

PROBATION BOARD FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

BOARD MEETING – FRIDAY 21 FEBRUARY 2025

9.30 AM – Boardroom, Clifton House, Belfast

ATTENDANCE

BOARD MEMBERS

Mr Max Murray, Board Chair
Ms E Patterson, Deputy Chair
Ms M Brunt
Mr K Donaghy
Mr B Ingram
Mr J Johnston
Ms A Lloyd-Stevens
Ms C Magee
Ms B Mongan

OFFICIALS

Ms A Stewart, Chief Executive
Mr S Hamilton, Director of Operations
Ms G Montgomery, Director of Operations
Mr P King, Head of Finance & Estates
Ms C Sweeney, Head of HR and L&OD
Ms G McGreevy, Heads of Communications
Ms J Fitzsimons, Board Secretary
Mrs A Abraham, Business Support Manager (Minutes)

1. WELCOME, OPENING REMARKS AND CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Board Chair welcomed everyone to the final meeting of this Board term and thanked Members for their loyalty and support in his last three years as Board Chair. A quorum was confirmed. There were no conflicts of interest.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies.

3. MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING – FRIDAY 31 JANUARY 2025 (PAPER)

The minutes of the Board Meeting held on Friday 31 January 2025 were approved as a true and accurate record.

The minutes were approved by the Board.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES – FRIDAY 31 JANUARY 2025 (PAPER)

There were two actions from the previous meeting.

1. The Chief Executive confirmed she had drafted a response for the Board Chair to the letter from the DoJ Permanent Secretary regarding the decision not to include a PBNi representative on the Criminal Justice Board.
2. Following the ARAC meeting on 7 February 2025, senior management will agree the approach to a deep dive on Standards Deviations for approval at the next ARAC meeting.

The Board noted the paper.

5. CHAIR'S REPORT (VERBAL)

The Board Chair apprised Members on the visit with the Chief Executive to the Lisburn office, where the team had been working with deviations for many months. Ms Montgomery gave an update on the current position and confirmed that currently one peripatetic Probation Officer is being piloted.

The Chair and Chief Executive hosted at PBNI Headquarters the meeting of the DOJ Partnership Forum on Wednesday 19 February 2025. Attendees included the Permanent Secretary, senior officials of DOJ and the Chair and Chief Executive of each of the DOJ Arm's Length Bodies. There was discussion on the Departmental priorities for the rest of this mandate and the 2025/26 budget and likely position going forward. The DOJ is working on a new Risk Management Framework with the aim of establishing better linkages between ALBs. The document will be shared in March 2025.

The Board Chair provided an overview of the Townhall meeting held on 18 February 2025 which he attended with the Chief Executive. Staff were updated on the PBNI budget 2025-26, the results of the staff engagement survey and the PBNI Business Plan 2025-26.

The Board noted the update.

6. CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT (VERBAL)

The Chief Executive provided an update on the annual Business Plan meeting with middle and senior managers on 17 February 2025. The Department of Justice (DoJ) Director of Safer Communities Mark Goodfellow provided input on the Department's priorities and the Senior Leadership Team provided the context of the PBNI strategic and operational context. Positive feedback was received from staff on the draft Plan and the general tone of the meeting was much more engaging than previous events. It is planned to have more regular events with middle and senior managers going forward. All PBNI staff had the opportunity to input to the the Business Plan 2025-26 through the Townhall meeting on 18 February 2025 and a separate meeting was held to get feedback from Trade Union representatives.

Ms Stewart advised that the DoJ was drafting its Corporate Plan, the main themes being Reducing Offending and Re-offending, Community Safety, Supporting Victims' Access to Justice and Our People. She advised that the new Board will need to take cognisance of this in developing the next PBNI 3 year Corporate Plan.

Ms Stewart also updated the Members on preparations that she is undertaking in advance of the Public Accounts Committee Hearing on Reducing Adult Re-offending in Northern Ireland scheduled for 4 April 2025.

In relation to the expansion of Enhanced Combination Orders (ECOs) as an alternative to short prison sentences, it was confirmed that PBNI would receive an additional budget allocation to extend ECOs in the North Antrim court area and scale up the provisions of ECOs in the existing court areas.

Ms Stewart also advised that PBNI had been invited to participate in research commissioned by the DoJ exploring the topic of relative need across policing and justice to determine whether there is an evidence base for more financial support to policing and justice given the operating environment. The purpose of the research is to ascertain a broad and high-level picture of the costs incurred around the delivery of services within the context of NI security costs. This is defined as those unique costs incurred by the PBNI over and above what are deemed normal probation costs, as a direct result of the specific security situation in NI now or in the past.

