

Reflections on a Pandemic: How COVID-19 Impacted upon Probation Practice in Northern Ireland

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Summary: In March 2020, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) had to adapt its practice in response to Coronavirus, which for many of us poses the biggest threat ever seen in our lifetime. The impact of this outbreak can be felt globally, as countries around the world close their borders and cities shut down. In response to the pandemic and the unprecedented restrictions imposed by the UK Government and NI Executive,¹ PBNI made very significant changes to its operational practice and working arrangements. From the beginning of March, the situation in Northern Ireland was changing daily and there was a need for speedy and effective measures to be taken. Importantly a key part of PBNI's strategy was to communicate decision-making to all staff in order to provide reassurance and some certainty to staff in difficult circumstances. This paper sets out the changes that PBNI made to adapt to the new circumstances between March and June 2020, including developing new operational guidance for staff, accelerating our implementation of smart justice and implementing an effective internal communication plan to ensure that staff understood what decisions were being taken and importantly why they were being implemented. Ten staff members² and two service users were asked to answer questions and keep diaries about the challenges and opportunities they faced during COVID-19, and their responses are incorporated into this paper.

Keywords: COVID-19, probation, practice, innovation, smart justice, lessons for future.

Introduction

On 11 March, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak. At the beginning of March, PBNI had established its Incident Response Team to manage the contingency plan around COVID-19.

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¹ NI has a devolved administration and local NI Executive and NI Assembly.

² Ten staff included Probation Officers, area managers, probation services officers and psychologists.

From the outset, PBNI's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) sought to take decisive, timely action with the ultimate aim, at all times, being to carry out our public duty of keeping everyone safe, as set out in the Government guidelines. In doing so, PBNI worked together with the Northern Ireland Department of Justice, the Police Service for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Prison Service, Northern Ireland Court Service, Public Prosecution Service, Youth Justice Agency and others.

The restrictions imposed by the NI Executive in response to COVID-19 affected public services in Northern Ireland very significantly, and the justice sector in particular. The Justice Minister Naomi Long MLA commented in April 2020:

It's an old adage to say that the wheels of justice turn slowly but, during this crisis, that has never been further from the truth. Time and again, I have been impressed by the work ethic, collaborative approach and 'can do' attitude of the wider justice family as they have worked together to find practical and agile solutions in the fast-moving and ever changing landscape created by the COVID-19 crisis. The innovative use of technology has ensured the delivery of justice is maintained while safeguarding staff and members of the public.³

In anticipation of the restrictions coming into place, PBNI had been reviewing its practice and developing operational guidance. Once the restrictions were announced, PBNI had developed guidance to ensure that essential service delivery to protect the public could continue, while at the same time safeguarding staff, service users and the wider public, as much as possible, from the risk of infection by COVID-19.

To capture learning about Probation's work during this crisis, ten staff within PBNI were asked to record video diaries outlining how they carried out their roles in these very different circumstances. Excerpts from these diaries have been used to inform this article. Two service users were also interviewed by the authors and asked about their experience of supervision during COVID-19. Those recorded interviews have also been used to inform this paper.

Background to PBNI

PBNI is a non-departmental public body, which works at every stage of the criminal justice system. All Probation Officers are social workers, and the

³ Minister for Justice Naomi Long MLA speaking on 8 April 2020. Press release available at <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/>

organisation also has a team of psychologists, probation support officers, community service staff, and specialist corporate services staff. The work carried out by social-work-qualified Probation staff is about assessing and managing risk, verifying information, and working directly with individuals to change and challenge their behaviour. It is in this context that the changes to operational guidance should be viewed. The organisation has had to be agile, innovative and creative in order to enable and empower staff to continue that frontline work in a different way.

Operational guidance

In order to comply with the NI Executive's measures in relation to social distancing and working where possible from home, PBNI streamlined its service delivery, closing its 21 offices, and instead opened seven 'operational hubs' throughout Northern Ireland. These operational hubs were based in Belfast and each county, to ensure that staff could meet those service users who required additional support.

On 1 April, PBNI published its 'interim operational guidance', which updated PBNI practice standards for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance covered supervision of orders and licences, work with high-risk offenders, work in courts, work in prisons, work with victims of crime, and work carried out by our psychologists.

