

Working with and in Communities – Insights from Probation on the Island of Ireland

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Summary: This article, co-authored by the Chief Executive of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Amanda Stewart, and the Director of the Probation Service, Mark Wilson (retired September 2025), sets out their reflections and insights on how both organisations work *in* and *with* communities to prevent reoffending and rehabilitate and reintegrate those serving community sentences and those subject to licence in the community. Community is at the heart of probation practice, and this article considers in detail what that means. Individuals subject to probation are part of communities and even when they receive custodial sentences, in most cases, they will eventually return to those communities. Many of the people under probation supervision have highly complex needs and require a broad range of support and assistance if they are to make better choices for themselves and their communities. The strong ties that have been developed with voluntary and community partners enable support for individuals to be provided at a local level. Those ties also facilitate consistency and structure in the lives of those who have offended, after the statutory services have completed their role. Effective engagement with communities to help raise awareness and understanding of the impact of probation and respond to community concerns is essential, too. Our statutory and community partnerships provide a forum to enable this engagement to take place but undoubtedly there is much more to do. Better and more meaningful engagement with all communities, including those harder-to-reach communities, will lead to enhanced community confidence in the role of probation to change lives and help build safer streets, towns and neighbourhoods for all.

Keywords: Probation, community, communities, partnership, reoffending, Ireland, Northern Ireland, engagement, voluntary sector, statutory.

Introduction

We all want and deserve to live in communities where we feel safe and are safe. Within the wider justice system, terminology such as ‘community safety’, ‘community justice’, ‘community policing’ and ‘community partnerships’ is

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widely used. Within a probation setting in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, the strategic context for delivering services is very much underpinned by our commitment to working within 'communities'. The Probation Service commits to: 'Changing Lives in our Communities for Safer Futures' (Probation Service, 2024a) and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland aims to: 'Change Lives for Safer Communities' (PBNI, 2023). With similar aims, both organisations' strategic plans set out the desire to work collaboratively and effectively across government, with community and voluntary partners, to contribute to safer communities. Both organisations maintain a similar value base, including acting respectfully and compassionately, and ensuring accountability and transparency, as well as holding the belief that people have the capacity to change. This article considers what the delivery of probation services with and in communities looks like in 2025 and beyond, including how we work collaboratively with communities and are accountable as public servants to the public. It further considers the challenges in continuing to deliver services with a meaningful presence in, and real engagement with, citizens in local communities and the issues they face.

This article provides background to the work of both probation services. It considers what we mean by 'community' and the changing nature of communities north and south, and how probation services may consider adapting and developing in light of those changes. It also considers the community partnerships that are available to probation to assist engagement with citizens, and the effectiveness of those fora. Finally, it considers community sentences and how community perceptions of probation shape and influence our policy and operating environment.

Probation on the island of Ireland

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) is a non-departmental public body within the Department of Justice. Established in 1982,¹ PBNI's devolved identity as an 'arm's length' organisation has enabled it to establish its own purpose and priorities and devise a set of strategic aims and objectives. This arm's length status means that the probation service is held accountable by a community-based Board comprising up to thirteen members who are appointed on a three-year basis by the Minister of Justice. The Board has a range of mandatory functions set out in legislation, including

¹ The Probation Board (Northern Ireland) Order, 1982, available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1982/713>

securing the maintenance of an adequate and efficient probation service (PBNI, 2025a).

Probation in Northern Ireland is a central part of the criminal justice system and works to address the causes of offending, to help prevent people from coming back into the system, thus protecting the public from harm caused by reoffending. The services it provides enable individuals to change their behaviour, which in turn reduces the likelihood of reoffending, reduces the numbers of victims, and makes communities safer. It is primarily responsible for the management of people on probation (those serving a community sentence or who have been released from prison subject to licence) and for preparing pre-sentence reports for judges and magistrates in the courts, to enable them to choose the most appropriate sentence. Probation staff also work in prisons, preparing people for release into the community, and we provide an information service for victims of crime, as well as restorative interventions, where appropriate. The service also provides a range of funding to voluntary and community groups to assist the delivery of services in the community.

