Reducing Offending in Partnership

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Summary: This paper tracks the development and roll-out in Northern Ireland of ‘Reducing Offending in Partnership’, or ‘ROP’, as it is known. It explores the background to ROP and the evaluation of the pilot project. It looks at the challenges and opportunities in the future as ROP is rolled out throughout Northern Ireland and the role of probation, police and other criminal justice agencies.

Keywords: Prolific offenders, offenders, partnership, criminal justice, police, probation, Northern Ireland, preventing reoffending, prevent and deter, catch and control, rehabilitate and resettle.

Introduction

In June 2012 the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland published a consultation document in relation to reducing offending. In launching this document the Minister, David Ford MLA, pointed to the heavy cost that crime imposes on our society – both financially and emotionally. Indeed, a study published by the Department of Justice estimated that the annual cost of crime in Northern Ireland is £2.9 billion – a huge amount of money that could be put to better uses if offending can be reduced.

The consultation document sets out how government can work more effectively to reduce offending behaviour. The Minister states that: ‘For us to reduce crime and offending, I am clear that we need to address the factors that lead people into criminal behaviour and the obstacles to them moving away from it. To be successful we must focus on both preventing offending and reducing re-offending. Where possible, it is much better to

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divert potential offenders away from crime rather than deal with people who have become habitual offenders.’

One of the initiatives highlighted in the document where important work is already under way is Reducing Offending in Partnership (ROP), which brings together criminal justice agencies and specialist services to target those who are at high risk of offending/reoffending and who are causing significant levels of harm.

This paper outlines what ROP is, and looks at its success to date and at what steps will be taken in the future to embed it throughout Northern Ireland.

**Background**

ROP is the strategic umbrella or overarching framework that brings together criminal justice agencies and specialist services to prioritise interventions with identified priority or prolific offenders. In the first instance, police in Reducing Offending Units use a matrix to identify prolific offenders in a particular area. This provides a basis for discussion with partner agencies, based on the risk assessments carried out on those offenders by the respective agencies, leading to confirmation of the offenders deemed to be a ‘priority’.

The objective is to target offenders who are at high risk of offending/reoffending, and who are causing significant levels of harm within their community and are often not cooperating with criminal justice agencies or related services. It is about developing coherent and efficient local structural arrangements into which existing interventions fit to provide a proportionate and effective response to the challenges presented by local offender populations.

At the core of ROP is the delivery of a managed set of interventions, sequenced and tailored to respond to the risks and needs of the individual. These interventions have the key aim of disrupting the offender’s criminal activity and thereby reducing their reoffending.

ROP is modelled on Integrated Offender Management (IOM) initiatives that have been developed in a number of areas of England since 2008 to assist the criminal justice agencies in the management of priority groups of offenders.

The ROP initiative in Northern Ireland arose out of a local police-led initiative in Ballymena to address the reoffending of prolific offenders in that area, particularly serious drug abusers. The chief feature of this local
initiative was the regular sharing of information in respect of cases between the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and PBNI. Over a period of time this led to discussions between PSNI, PBNI and the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) with regard to formalising this initiative and linking it to the IOM initiatives in England. These discussions were supplemented with visits by PBNI managers to IOM projects in Leeds, Manchester and Bristol. The agencies subsequently agreed to formalise the Ballymena initiative into a formal pilot across the PSNI H District, which encompasses Ballymena, Coleraine and Larne.

ROP is based on a three-strand approach, as follows.

1. **Prevent and Deter:** To reduce crime and antisocial behaviour involving young people through early identification and effective intervention strategies.

2. **Catch and Control:** A proactive approach by Police and partner agencies targeted at individual offenders who persist in their offending behaviour.

3. **Rehabilitate and Resettle:** Joint approach by all agencies to provide a gateway out of crime for priority offenders.

Catch and Control is police-led while the Rehabilitate and Resettle strand is led by PBNI in respect of adult offenders and both PBNI and YJA, where appropriate, with young offenders. Prevent and Deter focuses on early intervention and the Children and Young Persons Strategic Partnership has a key role in this strand, linking in with groups that work with substance misuse and looking at issues affecting children and young people.

PSNI has established seven Reducing Offending Units (ROUs) throughout Northern Ireland. The ROUs are made of detectives, uniformed officers and Youth Diversion Officers. They have unique skills sets, and each ROU officer is allocated up to seven priority offenders. The Probation Board and Youth Justice Agency have identified staff in each area to work with partner agencies.

Part of the success of ROP is dedicated resources, ownership and focus.

In practice ROP involves a monthly meeting between PSNI, PBNI and YJA where appropriate. At the meeting, the agencies address and review each case in the priority list of offenders and agree which category offenders currently fall into; for example, Catch and Control or...
Rehabilitation and Resettlement. Agencies also share information about developments in each case and discuss progress in terms of rehabilitation, compliance and reoffending. Finally they agree responses to each case.