Supervision

Staff continue to have supervision with service users, in line with assessed risk, using telephone or video contact. In order to comply with social-distancing guidelines, staff are not going into people's homes to carry out home visits, nor are they attending meetings in approved premises. It would not be possible to adhere to social-distancing guidelines and carry out these tasks. As one probation service officer explained:

My role is to deliver interventions to help people change their behaviour and take responsibility for their actions. I am now delivering one-to-one interventions over the phone and through video calls. This approach is not without its challenges and has had a mixed response from service users. One of my service users is a single mum with two children and it has been difficult for her to focus on the telephone as she is constantly being interrupted as she has no childcare. Yet another service user reports that she finds telephone contact actually works better for her as she can be

more open and forthcoming on the telephone than by talking face to face.
(Probation Services Officer 1)

Area managers and Probation Officers also noted a change in the dynamics of supervision during this crisis, with more emphasis on support and assistance for service users who are feeling vulnerable.

Every time a Probation Officer makes contact with an individual service user we need to consider whether they are living alone, do they have mental health issues, or are they struggling with addictions? As well as holding people to account, we are asking questions about their basic needs. Are you coping? Do you have enough food? Do you have electricity? Do you have medication? (Area Manager 2)

Service users, particularly in rural areas, have reported difficulties in accessing local services, and in some cases, the only contact they have in any given day is from Probation. Probation staff in those areas have reported having the added responsibility of trying to ensure that service users, particularly those who are vulnerable, have basic necessities.

Staff, recognising the vulnerability of many of our service users, have provided support by linking them into food banks and support services as needed; for example, information has been provided on groups who can deliver essential items such as food and medication in each locality. This contact and support from Probation has been key during the crisis and was referenced by all those interviewed as reflecting a change in practice.

This support is acknowledged by a service user, who said that the weekly contact with someone outside her family support, with whom she could share some of the anxieties and issues faced during lockdown, was helpful.

I look forward to talking to my Probation Officer, knowing that she is going to ring me each Tuesday at 11.00 — I can plan my day and time around that ... it's nice to know that I can talk to her on that day and just talk about how things are going ... I don't have to worry about upsetting others and it's nice to talk to someone who is not in my family, I can be myself. (Service User 1)

It is of interest that Probation Officers have reported that the telephone calls with service users, and subsequent follow-up to other support agencies, have resulted in increased time demands.

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. (Probation Officer 2)

High-risk offenders

Staff are, however, continuing to see some service users face to face, and the guidance reflects the need to ensure that high-risk offenders are prioritised. It states:

All service users who are assessed as presenting a Significant Risk of Serious Harm (SROSH), or who are assessed as category 3 under Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland (PPANI),⁴ should have weekly contact, alternating face to face interviews with telephone contact.

Face-to-face contact can also be arranged in cases where staff have specific concerns, even if those cases do not meet the threshold. The guidance also highlights the need for increased liaison with partner organisations — for example, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, hostel staff and social services — to verify the circumstances of high-risk service users and share information more regularly.

Area Manager 5, who works in the co-located public protection team, highlighted the importance of increased interagency working and sharing information:

Sharing of information and close inter-agency working is absolutely vital in the area of public protection. We have weekly briefings which are now conducted by teleconference, with follow-up actions a mixture of telephone and video calls, as well as making direct face-to-face contact if required. Chairing Local Area Public Protection Panel (LAPPP) meetings with PSNI, Healthcare Trusts, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Prison Service where all PPANI offenders are assessed

⁴ Category 3 offenders are those where previous offending, and/or current behaviour and/or current circumstances present clear and identifiable evidence that the offender is highly likely to cause serious harm through carrying out a contact sexual or violent offence.

and risk managed, are all conducted by teleconference. We have worked together to make the new arrangements operate effectively and ensure that we can focus on those offenders who pose the highest risk to the public. (Area Manager 5)

Amongst those high-risk service users who have been prioritised are violent and sexual offenders. There has been an increase in reported incidents of domestic abuse during the first months of the pandemic (PSNI, 2020). During April, domestic abuse call-outs peaked at 723 in one week, compared with the average of 537 for the same week in previous years. The overall increase in April 2020 is approximately 20% compared to an average of the previous years.

