



**PBNI** Probation Board  
for Northern Ireland

# **COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2023-26**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Communication is a powerful force for good in public service. When practiced effectively it can help improve, enhance, and save lives. This strategy aims to raise awareness of PBNI's role in reducing reoffending and changing lives for safer communities.

This strategy seeks to use the learning and insights from the implementation of the last 3-year strategy. Several surveys have been undertaken over the last three years and focus groups conducted with service users. It also takes account of best practice and latest developments in communications practice. The pandemic, changes in technology and how news is disseminated has undoubtedly changed how we communicate.

More people are receiving their news through social media channels than traditional news outlets. There is a public expectation that messaging will be concise, delivered speedily and that we will use a 'story telling' approach including using lived experience to explain the benefits of the services we deliver.

Likewise, from internal communications approach the aim of this strategy is to support the significant work being undertaken to improve and develop a culture based on our organisational values. Best practice has shown that the pandemic changed not only the way we communicate but also the tone of internal communications with a less deferential approach and a focus on empowering our employee's voice.

This strategy explains how we used feedback and insights to shape the strategy; the context in which we are communicating; our aim in communicating, our objectives, how we will deliver those objectives and our key audiences and key messages.

## **2. CONSULTATION AND FEEDBACK**

This plan has been shaped by feedback from staff, service users and partners.

During August to November 2022 the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) consulted on its Corporate Plan 2023-26. During this consultation there was significant feedback in relation to raising awareness of Probation's role externally and ideas about how effective internal communications could support staff engagement.

The feedback from the Corporate Plan has been used to shape this communications and engagement strategy. In December 2022 PBNI also conducted an engagement survey of its key stakeholders and in July 2020 and February 2023 internal communications surveys were conducted with staff. In June 2020 focus groups were held with service users. We have also used an ongoing feedback loop through the staff suggestions email where staff have given ideas throughout the year on how to make internal communications more effective. The results of these surveys, focus groups and staff suggestions have all helped form this strategy.

### 3. CONTEXT

Change is a constant for all organisations. There is no 'steady state' anymore, only constant flux, with organisations needing to be more agile and responsive to succeed and meet their objectives. Within the Probation Board for Northern Ireland there has been significant changes over the last 18 months. A new Board was appointed in March 2022. A new Chief Executive and senior team is in place. A Criminal Justice Inspection Report into Probation Practice in 2020 provided several strategic and operational recommendations for the organisation to take forward. Major work has taken place to develop a new organisational culture taking account of trauma informed principles to help build a culture consistent with our values of respect, integrity, openness, and accountability.

At the same time, we have been living through a period of societal, political, and economic instability. The Covid-19 pandemic changed how we communicate. It enhanced the speed and regularity of organisational communications with staff and service users particularly in relation to the dissemination of public safety messages. It also changed the tone of communications.

A more compassionate and empathetic tone of communications was adopted within PBNI and many other public service organisations. The aftermath of a global pandemic coupled with the war in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis have all impacted upon communications within public services and escalated the importance of corporate communications in disseminating key messages about organisational priorities and finances.

Currently Northern Ireland does not have a functioning Executive and Assembly in place therefore government communications, at this time, are limited. There is also a lack of clarity in relation to future Ministerial priorities. We are operating in a challenging financial environment which impacts upon this strategy.

There has also been a marked shift in public trust in recent years; and at the same time an increasing popularity of social networking and alternative sources of news, away from the mainstream media. This change poses new challenges for senior leaders and communicators when trying to shape an authentic narrative and build trust.

The PBNI Communications and Engagement Strategy for 2023-26 supports the delivery of the PBNI Corporate Plan 2023-26. PBNI's Corporate Plan sets out four strategic priorities and outcomes that we want to deliver to achieve our aim of 'changing lives for safer communities'. The outcomes are:

- Our people are supported through a positive and inclusive working environment to deliver an effective and stable Probation service.
- We have a safer community through the delivery of high-quality, effective Probation services.
- The Probation Service is sustainable, adaptable, and prepared for future challenges.

- We have developed partnerships to help make communities safer.

This communications strategy will support each of the outcomes in the Corporate Plan by:

- Using effective internal engagement to help ensure our people feel valued and are supported to deliver an effective and stable Probation service.
- Developing communications with the public and stakeholders to explain to them about the value of the services we deliver.
- Supporting organisational plans towards smarter working.
- Support managers to develop local engagement plans and partnerships that assist Probation in making communities safer.

