

Doing What Matters Most: How Probation Can Contribute to Reducing Reoffending

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Summary: This paper considers the opportunities for Probation to develop its contribution to preventing reoffending and desistance in the context of a new strategic plan published by the Northern Ireland Executive, prioritising 'safer communities'. For the first time, the strategic vision of government encompasses the need to enhance and strengthen community sentencing in Northern Ireland, and this provides opportunities to contribute more to preventing reoffending. This paper sets out the context in respect of reoffending in Northern Ireland, the academic framework of desistance, PBNI's current contribution to desistance, and operating context and the opportunities for PBNI to contribute further to reducing adult reoffending in light of this new strategic approach.

Keywords: Reducing adult reoffending, cross-government strategy, desistance, theories of desistance, PBNI, community-based sentences, community service.

Introduction

In 2025, the Northern Ireland Executive published its Programme for Government (PfG), *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most*, which outlines its nine priorities for the years ahead. Within priority seven, 'Safer Communities', it commits to developing a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending. Within this strategy there will be a focus on preventing people from entering the justice system, where possible through early intervention and diversion, and when individuals do enter the justice system, an increased use of community sentencing (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025).

There is a clear synergy between this PfG priority and PBNI's remit, role and function. This paper outlines the impact of reoffending on NI society, some of the research in respect of desistance, PBNI's current contribution to desistance and reducing reoffending and, importantly, what we need to do

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to enhance the impact we have on making communities safer in the context of a new strategic direction from the NI Executive.

Reoffending

The *Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland* Northern Ireland Audit Office report (NIAO, 2023) outlines that there are approximately 31,000 individuals convicted at court each year or given an out-of-court disposal. In 2021–22, there were 11,724 reoffences committed by 3,386 individuals, with adults committing 10,734 of these reoffences.

The *Cost of Crime in Northern Ireland* report (DOJNI, 2025), whilst not specifically on reoffending, estimated that the cost of crime as a whole to Northern Ireland was £3.4 billion. We also now know, following work completed by the Department of Justice, that the cost of reoffending in Northern Ireland is £374 million.

In 2021–22, 17.6 per cent (3,386) of individuals in the cohort reoffended (adults 17.4 per cent, youths 23.5 per cent), which is a 1.2 percentage point decrease from the previous year (18.8 per cent). At 45.4 per cent, those released from custody had the highest reoffending rate. This was followed by community supervision (28.6 per cent), community other (17.1 per cent) and diversions (15.7 per cent). Across all disposal groups, reoffending rates decreased compared to the previous year's cohort (NISRA, 2024).

It is clear, however, despite moderate reductions in reoffending in recent years, that reoffending remains an issue which costs Northern Ireland economically but, more importantly, in terms of the impact on victims and wider society. Reducing reoffending must be a priority area for the Department of Justice and all organisations tasked with preventing offending and reoffending because of the serious impact that it has on victims, communities, families and the individuals themselves. It is therefore essential that all organisations involved in preventing reoffending understand and align their policies and practices with evidence and research in respect of what works in assisting people to desist from crime.

Academic framework of 'desistance'

Given that the term 'desistance' now permeates nearly all discussions in relation to both criminal justice policy and practice, it is easy to forget its relative infancy. As noted by Maruna (2017), 'As recently as two decades ago, hardly anyone had heard the term, and even the criminologists that created the

concept could not decide how we were going to spell the word' (p. 5). Annison and Moffatt (2014) point out that although there is an unsurprising familiarity with the term 'desistance', given that the fundamental aim of criminal justice policy and practice is to deliver a reduction in offending and reoffending, its actual meaning within the criminal justice system is surprisingly unclear and there is no universally accepted definition of 'desistance from crime'. Within probation practice, it is frequently referred to as the 'cessation of offending', but this is not a universally accepted position. Beck and McGinnis (2022) published a very interesting article on the relationship between probation supervision and desistance, which adds an extra component to consider. Weaver (2019) suggests that the debates surrounding the definition of desistance are reflective of the 'diversity of theoretical conceptualisations of desistance and the challenges of empirically measuring desistance' (p. 642). Whilst desistance from crime is generally accepted as being the 'long term abstinence of criminal behaviour among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behaviour' (McNeill *et al.*, 2012, p. 2), there is significant divergence in views regarding the length of the criminal career the individual had to be initially involved in to be considered a 'desister', the nature and seriousness of the original offences committed, the frequency of offending that had to take place, the seriousness of any potential relapses and how long the individual has to be a 'non-offender' to be considered a 'desister' to establish with any degree of certainty that desistance has occurred.

