

PROTECT N&S – A Cross Border Initiative

David Williamson PROTECT N&S Project

Summary The PBNI and PWS have joined together to establish a cross border project under strand 5.2 of the PEACE II EU funds. The Project aims to contribute to the process of peace and reconciliation through improving community safety. The article outlines the thinking behind the Project, its implementation and proposed actions as well as looking at how the two services might work together in the future.

Keywords Co-operation, best practice, training, partnership

Introduction

The Belfast Agreement of April 1998 committed the UK government to instigate a review of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, and to act on the recommendations arising from such a review. In the terms of reference for the review one target area was an examination of the "scope for structured co-operation between the Criminal Justice agencies on both parts of the island" (The Belfast Agreement – Policing and Justice, Annex B). This is the genesis of the joint initiative between the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and the Probation and Welfare Service (PWS), which led to the establishment of PROTECT N&S. The Criminal Justice Review reported in March 2000 and, following a consultation process, a Government response was published in November 2001 and an implementation plan put in place. In June 2003 an updated Criminal Justice Review Implementation Plan was published, outlining the progress made to date. At this time a Justice Oversight Commissioner (Lord Clyde) was appointed to track the implementation process and report on progress, and in his 2004 report the Commissioner notes that: "One example of work to align standards across core business areas is the Probation Board and [Probation and] Welfare Service project PROTECT N&S". (Criminal Justice Oversight Commissioners Report 2004, p.163) The report makes other references to the work that PROTECT N&S will be undertaking and it is the aim of this article to detail not simply the background to the project but also lay out its objectives and to offer some thoughts as to how such a project may contribute on an ongoing basis to the work of the two Probation agencies.

Background

The PEACE II initiative of the European Union has a number of strands, among them 5:2, which is administered by the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB), and concentrates on improving cross-border public sector co-operation. It is under this strand that PBNI and PWS submitted an application for 30 months funding for a project aimed and impacting on reoffending and consequently community safety by promoting best practice in probation through sharing knowledge and experience, both between the two Probation services and also internationally. The Project summary that comes from the original application to SEUPB for funding outlines the project goals well:

The rehabilitation and re-integration of offenders requires that they take personal responsibility to take steps to stop offending and to make reparation. It also requires a response from the community, which recognises that communities also have a role to play in the reduction of offending. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Probation and Welfare Service in the Republic of Ireland wish to maximise the opportunity provided by peace to begin to understand, share and develop professional approaches to assist in the effective management of a range of offenders... We intend to develop practice guidelines, best practice programmes and establish projects in border counties evidencing this, albeit that the impact will be on an All Ireland basis.

At the heart of the action the Project is charged in relation to its funding with making a contribution to fostering Peace and reconciliation on the island. SEUPB monitor the work and seek evidence of this being part of the focus of the project. The choice of the Project name PROTECT N&S, while representing a concept in relation to the role of Probation is also an acronym (Probation Reducing Offending Through Enhanced Co-Operation and Training). It was felt that this again accurately reflects the goals of the project and sets real priorities for its operation. For both PBNI and PWS this is a time of major change, both within the organisations and also in terms of the place of the organisations in the wider criminal justice systems both north and south. In a new political environment on the island and at a time when crucial questions of operation, standards and relationships are explored in other papers in this issue of the Irish Probation Journal, the establishment of PROTECT N&S offers a chance for the two Probation services to explore, at a structural level, the potential benefits of co-operation. The Project also offers an opportunity for staff at all levels to look at best practice, to consider their work in a wider context and, for border teams, to have the possibility of increasing the range of available resources on the ground. This seems like a massive workload and a set of ambitious goals. The challenge for PROTECT N&S is to make itself relevant to staff and to provide a real contribution to Probation work throughout the island, both in terms of staff on the ground and at an organisational level. How do we propose to do this?

When PBNI and PWS began to consider establishing this project, steps were taken to talk to Probation staff in both agencies about what particular practice issues they had, what areas of their work provided the most concern and would benefit from exploring best practice on a cross border and international basis. Arising from this came six broad offender areas or issues that it was felt could provide the focus for one of the core activity areas of the Project. These areas (Young Offenders, Drug Dependent offenders, Alcohol related offending, Sex Offenders, Domestic Violence, and Dangerousness) will be addressed initially through six focussed seminars for Probation teams, which will look at best practice but will also consider how the work of staff in border areas can be enhanced in terms of working with such offenders and with such issues. Having these seminars though, without seeking to sustain learning or enhance practice on an ongoing basis, will make the exercise limited and inherently flawed.