Probation Officers in Northern Ireland are registered by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council because they are qualified social workers. They develop respectful and honest relationships with individuals who offend, as well as promoting the rights of victims (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2025). The operating environment for PBNI has changed over time. For example, the development of probation practice has evolved, from a commitment to assist, advise and befriend, to evidence-based work in assessing and managing risk and interventions, focused on changing behaviours that contribute to reoffending. The age profile of those under supervision has changed, and we now deal with adults, an increasing number of whom are in the older 30–39 age bracket (PBNI, 2025a). Those we work with also have increasingly complex needs. At the same time, we have enhanced oversight and accountability structures and a challenging financial environment (Hansard, 2024). All of these factors have changed the operating focus of our work.

Collaborative working has also developed significantly over recent years. This has happened partly because of the legislative requirements, including the introduction of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland), 2011, which established Policing and Community Safety Partnerships.² The functions of PCSPs and DPCSPs set out in the Act include the requirement to make arrangements for

2 Under this legislation, each District Council in Northern Ireland established a Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP). Belfast City Council also established four District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (DPCSPs) to mirror the Belfast City policing districts of North, South, East and West Belfast.

obtaining the co-operation of the public with the police in preventing crime and enhancing community safety in each local district. The collaborative nature of probation's work has also developed because of a very clear strategic direction at leadership level with PBNi to enhance and create new partnerships to enable us to deliver the most effective services.

The Probation Service

The Probation Service is part of the Department of Justice and plays a vital role in making our communities safer by working to reduce reoffending, resulting in fewer victims of crime.

The Probation Service provides a unique contribution through the management and rehabilitation of people referred to the Service by the courts or on release from custody, supporting positive change and enhancing community safety (Probation Service, 2024a). The Service contributes to this by ensuring that court-ordered supervision is implemented in a way that protects the public, holds people to account and supports rehabilitation. Further, it delivers effective interventions with individuals subject to community sanctions, to reduce the risks associated with offending and support their rehabilitation and reintegration. Finally, it delivers opportunities for people to make good on the harm caused by crime, through reparation work and restorative justice. Its work is informed through strategic alignment and collaboration with a range of organisations from statutory, voluntary and community settings. As part of the Department of Justice, its priorities and goals are clearly aligned to the Department of Justice *Statement of Strategy 2024–2026*, the *Youth Justice Strategy 2021–27*, the *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Policy 2022–24* and the Department of Justice *Policy Paper on Restorative Justice 2023*. Likewise, its objectives and aims support the work of the newly established statutory agency, Cuan, in delivering *Zero Tolerance: The Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-based Violence 2022–26*. Equally, the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, 2024 has, amongst a range of other developments, enabled the national roll-out of the Community Safety Partnership model, a model that is welcomed by the Service.

As in Northern Ireland, probation practice is guided and informed by social work values. While it is not compulsory for Probation Officers to be registered as social workers with CORU (the Health and Social Care Professionals Council), most are qualified social workers. At the core of what probation staff do across all work is to: motivate service-users to change, to

help them increase their ability to change, and to facilitate improved opportunities for change. Probation Officers do this through the development of positive professional relationships, within clear role boundaries, and using skills and interventions based on those shown by research to be effective. These, in turn, are founded on social work training and national and international standards of good practice, including, for example, the Council of Europe Probation Rules (2010). While those we work with are, in the main, those who have committed criminal offences, a central focus for probation work is the impact of offending on victims, and the needs, rights and position of victims of crime. Our work would be one dimensional if we focused only on the individual who has offended. In doing what we do, we need to be conscious of, and seek to repair where possible, the broken relationship between the person convicted of offending, victim(s) and the community.

In short, probation on the island of Ireland seeks to reduce reoffending, prevent further victims, promote rehabilitation, support reintegration and facilitate social inclusion.

Shared vision and shared challenges

At a strategic level, both probation organisations share similar aims, visions and values, and operate within comparable contexts. PBNI's *Corporate Plan* (2023) has four strategic priorities and outcomes. The first outcome focuses on supporting our people, through a positive and inclusive working environment, to deliver an effective and stable probation service. The second outcome is working towards a safer community, through the delivery of high-quality, effective probation services. The third outcome relates to having a probation service that is sustainable, adaptable and prepared for future challenges; and the fourth outcome focuses on developing partnerships to help make communities safer. Likewise, the Probation Service's *Statement of Strategy* is developed around five pillars, two of which focus on enhancing community safety and building collaboration and engagement. The other three pillars are empowering staff, enabling social inclusion and futureproofing the service.