In recent years, there has also been a change in mindset regarding desistance as an entirely personal journey for the individual, to acknowledging that desistance is much more of a social movement (Barr and Montgomery, 2016; Maruna, 2017).

There is a growing body of research underlining the importance of viewing desistance as a process, supplemented by the burgeoning number of criminologists and indeed practitioners who refer to the desistance 'journey', a progression by which individuals cease offending (i.e. a dynamic interpretation) and sustain and maintain an offence-free lifestyle, as opposed to its being the actual 'outcome' (i.e. a static interpretation):

Since the 2000s, desistance scholars have more commonly come to conceptualise and debate desistance as a process rather than an event or as the moment of crossing an arbitrary threshold.

(Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 435)

The view that desistance is a process/journey is supported by Uggen and Kruttschnitt's (1998) proposal that desistance has two clear elements – the change from offending to non-offending, and then the non-offending becoming a permanent state, that is, the long-term maintenance of non-offending. Maruna (2001) concurs and outlines that the definition of desistance needs to emphasise and focus on the 'maintenance' rather than the ceasing to offend/termination.

The static definition of desistance, which is focused on termination alone, masks the complexities and challenges that the individual has experienced in their journey towards ceasing to offend and has the potential negative consequence of individuals who have lapsed or relapsed into offending behaviour not being offered the support, encouragement and reinforcement they need in periods when they need it most. It can be suggested that the definitions advanced by Bushway *et al.* (2001, 2004) and augmented by Kazemian (2007) are based on a more realistic interpretation of the individual's desistance journey, and challenge academics and practitioners to accept a level of ongoing (re)offending as a norm, without losing belief that the person can change, or losing 'hope' that they will cease offending.

Primary, secondary and tertiary desistance

'Primary desistance denotes the cessation of offending behaviour, including temporary absences or gaps in the commission of crime' (Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 435), recognising that desistance is a process/journey and that non-permanency is a reality.

Farrall and Maruna (2004) define secondary desistance as the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the adoption of a non-offending identity, which signifies that the person is compliant with the law and 'social norms'. Graham and McNeill (2017) outline that the negative effect of 'labelling' starts to be reversed when people identify themselves and, more importantly, are identified by others as something other than an 'offender first'. Feedback from PBNI's service-users involved with the service-user involvement groups strongly supports this notion. Being viewed by PBNI as worthy of being asked for their feedback supports this identity shift.

McNeill's (2016) tertiary desistance refers 'not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but in shifts to one's sense of belonging to a community' (p. 201). This reinforces the importance of belonging, of (re)integration into communities, of a sense of self and, importantly, being able to receive and being in receipt of

rights and opportunities available to all (Graham and McNeill, 2017). Tertiary desistance is posited as the ultimate, the end goal where the previous 'offending self' pales into insignificance. However, given the increasing focus and attention to 'post-punishment' punishment, by virtue of disclosures of previous offending and disqualification from many aspects of life,

fuelled by populist punitiveness (Bottoms, 1995; Garland, 2013), the sobering reality is that a significant number of people with convictions will never be allowed to realise tertiary desistance.

(Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 436)

The final Draft Justice Bill in Northern Ireland may go some way to addressing some of these issues.

Brief overview of the theories of desistance

Individual theories – maturational/agentive

The theories that fall into the maturational/agentive theoretical perspective suggest that as people who have offended get older, i.e. enter their late twenties, early thirties, there is a marked decline and eventual cessation of criminal behaviour that commenced in their adolescent years (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Moffit, 1993). The earliest proponents of this perspective, Glueck and Glueck, stated in 1937,

the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of maturation offer a chief explanation of improvement of conduct with the passing of years.

(Glueck and Glueck, 1937, p. 149)

Since this time, the focus on a decline in offending as age increases has been front and centre of criminological studies and debate. The age crime curve outlines a steep incline peaking in late teen/early adulthood and declining over the remaining ages, substantiating that most individuals desist as part of the 'natural' ageing and maturation process (Uggen, 2000; Laub and Sampson, 2001) and supporting the sentiment that 'violence is a young man's vice: it has been said that the most effective crime fighting tool is a 30th Birthday' (*Times Magazine*, 1994). Within this school of thought, there is consensus that offending will decline with age and 'that the vast majority of those people who