#### **4. AIM AND PRINCIPLES**

The aim of this communications strategy is to support the Corporate Plan for 2023-26 within the content of a trauma informed workforce. In doing so we will enhance engagement with internal and external audiences and increase the understanding, awareness, and influence of Probation in NI and help build confidence in the services provided. From this strategy there will flow more tactical and detailed annual communication plans.

We will communicate a clear vision of the work Probation carried out. Our communications and engagement will be:

- Accessible & Inclusive to all sections of our community and, in particular, groups who are the hard to reach.
- Clear and Professional to demonstrate pride and authority in what we do. Consistent with our strategic vision and priorities as outlined in the Corporate Plan 2023-26.
- Flexible in ensuring communications are undertaken in a variety of different formats that reflect progressive communication and diverse local needs.
- Honest, Empathetic and Transparent. We are committed to being clear about why we are engaging and managing expectations about the work we conduct. At times we may have to communicate difficult messages to communities, to our Service Users and to our staff.
- Targeted to ensure we get messages across to the right people in the right way.
- Timely to ensure we respond to all enquiries as quickly as possible and engage with people early as possible in the process of communication or engagement.
- Two-way. We won't just talk - we will also listen.

## 5. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this strategy aim to further support development of a trauma informed organisation, enhance staff engagement, help the public better understand the role of Probation in making communities safer; assist opinion formers and stakeholders understand the work of Probation and appreciate the key role Probation plays in criminal justice.

Specifically, the objectives are:

**(i) Use effective internal engagement to help ensure our people feel valued and are supported to deliver an effective and stable Probation service.**

There are four enablers identified to enhance staff engagement which are key considerations when developing and delivering this strategy:

- Strategic leadership and narrative - this is the organisational vision coupled with visible, empowering leadership that provides a strong strategic narrative.
- Engaging managers – every survey shows managers are the most important and preferred channel for employees. So, the single most important factor in delivering our internal communications is through our managers.
- Employee voice - ensuring the employee voice is heard and listened to within the organisation in a less deferential form of internal communications.
- Integrity - organisational integrity is where the vision and values on the posters are evident by daily behaviours.

**(ii) Develop effective communications with the public and our key partners to explain to them about the value of the services we deliver.**

The last public perceptions survey of Probation took place in 2016. Seven in ten of the survey respondents (71%) had heard of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. That was an increase to the finding in the 2012 survey, when 68% of respondents had heard of the organisation and in the 2009 survey, when 65% of respondents had heard of the organisation. In 2016 of the 71% of survey respondents who had heard of PBNI; 87% had no contact with the organisation, 10% had contact in another capacity, 2% had contact as a victim, and 1% had contact as a service user. Across the UK and Ireland, it is generally accepted that the public have less awareness about Probation services than some more high-profile public services. It is important to note that only a small proportion of the public have direct contact either as a victim, service user or family member with Probation services.

The purpose of raising public and key partners awareness and understanding of Probation is to influence partners to achieve shared priorities, ensure that it is sufficiently resourced and able to deliver vital services to reduce reoffending, protect the public and support confidence in the justice system.

**(iii) Support organisational plans towards smarter working.**

Through evidenced based communications plans we will support organisational priorities in relation to the roll out of new IT systems, the estates strategy and new ways of working. We will effectively communicate with staff and partners and explain the rationale for our decision making.

**(iv) Support managers to develop local engagement plans and partnerships that assist Probation in making communities safer.**

Probation's strength lies in its ability to work in partnership with a range of statutory organisations such as courts, prisons, police and community and voluntary organisations. A key element of the feedback from the consultation process for PBNI's Corporate Plan 2023-26 was staff's desire to engage and build more partnerships locally. Likewise, community/voluntary partners and statutory partners requested that partnership working, and local engagement be prioritised. The survey of stakeholders conducted in 2022 reiterated the importance of local face to face engagement. By supporting our managers to identify key stakeholders, develop local engagement plans it will enable them to enhance current partnerships and build new coalitions.