Reflecting societal changes, the operating environment for both organisations has changed in recent years, with the complexity of risk and need presenting. More people are presenting with poor mental health, addictions and trauma-related matters (PBNI, 2025a). There is also an increase in those on supervision who are unable to access appropriate and

sustainable housing (PBNi, 2023; Hansard, 2024; Probation Service, 2024b). Probation Officers in the Republic of Ireland have observed a similar increase in housing support needs within their caseloads. We have seen changes in our caseloads, including an increase in the numbers of people who have committed serious offences, including domestic abuse and sexual offending, as well as in the types of crime and opportunities to commit crime, including online offending.

Every service-user we work with is part of a community, and even when they receive custodial sentences, they will eventually return to the community. As outlined, many of those under supervision have a range of needs and may require a broad range of support and assistance if they are to make better choices for themselves and their communities. Strong ties with communities are therefore essential if we are to assist those people subject to supervision to make the choice to change their lives and become rehabilitated and reintegrated fully into society.

This means that, more than ever, there is a need for collaboration, and probation services cannot be delivered in isolation. That partnership working is critical with justice partners but there is also a need for significant investment in developing our partnerships with community and voluntary sectors, as well as tapping into the potential of the informal resource network (e.g. family and kinship ties, community leaders and volunteers) available throughout communities on the island of Ireland.

With over thirty-five community-based offices nationwide, the Probation Service is a national service on a larger scale than PBNi, which currently operates out of eighteen community-based offices. A challenge for the future is how best to physically deliver services in a way that is efficient and effective and best uses resources to connect with local communities.

Before we consider some of these issues in more detail, we want to consider first what we mean by working with the community, and the definition of community.

What do we mean by probation working with ‘the community’?

The term ‘community’ and the consideration of a community in which an individual resides often invokes thoughts of the geographic location, or physical composition, of a particular locality. It is also likely to invoke thoughts of the social fabric of a particular locality, the people who reside there and how they may interact or influence each other. The former carries considerable

importance for the work of probation practitioners. For example, the physical composition of a locality can include prosocial opportunities an individual may access, or in the context of the ever-increasing challenges presented by homelessness, it may or may not provide the very foundation from which someone can move forward. It is, however, the latter which will be the focus of this article – the people who comprise communities and how they relate to one another.

A recent report notes that, as social beings, our sense of community can be a powerful tool for improving health and wellbeing and strengthening our resilience in difficult times, and indeed, for many, the pandemic proved this theory (Permanent TSB and Kantar, 2022).

The authors of the book *The Connected Community* (Russell and McKnight) are proponents of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), which is a community development approach that focuses on identifying and mobilising a community's existing assets, skills and passions, rather than focusing on problems and needs. The book emphasises that communities are built from the inside out, driven by relationships and the connections between people. The authors assert that our disconnection from 'people and place' diminishes our quality of life, and they demonstrate, through a range of examples and stories, how neighbours can work together in their own area to connect with one another and create healthier and safer communities (Russell and McKnight, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a perfect reminder of the importance of connections within communities and how isolation and loneliness can provide a perfect storm, which impacts upon wellbeing and mental health and exacerbates issues with addictions. During the period when social distancing restrictions were in place, probation staff reported on how their role changed to one of providing support, helping service-users to cope with loneliness and enforced isolation. One Probation Officer reflected during the pandemic:

'I need to have conversations about the usual concerns, how they are feeling and if they are taking their medication, if required. Now, with the COVID-19 lockdown, we have an added responsibility to supervision. My conversations have been extended to address each client's role and responsibility in protecting each other from the spread of infection, and the added issues the impact of enforced isolation and loneliness has had on them.'

(O'Neill and McGreevy, 2020)

For those on probation supervision, many are facing myriad challenges, which may include tackling poor mental health, addictions, isolation, homelessness or unstable housing, lack of employment and education, navigating the criminal justice system, and dealing with the stigma and shame of having offended. Whilst for some individuals, their community, people and influences in their life may have negatively shaped their experience, and therefore there is a need for them to 'break' from these communities in order to desist from crime, we would assert that it is also the case that a sense of belonging, having purpose and meaning in life and being embedded within a community can be an overwhelmingly positive experience and assist a person on their journey of desistance (Maguire and Carr, 2024).

