried and acquitted and so will not see any custodial sentence, and some who are tried will have spent such a period on remand that the judge will simply say, "You've spent that period on remand. That meets the sentence that I was going to impose", so they are released at that stage. On the question of whether I am satisfied with that, to say that I am satisfied or dissatisfied would be to criticise what the judges do, and it is not my role to do that.

We have thought about whether we could do things on the bail set-up. I am conscious of there having been a Law Commission recommendation that we consolidate bail law, which also appears in the Audit Office report. We do not think that that would change an awful lot. We do not think that merely taking the common law, putting it in a statute, bringing it before the House and reiterating it would change the remand figures. We have looked at other aspects of it. Seán, I am conscious that you know more.

Mr Holland: As the permanent secretary said, we have looked at that. Although, in 2012, the Northern Ireland Law Commission recommended consolidation of the law, it did not recommend any change to the conditions on which bail would be granted. As has been said, it would be a struggle to decide which of those conditions to alter, because bail must be granted unless there is a risk of interfering with the process of justice, reoffending, or harm to self and/or others. When that has been looked at by the Criminal Justice Board, the Northern Ireland Law Commission and the Minister, there was no appetite to amend any of those things.

We look at what happens in other jurisdictions. There was a Bail and Release from Custody Bill in Scotland. We looked carefully at that. The Scottish Government's assessment of that Bill is that it will

not change the numbers of those who get bail or those who go on remand. It is about consolidating law. There is a recommendation that we should do the same, and we agree with that recommendation. Given that we are in a shortened mandate, however, it was not a priority when compared with the sentencing Bill, the victims Bill and the consolidated Justice Bill. That does not mean that we are doing nothing on that: we are trying to increase the number of situations in which a judge will be minded to offer bail by expanding bail support programmes. I am not best placed to speak on that, but it is intended to give greater confidence to a judge that bail is appropriate by having a bail support offer, as opposed to interfering with the grounds for bail through a bail Act.

Ms Wall: We are developing that bail support programme. We learnt about that from other jurisdictions through the five-nations group: England, Wales and Scotland are looking at doing that. We are developing a pilot programme to deliver a bail support scheme for females. We have seen a significant increase in the number of females in the prison population, particularly those on remand. Today, there are 120 females in prison, 50% of whom are on remand. Currently, there is no alternative. Judges do not have the offering that may be available in other jurisdictions, so we are working across government and with the Lady Chief Justice's office on developing that proposal.

Ms Forsythe: Have you any idea of the cost to the taxpayer each year caused by the high percentage of those committed to remand who do not go on to receive a prison sentence?

Mr Widdis: The general cost of keeping a prisoner in the prison estate is approximately £50,000, and the figure is not noticeably different between remand and other prisoners.

Ms Forsythe: Do you not isolate a figure for those who have been held on remand and do not go on to receive a prison sentence?

Ms Wall: We have the cost of a prisoner place per year. We can break that down to a week or a day: it costs about £148 a day to keep a prisoner in a prison in Northern Ireland. We do not have the figures for the remand population.

Ms Forsythe: Grand, thank you.

You have already touched on my next question. In the context of the discussion of overcrowding in prisons and the fact that, in 2021-22, 37% of the prison population was on remand, what work have you done to consider bail legislation and information? You mentioned the bail support programmes and bail hostels.

Mr Widdis: On the bail legislation, as indicated, we looked at it. If it is of any reassurance to the member and the Committee, I will say that it is not just the Department that takes this view. The Criminal Justice Board, which includes representatives from across the system at the most senior level, looked at the bail law proposal and is content that existing bail law is fit for purpose. We will continue to keep that under review, and, as Seán said, we will watch what happens elsewhere. However, there are practical things that we can do. For example, the bail support pilot that Beverley talked about is intended to increase the likelihood that a judge will feel confident enough to give bail to an individual to go back into the community, instead of being remanded into a women's prison. That would be subject to strict controls, as bail will always be subject to the strict controls that the judge places on it. If we can provide support that is likely to help the individual not breach those conditions, that is likely to keep the person out of the prison estate, and we think that it is a viable alternative.