start to offend eventually cease' (McNeill *et al.*, 2012), yet there is still very little consensus regarding the cause of this decline. The view that 'ageing is the only factor that emerges as significant in the reformatory process' (Glueck and Glueck, 1937, p. 105) is, however, too simplistic and masks the fact that individuals desist at various times in their lives and at various rates (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Neither does it explain the individual who committed their first offence, i.e. fraud, at the age of 40 years, the 60-year-old female shoplifter, or the prolific car crime 'offender' in their fifties. Nor does it unpack the ageing process or the impact of various biological changes, social interactions or general life experience that occur with age: 'age indexes a range of different variables and in itself is not an explanation for change' (Maruna, 1997, p. 3). As of March 2023, 23 per cent of those supervised by PBNI were in the 20–29 age bracket and 39 per cent were in the 30–39 age bracket. This is a significant shift from 2013 when the figures were reversed, with significantly more falling into the 20–29 age bracket than were in the 30–39 cohort (PBNI, 2025a). Whilst it is difficult to provide a clear explanation for this change in age profile on PBNI's caseload, it does misalign with the widely accepted age/crime curve.

Social and structural theories – sociogenic

Social learning theory, which is used to describe both why someone starts offending and why they stop offending, suggests that it is the same variables that lead someone into crime that, when reversed, lead to the cessation of offending (Akers, 1990; Cromwell *et al.*, 1991; Warr, 1998). For example,

differential association with non-criminal peers, less exposure to, or opportunities to model or imitate criminal behaviour and the development of attitudes favourable to desistance.

(Weaver, 2019, p. 646)

One of the strengths of social learning is that it applies equally to desistance from crime and to other problematic behaviours such as drug misuse and alcohol misuse. Whilst this is positive, the approach is still lacking in that it does not account for the onset of commission of crime in someone who has a stable upbringing, prosocial peers and role models, some of the characteristics more frequently evident in some white-collar crime.

Practitioners frequently focus on the influences of social control, including family, education and employment, when trying to encourage desistance.

However, individuals are more likely to gain employment after they have stopped/ceased offending, as opposed to employment causing desistance; it is the impact of employment on the individual's sense of self, their goals and priorities that can explain the link between employment and desistance. Similarly, Giordano *et al.* (2002), whilst acknowledging the importance of family and friendship, and social bonds, in encouraging desistance, outline that positive social bonds have a positive influence on how the individual sees themselves, their sense of self and their sense of identity, as well as shaping and influencing how they use their free time, as opposed to being the actual trigger for desistance. Further, it is important to note the gender difference when considering the importance of relationships/marriage; Sampson and Laub (1993) noted that a stable relationship is conducive to positive behavioural change in men. However, the same relationship can be a hindrance for desistance for women, and independence from a relationship actually promoted desistance (Leverentz, 2006).

This therefore suggests that desistance cannot be explained or triggered exclusively by internal factors such as age, or external factors such as gaining employment, but rather a combination of the two, which result in changes to both personal identity and perceptions of social identity, with notable synergy with the concepts of secondary and tertiary desistance (Maruna, 1997; McNeill, 2006) discussed above. It is important, however, not to construct the individual as a passive responder to these social factors, without considering the impact of individual circumstances (Farrall and Bowling, 1999).

Identity theories

Identity theories highlight 'the subjective dimensions associated with ageing, human development and changing social bonds' (Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 439). To explore the impact of being a parent, as an example, individuals involved in the criminal justice system frequently link their becoming a parent with the cessation (temporary or otherwise) in their offending behaviour, yet there are many individuals who could be termed persistent 'offenders' who have children. Therefore, becoming a parent is not a trigger or cause of desistance, rather it is the subjective value the individual places on being a parent that is important in modifying the trajectory of life. Identity theories are useful when trying to explain desistance as they are more unique to the individual and avoid overgeneralisations about the causal or triggering effect of, for example, becoming a parent (Farrall, 2002; Paternoster and Bushway,

2009). Understanding the cognitive shift in any situational change is critical to understanding the associated change in behaviour (Giordano *et al.*, 2002). Graham and McNeill (2017) helpfully highlight that 'identity theories draw attention to the de-labelling process of becoming known as someone or something else; that is, something other than the stigmatising labels of "offender" or even "ex-offender"' (Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 439), creating a sense of citizenship and belonging. The social opportunities that employment/marriage etc. present to the individual are hooks for identity change and, ultimately, desistance. The more social bonds grow, the greater the incentive to avoid offending, to desist, as there is too much at stake for the individual to lose, including their positive perception of self and their 'new' identity as a 'family man', 'good mother', or 'hard worker'. Further, when individuals take on a role or are even given the opportunity to apply for a role that is altruistic in nature, be that with or without financial reward, the impact of 'identity' generation is enhanced (Graham and White, 2015). Whilst avoiding overgeneralisations that other theories can be accused of, identity theories still leave gaps and questions and do not fill all the voids left. To give one example, identity theories do not fully explain why an individual who has desisted for a period of time, who has a stable family life, employment and social bonds – all factors linked to their initial decision to stop offending or desist – might relapse into offending behaviour.