As people working in the field of probation, understanding the influence of people within communities with whom those we supervise engage, both positively and negatively, is a crucial part of how we affect positive change.

For example, systems theory (Friedman and Allen, 2011) provides a framework for understanding how individuals are affected by – and interact with – their environments. It is not just about the person; it is about the relationships, roles, and structures around them. This holistic view is essential for assessing people's needs and planning interventions to facilitate change.

McNeill and Maruna (2008), drawing on the findings of desistance studies, reflect on the community, social and personal contexts that exist to help facilitate change, and cite Farrall (2002), who states that; 'social circumstances and relationships with others are both the object of the intervention and the medium through which ... change can be achieved'. McNeill and Maruna (2008) reflect that desistance-supporting interventions need to respect and foster agency and reflexivity; be based on legitimate and respectful relationships; and also focus on social capital (opportunities) and human capital (motivations and capacities).

Understanding the communities from which our service-users come is, arguably, a critical element of our work if we are to help effect change. Whilst our staff often come from and live in local communities, it is important to consider whether our organisation and staff really reflect the communities that we serve. Both jurisdictions have seen significant community changes, particularly as a result of increased ethnic diversity (NISRA, 2025a; CSO, 2025). As demographics in communities change and shift and we see more newcomer communities, it is a fair assertion that the make-up of our staff does not necessarily reflect the diversity now apparent in many of our local communities. For example, within PBNi, monitoring information held internally (December

2022) indicates that the PBNl workforce ethnicity is made up of 98 per cent white, 0.5 per cent black, 0.5 per cent mixed race and 1 per cent not disclosed.

Within Northern Ireland, there is also the additional issue of separated communities, which is rooted in political and historical factors where some remain segregated along religious lines. For example, most of those living in social housing, particularly in Belfast, are not living in shared communities, but rather are living in housing that is predominately one religion. This has an added dimension in that during forty years of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, services, including probation services, were sited at locations to facilitate safety and security to either side of the community, for those using these services. These services are often still at the same locations, and it has been a huge challenge to facilitate society moving away from having almost every service located on a very local level. Speaking in the NI Assembly in March 2025, MLA Eoin Tennyson commented that:

'...90 per cent of social housing remains segregated; peace walls divide communities; and paramilitary organisations continue to exert a toxic influence. This is a society where, for too many, community background still dictates where you go to school, what street you live on, the football teams that you can support, the sports that you can play, the services that you access and what your political views should be. Not only is that anathema to the vision of the truly shared future that the people of Northern Ireland signed up to in 1998 but it comes at a huge financial cost.'

(Hansard, 2025)

Recognising the diversity of communities, and the challenges faced within many communities, how do we harness the potential that exists within these areas to help create a safer environment and how do we develop our ability to engage meaningfully with people to truly support desistance?

Probation's partnership with communities through community development

For both probation organisations, a key priority is to work with our network of community-and-voluntary-based organisations to further develop and deliver dynamic services that are responsive to the needs of modern probation service. Probation's reach into communities only goes so far and, by and large, both organisations are '9–5 services' that work with people only

for a designated period of time as determined by the courts. It is therefore critical that there is a network of community and voluntary organisations who can assist probation's aims and continue to work with people after probation services have ended for individuals.

In the Probation Service there is a long history of valuing being present in and linking with communities. This enables the Service to understand and be responsive to local needs, to be more integrated with the community's responses to its needs, be better networked with statutory and community partners and, ultimately, to assist those referred to us to reintegrate and lead more productive lives. The Service supports 60 community-based organisations, including circa €17.5 million in funding annually (Probation Service, 2024b). While not universally spread, the projects, which worked with a total of 4,500 people in 2024, complement the work of Probation Officers by forming strong purposeful relations, creating a community with positive, consistent support, and a belief in the person's capacity for change – instilling a sense of hope that is often a prerequisite to change. The work of the community-based organisations brings a responsive dynamism and resilience that is greatly valued. A community-based connection is a change-enabler that, more often than not, goes beyond the period of probation contact.