The Board noted the update.

7. CORRESPONDENCE (PAPER)

There were three items of correspondence to note.

7.1 Correspondence between the Clerk to the Committee for Justice and the Chief Executive on the Draft Budget 2025-26

The Chief Executive referred members to PBNI's response to the DoJ's confirmation of the draft budget allocation 2025-26.

7.2 Justice Minister to the Chief Executive on the Jonathan Cresswell Case

The correspondence requested PBNi's views on the Terms of Reference for the Review of the Jonathan Cresswell case.

7.3 Response from the Chief Executive to the Justice Minister on the Jonathan Cresswell Case

Members were asked to note PBNi's response to the Justice Ministers request for feedback on the Terms of Reference. The Minister's office is due to release a press release confirming the arrangements for the review at 1 pm today, 21 February 2025.

The Board noted the correspondence.

BOARD BUSINESS

8. MANAGEMENT INFORMATION QUARTERLY REPORT Q3 (PAPER)

Members were asked to note the key highlights of the Q3 Management Information Report.

Our People

Ms Sweeney reported on the work of the HR and L&OD departments. A range of HR policies including the Managing Attendance Policy are currently being reviewed. Ten Probation Officers had been appointed from the recent recruitment exercise. A further recruitment will take place from March to attract AYE students. There are also some residual issues arising from implementation of a new pay framework that are currently being finalised including a job evaluation framework.

Our Services

Mr Hamilton gave an overview of statistics as at the end of Q2. Q3 figures will be available very soon, as per the reporting schedule. He noted that it appears that caseload may have dipped slightly, for the first time since Covid.

Ms Montgomery advised that there had been an increase in the number of court reports completed from Q2 to Q3. The number of new victims registered in Q3 had increased slightly from Q2. There had been seven Serious Further Offences (SFOs) reported in Q3, two additional cases since the report was written. Deviations were not a feature of any of the SFOs. At the time of writing there were no teams deviating to 60%.

In respect of Causeway Onboarding, there may be a delay from the proposed November 2025 date and this will be confirmed at subsequent Board meetings.

Action: Position Paper on Causeway Implementation to be brought to a future Board meeting.

Mr Hamilton advised of plans to roll out ECO to another court area, following the confirmation of funding. Courts sitting in Antrim, Coleraine and Ballymena have been selected. A letter to this effect is being drafted to the Lady Chief Justice. From 1 April 2025 ECO in its original format will be available and managed within generic teams.

Fieldwork is ongoing in the review of Prisoner Development Model (PDM), NI Prison Service, with significant input from PBNi. The final report should be completed by the end of March. The full report will not be released until the separate review of NIPS Psychology Services is completed, possibly May 2025.

The third session, hosted by NIPS, of the Public Protection Advisory Group (PPAG) Leadership Programme on Adaptive Leadership will take place on 26 February 2025.

Our Resources

Mr King updated Members on the budget 2025-26, the pay award 2024-25 and the work of the Estates department.

Human Resources and Organisational Development

Mrs Sweeney advised Members that there continued to be high numbers of sick absence across the organisation. The Chair reiterated that the Board remains concerned about this issue and hopes that ongoing work to address the high levels of sickness absence will impact on the figures.

Communication and Engagement

Ms McGreevy informed Members that it had been agreed by the DoJ to set up a justice-wide communications group. This will be a good opportunity for joint messaging and narrative.

The Justice Minister attended a Community Service placement in December and has expressed interest in visiting more Community Service projects in the incoming year.

In terms of Data Protection, data incidents remained steady. There had been an increase in Subject Access Requests (SARs). The cyber-attack on Choice Housing on 20 February 2025 was noted. PBNI has limited dealings with Choice Housing and there is no SLA in place.

Complaints to date in 2024-25 have mainly been resolved at Stage 1. Currently, only one complaint is at Stage 2.

The Board noted the paper.

9. DRAFT BUSINESS PLAN 2025-26 (PAPER)

Mr Hamilton gave a brief summary of the draft Business Plan 2025-26. Following feedback from middle managers, unions and Members at the last Board meeting, some changes had been made. Trauma had been referenced throughout the plan rather than stand alone. It was suggested that Trauma Informed Approach should be stated upfront in Our Values section. Following discussion Members agreed that the Plan was concise, to the point and relevant.

The Board approved the PBNI Business Plan 2025-26.

10. BOARD EFFECTIVENESS 2022-25 (PAPER)

The Board Secretary referred Members to the paper and requested feedback. The paper will be used within the Induction Programme for new Members and also for the Board's submission to the PBNI Annual Report 2024-25. The Deputy Chair commended Ms Fitzsimons for her work on the paper.

