

Reflections on a Pandemic: How COVID-19 impacted upon probation practice in Northern Ireland

Summary

In March 2020, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) quickly and significantly adapted its practice in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 to ensure it could continue to deliver essential services to keep people safe.

In Northern Ireland, the role of probation is to change lives for safer communities by working with individuals to assess and manage risks, ensuring compliance with court orders, delivering interventions and programmes, working with victims of crime, and preparing individuals for release from custody into the community. In essence, probation staff work to rehabilitate and resettle individuals by addressing their offending behaviour and facilitating a process of change. Social work values are fundamental to that work. We are committed to serving the public, addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, believing in people's capacity to change and taking an individualised approach to each case.

This paper sets out how we have continued to adhere to these values while adapting our practice to comply with Government guidelines and restrictions and keep people safe.

Keywords: COVID-19, Social Work, Probation, high-risk offenders, prisons, courts, community service, psychology, victims.

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Introduction

On 11 March, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak. Shortly afterwards, the NI Executive put in place a range of restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the infection. In response PBNI's Senior Leadership Team (SLT) took decisive and 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 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. At the same time PBNI developed Operational Guidance which covered the areas of supervision of orders and licences, high risk individuals, work in courts, work in prisons, work within psychology and work with victims of crime. PBNI staff played a central role in the early release scheme, engaging with those released early by Northern Ireland Prison Service (under Rule 27) who were subject to Determinate Custodial Sentences. This paper sets out how the organisation developed practice in each of its key areas of work.

Supervision

In terms of 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 home visits and attending meetings in approved premises were temporarily ceased.

There has also been a change in the dynamics of supervision during this crisis, with more emphasis on support and assistance for service users who are feeling vulnerable. This is explained by an Area Manager: *"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."*

Staff recognizing the vulnerability of many service users have provided support by linking them into food banks and support services as needed. This support is acknowledged by a service user who said the weekly contact with someone outside her family was extremely 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" (Service User)

PBNI staff have also acknowledged the assistance and support of the voluntary and community sectors who have continued to provide importance resources to service users particularly in the field of addictions and mental health. For example, AddictionsNI an organisation which PBNI partners with provided a number of service users with mobile phones to enable them to utilise one to one telephone counselling sessions.

High Risk Offenders

Staff are 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 should have weekly contact, alternating face to face interviews with telephone contact". Face to face contact can also be arranged if there are cases that staff had concerns about even if they didn't 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.

Amongst those high risk offenders that have been prioritised are violent and sexual offenders. During this period of increased social isolation PBNI were mindful of the fact that there was likely to be an increase in domestic abuse. There has been an increase in reported incidents of domestic abuse during the first months of the Pandemic¹. 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 is approximately 20% compared to an average of the previous years.

PBNI operational guidance reinforced that fact that particular cognizance should be given to domestic abuse cases and cases where individuals may be vulnerable due to addictions or poor mental health. A new screening tool² was introduced to assess high risk cases where domestic abuse was a concern but also cases where child protection or mental health and addictions may be an issue.

¹ <https://www.psnipolice.uk/globalassets/inside-the-psni/our-statistics/domestic-abuse-statistics/covid-19/domestic-abuse-calls-to-05.05.20.pdf>

² A new screening tool was introduced to assess cases where domestic abuse, ,child protection and vulnerable adults , or mental health may be an issue in order to afford greater protection to service users and public. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/probation-services-introduce-new-safeguards-amid-rise-in-domestic-abuse-39247681.html>

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. 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.

Hostels or 'approved accommodation' make a significant contribution in the resettlement of service users upon their release from custody and sustaining others in the community, particularly those who are high risk. Careful contingency planning by the hostels, individually and collectively, arrangements for self-isolating, moving those with underlining health conditions to hostels with en-suite facilities, support from Interdepartmental Planning around Homelessness and much welcomed extra funding from PBNI, has allowed them to continue to offer service during these extremely challenging times.

Prisons

PBNI staff and partner agencies who operated within all prison establishments were asked by the prison service to leave and work remotely in an effort to reduce the numbers coming into custody. Probation staff while working remotely are continuing to help prepare prisoners for release including completion of release plans and complete reports for the Parole Commissioners. PBNI staff have also played a central role in the early release scheme, engaging with those released early by Northern Ireland Prison Service (under Rule 27) who will be subject to Determinate Custodial Sentences. The focus of contact is on developing a case-plan and completing brief pieces of work via telephone. The recall process is unchanged and the same threshold for recall applies.

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. All breach matters instigated by PBNI are now dealt with solely by way of report, without PBNI prosecuting presence in Court. Warrants are still available in cases where there is risk to the public, and summons 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, which is a court piloted in Belfast Magistrates court and takes an alternative approach to help offenders when substance abuse is an underlying problem. 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.

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 services are now 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 needs 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. 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 10-15 minutes. In reality, each telephone call is lasting 30 to 40 minutes” (PBNI psychologist)

Victims

Importantly work with victims of crime is continuing and victims can register on line and information is provided to victims by telephone.

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 requests for information from victims 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)

The staff in the Victims Unit reported challenges in communicating on sensitive issues over the phone but also said 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 lock down.” (Probation officer)

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.

Learning from COVID 19 experience

There has been some clear learning from our work during COVID-19.

Firstly, the importance of technology has been critical in enabling staff to continue to deliver services. Technology and the move towards ‘smart justice’ has 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 system 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 service users. Indeed PBNI’s experience is that the use of tele and video conferencing has been essential and is something, which should continue long after the COVID-19 crisis abates.

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.

In order to continue with recruitment plans, PBNI also moved its induction course online in order to provide new recruits to the service with the appropriate training and understanding of required areas of work.

Secondly effective and regular communications during this period has been essential in reassuring staff and explaining changes in practice. 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. 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 records a weekly podcast for staff. We have also released through social media a series of video diaries from staff who are working on the frontline during the COVID-19 crisis.

Finally the skill set of probation staff and the values which staff hold dear, has been key in helping them to adapt to change. During this difficult period, probation staff have been able to use their skills and resources to refocus and reprioritize their work. Frontline staff and those providing support have been able to use such skills to adapt their approach and continue to provide an individualized service to all service users. During this period, PBNI has come together with a 'can do' attitude and a compassionate approach to deliver essential services, support service users and support one another.

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