Likewise in Northern Ireland, the community and voluntary sector has traditionally played a strong role, with organisations such as NIACRO (Fulton et al., 2021) working closely with probation services. Fulton et al. recognise that NIACRO's contribution to building safer and peaceful communities in Northern Ireland is its very grounding in those communities and the fact that it was amongst the first organisations to give voice to the concept of justice reinvestment or decentralising justice investments from state institutions to community-building initiatives. The Probation Order (1982), which remains the main legislative instrument in respect of probation in Northern Ireland, sets out that one of the main functions of the Board is to enter arrangements with voluntary organisations to provide services to assist in the supervision of those subject to probation. As well as providing community grants to local organisations to assist with the provision of community service placements, PBNi has a number of partnerships with community and voluntary organisations, for example through 'Aspire' (Ritchie and McGreevy, 2019), which is a collaborative project led by PBNi and delivered in conjunction with NIACRO. Aspire aims to reduce criminality and risk-taking behaviour in young men aged 16–30 who are marginalised from communities and at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism. Similarly, probation in Northern Ireland provides

funding to Women's Aid to assist in the development of interventions to tackle domestic abuse. The Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP) is an innovative programme designed for adult males who have demonstrated the potential to be abusive in intimate partner relationships, and whose children are assessed by Social Services to be at risk. Funding is provided to Women's Aid to assist in the delivery of this intervention.

Aside from the funding arrangements that exist, probation also has essential partnerships in place with the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland to provide 'approved accommodation'. These premises are managed by community and voluntary organisations, including Extern, the Simon Community and the Council of Social Witness, Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Approved premises act as a transition or halfway house between prison and settlement in the community for people leaving custody who are assessed as high risk. They have two main roles: to help rehabilitate and resettle some of the most serious offenders leaving custody; and to make sure that the public are protected in the offenders' early months in the community. Having a home in a community when you leave prison is a key determinant for successful rehabilitation and preventing further offending, yet the location and use of approved premises also poses real and genuine concerns within local communities. Engagement with communities in areas where approved premises are located is essential in trying to ensure that we can listen to concerns and provide information and reassurance to local communities. In recent months, probation staff, alongside colleagues in policing and the voluntary and community organisation that runs one approved accommodation have been holding a series of local engagements with politicians and residents to try to ensure that the local community is better informed. These engagements and local relationships undoubtedly help build confidence and, at the same time, support residents in approved accommodation to settle and integrate better within the local community. The issue of community concerns in respect of the housing of individuals who have offended is a long-standing problem that has been the subject of much public discussion and debate. Thompson (2014) highlighted the critical importance of building community confidence in order to reintegrate these individuals back into the community, and the issue remains as contentious today.

The importance of collaboration with community and voluntary organisations to assist in the delivery of probation services is vital. As noted earlier, probation services across the island work with individuals for a

designated period of time. When those statutory services that are provided end, it is essential that there is support provided to individuals from within the wider community and voluntary sector. In both jurisdictions, the expertise and experience within the community and voluntary sector are of a high standard and valued, as evidenced by the efforts that have been made in both jurisdictions to protect funding for this sector, in the face of budget pressures.

We understand that in order to support sustainable change and reduce reoffending, we must also target the underlying causes of crime. For this reason, we will continue to build capacity in the area of social inclusion and play our part in helping individuals to overcome inequalities, by challenging stigmatisation and removing barriers to participation in society. We will continue to leverage the innovation, skills and expertise of the community-based organisations we fund, benefitting from their unique perspective in support of achieving our shared aims.

While the link between the community and voluntary sector and probation is well documented, the role of volunteerism within the work of probation in both jurisdictions is underdeveloped. Many of the probation services' collaborative partners make use of volunteers, particularly in mentoring roles. For example, Le Chéile is a mentoring programme for young persons engaged with the criminal justice system and their parents, and CoSA, Circles of Support and Accountability, supports those who have histories of sexual offending. Many other jurisdictions do make use of volunteers successfully within probation. The CoPPER (Cooperation to Promote a European Volunteering Programme in Probation Services) project, co-ordinated by the Confederation of European Probation, of which the Probation Service is a partner, aims to enhance community involvement in probation by training volunteers to support probationers. This involves providing informal support, advice and guidance to individuals on probation, ultimately facilitating their social reintegration. While at the early stages, there is real potential in taking this approach.