We bid for transformation money for that — you have heard that a lot from me today; we were optimistic — but we did not get it. Again, the Minister has recognised the impact on both the individuals and the rest of the prison population, and we think that there is merit in doing a pilot project. We have secured £500,000 or thereabouts to fund it this year. If it is of any reassurance, I will say that we have looked beyond the five nations to New Zealand, Australia, Canada and other international jurisdictions to see what other people are doing and to learn from that and find solutions to the problems.

Ms Forsythe: It is good to hear that the Department is ambitious with its transformation bids. Hopefully, we will see more coming through in the next round. Thank you.

Mr Crawford: I thank the panel for their time and answers. I apologise for not being in the room to ask my questions in person.

In addition to the large numbers of remand prisoners in Northern Ireland and the length of time taken to process court cases, prisoners here often spend longer periods in custody. The Audit Office reported that the completion time for court cases had increased from 162 days to 226 days between 2017-18 and 2021-22. What is the current position? What is being done to ensure that court processes and systems are more efficient?

Mr Widdis: Forgive me, Mr Crawford, the sound was not good. If I have your question right, it was about the increase in disposal times in the court, which the Audit Office identified as being up to 226 days, and what we are doing about that. We agree that, logically speaking, that feeds into the extension of time on remand.

The latest figure is 190 days. Separate from the reoffending piece and the offending piece, the Criminal Justice Board is responsible for a programme on speeding up justice and eradicating delays in the justice system. There are other participants in that programme, but we totally agree that the entire system is interconnected, so it is incredibly valid and relevant. That is a programme of activity across all the partners; it is not just inside the Department. It is intended to drive out unnecessary delay. We have looked at the systemic issues and tried to identify where delay arises. Imagine the passage of a person through the criminal justice system from first detection by the PSNI to finishing at the other end after, for example, some kind of supervision period in the community. We have identified the hotspots of delay in that. We have used those to identify five projects that are wrapped up in a programme in which the core idea is to eradicate delay. We are doing that by, for example, increasing out-of-court disposals, which would see fewer cases coming to court because they are dealt with via a prosecutorial fine or the equivalent of a fixed penalty notice or community resolution notice from the police. There is scope to make efficiencies at the very lowest level of offending and to identify a more suitable disposal, rather than occupying court time, which, everybody agrees, is precious and expensive.

We have a digital reform programme going on. A substantial piece of work is being done in the courts on Themis. There are other digital improvements. For example, there are a few places in which you still need a physical document or signature. We are looking at what legislation is needed to change that so that we can do things digitally more easily. We are also looking at committal reform, which is a reform programme based on the notion that, before you are committed to the Crown Court, there are all sorts of preliminary steps in the Magistrates' Court. There is a lot of inefficiency in that regard. The House legislated on it some time ago. We are trying to bring into place by November of next year the final stage of committal reform, so that you will not have those relatively time-consuming and low-value interventions in the Magistrates' Court and, instead, if the case is sufficiently serious, we can just get the whole thing started in the Crown Court.

There are a couple of other projects, but those are some of the obvious ones. The objective is to drive out delay and provide a smoother system and, therefore, better justice faster, which is good for victims, the system and society. From a PAC point of view, it is good for value for money as well. As I said, we have reduced the headline figure across all court cases from 226 — I think that that was the high point — to 190. There are variable rates, but I do not have them to hand. For example, in the Crown Court, logically speaking, cases take longer than those in the Magistrates' Court. Cases in the youth court take a different length of time as well. If the member is interested, we can provide a bit more detail on that to the Committee.

Mr Crawford: Great. In order to improve rehabilitation and resettlement outcomes for remand prisoners, it is extremely important that ways be found to encourage and identify prisoners who actively engage with prison-based programmes. Will you tell us about the work that has been done in that area and whether it has been effective?

Mr Widdis: I think that the question is about what we are doing to encourage and incentivise remand prisoners to engage with our offering: is that correct?

Mr Crawford: That is correct.

