Inaugural PROTECT N&S National Conference Summary

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Summary
PROTECT N&S is a joint initiative between the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and the Probation & Welfare Service (PWS). The project was developed as a response to the Belfast Agreement and the subsequent Criminal Justice Review that highlighted the need for development of co-operation between public bodies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This paper is a summary of the proceedings of the inaugural project conference, held in May 2005.

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Introduction
Funded by the Special European Union Programmes Body under the Cross-Border Co-operation Measure, PROTECT N&S aims to contribute to community safety throughout Ireland by enhancing co-operation between the two Probation Services with particular emphasis on developing best practice, joint training and exchange opportunities. The project brings together an Ireland-wide network of probation management, staff and Criminal Justice experts who have practical experience of effective practice in securing the protection and safety of communities through the social inclusion of offenders.

PROTECT N&S has been in operation for fifteen months and has sought to focus on the significant challenges of building a safer society, through partnerships with other agencies and communities. This is at the heart of the mission statements of both PWS and PBNI.

The inaugural PROTECT N&S National Conference was held in Dublin on 24/25 May 2005. The Conference aims were to:

- Promote the role of the community in working in partnership with criminal justice agencies towards enhanced community safety,
- Demonstrate current effective practice within criminal justice services, and
- Identify developing trends and issues in criminal justice across Ireland.

Over 120 people attended and participated in a varied, interesting and challenging programme building on the work undertaken in the four seminars with PWS and PBNI border teams during the last year. Domestic Violence, Alcohol-Related Offending and Drug-Dependent Offending were particular issues under consideration in these seminars. A very full Conference
programme contained 4 plenary presentations and 12 Presentations/Workshops, covering very diverse themes. It was planned that rather than take plenary feedback, presentation summaries would be posted on the PROTECT N&S website.

Tara Boyle from the Special EU Programmes Body placed the work of PROTECT N&S in a wider Peace and Reconciliation context. Her comments cited the project as an excellent example of what the Peace Programme is seeking to do. Following opening speeches by Brian Lenihan, TD, Minister of State for Children, and Ronnie Spence, PBNI Board Chairman on behalf of NIO Minister, David Hanson, a thought-provoking keynote speech by Brendan McAllister, Director of Mediation Northern Ireland, explored the “Challenges and Opportunities in creating Inclusive and Safer Communities”. Brendan defined ‘peace’ as a balance within ourselves and between self and others. He challenged delegates to consider their creativity and explored the concepts of spirituality and the moral imagination. Peacemakers, he said, demonstrated four qualities:

- They form relationships across the divide,
- They think transcendentally or inclusively from the perspective of the ‘other’,
- They are creative and
- They take risks for peace.

Brendan placed these comments in the context of change in communities and recommended a norm of partnership.

Dr Derval Howley, Director of the Homeless Agency gave a detailed outline on the work of the Agency in Dublin and its legislative and policy background, highlighting the many initiatives being taken within the sector. She outlined links with the PWS, specifically with and through the PWS led Homeless Offenders Strategy Team (HOST). She described a number of initiatives in relation to offenders, including the Homeless Persons’ Unit in-reach services to Mountjoy and other prisons, the Access Housing Unit Pilot (providing assessment, referral and support for prisoners into private rented accommodation) provided on a multi-agency basis, and the Joint Accommodation Protocol between PWS, the Irish Prison Service and Dublin City Council. Derval’s conclusions were:

- Partnership is hard work but does work,
- Communication is essential,
- Partnership and communication can lead to better outcomes for individuals and communities.

Both these speakers emphasised that the attainment of safer communities will only be achieved by the co-operation of state and voluntary agencies and the effective engagement of these services with the communities that they serve.

Conal Devitt took up this theme in his Community Safety presentation on developing part-
partnerships with communities. Community Safety Partnerships have to overcome prejudice to have added value in promoting perceptions of communities being safer. He stressed the need for local involvement to make these partnerships work.