**(v) Enhance our engagement with Service Users**

Staff's relationship and engagement with service users is key. By service users we mean those people who are supervised on a court order or licence and those who are registered as victims through the victim's information scheme. We want to be able to enhance our engagement with these groups and importantly this objective also links to other objectives in terms of building awareness. By having good engagement with service users, we can support them to tell their story and share their experience about how Probation has impacted their life.

## **6. DELIVERING ON OUR OBJECTIVES**

**(i) Use effective internal engagement to help ensure our people feel valued and are supported to deliver an effective and stable Probation service.**

Over the next 3 years we will:

- Ensure Area Managers are equipped to deliver internal communications. Using QAM we will ensure that Area Managers are aware of key messages and

understand the importance of engaging with staff, with key milestones written into local business plans.

- Produce Probation News which is one of the most effective communication tools within PBNI. Over 97% of staff surveyed in 2022 read the publication. In 2022-23 we will work to simplify the messaging.
- Conduct town hall meetings every 2 months to explain key organisational decisions and messages to staff. We will work to make those relevant to all staff.
- Develop a new intranet.
- Develop our long service and staff awards to recognise staff achievement.
- SLT and Board will conduct regular team visits and, where appropriate, SLT will work from local offices on a regular basis.
- Develop an internal communications plan to support pay modernisation project.

**(ii) Develop effective communications with the public and our key partners to explain to them about the value of the services we deliver.**

**Over the next 3 years we will:**

- Develop a series of podcasts with staff and key stakeholders to tell the story of Probation.
- Build our social media presence.
- Hold regular briefings with each political party to update them on key strategic issues for PBNI including budgetary and service delivery matters.
- Work with key partners to deliver key messaging using the traditional media.
- Build relationships with regular briefings/meetings with our sponsor department and key partners across Government.
- Hold a series of external events/conferences to explain the work of Probation.

**(iii) Support organisational plans towards smarter working.**

**Over the next 3 years we will:**

- Provide a communications plan to support new ways of working.
- Develop our Probation App with a view to enhancing engagement with service users.

**(iv) Support managers to develop local engagement plans and partnerships that assist Probation in making communities safer.**

- Develop a local engagement plan within each local area.
- Hold local engagement days for local stakeholders in each office.

- Support local managers to deliver effective messaging within PCSPs.

**(v) Enhance our engagement with Service Users**

Over the next 3 years we will:

- Support and develop the service user forums.
- Support the production of the Service User Newsletter 'Connect'.
- Develop the PBNI app with user friendly and easy to understand information for service users.
- Support service users to tell their stories through videos, podcasts and at events.

## **7. KEY MESSAGES**

**It is accepted that messages will need to evolve and be amended depending on the context in which PBNI is operating. Language is important in messaging. Where possible PBNI will no longer use the terminology of 'offenders' and rather refer to those we supervise as 'people' or 'people who have offended'. PBNI will also refer to community sentences as 'sentences served in the community.'**

There are some overarching messages that need to be central to all communications. These include:

- Probation is a central part of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. It works to address the causes of offending, to help prevent people coming back into the system again and protects the public from harm caused by re-offending. The services we provide enables individuals to change their behaviour which in turn reduces the likelihood of reoffending, reduces the numbers of victims and makes communities safer.
- We are a trauma informed organisation and everything we do is underpinned by our commitment to achieve a positive outcome for the people we work to create safer communities and reduce the number of victims of crime.
- PBNI supervise sentences imposed by Judges that are served in the community. Through supervision we hold people to account, challenge their behaviour and deliver effective interventions.
- Evidence shows that effective community-based interventions, when targeted at the right people, will have a greater impact than imprisonment at much reduced cost.
- The structure of the Probation Board and its representation from various professional



backgrounds and across our communities in Northern Ireland provides a level of independence, accountability, oversight, and strategic thinking which is to the benefit of Probation practice and delivery.

- Probation in Northern Ireland works. We know that from evaluations of our work and from feedback provided by service users. We are making an impact improving outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

## **8. STAKEHOLDERS**

**PBNI communicate with a range of audiences. Key stakeholders are within these broad groupings:**

- Staff.
- Union representatives.
- Service users.
- General public.
- Criminal Justice organisations.
- Sentencers.
- Department Officials.
- Justice Minister.
- Social Work representative bodies.
- Councils.
- PCSPs.
- Elected representatives.
- Community and voluntary organisations.
- Civic society.
- Media.
- National & International Probation organisations.