Ms Wall: When a prisoner comes into custody, we engage with them on what we call a "prisoner needs profile". That is the first stage of the rehabilitation programme for people in prison. We look at their specific needs and aspirations, and then we develop, working with them, a prisoner development programme. That is available to all prisoners, whether they be remand or sentenced. As I said, we have tailored programmes for that cadre. The challenge for us, as Hugh said, is that some remand prisoners view engaging in behavioural programmes as an admission of guilt in advance of a court

hearing and, therefore, choose not to engage in them. However, we are having good and growing success with encouraging remand prisoners to engage in education and rehabilitative-type programmes around, say, drug and alcohol abuse. We see improvements and increased uptake in that regard. We will continue to work to develop them. Hopefully, the ongoing review of our prisoner development model — our rehabilitation model — will provide us with recommendations around how we can better tailor that to deal with the increasing remand and prison population and the increasing number of people who come into prison with complexities as regards poor mental health and addiction.

Mr Crawford: That is great. Thanks.

Ms Forsythe: In the environment that we are in, in which there is limited funding, it is important that we make the best use of public money. Given the rise in the prison population — you touched on this earlier, but I want to get a bit more detail — what initiatives have you taken with the voluntary and community sector to focus on the prevention of reoffending?

Mr Widdis: We do substantial work with the voluntary and community sector and are grateful to it for partnering with us in all sorts of ways. From recollection, we have 19 or 20 partners that do all sorts of things in different parts of the system, including, to be fair, outside of reoffending. Organisations such as NIACRO and Extern work with us on various programmes. I mentioned the short-sentence prisoners transition programme that Extern helps us with. That is particularly useful, because there are things that we can do inside the prison that Extern helps us with, but, once the person has left the confines within which we work and are outside the prison, Extern can take the journey much further than we can. Do you want to give more detail on that, Beverley?

Ms Wall: We could not deliver the rehabilitation work that we deliver in prisons without the support of those voluntary and community sector organisations. They bring a particular skill set that we do not have. Prison officers are skilled individuals who deliver a particular role, but they do not have the range of skills that those in the voluntary and community sector do. That sector is key, and those organisations are extremely valued as partners within the prison setting and without. They have a reach within and without prison, so they can provide support as people leave prison and continue to provide it.

Ms Forsythe: Brilliant. I totally agree. Do you collect any data on that? As you move forward with the collation of data across Departments, will those linked with the voluntary and community sector be captured?

Ms Wall: Absolutely. With all the funding that we provide to voluntary and community sector organisations to provide services in prisons, we have action plans and report cards to monitor the impact, so we know what impact they have. As we take forward the development of an Executive strategy, we will engage not just with other Departments and statutory bodies but with the voluntary and community sector organisations that have provided that valuable service in prisons for many years.

Ms Forsythe: That is great to hear. I declare that I am chair of the all-party group on the voluntary and community sector. I should have said that.

Mr Boylan: I am glad that you declared that.

Mr Widdis: We engage with a huge range of organisations. There is a chaplaincy service to which all the Churches contribute, and you can imagine the kind of work that it does. We engage with the Prison Arts Foundation, hostel providers, restorative justice organisations and Cruse. As I said, we engage with 19 or 20 organisations. They will change from time to time as programmes are relet or whatever. However, the value and breadth of ability that those organisations bring is huge. That is not so much inside the prisons, but the Probation Board does it as well. Is that right, Amanda?

Ms Stewart: Yes. We in the Probation Board also have a focus with the community and voluntary sector. We are based in communities for good reason. We have a dual role. We have the responsibility to risk-manage people but also to reintegrate and resettle them into the community. It is important for probation services to be based in communities and to have those local networks and supports, because they are often there when the statutory sector moves away. Community service is a fantastic example of people being seen to give reparation to the community for the harm that they

have done and to face up to that harm. That is a powerful tool that we are keen to develop further in order for there to be confidence in the judiciary, but it is not used as much as we would like it to be. We are keen on it, and the senior leadership team and the board have been giving it a push.

Similarly, we fund community and voluntary sector partners to support some of the work that we do alongside people to address their employment issues and provide them with mentoring. Given the chaotic lifestyle of some of the people whom we work with, NIACRO are brought in to mentor, to take them to appointments, to make sure that they get access to the services and to support them through that journey. It is about risk management but also, ultimately, about enabling them to reintegrate into the community.

Mr Widdis: As the Member knows, it has been tight over recent years, but, if it is of any reassurance, I will say that we have, as I understand it, managed throughout to protect the core funding for community and voluntary sector partners. That has certainly been the case since I have been in the Department and since the Minister came back. It has been protected in recognition of the value of what they do and of the harm that can be done to those bodies and the services that they provide if they are subjected to the vagaries of single-year funding and the absence of long-term commitment, which Mr Delargy asked about. Another reason why we are really keen to get to multi-year budgets is so that we can plan in partnership with all those community and voluntary partners.

