



# Response to the Probation Board for Northern Ireland

## Consultation on Corporate Plan 2023-26

### Introduction

Extern plays a vital role in delivering services to people and communities. We transform lives as the leading social justice charity across the island of Ireland. Operating since 1978, Extern changes lives every day through its work, believing that everyone should be able to find stability to change their lives and contribute to the community in which they live.

Each year we speak up for and support more than 20,000 children, young people, individuals, and families. We enable them to overcome their challenges, empower positive change and support family unity.

Extern's vision is to change lives to support a socially just and inclusive society and its mission is to create opportunities and provide supports to enable everyone to meaningfully participate in society.

Extern provides services across 7 key areas:

1. people who have been through the criminal justice system
2. young people who are not in education, employment, or training
3. young people in crisis, in care and facing family breakdown
4. homeless or facing homelessness
5. minority ethnics
6. people dealing with ill mental health
7. people living with drug and alcohol addictions.

We very much welcome the opportunity to respond the Probation Board for Northern Ireland Consultation on Corporate Plan 2023-26. Our responses to the consultation are detailed overleaf:



## **QUESTION 1: Do you agree with our four strategic priorities?**

Yes, we believe they are reflective and relevant to what is happening across the sector in working to support the most vulnerable and high-risk people in society. When statutory and voluntary & community services are in line with each other's approach it makes for a stronger partnership and fluid approach to addressing the issues and challenges. We are encouraged that this will promote further partnership working at all levels.

Below, we have included more specific comments for further clarification or consideration to the 4 priorities.

### **Strategic Priority 1**

**Our People – We will develop, support and empower our staff to improve service delivery.**

- It is imperative that there is consistency for service users in terms of probation supervision, especially to a more complex client group with more addictions and mental health issues being prevalent.
- Should additional support and training be given to PBNI staff with regards their more complex caseload, i.e., suicide prevention, addictions, and mental health.
- Should PBNI reflect on their entry criteria for roles. What qualifications are needed for staffing roles, is a social worker degree always required and relevant? Could PBNI widen the scope to include Criminal Justice and Youth Worker qualifications to increase the talent pool.
- We commend the department in their vision to develop, support and empower their staff. This believe this strategy would be helpful to follow in terms of influencing other agencies to do the same, particularly those agencies who work with the same or similar service user group.

## **Strategic Priority 2**

**Our Services – We will deliver an effective statutory probation service to reduce reoffending.**

- There could be more details with regards to 'repeat' clients and how they will be managed.
- There could be more specific targets as to how PBNI intends to tackle and reduce crime and offending figures.
- There could be more detail on youth justice and the issues of individuals transitioning from youth justice to adult justice services, and the role of trauma informed and attachment focused practice.
- We welcomed the reference to the restorative practice approach, is/will there be opportunities to implement this approach across partner services?
- No reference has been made to voluntary service users. Approved Probation Services have several service users who are subject to court orders e.g., VOPOs and SOPOs who are referred to Approved Premises. Partners need assurances that, whilst PBNI cannot engage in enforcement action due to not having statutory responsibility for these orders, that they will be risk managed to the same standard within the partnership arrangement.

## **Strategic Priority 3**

**Our Funding – We will prioritise our budget to maximise service delivery**

- The document highlights that 'Currently there are over 4000 individuals on PBNI's caseload'. Against how many staff? (Give a fuller picture)
- More clarification needed on how the department will find ways to mitigate the impact of financial constraints on the front-line delivery over the next three years, yet maintain practice standards?

## **Strategic Priority 4**

### **Our Partnerships – We will develop our partnerships to help make communities safer.**

- Extern welcomes the commitment to an early intervention approach to avoid enforcement action later. Intervention is not just about enforcement it is also about prevention.
- Extern welcomes the comment to prioritise the departments engagement with local government particularly through Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) and with such initiatives as Complex Lives, which is particularly important to our service users.
- Suggest a tiered approach to probationary services where less challenging cases are supported by the voluntary sector employing a wider range of skill sets.
- Suggest where cases need a different approach such as mental health recovery, support services could be delivered by the voluntary sector in partnership with PBNI.
- Alternative complimentary services for young offenders using voluntary sector resources.

#### **QUESTION 2: Is there anything missing from the strategic priorities?**

Perhaps a concept of service development and where PBNI is wanting to be at the end of the corporate plan timeframe? Currently 4000 cases being managed – is there a projected or hoped for figure that PBNI would like to meet in terms of a reduction in cases, particularly in terms of repeat cases/offending that they would like to reach and achieve through the development of their practice and people. The area of repeat cases is lacking within the strategy. Awareness that this is a collaborative effort between PBNI, Trusts, DOJ, DFE, DOC and services across the voluntary and statutory sectors. There is mention of the private sector – some elaboration on how this will be engaged with would be useful. Additionally, working in partnership with PBNI within approved premises has flagged up deficits in provision of support by PBNI for individuals within the prisons. Further emphasis on partnership working with Prison Healthcare and the Trust to address issues pertaining to mental health and offence focussed work prior to release would have been very welcome and would contribute greatly to PBNI's overall commitment to service development and reduction of crime.

### **Question 3: Is there anything further you wish to add?**

The strategy highlights issues that are prevalent for all organisations and services who work with people within the criminal justice system. Collaborations and partnership working will be crucial going forward if service users' needs are to be met and risks safely managed. Staff engagement, pay review and wellbeing are the key issues that have arisen throughout and after the pandemic, the current cost of living crisis and the increasingly complex needs of the service users. Whilst these issues are extremely concerning and challenging it is reassuring that PBNI appear to be in touch with what is happening on the ground and that their strategy and corporate plan for 2023-2026 is rooted in the reality as of what all organisations, staff and members of our community are currently facing.

### **KEY Questions/Further points for consideration**

1. How will residents of Approved Probation Services be managed? Within Approved Premised, full partnership working is needed, not remote working. A dedicated PBNI presence within these services is vital.
2. If PBNI are unable to retain a core cohort of experienced social work staff, will service users who live independently in the community be prioritised over those who are supported within Approved premises? This is a concern to partner agencies, that would need addressed.
3. The consultation has highlighted 'The lack of a multi-year budget and uncertainty around our financial resources makes planning, particularly longer-term planning extremely difficult.' We agree with this statement and that recognition is needed that this would impact on all service users within partner agencies too.
4. When preparing prisoners for releases subject to licences, we have noted gaps in service provision (within Q2). How is this to be addressed going forward? For example, prisoners released with no ID, no medication, or without access to accommodation.
5. Concerns that with the limited resources and pressures on budgets, the department cannot depend or have an over reliance on Voluntary sector staff to maintain risk management. Or that PBNI can intervene with voluntary services to address the need and risks identified.