Both probation services recognise and acknowledge the important role that the community plays in working with people who have committed offences, supporting their rehabilitation, reintegration and engagement in a positive lifestyle. Providing opportunities for community members to engage with us is an important feature of our work. This includes creating opportunities for volunteering and the provision of community service placements. In recognising the unique 'value added' that volunteerism brings work and, more importantly, the positive influence and impact that this can

have on the lives of service-users, there remains untapped potential in communities throughout the island of Ireland. This is an area which merits further attention and may assist in ensuring that those who work with service-users are more reflective of the community within which they live. In turn, this links to how probation services harness the expertise of people who have lived experience of the justice system to assist others to desist from crime.

Rooted in the belief that social inclusion factors such as addiction, poor mental health, and homelessness can be responded to more effectively through a revised and structured approach, the Probation Service has established a Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU) to oversee the effective co-ordination and implementation of the Probation Service's work in these areas. This is a very deliberate response to an understanding and appreciation of the social context and the ways in which the above needs may interrelate and require complex and innovative solutions, rather than thinking of offender rehabilitation solely as individual treatment to reduce/remove criminogenic risk. The Unit aims to ensure that our work is aligned with wider social inclusion policy directions, in order to maximise opportunities to support reintegration and thereby reduce reoffending.

Statutory partnerships with and across communities

All who work in the criminal justice system share the goal of helping to create a safer and a fairer Ireland. While each organisation and agency within the criminal justice system brings its own unique contribution to the process, we multiply what each of us brings to the table when our energies are combined in a focused way. Interagency co-operation with our justice partners, particularly the courts, the prison service, the police and the youth justice service, is central to everything we do.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs)

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) are statutory bodies, which were established under the Justice Act (Northern Ireland), 2011, and were set up on 1 April 2012. They are funded jointly by the Policing Board for Northern Ireland and the Department of Justice. The overall purpose of PCSPs is to make communities safer. Their aim is to empower communities to develop solutions that will help to tackle crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, alongside contributing to an increase in confidence in policing (Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, 2025).

Each of the eleven District Councils in Northern Ireland is required to establish a PCSP and each one consists of between eight and ten political members (councillors), who are appointed by the local council; and between seven and nine independent members. There are also representatives from seven public-sector organisations, including PBNI, who are designated to sit on the PCSP. Designated members are equal members of the partnerships and are expected to contribute actively alongside the political and independent members in all facets of work relating to community safety. The relevant responsibilities of the organisations represented by the designated members will also be recognised in the development and implementation of the PCSP action plan.

PCSPs provide a forum to support PBNI and other partner organisations to work with vulnerable people in reducing harm to communities caused by alcohol and substance misuse. They are uniquely positioned, with key partners represented to adopt a public health approach to criminal justice issues within local communities. Other areas where PCSPs have proven important and aligned to probation work are in actively supporting initiatives for victims of domestic abuse, including training for frontline professionals on risk and risk indicators for domestic abuse and domestic homicide.

Staff have reported that while there are benefits to being part of PCSPs, there is also frustration that many of the meetings tend to focus primarily on policing issues, with more general community safety issues having lower profile and less discussion.

In 2023, PBNI undertook an internal review of our role within PCSPs to consider how we best use the expertise of these partnerships. One area we are considering, which may be of value, is to have PCSPs commission services locally – for example, in the area of tackling addictions – which would allow members of the PCSP (statutory, elected, independent/community) to make referrals to a local service that is more responsive to local need. There are also opportunities for PBNI to use PCSPs to raise awareness and understanding of our role and we have offered all PCSPs presentations on key areas of our work, to generate greater awareness in probation's role. Whilst PCSPs have been in operation for over a decade, there remain opportunities to utilise these partnerships better to enhance community engagement.

Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs)

In Ireland, the Policing Security and Community Safety Act, 2024, which came into operation on 2 April 2025, placed Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs) on a statutory footing. Recognising that every community is different and has different problems and issues, each partnership will develop and implement a Local Community Safety Plan tailored to the specific needs of that area. Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs) aim to prioritise the voice of local people in identifying and addressing community safety issues in collaboration with a broad range of relevant stakeholders, including local councillors, An Garda Síochána, community representatives, business and education representatives, local authorities and a range of statutory agencies, including Probation Service, which participates on a number of LCSPs.