Ms Forsythe: That is great. Thank you. As we are transforming public services, a key part is to remember that they go further than just the Departments and government bodies.

Mr Boylan: I would like clarity on a couple of points. Hugh, you made that many bids that I will not be sending you to the auction house, just in case. God knows what you would come back with, but fair play to you.

You mentioned a figure of £374 million as the overall costing: can you give us a breakdown of that? If you cannot do that now, you can send it on to us.

Mr Widdis: Once the report is finalised, proofed and ready for purpose, we will get it to the Committee as soon as we can. We will publish it, but we are keen to have other people look at it. As with all the Department's research, we want it to be challenged, in a sense. There are other academics out there. John Kerr and my colleagues in the Department who have done this have spoken widely to people about it, but we would be happy to have any input.

I will give a headline breakdown. Using the same methodology as is used, for example, by the Home Office and in the cost of crime report, which is a bigger thing, we break it down into anticipation costs, consequence costs and response costs. Anticipation costs are things like insurance and putting up security measures, such as alarms. That is essentially in anticipation that crime might happen to you as an individual or business. Consequence costs are about consequences such as, "I have broken windows at my house", "I have been injured", or, "The car has been damaged". We attribute an economic cost to that. There is absolutely a human and social cost to it as well. Response costs are about policing, investigation and so on. The breakdown of those costs is as follows: anticipation costs are approximately £9 million; consequence costs are £247 million; and response costs are £117 million. That roughly makes up that £374 million. It might not be totally right, but that is to do with my maths. I will be happy to get the report to you.

Mr Boylan: I have a final question. They all use dashboards, but those are only as good as the information that you gather. We had the talk about remand and rehabilitation and who is using it and who is not. If it is to be used properly, we need to get the proper data. It is a good system and a good metric, but we need to ensure that we get the right information and the right data. If it is to be outcomes-based and we are to use data, it needs to be right.

Ms Wall: In developing the dashboards, we are working with NISRA colleagues to ensure that we do it right.

Mr Boylan: Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Members, are there any other questions? No.

TOA, do you have any comments?

Mr Stuart Stevenson (Department of Finance): It may be worth making one contextual point, Chair. During the discussions today, it struck me, from a Department of Finance perspective, that the timing of the inquiry is critical. Mr Widdis talked about this being an invest-to-save area. The fact that the Executive are, today, looking at the final Budget for 2025-26 is important. However, looking ahead, we are two months from the spending review, which will kick-start the bulk of the multi-year Budget that we have touched on at different stages today. The work on Budget sustainability and those five-year plans will be absolutely critical in this area.

Mr Boylan asked about the costs, and we need to reduce those costs in the long term. In respect of timing, with the Programme for Government in place *[Inaudible]* multi-year Budget, there is a real opportunity to make long-term progress in this area. A window of opportunity is opening for us. I look forward to the rest of the inquiry.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): I appreciate that. Thank you very much for those points.

C&AG, do you have any comments?

Ms Dorinnia Carville (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Thank you so much to Mr Widdis, Ms Wall, Mr Holland and Ms Stewart for attending. We have noted some things that we may come back to you on for further clarity or for information. We really appreciate your coming before the Committee today.

Mr Widdis: Chair and Committee members, thank you so much. I certainly found the session useful, and I hope that colleagues did as well. I hope that we have assured you about the progress that we have made since getting the report and, indeed, before that. We will be happy to come back with further information once we go further in the journey on the cross-departmental strategy.

I am conscious that the Audit Office recognised the incredible work that people do. I maybe did not touch on that. I talked a lot about high-level numbers, cohorts and so on, but, behind all these stories, there is a victim. We are conscious of reducing reoffending so that we do not get more victims in the future. That is done through the incredible work of individuals in the probation service, the Prison Service, the voluntary and community sector and our partners in education and health services who help us on this journey. I am incredibly grateful to the Audit Office for recognising that in its report, and I reiterate that here today. It has been a really useful opportunity for us, Chair. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chairperson (Ms Brownlee): Thank you.