

Probation work in Dublin: emerging from lockdown?

An article written by Áine Morris, Probation Officer based in Dublin at the Restorative Justice and Victim Services Unit.

Twelve weeks ago I couldn't have imagined how quickly my colleagues and I would adapt to working remotely. As we moved into lockdown community based Probation Officers began working from home. In the main client work was undertaken by telephone with office attendance only for a very specific purpose. Despite the challenges work has continued at a steady, busy pace. We now have remote access to our IT system which is critical for timely administrative tasks and for access to organisational guidance documents to support changes to service delivery. The use of zoom and teleconferencing has allowed for ongoing peer and interagency contact. Work life, though changed, has gone on and we are now moving to another stage of the "new normality".

Victim queries and requests

The Restorative Justice and Victims' Unit is the lead for Restorative Justice practice and is a central point of contact for victim queries and requests. Covid-19 has created some opportunities to pause and consider the next steps on our journey. A key project is the development of guidance documents to increase victim awareness across practice and to provide a more integrated approach to addressing harm. The Unit has also adapted our training material so that it can be delivered remotely.

Throughout the pandemic victims have continued to make contact. There are queries about restorative justice, questions about court orders and what "supervision" means. Contact has been through email and telephone. For some, lockdown has given them time to consider what they need and require to repair the harm caused to them. I am frequently reminded of the importance of active listening techniques.

Prior to lockdown I facilitated a number of restorative conferences. Throughout the current restrictions I have tried to mirror normal practice through telephone and email contact with participants of those conferences. It has taken flexibility and patience but clients have been able to keep to their "agreements". In turn this has supported the Courts in their efforts to continue to process cases.

Restorative Justice Service

One of our community partner organisations here in Dublin is "Restorative Justice Service". The project has established working groups to forward elements of their strategic plan (2019-2022). I have continued to meet with community and board members using the zoom platform. We have looked at ways of helping those responsible for harm and communities and individuals impacted by that harm to participate restoratively. We are now making recommendations to the Board of Management.

As a member of the Women's Strategy Group I have prepared a guidance document on "Working with Women during COVID-19." As in other jurisdictions reported incidents of domestic abuse have increased during the pandemic. There are concerns for women's mental health. My colleagues and I hope this document will support gender specific work as we move through the phases of lockdown.

Zoom coffee breaks

Through zoom meetings and email I have remained in contact with colleagues. I find that a zoom coffee break allows for a different kind of chat but also reinforces my professional identity and allows for shared problem solving that is part of my usual practice.

As we moved through the phases of lockdown and now look towards a phased return to the office there has been much learning, creativity and an adaptability that might not have been anticipated. These experiences will help us to better engage with the further challenges that undoubtedly lie ahead.