Situational theories

Bottoms (2014) 'observes that the situational and spatial dynamics of desistance, whilst barely featuring in the criminal careers literature, deserve attention in their own right'. Offending behaviour is influenced by more than age, social control and social bonds, but also by the social and physical environment in which people are 'situated'. Behaviour can change, for better or for worse, when the surrounding environment is changed. Farrall *et al.* (2014) further this proposition: 'desistance is not just about no longer offending, it is also about adopting a different set of routines which take individuals to very different places from when they used to offend'. They acknowledge that there is an element of personal choice, and imposed changes on a social or physical environment are unlikely in themselves to create desistance. For example, they found that those who have desisted from crime 'appeared to consciously create routines for themselves and others' (p. 173). Given the struggles that many individuals who have offended have in making rational choices in any

and, indeed, all areas of their lives, this approach has been criticised for underplaying the 'deficiencies' that these individuals have in relation to decision-making (Healy, 2013). Felson (1986) stated that the issue with the focus on choice and agency is that people make choices, but they cannot choose the choices available to them. Desistance is therefore more likely to occur or commence through an 'interplay between individual choice, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual' (Farrall and Bowling, 1999, p. 261).

PBNI's current contribution to desistance, and operating context

Probation is a central part of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland and PBNI is responsible for the supervision of individuals serving a community sentence and those who have been released from prison subject to licence, currently over 4,100 individuals (this number includes those currently in custody who will ultimately be supervised).¹ As part of the supervision of orders and licences, PBNI delivers a suite of programmes and brief interventions targeted at the individual's offending needs. PBNI is responsible for preparing pre-sentence reports for Magistrates, Crown and Appeal Courts to assist sentencers in imposing the most appropriate sentences, and completion of reports for the Parole Commissioners; over 3,000 reports, in total, are completed annually. PBNI also works in prisons, preparing people for release into the community, and provides an information service for victims of crime, with over 500 registered victims, and it delivers restorative interventions where appropriate. This will be an increasing area of work in the future. It must all be seen in the context that PBNI is a demand-led service, with finite resources.

The landscape within which Probation operates is constantly evolving and becoming increasingly complex. More service-users are presenting with significant mental health conditions, poly drug use/addictions and issues with accommodation. Service-users have complex needs, and the causes of their offending behaviour are rooted in socio-economic issues, including poverty, poor mental health, and addiction. Access to sustainable and appropriate housing for those on probation and those leaving custody is a growing issue. Previously, the NI Audit Office Report highlighted the need for increased cross-government working along with a more clearly defined strategic direction to focus on the systemic issues, which are making it more difficult to

¹ Statistics on annual and quarterly figures can be found on the Probation Board website at <https://www.pbni.org.uk/statistics-and-research>

rehabilitate 'hard-to-reach' prolific 'offenders' trapped in a cycle of offending and reoffending (NIAO, 2023, p. 15). Most recently, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on *Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland*, published in June 2025, highlights the need to finalise the development of a cross-departmental offending and reoffending strategy, which should have a central focus on victims, and which takes cognisance of and aligns with the existing strategies and initiatives across key stakeholders (NIA, 2025, p. 13).

Bearing in mind the evidence and research in respect of desistance, how can PBNI adapt its practice and influence policy to contribute over the course of the next three years to reducing adult reoffending?

PBNI's future contribution to reducing adult reoffending

There are a number of ways in which Probation could contribute further to reducing adult reoffending. However, these are dependent upon having the right investment, support and policy and legislative framework in place.

Increased use of community-based sentences as an alternative to short prison sentences

There are currently three community orders that can be imposed by the courts in Northern Ireland. They are a Probation Order, a Community Service Order (CSO) and a Combination Order (including the Enhanced Combination Order). Local and international evidence (including reoffending statistics) show that community sentences are more effective than short prison sentences at reducing reoffending (NISRA, 2024). Probation supports the use of custody as a necessary means to manage those who pose a risk of serious harm. It is, however, recognised that imprisonment negatively impacts the support structures and those positive 'social bonds' that may prevent people from offending or reoffending, such as family relationships, accommodation and employment.

