

Is the day of a probation officer in Germany similar to the one of someone working in Romania? In the series 'A day in the life of a probation officer', we publish articles written by probation officers from different countries in Europe to see if their days look alike or are very different from each other. This article is written by Kerri O'Neill a probation officer from Northern Ireland.



My name is Kerri O'Neill and I qualified as a Social Worker from The Queen's University, Belfast in 2010. I worked for five years in Child Protection in both Northern Ireland and Australia before securing employment with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland where I have worked from July 2015. Having worked in the South Belfast & Lisburn team, the Intensive Supervision Unit and the Public Protection Team, I am now employed as an Area Manager.

I currently have responsibilities for the Intensive Supervision Unit that covers the North Antrim/Mid Ulster areas as well as staff members from the North Antrim Team and am based in the Ballymena PBNI office.

I represent the organisation at the local Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference, North Antrim Policing and Safety Community Partnership (PSCP), Northern Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnership (NDSVP) and I am a Local Area Public Protection Panel (LAPPP) Chair. I commenced this role in June 2020 in the midst of the Pandemic and so the start of my career in management has been nothing short of unique.

I have family and friends around the world and we had been discussing Covid at various points as it made its way across the globe. I myself had been travelling in Poland when I learned that a national lockdown was on the horizon in March 2020. Having returned home, lockdown was announced and we were personally and professionally plummeted into a surreal situation, one that in my lifetime I am unable to compare to anything else. Immediately we were asked to reduce our social contacts and so life changed dramatically and I do not believe anyone anticipated that we would still be subject to restrictions over one year later.

While remote working was initially a novelty, our priority was managing high risk offenders in the community. In the Intensive Supervision Unit, we oversee those who are within the Public Protection Arrangements of Northern Ireland, which includes Sex Offenders and Domestic Violent Offenders. We worked hard to prioritise victims and potential victims.

In a time of unique change our ability to deliver a service was not without its difficulties. The organisation set out to implement a dynamic recovery plan to guide staff in being innovative in delivering a service that supports the needs of the service users, addresses their offending behaviour all whilst continuing to protect the public. Staff have worked tirelessly during the pandemic to adapt to new ways of working all whilst being as effective in our ability to meet the needs of service users and to ensure risk is identified and managed appropriately despite restrictions and social distancing guidelines.

The use of technology has been imperative in our work. Staff relied on video calls in the absence of face-to-face contacts to engage with service users, colleagues and others in the community. The importance of multi-agency work and collaborative practice has been more evident now than ever. I have participated in meetings around risk management of offenders via WebEx, have chaired multi-agency meets via teleconferencing and have continued to participate and develop working relationships within our community partnerships via zoom and Microsoft teams. The sharing of

information with partners remains crucial in our role. Our ability to continue to do this has been an achievement of not only PBNI but also our statutory and voluntary partners.

Whilst we as a team and organisation are now increasing our face-face contacts, we are continuing to navigate the delivery of an effective service against the backdrop of a difficult climate. Overcoming the impact of Covid on service users and workforce wellbeing seemed at times an insurmountable task however the commitment and motivation by workers at all grades to continue to do their job to a high standard despite many obstacles has been a credit to the organisation. As a manager, I endeavour to be present and available to the best of my ability for staff albeit this is often via video or phone call. Consistent and meaningful interactions with staff has been an important factor in my managerial role and I will continue to prioritise staff wellbeing in the future months. Like many I have missed being in close contact with colleagues and I very much look forward to a time when we can return to the workplace and that my contact with colleagues will not be dictated to by restrictions and/or social distancing.

For me personally I have experienced the many highs and lows that the pandemic has brought about emotionally and physically. I found it very difficult not being able to see family and friends, not to be able to travel which for anyone who knows me is one of my biggest passions and of course home life began to intertwine heavily with work life and the boundaries became blurred often making it difficult to switch off. Like many others, I became an avid walker during lockdown, which I hope to continue and I have come to realise the importance of talking with others and of taking care of our emotional wellbeing during difficult times.

With restrictions easing and “staycations” this summer, I have enjoyed some time away to recharge the batteries!