



PBNI Probation Board
for Northern Ireland

Service User Involvement Strategy For the Probation Board for NI 2025 – 2030

‘Changing Lives for Safer Communities’

Date approved: September 2025

Alternative Formats

This documentation can be made available in alternative formats such as large print, Braille, disk, audio tape or in an ethnic-minority language upon request. Requests for alternative formats can be made to the Probation Board using the following contact information:

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1. Introduction and Context

PBNI's first Service User Involvement Strategy was introduced in 2017. There have now been two iterations of the strategy, the most recent of which, approved by the Board in May 2021, ran from 2021 to 2025 and set out the importance of service user involvement in PBNI's delivery of services. The first-hand experience of service users, both those who have offended and those who are registered with the Victim Information Scheme provides new, and differing perspectives for organisations which can help tailor delivery of services, and it is important that PBNI's Service User Involvement Strategy recognises the valuable contribution that people with lived experience can make in shaping services. In addition, involvement of service users benefits the individuals themselves, promoting desistance, improving self-confidence and promoting self-esteem. The involvement of service users, particularly those who have offended also carries inherent risks which this strategy seeks to mitigate but can never eliminate.

Since 2017 PBNI has developed and facilitated a number of Service User Involvement Groups across different locations with the aim of enabling current and previous service user contribution in areas such as consultations, staff induction, staff training, participation in staff events/media, and contributing their views on service delivery and estates.

We are on a journey in relation to meaningfully involving service users and this is an area of work that PBNI continues to value and remain committed to. This revised strategy builds on the work that has been achieved to date and sets out our ambition for the expansion of Service User Involvement over the next five years.

2. Strategic Vision and Purpose

To embed meaningful, ethical, effective and appropriate service user involvement at all levels of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's work, from individual case management to more strategic decision-making, thereby enhancing rehabilitation outcomes, organisational legitimacy, and long-term desistance.

3. Rationale

The rationale for embedding a Service User Involvement Strategy is grounded in the principles of effective practice, social justice, and a trauma informed approach. Involving service users, those with lived experience of the criminal justice system, both individuals who have offended and victims, in the design, delivery, and evaluation of probation services enhances the relevance, quality, and legitimacy of those services.

Meaningfully involving service users recognises that people with lived experience hold unique insights into what works in practice, what barriers exist, and how services can be more responsive and effective. There is a growing body of research and academic literature which highlights that for those who have offended, involvement also supports desistance by fostering personal agency, responsibility, and a sense of social inclusion; this is the ultimate aim of PBNI.

4. Strategic Drivers

Policy Mandates and Strategic Commitments

National and international policy frameworks increasingly emphasise the value of involving those affected by criminal justice systems in service design and governance. Probation services in other jurisdictions have embedded service user involvement initiatives, signalling a shift toward more collaborative and democratic forms of service delivery.

Evidence from Research and Practice

Research demonstrates that service user involvement can improve engagement, reduce reoffending, and lead to more tailored and effective interventions. For example, evaluations of user involvement initiatives show improved service responsiveness, better communication between staff and users, and increased service user satisfaction (which can lead to increased compliance).

Organisational Learning and Improvement

Listening to service users helps organisations identify gaps in service provision, challenge assumptions, and co-produce solutions that are grounded in lived reality. It

enhances accountability, improves transparency, and ensures that services evolve in line with the needs of those they exist to serve.

Ethical and Values-Based Practice

Involvement aligns with core values of social work and probation practice, including respect for the inherent dignity and worth of the person, empowerment, and social justice. It challenges traditional power dynamics and promotes the active citizenship of people with convictions, congruent with desistance theory.

Supporting Desistance and Rehabilitation

Involvement contributes to desistance by fostering hope, shaping identity capital, and supporting people in making meaningful contributions to their communities. Participating in shaping services can also reinforce prosocial identity and strengthen motivation for change.

This strategy sets out to formalise and embed service user involvement across all levels of probation practice in a structured, ethical, and sustainable way. It provides a framework for appropriate and meaningful participation, ensuring that involvement is not tokenistic but contributes to continuous improvement and positive outcomes for individuals and communities.

5. Strategic Objectives

- Embed service user involvement across the organisation.
- Develop inclusive and safe participation mechanisms at local team and, where appropriate, strategic levels.
- Promote co-production in service design, delivery, and evaluation.
- Build capacity among service users (and staff) for meaningful engagement.
- Monitor, evaluate, and evolve the approach based on impact and learning.

6. Core Values

- Dignity and respect – everyone’s voice matters;
- Empowerment – supporting service users to influence change;
- Equality and diversity – opportunities should be open to all service users;

- Equity – inclusive and accessible involvement for all;
- Transparency – clarity about process, limits and decision making;
- Integrity and professionalism – all decisions are defensible and keep everyone safe; service users are protected from potential exploitation;
- Authenticity – genuine involvement, no symbolic gestures, no tokensim.

