Probation Board for Northern Ireland Service Users Survey

Paul Doran, Laura Duncan, Louise Gault and Ruth Hewitt*

Summary: The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi) recognises the importance of seeking the views of offenders under supervision as part of the continuous development of services designed to reduce reoffending and effectively integrate offenders back into society. In 1996 and 2005 PBNi commissioned independent surveys of offenders under supervision. With the introduction of new legislation (the Criminal Justice Order 2008) and significant changes in criminal justice, PBNi felt it was timely to conduct a new survey of offenders. This survey was carried out at the end of 2009 and reported on during 2010. This paper provides a summary of key findings from this survey and highlights some interesting views of offenders under supervision.

Keywords: Offenders, supervision, customer, survey, satisfaction.

Introduction

PBNi staff operate within the framework of Northern Ireland Standards and Service Requirements, which set out how reports will be prepared and court orders supervised (www.pbni.org.uk). In recent years there have been significant changes within the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland as a result of new legislation, in particular the Criminal Justice Order (NI) 2008. This has resulted in developments within the organisation in relation to both responsibilities and structure. Due to these changes and PBNi’s vision ‘to be an excellent organisation delivering best practice probation services’, it was deemed appropriate to obtain views on PBNi from those who receive PBNi services.

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PBNI completed surveys of offenders under supervision in 1996 and again in 2005, which provided valuable feedback in relation to service delivery. As part of the 2005 survey, conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), a research model was created to enable replication of the research at timely intervals by PBNI. This survey was reported in Volume 2 of the *Irish Probation Journal* (2005) and the methodological detail is available from the authors.

**Summary of methodology**

*Sample*

On a daily basis PBNI supervises over 4,200 offenders, approximately 80% of whom reside within the community. This survey concentrated on those under PBNI supervision within the community who were aged 18 and over. The sample was further restricted to all those who had been on community supervision for at least three months, giving them sufficient time to have gained experience of PBNI. In total a sample of 277 offenders was selected at random from a population of approximately 2,500 offenders.

On completion of seven weeks of fieldwork, a total of 193 interviews were completed (8% of the targeted population). Although this was a smaller sample than anticipated, analysis showed that the offenders included in the survey were representative of the PBNI population in terms of location, type of court sentence received and gender.

*Approach*

The PwC research model was adopted for this survey primarily to enable comparison between the 2005 and 2009 research findings. The structured face-to-face interviews employed in this model allowed for in-depth information to be obtained and additional comments to be made, and explored and avoided any literacy problems experienced by offenders. An important part of engaging with offenders through the interview process was to reassure them that the information they shared would be kept confidential. This allowed offenders to speak freely, enhancing the reliability of the results obtained.

The fieldwork took place between October and December 2009; each offender was interviewed in private for approximately 30 minutes by two independent interviewers. Although these interviews were conducted on PBNI premises, operational staff members were not present.
Results

The following is a brief summary of some of the key findings from this report.

Contact
In terms of frequency of contact, as with the 2005 survey, 94% said they had supervision with their Probation Officer at least once per week when they started their order. More details on levels of contact at different stages of supervision can be found in the main report. Overall 92% were either satisfied or very satisfied with the frequency of their planned contacts throughout their supervision. The majority of offenders (77%) saw their Probation Officer for between 30 minutes and one hour, and 98% of offenders were satisfied with the length of their session. Three-quarters of offenders indicated that they had contact with other programmes and treatment services as part of their community order, and 89% stated these were either quite useful or very useful, an increase from 33% and 76% respectively found in the 2005 survey.

PBNI Standards require offenders to be visited, when appropriate, at home; 95% of offenders confirmed this had taken place. Although the majority of offenders had no preference or did not object to home visits, 18% preferred that their supervision take place at their local PBNI office. There was an increase in offenders stating that it was very easy to contact their Probation Officer (from 75% to 88%), which could reflect advances in technology such as mobile phones, with which Probation Officers are now issued as part of their employment.

Contact with significant others
It is recognised within PBNI as good practice to have, where applicable, contact with family members and other significant people within offenders’ communities. Thirty-one per cent of respondents stated that their Probation Officer had contact with their family, and 5% stated that their Probation Officer had contact with others in their local area – down from 44% and 9% respectively in the 2005 survey.

Changes in contact
Detailed information was obtained on people who experienced a change in their supervising Probation Officer and their attitudes towards this. In comparison to the 2005 survey, there was an increase in the number of
offenders reporting the change in Probation Officer as negative, although reasons given in the two years are similar. Eighty per cent of those who experienced a negative impact stated that having to build a new relationship caused the negativity. The two other reasons, both stated by 10%, related to the age difference between the offender and the Probation Officer and the fact that the offender found it inconvenient at the time. Recent research has highlighted the importance of engagement with offenders as part of the desistance paradigm (McNeill, 2009). Increases in both the rate and the perceived negative impact of changes in Probation Officers are relevant factors when decisions about future service provision, particularly in relation to the provision of specialist services and urban and rural areas, are made.