Enhanced Combination Orders (ECOs), which were implemented initially in 2015 in two court areas, deliver positive outcomes and support desistance and rehabilitation, as evidenced by research and evaluations.² As an alternative to a short prison sentence, it is an example of an effective mechanism to reduce demand on prisons and improve outcomes for individuals and wider society. PBNI's budget allocation for 2025–26 has

² Access all the evaluations on Enhanced Combination Orders at <https://www.pbni.org.uk/problem-solving-justice#toc-2>

allowed the organisation to roll out the use of ECOs to a third court area and, for the first time in ten years, enhance our commitment to ECOs. It is our ambition to provide this intensive community order to all court areas of Northern Ireland, but it will take investment to enable us to provide it throughout the jurisdiction. The PAC (2025) recommendation for the Department of Justice to make the full roll-out of the ECO programme across Northern Ireland a key priority to be delivered within the next eighteen months is therefore welcomed (NIA, 2025, p. 14). Longer-term investment in ECOs will provide more positive outcomes for individuals and take pressure off the increasing prison population in Northern Ireland.

Increased use of community service

Arguably, the most well-known form of community sentence is community service, often depicted in the media by images of individuals undertaking manual work. Community Service (CS) is one of the most successful orders in terms of preventing reoffending in Northern Ireland. The most recent reoffending rates tell us that 24.8 per cent of those undertaking CS will reoffend within the twelve months following sentence. That means that 75 per cent of those receiving CSOs will not reoffend in the next twelve months. This must be seen in the context of the seriousness of the behaviour for which a standalone CSO is imposed; CSOs are frequently imposed when the individual does not present with other issues that require probation intervention. Further, whilst not directly comparable, the reoffending rate for those being released from custody having served a sentence of twelve months or less is 59.5 per cent. The numbers of CSOs imposed by the judiciary in NI has seen a year-on-year reduction over the past ten years. In 2010, CSOs made up 20 per cent of the PBNI caseload. In 2024, they made up just over 8 per cent of the caseload.

PBNI is committed to work with the Judiciary to increase the number of CSOs imposed. There is more to do to enhance judicial confidence in these orders. A range of work placements needs to be available that provide appropriate options for the people and a creative approach to ensuring that people undertake fulfilling and meaningful work that benefits local communities. PBNI servicer-users self-report that undertaking meaningful community service enhances their sense of 'citizenship and belonging' as they are able to give something back to their local community. In the course of the next twelve months following a public relaunch of our community service strategy, PBNI will be considering how to enhance the current Community Service Order to make this option more attractive to the Judiciary.

In our neighbouring jurisdiction, the Republic of Ireland, Section 3 of the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act, 1983 (as amended by the Criminal Justice (Community Service) (Amendment) Act, 2011) provides that a court must consider a community service order in cases where that court is of the view that a period of imprisonment of twelve months or less is an appropriate sentence for the offence committed. Similar legislation does not currently exist in Northern Ireland, and it may be worth considering in detail the impact and outcomes of this legislation in the Republic of Ireland and whether a similar legislative framework would be beneficial in Northern Ireland.

Post-release support

We know that, for those leaving prison, additional assistance is needed to support desistance, rehabilitation and reintegration into communities. It allows individuals to make positive connections in their communities, helps to prevent reoffending and supports more positive outcomes for the individuals and, in turn, local communities.

Desistance theory emphasises the need for a dynamic, person-centred approach to supervise and support individuals following their release from custody. The challenge of the desistance journey is one that transcends the boundaries of criminal justice institutions and organisations, incorporating the need to support and repair relationships within families, communities and society. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals are less likely to reoffend if they can access appropriate, practical support and develop prosocial bonds as they return to the community. More consistent and, indeed, increased availability of support services for those leaving custody is therefore required. Changes such as not releasing individuals on a Friday or Saturday (which requires new legislation in Northern Ireland) and ensuring that those leaving custody have sufficient access to prescribed medication and appropriate accommodation would have significant impact. There are undoubtedly lessons to learn from recent legislation introduced in Scotland, the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act, 2023, which states that prisoners should not be released on certain days of the week, in order to aid their rehabilitation. PBNI would be keen to examine similar possibilities for Northern Ireland.

Peer mentoring

There is a growing body of research and evidence to support the use of peer mentoring for those involved in the criminal justice system and those released

from custody. PBNI has some experience of mentoring via previous programmes like the 'Transitions Project', 'Reset' and 'Through the Gate', but utilising the skills of those with lived experience of the justice system is a next step that should be actively considered.