In June 2004 the Project held an initial seminar with PBNI and PWS teams in Enniskillen and outlined some of our thinking about the six focussed areas. This very successful introduction to the teams showed us that the Project should serve a real need and also demonstrated that staff on the ground are keen to develop their own practice and to become more effective in their practice. When we considered, for instance, the area of domestic violence, a stimulating debate over sanctioned and non sanctioned interventions as well as the possibility of accessing services on a cross border basis followed. When we hold our first offence focussed seminar in the coming October it will be on domestic violence and it seems that this can be an issue that we can look at both at practice, theoretical and strategic levels.

Recognising the need to put in place sustainable actions, the Project has also been charged with implementing two cross border projects aimed at putting into a practice context some of the learning that comes from the seminars. These projects should be understood not as separately or independently funded activities but rather actions that can be internally managed by the two Services and do not necessarily have budgetary implications. The first of these is to be established in 2005 in the border areas and their success is dependent on the success in linking to staff on the ground as well as with partner agencies in the respective criminal justice systems.

PROTECT N&S is also to run two major conferences, one in 2005 and one in 2006, which will be open

to PBNI and PWS staff. These conferences are seen as not only a platform for disseminating on a wider basis work done but also providing a forum for discussing the wider issues that are common to the two Probation services. The running of these conferences represents a major challenge both in terms of the practical work to be done but also in terms of how such conferences should be focussed. One might consider, for instance, that in a census of February 2004, 18% of caseloads within by the Probation and Welfare Service were female offenders while the PBNI figures for 2003-4 showed only 5% of caseloads comprised female offenders. Why should there be this disparity and in what way has the PWS reacted to this and what are the implications of such figures? Questions such as this, which have wider implications, might well be an area for exploration in a conference setting.

This bears a relationship to another of the tasks of the Project, which is to attempt to identify emerging areas of work and developing crime trends and to begin the process of looking at whether these are jurisdiction specific or not and in what way they will potentially impact on the work of the two services. In Northern Ireland there has been a great deal of concern about the growth of drug misuse and drug related offending. This is seen naturally as a matter of concern and all services in the criminal justice system are looking at how they might best respond. PROTECT N&S, building on the experience of the PWS and its partner agencies are well positioned to be a resource for PBNI and other services in relation to organisational and structural responses in certain areas (e.g. in relation to the issue of drug misuse it might be a useful exercise for PBNI staff working in areas with a developing opiate problem to spend some time with PWS personnel looking at how services have developed, including the pilot Drug Court in Dublin) and also in terms of practice level responses. Equally, as PBNI look at the positive figures in relation to reductions in car crime, and also in recidivism among drink drivers (see relevant contributions to this edition of *Irish Probation Journal*), there may well be lessons for the PWS in what programmes and interventions might garner most successful outcomes. Identifying and responding to changes in patterns of crime can be most effective when it is a shared activity, because it is by pooling knowledge and experience, which are a key resource, that we can impact most positively.

This brings us back to the core activity of dissemination of best practice across the two services. Beyond events such as the seminars and conferences, PROTECT N&S will work as a networking resource and activity. Bringing together management and staff at a range of activities and with focussed sharing of experience, we can build on the set pieces. If one goes back to the issue of drug misuse it might be a useful exercise for PBNI staff working in areas with a developing opiate problem to spend some time looking at how services in the Republic work, and what are the practice issues. Equally with both organisations making positive contributions to responses to domestic violence then PROTECT N&S can act as a conduit for sharing the experience and looking at strengths and weaknesses in different approaches. This also ties in to the agreed target of the project in relation to interagency and international staff exchanges.

Ongoing dissemination will also be aided by two other ventures. When the Project is formally launched in Armagh on 13th September 2004, it will mark the going on-line of the PROTECT N&S website, which will be a resource for staff both, with news of upcoming events and activities in the two organisations and also further afield. The website will also provide access to the *Irish Probation Journal*, allowing a broader access to this exciting venture between the two services.

Thus the Project sees itself as making an ongoing contribution to the PWS and PBNI, and indeed to the wider criminal justice world. In addition to the senior management team that will oversee the project, the two services have established an Expert Panel drawn from key statutory and voluntary agencies. This provides the project with not only an opportunity to gain from being able to meet with the panel but also

offers the two services the opportunity to present its actions and thinking in a constructive and influential environment. Overall PROTECT N&S offers a genuinely exciting and truly innovative potential to run on after funding under PEACE II ends; contributing in an ongoing way to the work of PWS and PBNI, and by extension to the goals of a safer society.

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