PBNI operational guidance reinforced the fact that particular cognisance should be given to domestic abuse cases and cases where there is a child protection issue or where individuals may be vulnerable due to addictions or mental health needs. As well as introducing a new screening tool for these cases (Young, 2020), the guidance stated that regular and proactive contact with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (Public Protection Branch) should be maintained to check whether there have been any police call-outs in individual cases.

Interventions and programmes continue to be delivered and, again, high-risk offenders, including domestic abuse perpetrators, are prioritised. Programme delivery takes place using video technology and telephone. Worksheets are provided to service users and, using video or telephone, the programme staff carry out the intervention with the service user. Partner support workers, who provide support to partners and ex-partners of the men attending programmes, continue to carry out their roles using video and telephone technology.

Approved accommodation for offenders to use on release from custody makes a significant contribution in the resettlement of service users upon their release from custody, and assists in sustaining others in the community, particularly those who are high risk. PBNI has 93 beds available to service users within seven approved premises across Northern Ireland. These are in premises run by partner organisations including Extern, the Simon Community, the Salvation Army and the Presbyterian Board of Social Witness.

There was a real concern that should staff or residents in premises become infected with COVID-19, they might cease to be able to function. Careful contingency planning by the approved premises, individually and collectively,

arrangements for self-isolating, moving those with underlying health conditions to hostels with en-suite facilities, and much-welcomed extra funding from PBNI, have allowed them to continue to offer services during these extremely challenging times. Testing is available and, to date, there have been no positive results in any approved premises.

Prisons

PBNI staff who are based in the three prison establishments are now working remotely at the request of the Prison Service and are continuing to help prepare prisoners for release, including completion of release plans and completing reports for the Parole Commissioners. PBNI staff have also played a central role in the early-release scheme, engaging with those released early by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (under Rule 27) who will be subject to determinate custodial sentences. At the time of writing, 143 prisoners in NI have been released 'early'. These are individuals who were in the last three months of their custodial sentence; the early release scheme applied to those who had received a 'straight' custodial sentence and those who were subject to licence on release. There were several exclusions, including those who had committed serious violence, domestic abuse and those who were homeless. The apparent 'success' of the early release in Northern Ireland contrasts significantly with the early release scheme in England and Wales. It was announced in England and Wales on 4 April that up to 4,000 prisoners who were within two months of their release date and had passed a risk assessment would be released. However, on 27 April, ministers confirmed that only 33 prisoners had been released — including pregnant prisoners and inmates in mother-and-baby units, meaning that fewer than 20 had been freed under the temporary early release scheme (Grierson, 2020).

Probation Officers working in the prison setting recalled that the onset of the pandemic had an impact on their day-to-day practice, as highlighted by one Probation Officer:

I suddenly found myself working in a completely different way ... being a 'key worker' in a prison setting brought new problems to be resolved, such as hand washing and accessing hand sanitiser when you have so many gates and biometric palm readers to negotiate in a prison setting. The very person-centred greeting of a handshake became a virtual wave. (Probation Officer 1)

Courts

Courts have rationalised their operations into four hubs for emergency business only, and the Lord Chief Justice has given clear guidance as to what this constitutes. The consequence of this for PBNI is that many pre-sentence reports that would have resulted in community-based sentences have been adjourned for at least eight weeks. There will also be a substantial downturn in the number of new pre-sentence reports requested in the coming weeks, which will result in very few new orders or licences being made until courts resume normal working. All breach matters instigated by PBNI are now dealt with solely by way of report, without a PBNI prosecuting presence in court. Warrants are still available in cases where there is risk to the public, and summonses can still be lodged, albeit with lengthy service periods. PBNI staff are completing pre-sentence report appointments via video WhatsApp where possible, or alternatively via telephone.

PBNI is currently involved in the Substance Misuse Court, a court piloted in Belfast Magistrates' Court and which takes an alternative approach to helping offenders when substance abuse is an underlying problem (O'Hare and Luney, 2020). It directs eligible offenders on an intensive treatment programme, to help tackle their addiction and change their behaviour. While the court is not formally sitting, treatment work continues and, indeed, engagement has increased as Probation staff work closely with those individuals currently receiving treatment. Probation Officers report that engagement levels have increased because individuals are in need of additional support and help to tackle addictions at this time.

Victims

Importantly, work with victims of crime is continuing; victims can register online, and information is provided to victims by telephone.