The Board noted the paper.

11. POSITION PAPER TO INFORM NEW BOARD AND CORPORATE PLAN (PAPER)

The paper will be the basis of a First Day Brief for the new Board and the new Corporate Plan 2026-29. The Chief Executive took Members through the key sections including Reducing Offending and Reoffending in Northern Ireland, PSNI Recorded Crime Figures, the wider global and UK context, trauma informed themes, links with Partnerships and the Sentencing Review, PBNI's budget 2025-26 caseload

statistics, programmes and staffing and culture. The three key areas suggested for Board focus in 2025-26 were how the Board could influence policy in the context of the Programme for Government, the need to continue to build organisational resilience and linked to this an organisational review of PBNI, continuing to keep a focus on organisational culture and confidence in community sentences and the work of Probation.

The Board noted the paper.

12. BOARD SECRETARY'S BUSINESS (VERBAL)

The Board Secretary advised that the Partnership Agreement between the DoJ and PBNI had been due to be signed off at the meeting but had been delayed due to some late minor amendments being requested by the DoJ. The Board Chair confirmed that the agreement will be signed before the end of the Board's term on 28 February 2025.

Members not standing for a further term or finishing their 2nd term of the Board, were asked to return tablets and ID cards to the Board Secretary together with outstanding travel expenses claims.

The Board noted the update.

AUDIT & RISK ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE (ARAC)

13. COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE (PAPER)

The Committee Chair gave a summary of the ARAC meeting held on 7 February 2025. Items considered were the Draft Q4 Strategic Risk Register 2025-26 and the draft Anti-Fraud and Anti-Bribery Policy. The new format of the Strategic Risk Register (SRR) was commended. The annual self-assessment of the ARAC Committee was very positive and confident that the appropriate mitigations and controls were in place to manage risk. Mr Ingram thanked the Committee for their work over the last three years and noted the contribution from the late Mr Bodger, former Committee Chair.

The Board noted the update.

13.1 Draft Q4 Strategic Risk Register 2024-25 (Paper)

The Board Secretary highlighted the key changes to the Strategic Risk Register (SRR) since the last quarter. She advised consideration may be given at the next ARAC meeting to add the Delay in Causeway On-Boarding as an additional risk.

The Board approved the paper.

13.2 Draft Anti-Fraud and Anti-Bribery Policy (Paper)

Mr King advised that the Policy had been reviewed and updated in accordance with the policy review schedule and much of the policy is a standard format including the response plan. On-line training may be required to ensure staff awareness of their personal responsibility in relation to fraud and bribery.

The Board approved the paper.

CORPORATE RESOURCES COMMITTEE (CRC)

14. COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE (VERBAL)

There was no update from the previous meeting. The Committee Chair thanked everyone for their contribution during the last three years.

The Board noted the update.

14.1 Financial Outturn Report January 2025 – Update (Paper)

Mr King referred Members to the Report. Currently PBNI is on target to keep in budget with a possible underspend of £163k in Capital due to the timing of the Electronic Case Management System (ECMS) change controls being completed and a delay in progressing a new leasehold in Enniskillen. Additional funding of £200k for depreciation, which was requested in the January monitoring, had been received.

The Board noted the paper.

14.2 Draft Budget 2025-26 (Paper)

Mr King confirmed that the budget for 2025-26 had been set at £22,114k and talked through the proposed areas for spend in the incoming year. It is hoped that additional funding will be received to offset the increase in Employers' National Insurance contributions. Members welcomed the alignment of the budget to the Programme for Government priorities. Members were asked to note the draft allocation letter and approve the proposed draft allocations.

The Board approved the paper.

POLICY AND PRACTICE COMMITTEE

15. COMMITTEE CHAIR'S UPDATE (VERBAL)

There was no update since the previous meeting. The Committee Chair thanked all for their contribution during the last three years.

15.1 Criminal Justice Trends (Paper)

Mr Hamilton referred Members to the paper provided by Naomi Mill, Deputy Head of Stats & Research. The Committee Chair commended Ms Mill for her continued work on statistics and trends in the last year.

The Board noted the paper.

OTHER BUSINESS

16. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Board Chair reiterated his thanks to Board Members for their commitment during his tenure. He thanked the Chief Executive and her team for all their hard work and support and wished the organisation best wishes in the future.

The date and time of the next Board meeting will be confirmed in due course.

The meeting ended at 12.20 pm.

Mr Glenn Houston
Board Chair

Date