The objective is to bring the relevant bodies together with communities in a collaborative manner, by focusing on the concerns identified and prioritised by local people. One particular example in which the Probation Service is collaborating, under the Dublin LCSP, is the 'Bridge Project', which offers an alternative to custody for adult male offenders. Collaborating with gardaí and youth workers, the project, funded by the Probation Service, targets anti-social behaviour among young people, facilitating connections with communities to deter involvement. Diversionary prosocial activities for young men have been put in place through the LCSP, which have proved beneficial.

In terms of further utilising these statutory partnerships, there remains an opportunity to use these fora to listen to community concerns and provide flexible and responsive community sentences, which can benefit the local community, particularly in respect of the sentencing option of community service.

Community sentences

Society, through government, for many centuries, has assigned the task of deciding the correct sentence for an offence to the judges in criminal courts. One of the sentencing options available to the courts is community sentences, which are sentences served in the community and are distinct from custodial sentences, which can be immediate or suspended. Community sentences can take a wide variety of forms and can be tailored around the individual. A range of studies and research has been conducted about the effectiveness of community sentencing. Of those people sentenced to a community sentence in Ireland in 2020, 27 per cent had reoffended within one year, compared to

41 per cent of people released from custody (CSO, 2024). In Northern Ireland, reoffending information shows that the rate of reoffending for adults sentenced to a community order was nearly half that of adults subject to a custodial sentence of less than twelve months. Whilst we cannot directly compare, the latest figures (those sentenced/released in 2021–22) show that 53 per cent of adults released from custody (having served less than twelve months) reoffended, whereas this was much lower for adults on a community sentence (NISRA, 2024).

A key reason why community sentences are more effective than short custodial sentences at reducing reoffending is that they allow people to retain contact with support networks and services which can help to address the factors contributing to their offending – maintenance of family ties, jobs, housing, and childcare responsibilities – which reduces the risk of reoffending.

Currently, community sentences fall short of their potential, in terms of their potential usage, and we would like to see an increase in the use of this sentencing option. To enable this to happen, there needs to be confidence in community sentencing, and that includes both judicial confidence and community confidence in probation services' capacity to deliver.

Evidence shows limited public understanding of sentencing, and despite falling crime rates, public attitudes toward crime continue to prioritise the importance of punishment and public protection. Findings from the NI Safe Community Survey (2019/20) (Campbell *et al.*, 2021) asked respondents what, in their opinion, would be the most important things the justice system could do to improve its public confidence rating. Respondents were most likely to cite 'tougher sentences' as one of the most important things that could be done to improve public confidence

Within community sentences, community service is one of the most visible and well understood areas of sentencing, and that may well be because it is visible within communities, communities can have a say in how and where it is conducted, and there is a form of reparation in terms of giving or paying back to local communities through this order. We have seen the reparative impact of community service through unpaid work completed in communities, in schools, sports grounds, tidy towns, graveyards and beaches.

In providing evidence to the House of Lords enquiry (Justice and Home Affairs Committee, 2023) on community sentencing, the Criminal Justice Alliance said that 'in Scotland there is legislative responsibility to consult specific people and organisations on the types of unpaid work activity that should be carried out in their area'. They recommended that 'Probation

should also develop more hyper-local partnerships by engaging with victims of crime and community groups to identify local needs'. They added: 'greater involvement of the voluntary and community sector in unpaid work placements would also be beneficial', pointing out that 'many voluntary and community sector organisations employ staff with lived experience of the criminal justice system in roles where engagement and rapport building is important' (Justice and Home Affairs Committee, 2023, p. 53).

This is an area where our statutory local community partnerships in both jurisdictions could be beneficial, both in terms of assisting to provide referrals to community placements and in highlighting and profiling the unpaid work completed in local communities.

Community Service Orders (CSOs) have been in use in Ireland since 1983 when the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act was passed. CSOs are a direct alternative sanction to a prison sentence of twelve months or less for persons aged 16 years and over. CSO hours can range from 40 to 240 hours, and failure to complete can result in the custodial sentence being imposed. In 2025, the Probation Service launched its *Community Service: New Directions Implementation Plan 2025–2027*. The goal of this plan is to deliver community service as a robust sanction, which is used consistently and with confidence by the judiciary across all courts nationally. At the heart of this implementation plan is the intention of working with those who receive CSOs, to reintegrate them back into their communities and to facilitate them in learning new skills that will assist in their desistance journey, while they are engaging in reparative work in their communities. The plan also aims to improve victim satisfaction levels and build public confidence in community-based sanctions (Probation Service, 2025)

As both services on the island of Ireland look at how best to increase the use of community service, there is no doubt that the involvement of local people within local communities must be a key element of the development of our approach.

