

ENHANCED COMBINATION ORDER

CASE STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

Short term prison sentences can have an adverse impact on family relationships, employment and housing. They are also unable to facilitate the time needed to address mental health issues and addictions. PBNI therefore developed a demanding community sentence as an alternative to short prison sentences (12 months or less). Based on existing legislation and known as the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO), ECOs offer Courts a community based sentencing option in a more intensive format. It is currently available in two Court areas.

ECOs focus on targeted interventions, restorative practice, desistance and victims work, with service users also required to complete unpaid work within their local communities (Community Service). Every person subject to an ECO is assessed by PBNI psychologists, with those who need it receiving a bespoke mental health intervention. Where appropriate parenting/family support work and accredited programmes are also part of the order.

As well as Probation Officers (POs), ECOs involve Probation Service Officers (PSOs), Community Service Officers and PBNI Psychologists.

The initiative has been embraced by the Judiciary and the number of short custodial sentences imposed by courts in which ECOs are available decreased by over one fifth. This reduction in custodial sentences, with the resultant decrease in tax payer costs, was identified as a major benefit of the project. This community sentence provides value for money and positive outcomes.

This booklet will demonstrate the difference that the Order is making to people's lives.

ENHANCED COMBINATION ORDERS

Below are some testimonials from people who have commenced the Enhanced Combination Order. They explain how the Orders have helped them change their lives.

“ Jim received an Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) in August 2019. He received a two year sentence to be served in the community, with 80 hours unpaid work, a psychological assessment and participation in victim focussed work as well as relevant programmes. The work carried out with probation and partner agencies helped this individual tackle the root causes of his offending behaviour.

“If it hadn’t been for this ECO it would have been prison. Then I would have lost my benefits, my home and access to my child. This is critical. Nobody tells you that after three months all your benefits stop. If I had been sentenced to prison I would’ve been homeless when I came out. At the time I went to court ECO was a new thing. My Probation Officer explained what I would have to do and that we would take it one step at a time, to make sure that I wasn’t overwhelmed. They listened to any issues I had, especially when I was struggling and they tried to find ways to help. Now I’ve completed my community service, my programmes and I’ve had help with my addictions. Writing the letter to my victim has also helped me. I’ve done my bit to apologise, to put an end to my guilt and to close the story. I’m hoping for forgiveness. I feel bad about what I have done. I understand that I was unwell at the time but I am responsible for my actions.”

“ Kim has been on an Enhanced Combination Order for over a year. Her Probation Officer describes the difference it has made: *“The change in Kim throughout this order has been extremely encouraging, even when she attends the office now her attitude is completely different she is open, honest and comfortable speaking to staff. She has continued to stay off alcohol and has gained great experience and life skills through her community service placement. Although Kim was quite chaotic at the start, she has always been compliant, has not received any warnings, and has not further offended. Her progress has been fantastic over the past year and I look forward to seeing the growth and outcome of the next year of Kim’s order.”*

“Andy has various previous convictions dating from a young age. He is currently on an Enhanced Combination Order for assaulting police, criminal damage/arson, resisting police, threats to damage property and improper use of public communications network. Andy’s case plan was created to address victim awareness, addictions, employment and emotional and mental well-being.

Andy’s Probation Officer said: “Andy was referred to Community Restorative Justice (CRJ), and during this time he completed an apology letter, took part in a human faces programme and engaged in 1-1 work around restorative justice, until we were satisfied with his progress. Andy also attended community addictions and community mental health appointments throughout his order and had a key worker who assisted his addictions and mental health. At the start of his order Andy would have often attended the office under the influence but since he has been working with these teams it has dropped to a rare occurrence. Andy was addicted to prescription drugs and his mental health would fluctuate regularly so these services helped to support him. Andy has recently been working with Extern who have been helping him with his housing application. Ascert staff have also been engaging with Andy and this was assisting him with his drug and alcohol use. There has been a massive improvement in Andy’s attitude, drug use and mental health.”