Order requirements
Ninety-seven per cent of offenders stated that they were informed about the requirements of their order, including the importance of keeping appointments and behaving appropriately. One interesting change has been the increase in the number of offenders who recalled requirements regarding personal behaviours – taking drugs, drinking, etc. (up from 49% to 89%). This could be seen as a reflection of a greater emphasis on criminogenic needs during the supervision of offenders. This view would be supported by findings noting an increase in use of offending behaviour programmes (16% in 2005 to 50% in 2009), drug and alcohol counsellors (19% to 45%) and other agencies, such as the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO; 20% to 53%), with the specific design to target such needs.

Assessment of likelihood of reoffending
The survey noted that there was a slight reduction in the number of offenders who recalled that a risk assessment had been completed by their Probation Officer (from 84% to 80%). This does not mean that such an assessment was not completed; it simply reflects offender awareness of this process. However, this highlights a target area for change and an increased need to involve the offender fully in the risk assessment process.

Views on Probation Officers
Information is also available on the offenders’ view of which characteristics best describe their Probation Officer; one interesting outcome was the reduction in the number of offenders who saw their Probation Officer as a friend (from 16% in 2005 to 6% in 2009). While some may argue that this
is a result of an increasing move away from the “advise, assist and befriend” approach, others would state that it is a more realistic assessment of the relationship between the offender and the Probation Officer. Further questions explored this relationship in more detail; a summary is given in Table 1. Interestingly although there has been a drop in the number of offenders who would regard a Probation Officer as a ‘friend’, more offenders in 2009 felt that their Probation Officer helped them come to terms with things and fewer felt that their Probation Officer didn’t really care about them.

Table 1. Offender views on Probation Officer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>% Strongly agree/agree 2005 (N = 142)</th>
<th>% Strongly agree/agree 2009 (N = 193)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whatever sort of problem you have your Probation Officer will help you sort it out</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you ever think of getting into trouble, your Probation Officer is always there to help you</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Probation Officer helps you come to terms with things</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she tries to push you into things you do not want to</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she doesn’t really care what happens to you</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Desistance from offending behaviours

Offenders were also asked about desistance from further offending. For 76% of offenders, being on probation helped them to desist from offending; 73% felt it would help them to avoid offending in the future. Offenders were also asked what factors were most important in making them think twice about reoffending. Table 2 provides a breakdown of these responses, highlighting the important influence of the family and reinforcing the importance of home visiting and involving others in the supervision plan for desistance from offending.

Summary

Overall the results of this survey reflect the fact that offenders’ experience of PBNI is generally positive in terms of both balance and scope of contact, including a focus on addressing the criminogenic needs of offenders.
While this is encouraging, the report also highlights areas for further consideration by PBNI that will be useful for the development of services. For instance, office location in Northern Ireland (as in the Republic of Ireland) is critical, particularly in rural areas. Results from this survey will therefore help to inform developments within PBNI’s estates strategy. The increase in ease of contact with Probation Officers could reflect advances in the use of technology within the service, such as the availability of mobile phones, electronic monitoring and video conferencing. Finding new ways to have contact with offenders is particularly important in the light of economic pressures and for future service delivery strategies.

Given the commitment of PBNI to work with families and communities to address crime and the harm it does, it is of concern that there has been a reduction in reported contact with family members or others in the local areas. While this may reflect an increased focus on criminogenic need, such a focus should not be seen as a competing alternative, although it is encouraging that there has been an increase in the use of offending behaviour programmes and drugs/alcohol interventions as well as links to voluntary agencies.

The findings of the research reinforce the importance of the relationship between the offender and the Probation Officer as a factor in changing behaviour. This would support findings reported by McNeill (2009) that in order to reduce reoffending, positive change must be made in all aspects of an offender’s life, which can most effectively be achieved through constructive offender/Probation Officer engagement. The survey has provided reassurance for PBNI that offenders have a realistic view of what is expected of them and what they can expect of PBNI; this provides a firm foundation

### Table 2. Factors influencing desistance from crime

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>% Offenders 2005 (N = 142)</th>
<th>% Offenders 2009 (N = 193)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of going to jail</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Probation Officer</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being put on probation again</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your friends</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of losing your job</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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as the organisation enters into consultation for the development of its corporate plan 2011–2014.

**Reference**