There are also lessons to be learnt in respect of how we visibly demonstrate success and outcomes in respect of other forms of community sentencing. We have a challenge to explain and to raise areas within communities where community sentencing in all its forms can have a positive impact on individuals, families and communities.

Working to reduce further victimisation and repair harm

As previously stated, the work of probation would be one-dimensional if we focused only on those who commit offences. In doing what we do, we need to be conscious of, and seek to repair where possible, the broken relationship between individuals who have offended, victim(s) and the wider community. Probation does this in a number of ways. When preparing a pre-sanction assessment on a person, we assess, as part of that, the impact on the particular victim or victims, the person's understanding of that impact, and how we can help that individual to avoid creating more victims in the future. We also provide opportunities to people who have offended to make good the harm they have caused. This includes performance of community service, as well as a number of reparative and restorative interventions and programmes that probation delivers, both directly and indirectly, with community-based partners and agencies.

The Restorative Justice and Victim Services Unit (RJVSU) was established in September 2018, providing communication pathways through a single point of contact for victims of crime, as well as developing an integrated and consistent approach to restorative justice practice, provided directly or indirectly by the Probation Service. Similarly, within PBNi, statutory victim information schemes are in place (Montgomery, 2019) and a restorative justice strategy has been published, which refreshes our approach to working with community-based restorative justice organisations. Importantly, the strategy makes clear that restorative practice is not solely about the victim–perpetrator meeting, but can include repairing family relationships when the service-user is returning to the community, or managing difficulties. The wider reparative and restorative work with local communities must be a key part of our local engagement.

Conclusion – what does our work with communities look like in 2025 and beyond?

Whilst the nature and make-up of communities on the island have changed and evolved, the concept of communities made up of individuals who reside in a local area and how they interact and influence each other remains important to the work of probation. The pandemic reinforced the importance of connectivity and the value that positive social interaction brings. For those on probation who are already facing significant challenges, adversity and social exclusion, positive connections to local communities can bring a sense of belonging and constructively impact on their desistance journey.

It is critical therefore that we continue to ask the following questions. Are we sufficiently engaged with local communities? Are our strategies, policies and practices aligned with the clear direction to staff and stakeholders on why, how and with what outcome we should work with communities?

What we do know is that community engagement and reintegration is a two-way process. The individuals we work with must want to be part of the community, to see the value of contributing, and to be accountable for the harm they have caused. The members of the community must also be willing and have the resources to give that person the opportunity to participate and receive a second chance. Communities must be willing to engage in supporting desistance, and not simply be 'punishing communities' (McNeill, 2006).

If we want communities to provide that 'social capital' to assist the rehabilitation and reintegration of those we work with, we need to invest in community engagement. McNeill points to the challenges of community support for desistance and states that rather than being an excuse not to engage it should 'drive us to a recognition of the need for offender management agencies to re-engage with community education and community involvement and to seek ways and means, at the local level and at the national level, to challenge populist punitiveness'.

As we have identified, our work with community-based organisations and our funded partners can enable opportunities for change, supporting both the person and the community to engage with each other and highlighting the value of reintegration. For this reason, it is important that we continue to build capacity in the area of social inclusion, consider how we reach 'hard-to-reach' groups and individuals, in particular, and play our part in helping them to overcome inequalities by challenging stigmatisation and removing barriers to participation in society.

Likewise, opportunities exist through our statutory community partnerships for more effective local engagement and to raise awareness and explain the value that community sentences provide. There is an opportunity to change public perceptions about what effective sentencing is.

The development of all our strategic work, including our approach to restorative justice, service-user engagement and the use of our resources, including our estate and people, must consider the wider impact on communities and how it enhances our ability to engage with same.

The well-known adage that 'it takes a village to raise a child' is often used and denotes the importance of having a sense of collective responsibility, emphasising the importance of collaboration, shared values and a strong

sense of community. Likewise, probation services cannot work in isolation. We need the collective experience and expertise of a range of partners, and we need members of local communities to work with us to achieve our collective aim of creating safer streets and safer neighbourhoods.

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