“Jack is on an Enhanced Combination Order imposed in June 2019 for 18 months. The ECO includes an additional requirement for drug/alcohol counselling. His Probation Officer outlines the progress he has made: *“Since the commencement of the Order Jack has completed Community Service in a squad and also on placement in a charity shop. He has participated in all of the sessions with the Psychologist and both he and the psychologist have provided positive feedback. Jack has also completed victim focussed work with Alternatives NI and the Barnardos parenting programme as he and his partner are expecting their first child. In relation to addictions there have been sessions with Dunlewey around cannabis use & gambling, and Jack speaks very positively about this. Jack has engaged really well in this order, he has been motivated to attend as much as possible and reports from outside agencies and PBNI staff have all been very positive.”*

RESTORATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Restorative Interventions forms an important part of the Enhanced Combination Order.

As part of one individual's restorative work, she wrote a letter to the victim in her case.

"My Probation Officer referred me to Northern Ireland Alternatives and they helped me come to terms with what happened to me. They were friendly, down to earth, non-judgemental and understanding. It helped me heal. They helped me to understand what I was going through; realising the impact of the crime on the victim, realising how bad it was for the victim and their family; and for myself and my family. The face to face sessions helped with my self-awareness. I started to understand the reasons for my offence and the triggers. Now I know that I need to look after my mental health, so that I won't do it again. Writing a letter to the victim of your crime helps you come to terms with what you did. It helps you heal.

I want to give my apologies from the bottom of my heart, the harm that I have caused may that be psychological or physical. I had been going through a really bad patch in my life a few weeks before the assault. I had given up in life as I had my 13 year old daughter removed from our home due to my poor mental health. Over those weeks it escalated, I began drinking heavily on top of my medication to numb the pain I was feeling in my heart.

During my time on my ECO I have completed my 80 hours community service at a childrens charity shop. I feel like I have more to give to the charity so I have decided to stay on and I now work there as a volunteer 18 hours a week. I have worked with NIACRO and they have given me the opportunity to write a CV to help me get employment in the future as I now have a criminal record. I have engaged with Alternatives and their RJ programme. I have learned about the impact of my behaviours and I have been given this opportunity to think about the hurt and harm I have caused you and your parents and it has gave me a chance to apologise.

I am working hard on my mental health, I am now in a good routine with volunteering and family commitments. I am attending my appointments regularly and I am taking my medication as prescribed. I no longer drink or use recreational drugs.

I just want to let you know how sorry I really am. Writing this letter has finally brought my offence into reality and for everything I have caused you and your family, I am deeply heartbroken. I appreciated you taking the time to read this letter and I wish you all the best for the future."

UNPAID WORK/COMMUNITY SERVICE

Another individual on an Enhanced Combination Order talks about the positive impact of community service:

“I was given 80 hours community service in a charity shop and with the support of my Probation Officer I completed this within a few weeks. The staff treated me with respect and were thankful for the help. I’ve gained skills and responsibilities. I’m still at the charity shop one year later. I’ve stayed on and volunteer there three days a week. Sometimes I open and shut the shop. They trust me.”

INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRAMMES

Individuals can be referred to a range of interventions and programmes as part of an Enhanced Combination Order. Below is some feedback from those who have completed a drug and alcohol intervention, employment intervention and a parenting course.

“With the support of my Probation Officer, the ECO programme made sure I had the help I needed with my drug and alcohol addictions. Before I was in a vicious circle. No one was helping me get to the bottom of my mental health issues and underlying problems.”

“The NIACRO Working Well project helped me with building a CV so that I can get a job when I’m ready. I was so worried about the future. They reassured me and told me I wasn’t blacklisted for life. I didn’t know how to say about a criminal record, but they knew how to word it better. I feel more confident now.”

PBNI PSYCHOLOGY WORK

Referral to a PBNI Psychologist is a requirement of ECO and both staff and participants have been generally positive about the psychology element of the Order. The exit questionnaire from the 2019 independent Evaluation Report conducted by NISRA showed that 86% of service users found the psychology referral useful, and during the interviews both service users and PBNI managers were highly complimentary of this element of the order and the benefits that it provided.

The comments below are from the report

“ I thought the Judge was harsh when he put me on ECO but [named psychologist] has made me see that I have a drink problem and he helped me look at different things, like problems in my childhood. I hadn't seen the problems”.

Service User

“ One member of psychology is now dedicated to working with ECO clients. Communication is excellent as he is located with staff. Staff cannot praise this service highly enough”.

PBNI Manager

“ Psychology was so useful looking at your beliefs/motives. Up to the individual to engage and use it and I have. More of this type of work on your mind/attitude is most beneficial. First thing of any benefit to me”.

Service User



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