As stated earlier, one of the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was the announcement by the Department of Justice that some prisoners would be released early. This had a direct impact, and victims' requests for information increased as people contacted the victims' unit wanting to know if perpetrators in their case would be eligible for release.

Almost immediately, the Victim Information Unit telephone started ringing with enquiries from our service users anxious to find out if the perpetrator of their crime was eligible for early release. There was a need to provide

information and reassurance and deal with the many questions that victims had. (Probation Officer 5)

The staff in the Victim Information Unit reported challenges in communicating on sensitive issues over the phone but also said that there were some surprising benefits.

Overnight I moved from face-to-face client contact to liaising with victims and victim representatives by telephone only. Now, as a referral comes in, we make sure we contact the victim as soon as possible by phone. Initially I was concerned about 'cold calling'; however, I have been very surprised at the response. Some may be more receptive to taking the call and more inclined to engage in conversation in the current lockdown. Despite the subject matter, sometimes when there's been no social contact for someone, our call can be a welcome connection as well as a chance to impart information. (Probation Officer 5)

Psychology

The COVID-19 lockdown has brought mental health and addictions into sharp focus. The pandemic has increased stress, fear and anxiety, and those who have poor mental health and who struggle with substance misuse can be particularly vulnerable. The PBNI psychology team has developed new ways of providing psychological support to those most in need.

Prior to the lockdown, psychological interventions with service users were face to face, but the current situation has dictated that this *norm* no longer applies, and psychology had to be delivered in a different way. PBNI quickly adopted the use of various technical solutions, including Skype and Zoom, and psychologists assessed that one of the biggest risks to service users was relapse, and this framed service delivery. Psychologists ascertained that the best way of providing support was through regular and meaningful contact that would involve visual worksheets, confirmation texts and telephone/video interventions.

This way of working has been time-consuming, as noted by psychology staff.

As service users have different psychological symptoms, and a variety of different problems, bespoke interventions are required. Worksheets for each individual client need to be generated and this is time consuming. I

started a new process of creating worksheets, posting them to clients with a request that they are read and completed prior to the telephone intervention. To ensure as good attendance as possible, I texted clients asking them to confirm the most suitable time for a telephone call. Once agreed, the telephone intervention would then take place. As the intervention is delivered by telephone, Socratic questioning and guided discovery have reduced to an extent with a larger emphasis on psycho-education. I originally envisaged that each telephone intervention would last approximately 10 to 15 minutes. In reality, each telephone call is lasting 30 to 40 minutes. (PBNI psychologist)

The operational guidance is reviewed by the senior leadership on a weekly basis and, following staff feedback, it has been amended and revised against the need to deliver essential services.

Smart justice

Technology and the move towards 'smart justice' have been accelerated by COVID-19. PBNI has approximately 400 staff and, by the beginning of April, 340 Probation staff had been enabled to work effectively remotely from home, with access to PBNI case management systems and records. The use of video and teleconferencing has been of paramount importance in enabling staff to deliver programmes and complete supervision. Teleconferencing and webinars have been introduced for staff to keep in contact with each other and with service users. Business Insider (2020) reports:

Employers have increased their reliance on enterprise teleconferencing tools — such as Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, and Zoom — as their employees switch to remote working due to public health concerns. We expect that employers' dependence on such tools during the coronavirus pandemic will strengthen the case for 5G connectivity in the home — and in the office as enterprises recognize the value that teleconferencing tools offer.

PBNI's experience is that the use of tele- and video conferencing has been essential and is something that should continue long after the COVID-19 crisis abates. The importance of maintaining communication by such means is described by one area manager:

An important element of my work is staying connected to team members who are now dispersed and working from home. I make a point of keeping in telephone contact with my team as much as possible. I am mindful that everyone's circumstances are different. Some staff members have young families, are caring for vulnerable relations, others live alone. There can also be difficulties in getting a balance when you are working from home. Importantly we have also set up a WhatsApp group to stay more connected and it has been really important in keeping us all connected and there is a lot of reassurance for staff in being able to see and speak to one another. (Area Manager 1)

This view was echoed by Probation staff who have appreciated the continued contact with their line managers and colleagues.

