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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

NEW PROBATION ORDER AIMS TO CUT SHORT TERM PRISON SENTENCES

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland has developed a pilot scheme which aims to divert offenders from short-term custodial sentences by offering judges a more intensive community order with a focus on rehabilitation, reparation, restorative practice and desistance. The new order is called an 'Enhanced Combination Order'.

The Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) will be piloted from 1st October 2015 in the Court Divisions of Armagh & South Down and Ards.

Lord Chief Justice, Sir Declan Morgan stated: "Earlier this year a Criminal Justice Issues Group event, brought together a range of organisations to consider the strategic issues involved in moving towards the greater use of community sentences. This generated a useful debate and confirmed that there was support across the justice organisations for such a model. Following this event, I invited the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to consider how this type of community alternative might work in practice, and I am pleased to report that as a result of this engagement, they will now be piloting this new community disposal."

Justice Minister David Ford added: "The Enhanced Combination Order is one of a number of positive developments currently underway which have the potential to improve the effectiveness of our criminal justice system, and are being supported and informed by the involvement of the Judiciary working in close partnership with others. "

PBNI Acting Director Cheryl Lamont speaking in advance of the launch of the pilot: "The aim of the Enhanced Combination Order is to bring together elements of community supervision such as community service and restorative justice, with a greater emphasis on victim engagement and judicial oversight. Deputy Director of PBNI Paul Doran leads on this new initiative which aims to allow PBNI, alongside our partner agencies, to better manage risk and facilitate rehabilitation in the community. We know probation works in reducing reoffending and making communities safer. This order will help prevent reoffending by rehabilitating offenders."

The Probation Board will work closely with partners including the PSNI and Victim Support throughout the duration of this pilot. The assessment of suitability of individual offenders for the pilot will be completed by probation officers in cases where a custodial sentence of 12 months or less is being considered by the court.

ENDS

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Notes to the Editor

In practice an Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) will comprise:

- Weekly contact with a Probation Officer, which can be reviewed depending on level of compliance after a set period. The duration of the supervision element must not be less than 12 months nor more than 3 years.
- A robust and bespoke case plan will be drawn up.
- A restorative approach. This can include a range of activities including a letter of apology, mediation or face to face meeting with victims.
- There will also be a community service element. The unpaid work will be carried out at an accelerated pace.
- An accredited programme, if assessed as appropriate.
- Curfew will be imposed in appropriate cases. Curfew enforced by electronic monitoring if assessed as required.
- Other activities such as attendance and engagement with appropriate mental health organisations and family/parenting work.