The powerful “Don’t Say A Word” drama, performed by Sole Purpose Productions, eloquently illustrated the perspectives of both victim and perpetrator of domestic violence. The panel discussion following the performance teased out many of the issues and pointed to the need to maintain clear boundaries in interventions with the parties. The PROTECT N&S Domestic Violence seminar in October 2004 had highlighted the inter-relationship between domestic violence and other types of offending, postulating that in effectively tackling domestic violence we may well contribute to dealing with wider offending issues. Best practice in dealing with perpetrators of Domestic Violence involves delivery of accredited intervention programmes that address an offender's behaviour and run alongside monitoring and supervision rather than providing an alternative to supervision. The importance of victim safety was highlighted as key to effective domestic violence intervention.

Both PWS and PBNI have completed Service Policies in relation to domestic violence and both agencies have pursued active and positive engagement with the voluntary sector and the partner Criminal Justice agencies. The National Domestic Violence Intervention Agency, based in Dun Laoghaire, operates with the Probation & Welfare Service as a key partner while in Northern Ireland there are Probation partnership programmes such as the Belfast Non-Violent Relationship Project and the 24-week PBNI programme-approved Men Overcoming Domestic Violence Programme. The two Probation services have been developing appropriate responses to domestic violence, both from sharing experience and learning, to practical joint initiatives and projects. In the development of the first of two PROTECT N&S cross-border projects, staff working in an upcoming perpetrators programme in Dundalk will be able to avail of training provided by PBNI.

Provision of services for victims was addressed in a collaborative workshop by Christine Hunter of PBNI and Josephine Devine of PWS. Christine outlined the work of the new Victims Unit within PBNI, while Josephine detailed the process of preparing court requested Victim Reports within PWS. The engagement of local communities is taken a step further in the development of Restorative Justice. Carolle Gleeson and Alice Breslan presented on the Nenagh Community Reparation Project (Co. Tipperary) demonstrating an effective partnership model between statutory, voluntary and community partners to reduce crime, bring perpetrators and victims together and enhance community confidence in dealing with local crime. The complexities of operating restorative justice initiatives in the two jurisdictions was recognised and discussed.

Further models of productive engagement with other statutory/voluntary partners and local communities were demonstrated in the workshop on Drug Dependent Offenders given by Paul Okere from the Clondalkin Addiction Support Programme and Colin Dempsey from the Railway Street Project in Ballymena. Colin focused on the complexity of the inter-relationship between drug misuse and offending. The view of a simple causal relationship has been shown
to be somewhat too simplistic. Using resources to address an offender’s addiction without addressing their offending in parallel is only likely to lead to greater difficulty in achieving and sustaining positive change (whether that be through abstinence or harm reduction).

PROTECT N&S also has a brief to identify emerging trends in the criminal justice system and in crime. Ireland has rapidly become a diverse society. Net immigration has been increasing for almost 10 years, and has left us learning not only how to deal with offences borne of discriminatory and racist attitudes but also how we deal with offenders from a range of countries, with the attendant issues of language, culture and ethnic differences.

Elaine Geiran PWS, and Ellen Mongan, reminded participants that in Ireland the issues of how minorities are dealt with and the particular challenges that come from developing cultural awareness and overcoming negative perceptions are not new. In particular, they highlighted the experience of the travelling community, who have generally been over-represented in the courts system and particularly in the prison system. It is regrettable that we have not developed sufficiently an understanding and respect for diversity. Criminal Justice agencies, often faced with dealing with negative behaviours and hostility, can be particularly susceptible to developing such attitudes, as we continue to work with offenders and victims from a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

Liam MacGabhann from Dublin City University (DCU) and Mark Graham from the Access team of the former South Western Area Health Board (SWAHB) outlined the particular difficulties in working with mental health issues. They presented an example of a health-led intervention that has developed good working relationships with Probation. The mental health area is one that Probation staff and others in the criminal justice system often struggle with, reflecting wider apprehensions in society and a general discomfort with mental illness. Changes in the structure and delivery of mental health services and the increased vulnerability of the homeless and of people with addictions have increased the contact of those with mental health problems with the criminal justice system.