'Transitions' is a peer-mentoring programme delivered by NIACRO, which aims to help reduce offending, improve community safety and, at an individual level, improve resettlement and reduce the potential for return to custody for those transitioning from custody back into their community. It is intended to improve life management, motivational skills, health/lifestyle, and employment prospects for participants. Mentors provide a one-to-one, tailored mentoring service to individuals being released from custody who will be facing significant difficulties upon release. PBNI issued a funding call for a 'Through the Gate' service in 2024, building upon the same principles of the programme delivered by NIACRO Transitions at that time. NIACRO was successful in obtaining this contract to deliver a two-year programme to a target of sixty participants per annum. Transitions is a peer-mentoring programme for service-users, male and female, aged 30 plus (under 30s delivered through NIACRO Aspire community engagement, i.e. individuals who do not have a court order/licence) across Northern Ireland, who require peer-mentoring support to assist their transition back into the community following release from custody during a critical period, with the aim of aiding their successful resettlement and reducing reoffending. A 1:1 tailored programme is delivered to help reduce reoffending by assisting with motivational skills, improving health/lifestyle, supporting emotional wellbeing, and providing signposting and assistance with increasing employment prospects for participants for up to twelve weeks post-release.

This is an area where PBNI can potentially partner with other agencies who have more experience in this area of work. The experience of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Engaging People on Probation (EPOP) policy, which includes the use of volunteers and the employment of service-users, should also be carefully explored.

Early intervention

As a result of funding challenges, PBNI is currently in a position to provide only very limited early intervention, most notably the Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP), which provides men alleged to be abusive towards their partners with the opportunity to engage in an intervention programme aimed at developing knowledge and skills in which to develop

healthy, non-abusive relationships. This is a significant contribution toward the NI Executive *End Violence Against Women and Girls* strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024). PBNI's unique contribution towards this strategy should be further explored and considered. One tangible suggestion is to develop and deliver a 'healthy relationship' intervention to assist service-users in identifying issues in their intimate relationships at the earliest opportunity. This early intervention should be developed and co-produced with service-users to maximise its overall effectiveness. Existing service-user groups provide a mechanism for this. It is an area of development which requires some limited financial support and, over the course of the next three years, it will be considered if this can be achieved within our resources.

Post-supervision support

A further area where PBNI could potentially make a contribution to reducing reoffending is by offering post-supervision support to service-users who have completed their licence/orders. It is not unusual to hear of service-users who 'self-sabotage' when they are coming near the end of their order/licence period. These individuals, who may be socially isolated, rely on the support of PBNI and, on occasion, reoffend to ensure that they retain the support of and contact with PBNI. Through partnering with community and voluntary sector, or through increased resources for PBNI service-user groups, it may be possible to plug this gap.

Increased use of data and evidence

The NIAO report points to a need for more 'intelligent' use of information in, and beyond, the criminal justice system. In 2024, PBNI commissioned the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to complete a data linkage project to help determine the effectiveness of the Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation system (ACE) assessment tool (NISRA, 2025).

Data for individuals supervised by PBNI during 2019–20 and 2020–21 was linked with the Department of Justice (DoJ) reoffending dataset, and analysis carried out in relation to gender, age, disposal type and number of reoffences. Overall, it was determined that ACE assessments are a significant predictor of reoffending behaviour (PBNI, 2025b).

Over the coming year, PBNI will undertake work to enhance our gathering and use of such data and build on the research work undertaken in respect of ACE outcomes, to enable us to prioritise and target service-users with whom the most difference can be made.

Conclusion

The seven areas identified above where PBNI could do more to contribute to reducing reoffending require investment, legislative change (in some areas) and collaboration with partners across government. Underpinning these areas is the need to address public perception of what effective sentencing is. It is important to note that there are other initiatives led by the Department of Justice, now supported by PAC (NIA, 2025), where PBNI will play a contributory part in reducing reoffending. These are the development of electronic monitoring that utilises the latest technologies, and developing bail support and bail information schemes for females and males (NIA, 2025, p. 15).

In order to tackle the myths around community sentencing and the work of probation, and help to build public understanding about the benefits and positive impacts of community sentencing and rehabilitative work undertaken in the community, there is a requirement for a co-ordinated approach across the justice system to engagement and public awareness work.

Judicial confidence, stakeholder confidence and wider public confidence are critical if the opportunities presented in our new Programme for Government are to be maximised and do not only what matters most, but what impacts most on all our communities in Northern Ireland.

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