

CEP – Probation Board for Northern Ireland Response to COVID-19

Background

In March 2020 the work of probation in Northern Ireland changed beyond recognition.

Coronavirus poses the biggest threat any of us have ever seen in our lifetime.

In response to the pandemic and the unprecedented restrictions imposed by the UK Government and NI Executive¹, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) made very significant changes to its operational practice and working arrangements.

On 23 March in order to comply with the Government's measures in relation to social distancing and working where possible from home, PBNI streamlined its service delivery, closing its eleven offices and instead opened seven 'operational hubs' throughout Northern Ireland. On 1 April, PBNI published its 'interim operational arrangements', which covers case management, programme delivery, work in courts, work in prisons and work with victims of crime.

Case Management

Weekly telephone contact is being maintained with all service users. Office appointments are being arranged with all service users assessed as presenting a risk of serious harm (SROSH) or assessed as category 3 under the Public Protection Arrangements for Northern Ireland (PPANI). Probation Officers are arranging face to face contact with service users if they have concerns about increased risk. Probation Officers are liaising with other agencies (e.g. Social Services, PSNI) to verify service users' self report. Orders/licenses are continuing to be enforced. Area Managers are maintaining regular contact with their teams and are undertaking monthly supervision sessions. Area Managers are continue to monitor files.

Particular cognizance is being given to domestic abuse cases (as there is expected to be a significant rise in incidents of domestic abuse). Staff have been asked to ensure there is regular and proactive contact with the PSNI (Public Protection Branch) to check if there has been any police call outs (rather than relying on the Reportable Incident scheme).

Courts

Courts have rationalised their operations into four hubs for emergency business only, and the Lord Chief Justice has given clear guidance as to what this constitutes. The

¹ NI has a devolved administration and local NI Executive and NI Assembly.

consequence of this for PBNI is that many pre-sentence reports which would have resulted in community-based sentences have been adjourned for at least eight weeks. All breach matters instigated by PBNI are now dealt with solely by way of report, without PBNI prosecuting presence in Court. Warrants are still available in cases where there is risk to the public, and summons can still be lodged albeit with lengthy service periods.

Community Service

All Community Service work instructions have had to be stood down because of central Government directives regarding social distancing. Prior to this most providers had suspended placements. Assistant Directors are working with the Court Service on actions required to extend Orders administratively, as legally community service hours must be done within a 12-month period.

Programmes

Programmes and interventions are being delivered by telephone and video conferencing.

Prisons

PBNI staff in prisons are now working from home as a result of H&S advice from Northern Ireland Prison Service, and have the facility to work remotely. Staff are focusing on writing reports for Parole Commissioners and Licencing Panels. Staff are also completing release plans and engaging with those released early by Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Victims

PBNI services to victims remains. All contact, including report completion is now via telephone call. There was close liaison between PBNI custody staff and the Victim Information Unit in relation to individuals approved by NIPS for early release. Partner Support Workers, where involved, will maintain regular contact with victims.

Community and Voluntary Sector

Funding has been approved in order to keep priority providers going, and support services during the coronavirus difficulties. Delivery is primarily by phone at this stage.

Public Protection Arrangements for Northern Ireland (PPANI)

Local Area Public Protection Panels (LAPPPs) are continuing to take place via teleconferencing. Referrals continue to be made to PPANI in respect of eligible offenders, under 'significant concern' and 'exceptional circumstances'.

MARAC

Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) are continuing to take place via teleconferencing. Designated PBNI Area Managers continue to attend these meetings and share information as appropriate. PBNI staff are continue to make referrals in respect of high risk as appropriate.

Approved Premises

Approved Premises remain open. Referrals continue to be made with priority given to high risk offenders. PBNI has provided additional monies to each of the Approved Premises to help with additional demands resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic e.g. cleaning, sanitizing equipment.

Smart Justice and Technology

The majority of PBNI staff have been enabled to work effectively remotely from home with access to PBNI case management system and records. The use of video and teleconferencing has been of paramount importance in enabling staff to deliver programmes and complete supervision. Teleconferencing has been introduced for staff to keep in contact with each other and service users.

PBNI has also increased the use of its mobile phone app 'Changing Lives' which aims to provide services users with a range of resources and tools on their mobile device.