A mapping process has taken place to prioritise stakeholders for PBNI. This will enable us to plan and prioritise groups of stakeholders in the next three years and develop our engagement strategy for Board and senior management. The results are as follows:

## 9. STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS



### 1. Work with Closely

- Staff
- Union representatives
- Media with interest in justice
- Justice Committee members (when in place)
- Justice Minister (when in place)
- Minister's special advisor (when in place)
- DoJ officials
- Sentencers
- Legal profession
- Court Service
- NIPS
- PSNI
- YJA
- CJINI
- Partnership organisations through PPANI
- Community and voluntary organisations



### 2. Keep Satisfied

- Service users
- Councils
- Policing and Community Safety Partnerships
- Constituency MLAs
- Local media
- NI MPs



### 3. Keep Informed

- General public
- Social work representative bodies
- Other NI Executive Ministers and special advisors
- Church leaders
- Mayors
- NI Chamber of Commerce
- Confederation of European Probation



### 4. Monitor

- Local businesses
- Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
- Information Commissioner's Office
- NI Ombudsman

## 10. EVALUATION

From this strategy there will flow annual communication plans. These plans will form part of the organisation's overall business plans. This strategy will be reported on regularly at Board meetings. There will be a further internal communications survey and stakeholder engagement survey over the lifetime of this strategy.

## 11. WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED THROUGH PREVIOUS STRATEGY

- We have produced and published 117 editions of Internal *Probation News*.
- We have produced and published 16 editions of external *Probation News*.
- Alongside our partners in the Probation Service, we have produced and published 19 editions of *Irish Probation Journal*.
- In 2020 we launched PBNI Instagram and in 2022 launched PBNI Facebook page and have evaluated all our social media interactions which demonstrate increased engagements.
- We have held annual north south seminars with partners in the Probation Service, and both police services and prison services on the island.
- In 2022 and 2023 we held meetings with all the main political parties in NI.
- We celebrated 40 years of PBNI in 2022 with a social media campaign and series of events culminating in a celebration and staff awards in Belfast City Hall.
- We invited all staff members to a trauma informed practice conference in 2023.
- We have held annual business planning events for all middle managers across PBNI.
- We developed an internal communications plan to support the organisation throughout the covid-19 pandemic. We surveyed staff during this period and 98% said PBNI internal communications was good or very good.
- In 2021 we held our first town hall event.
- In 2021 we redesigned our website.
- We forged new partnerships with the Five Nations of Probation, the Confederation of European Probation and the International Criminal Justice Network to widen our reach into international communities.

## APPENDIX 1

### 2023-24      Communications Plan

#### This is Year 1 Communications Plan for 2023-24

**(i)      Use effective internal engagement to help ensure our people feel valued and are supported to deliver an effective and stable Probation service.**

In year 1 we will:

- Conduct a staff survey to measure employee engagement.
- Engage staff through involvement in social media campaigns including recruitment out-reach, meet the staff, PRIDE and MELA.
- Deliver six Team Briefs and six Town Hall events to inform, engage and involve staff.
- Develop our intranet and oversee the successful transfer of our intranet onto the Drupal platform
- Produce Probation News bi-monthly and continue its development as an effective staff communications tool.
- Implement a communications plan to support pay modernisation.

**(ii)      Develop effective communications with the public and our key partners to explain to them about the value of the services we deliver.**

In year 1 we will:

- Develop and implement a communications plan with the Probation Service to highlight the joint work of PPAG including the development of an annual seminar and publication of Irish Probation Journal.
- Develop social media engagement in conjunction with partners across all platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn) to increase numbers of followers and variety of content offered, including more videos and podcasts.
- Develop relationships with the print and broadcast media in order to place content in partnership with CVS and statutory bodies.
- Monitor delivery through feedback from participants/stakeholders, number of media opportunities, and the increase in followers on our social media platforms from the baseline of March 2023.

**(iii)      Support organisational plans towards smarter working.**

In year 1 we will:

- Provide a communications plan to support new ways of working.

**(iv) Support managers to develop local engagement plans and partnerships that assist Probation in making communities safer.**

**In year 1 we will:**

- Develop a local engagement plan within each local area.

**(v) Enhance our engagement with Service Users.**

**In year 1 we will:**

- Support service users to tell their stories through videos, podcasts and at events.