7. Levels of Involvement / Ladder of Participation

There are many different ways to involve service users, and the Revolving Doors Agency (2016) adapted Arnstein's 1969 'ladder of participation' which sets out a range of service user involvement from information to leadership i.e. no control to full control. This strategy will draw on the varying levels of participation outlined below as appropriate to the specific task / issue. Whether current service users or service users who have completed their order / licence will be engaged (or a mixture of both) will depend on the specific task / issue. It is accepted that there are tasks and initiatives where it will not be appropriate for current service users i.e. someone under active supervision to be involved in for example peer mentoring. Offence typology will also be a key consideration. The basic premise will always be keeping the organisation, our staff and our service users safe.

Level	Description	Examples
Information	Providing accessible information	Induction packs, resource packs, digital updates
Consultation	Gathering views and listening to feedback	Surveys, exit interviews, feedback forms, suggestion boxes
Participation	Engaging service users in service design or delivery	Regional service user involvement groups, focus groups, peer audits
Co-production	Equal partnership in shaping services	Service development panels, co-designing interventions, training inputs, meaningful involvement in recruitment

Leadership	Service users drive initiatives, lead and advocate	Peer-led research, mentoring, advocacy
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8. Current and Future Mechanisms for Involvement

Current

Questionnaires and Survey

Mechanism to gather widespread feedback

Service User Forums

Regularly held at local levels (including in prison establishments).

Facilitated by staff; inclusive and accessible.

Connect Service User Newsletter

Service users share their experiences to assist others via the newsletter

Service User Involvement in training

Service users participate in training and staff induction

Service User participation in media where appropriate

Future

Properly resourced service user forums

Service users voluntarily attend the service user forums; ensuring adequate resourcing to provide basic hospitality must be included and resourcing to fund the peer support element proactively considered.

Celebration of Contributions

Acknowledgement of progress made by current and previous service users through events, certificates or public recognition.

Peer mentoring scheme

Develop roles such as Peer Mentors to support service delivery, training, and mentoring, properly remunerated and reimbursed i.e. trained ex-service users mentoring and supporting individuals on probation.

Lived Experience Advisory Panels (LEAPs)

Include service users (current and previous service users as appropriate) in advisory groups on policy, communication, and programme development reporting to PBNI management. The current service user forums could be developed and progressed to LEAPs, properly remunerated and reimbursed.

Feedback Integration

Enhance systems for collecting and analysing feedback. Create a “You Said, We Did” model to demonstrate action.

Input into training

Staff and current and previous service users working together to deliver training to staff. Service user views on what the training should entail should be considered.

Representation on Project / Programme Boards

Including service users on Programme Boards / Project Boards and in strategic planning groups for example a current or previous service user attending all or part of the Aspire Reference Group. All involvement must be mindful of the specific needs of the service user(s) involved.

Participatory Research

Service users directly involved in research undertaken by PBNI staff (approved by the Research Governance Group) with a view to improving service delivery.

Media Participation

Service users continuing to tell their stories in a public arena

Participatory Evaluation

Service users directly involved in evaluating the effectiveness or impact of specific projects and programmes in which they have been involved.

Creative and expressive involvement

These offer non-traditional avenues to participation and often reveal deeper insights for example:

Storytelling and narrative projects – facilitated life story interviews, digital storytelling and arts-based projects that allow service users to share lived experience to help others and improve service design.

Creative writing and visual arts – allow service users to express experiences and influence public perceptions.

9. Action Plan / Implementation Plan for Service User involvement

PBNI are committed to consolidating service user involvement in the planning, development and evaluation of services.

Year 1 Action Plan

Action	Lead	Date
Develop Communication Plan / Awareness raising plan as clear accessible communication is vital for engagement	Head of Comms / Director of Ops	September 2025
Embed current service user involvement groups in all geographical locations and develop work already commenced with NIPS	AD Urban / AD Prisons	March 2026
Refresher training for facilitators of service user involvement groups to be delivered which will include parameters for the groups to help ensure consistency	Director of Ops and AD Urban	March 2026
Agree the topics on which we require service user feedback during 2025 – 2026 with the staff facilitators (with views of SLT incorporated). Whilst encouraging feedback led by the service users, areas to be addressed will include the structured supervision toolkit, accredited	Director of Ops and AD Urban	September 2025

programmes. the induction process / interview, barriers to participation in involvement groups, new policies that impact service users, new projects / initiatives involving service users and PBNI Estates.		
Agree plan for how we reach service users who are “harder to reach” i.e. those who have been breached / recalled	Director of Ops and AD Urban	March 2026
Publish and launch Edition 4 of the Connect Service User Newsletter	Director of Ops	March 2026
Develop reimbursement policy for service users	AD Urban / Head of Finance	December 2025
Agree plan with Learning and Organisational Development to ensure service users’ views are incorporated into staff training / service users participate in staff training as appropriate	AD Urban / Lesley McAllister	December 2025
Explore peer mentoring role and opportunities for previous / ex-service users working with current service users cognisant of inherent risks in this approach. This requires resources to deliver properly and safely and the development of a Safeguarding Framework, Risk Assessment and Training and Embedding Plan	Director of Ops and AD Urban	March 2026
Explore Lived Experience Advisory Panels and agree Terms of Reference	Director of Ops and AD Urban	March 2026
Review Year 1 Action Plan and Agree Year 2 Action Plan	Director of Ops and AD Urban	March 2026