This workshop identified, as Derval Howley had previously – in relation to homelessness, that those with mental health issues can present significant challenges to service providers. Though not necessarily the most dangerous service users by any means, in terms of the challenges they may pose, with often multiple difficulties and experiences of marginalization, the difficulty for service providers is to have interventions that identify risks and match needs and interventions appropriately.

PWS and PBNI staff exercise a range of highly developed core skills in their practice. PROTECT N&S has a brief to disseminate best practice. Dr. Hilda Loughran from University College Dublin (UCD) has worked on behalf of the PWS over many years, providing training to probation officers on Motivational Interviewing. PROTECT N&S, building on this, has looked to see how this skill, so useful in dealing with addiction, has been shown to be effective in other contexts. Hilda repeated the very valuable skills training presented at the Alcohol-
Related Offending Seminar in December 2004 on both conference days, demonstrating that this intervention fits very comfortably with the social work tradition of Probation in both parts of the island.

Stefan Falling and Niklas Eldholm, Probation Officers from the Swedish Prisons and Probation Service (KVV), presented on both days on the Swedish Electronic Monitoring model. They undertake both the practical monitoring and supervision and provide additional group work based interventions that support such monitoring and appear to give it added value. This highlights the principle of effective practice having a properly targeted intervention, something that was also emphasised in the presentation by the team from the national award-winning IMPACT Car Crime Project from Belfast. This project has shown positive results, and encompasses many of the key elements of successful inter-agency co-operation and community engagement, along with targeted interventions. Their detailed presentation highlighted that interventions need also to be able to adapt and change. This was emphasised by Heather Reid (NIACRO) and Lisa Cuthbert (PACE), who spoke about the Educational Trust, an all–island body supporting educational opportunities for long sentence prisoners, which has adapted and refocused its work as a result of the ongoing Peace Process.

Ciaran Kennedy (PWS) brought the conference to a conclusion, reviewing the two days and looking forward. He placed the conference in the broader context of the work of PROTECT N&S, highlighting that the process of peace and reconciliation is integral to the task of developing safer communities on either side of the border. Ciaran stressed that this is the time to take on this challenge with economic opportunity across the country, a commitment on the part of state agencies to co-operate, and increasing cross-border activity among the voluntary agencies.

Over the next year, PROTECT N&S will be looking at three further offence and offender areas - dangerous offending, youth offending and sex offending. Central to these is effective risk assessment and case management. Many of the principles that have been highlighted here in terms of interagency co-operation and community engagement will be particularly important in addressing these areas.

PROTECT N&S will continue to work to assist PWS and PBNI to build on their already successful relationship. One of the key tasks over the next year will be to look at the services that the two services are responsible for delivering and to identify where there are barriers to closer co-operation and how these may be overcome. Closely related will be consideration of where there are barriers to effective practice between the two services and other key agencies within the two criminal justice jurisdictions that compromise the development of increasing community safety. Development of working within communities will be another key area.

A particular value of the conference was the opportunity for Probation staff and wider criminal justice partners from both jurisdictions to meet and share knowledge, experience and best practice. Evaluation feedback was very positive and indicated that delegates considered the conference aims were achieved; the conference had been envisioning and had facilitated links
for future reference. Comments such as: ‘helped me to think outside the box’ featured in feedback from participants. The collaborative and participative approach by staff and community partners from both jurisdictions greatly assisted in sharing best practice approaches and feeding the evident curiosity as to how things are done ‘on the other side’. The conference also provided a useful ‘shop window’ for representatives from other agencies to view examples of work currently undertaken in both Probation organisations. It provided a valuable opportunity to bring staff together for a clear purpose and reinforced the value of the core aims and objectives of PROTECT N&S.

Conference presentations will be available on the PROTECT N&S website at www.protectnands.org with presenters’ contact details also available on the site for follow up as required.

Next year’s conference will be in May, in Northern Ireland. Further information will be circulated later this year and/or can be obtained from info@protectnands.org

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