As we were deployed to work from home the importance of embracing new technologies really came to the fore. Initially we used emails and conference calls to speak to service users and colleagues. Our managers had agreed a WhatsApp group to enable us to communicate with each other and update current work situations. As a team, we continue to link in with each other, update information, and share information from other organisations. (Probation Officer 4)

I've tried to remind my clients that I too feel the impact of having to stay at home. I miss socialising with my friends, my extended family and seeing my colleagues ... I feel that this hopefully encourages them not to be tempted to revert to usual habits and activities regarding meeting up with friends. (Probation Officer 2)

PBNI quickly adapted its training programme to meet the demands of the new working arrangements. Mandatory training for induction and the roll-out of a new case management system has taken place through e-learning, using video tutorials and online resources to assist staff.

PBNI has also increased the use of its mobile phone app, 'Changing Lives', which aims to provide services users with a range of resources and tools on their mobile device. Changing Lives is the first app developed specifically to help offenders in Northern Ireland to desist from crime and become rehabilitated. It has been recognised locally and internationally as an important tool in helping Probation to engage more effectively with service

users. Whilst designed to help offenders, it can be downloaded and used by anyone. During this period where remote working has become the norm, the app has been promoted and used extensively with service users.

Of course, while technology will work for many, it cannot work in all cases and we need to acknowledge and respond to that.

While technological advances in platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime, Skype etc. allow communication between staff and some service users, those without the technology on their phones for risk management reasons have to rely on phone calls and texts messages. Indeed, I have continued to use traditional postal services for some clients. (Probation Officer 1)

Communications

The PBNI response and communications plan in relation to COVID-19 was underpinned by the aim of providing timely, accurate and regular communications to all. PBNI communicated all decision making to staff and explained why those decisions were taking place. PBNI also communicated regularly with key stakeholders through the Department of Justice contingency planning group, and individually with key stakeholders including the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Court Service and others. The Head of HR holds a weekly teleconference with trade union representatives. The communications unit has developed a daily information bulletin with links to a range of resources, including guidance on working from home, and health and wellbeing links. The Chief Executive has spoken directly with all staff through a regular podcast. At all times, the purpose of communications has been to provide reassurance, support and clear guidance during a period of great uncertainty. Probation staff report that communication at this time has been critical. The feedback from staff has been positive.

PBNI has been very proactive ... I receive weekly updates as well as podcasts from PBNI's Chief Executive, almost daily updates from senior managers, and the communications team and my line manager are very supportive. (Area Manager 2)

Learning

Throughout this period, PBNI has sought to document learning, including what has worked well and what could be done differently. Staff have been

asked for feedback on a regular basis. There has been widespread support amongst staff for the decisions made by PBNI and the efforts taken to provide support and reassurance. Importantly the Senior Leadership Team is now considering how to prepare for 'recovery' and the return of staff to the workplace, as well as considering the potential for further outbreaks of COVID-19 at a later stage.

There are important questions to be asked in the future about ongoing working from home. Do we need to have as many offices into the future if staff can work effectively from home some of the time? There are questions about the continued use of technology. What more can we do to utilise technology as well as possible? Is virtual reality, for example, an option for some programme work?

All of these questions will be considered as we reflect on COVID-19 and how it has impacted upon the work of Probation in Northern Ireland.

Certainly there is a recognition that nothing is normal right now and a hope that, in the future, the learning experience will produce longer-term benefits for the organisation, our customers and service users.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it have had an unprecedented impact for PBNI. Alternative arrangements to maintaining practice were quickly agreed by the SLT and put in place.

Overall, service users have been remarkably compliant with the new arrangements and have welcomed the continued support from Probation Officers during this testing time. The pandemic has exposed the lack of social support in place for the most vulnerable people in society, and under lockdown PBNI is managing an increase in domestic violence and in alcohol and substance misuse.

During this difficult period, Probation staff have been able to use their skills and resources to refocus and reprioritise their work. Frontline staff and those providing support have been able to use skills to adapt their approach and continue to provide an individualised service to all service users. PBNI has come together with a 'can do' attitude and a compassionate approach to deliver essential services, to support service users and to support one another. This has been an unprecedented time and one that will undoubtedly affect how we deliver services well into the future.

The months ahead will probably be quite volatile and dynamic as Northern Ireland begins to consider how to exit lockdown. There will be much to

consider as PBNI continues to evaluate conditions and support a return to recovery, while protecting staff and public health.

PBNI recognises that the coronavirus crisis is a story with an unclear ending, and that we need to support and protect employees and those who access our services in this new world.

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