On a six-monthly basis the list of priority offenders is reviewed, with agreements as to which offenders should come off the list, either because of progress and positive response or because of long-term imprisonment, and other offenders are identified who are then added to the list.

In addition to PBNI’s statutory supervision cases, rehabilitation services are offered to appropriate offenders in the Rehabilitation and Resettlement Strand who are not subject to any form of statutory supervision. This part of the project marks a new step for PBNI in offering services to those not under statutory supervision. It is an expansion and development of PBNI’s role within criminal justice.

Offenders do of course have a choice. If they decide to keep on offending and not avail of the rehabilitation strand, the police will be working to catch them and bring them to court as quickly as possible, and will share information on any further offending with Probation staff and other relevant agencies in the partnership as necessary.

Overall, take-up of services by non-statutory offenders under the Rehabilitation and Resettlement strand has been quite limited to date. Of those that do take up services, some quickly become statutory cases and some are of a short-term nature with offenders withdrawing after a number of meetings with the Probation Officer. The aim in non-statutory cases is to provide rehabilitation interventions for a period of six months to assist the offenders to develop more positive lifestyles and reduce offending behaviour and risk of reoffending. Probation Officers will seek to engage the offender in a range of relevant services in the community to help address their criminogenic needs.

**Benefits of ROP**

PSNI commissioned an evaluation of the ROP initiative in Ballymena in 2012. Although ROP was in its very early stages, and taking into account that the evaluation focused mostly on PSNI restructuring for the purposes of ROP, the evaluation demonstrated positive results in terms of crime reduction and satisfaction among partner agencies.

The evaluation showed that through working together to manage priority offenders there is a clear decision-making process leading to greater ownership and a reduction in crime and reoffending. In 2012,
68% of priority offenders in Ballymena/Coleraine reduced their offending while engaged with ROP. The total number of priority offenders being managed in the pilot was 60. Acquisitive crime was also significantly reduced.

Another clear benefit of ROP is in relation to better and increased communication between agencies. A Criminal Justice Inspection Report published in 2013 looked at community supervision by PBNI, and inspectors asked PBNI staff about the impact on their work of ROP. Probation Officers highlighted that the main benefit of this approach was much improved communication with PSNI officers. They advised that the fact that one police officer was responsible for managing the offender they were supervising, and therefore had knowledge of all their offences, had led to this improvement. The Probation Officer found it easier to contact the PSNI as they had a named contact in the ROU and could therefore check information more easily, for example to verify information about arrests, cautions or convictions, or obtain further information.

The benefits of ROP have been highlighted and discussed by the Justice Minister at recent visits to probation offices, and include: reducing reoffending and offences (reduction in seriousness and increase in time elapsing from crime committed); reduction in risk scores allocated to offenders; increased number of priority offenders entering Rehabilitation and Resettle strand; increased and improved quality of offender information; reduction in delays within the justice system; increased confidence in the justice system; and reduced number of victims.

**ROP in practice**

While it is easy to quote statistics and evaluations, it is also important to consider how ROP works in practice and how it has been successful. The two case studies below illustrate this.

*Case Study 1*

Michael (not his real name) was nominated a ‘Priority Offender’ in May 2011.

He was part of a small group who were involved in stealing from retail premises.

After an initial meeting with Michael, he voluntarily agreed to work with ROP as he wasn’t subject to any statutory conditions or orders. To date and since being released on bail in 2011 and agreeing to work with
Case study 2

Mark (not his real name) is 19 and was placed on the Priority Offenders List following a serious assault and robbery that occurred in 2012. At the time of the assault, Mark was under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and was increasingly coming before the courts for offences linked to his misuse of drugs. He has previous convictions for burglary and theft, criminal damage and possession of Class C drugs.

At the time of the assault he was in the final stages of an 18 month Probation Order. Immediately following this he was moved to weekly contact with his Probation Officer, and he continued on this basis until his order expired at the start of November. From that point forward he has engaged on a voluntary basis through the ROP programme.

A primary focus of his supervision was motivating him to look at his substance misuse (which began when he was aged nine), and in particular a growing dependency on cannabis that he has been very resistant to
acknowledging. Through one-to-one work in probation supervision, he has reached the point whereby he has requested a referral to drugs counselling, and for the first time has expressed a desire to be free from substance misuse. He has also undertaken PBNi’s Victim Awareness Programme, and has been able to identify and empathise with the consequences of his offending.

Mark has also engaged with NIACRO’s Jobtrack Programme and has attained a forklift licence, as well as drawing up a CV and disclosure statement to assist with applying for work. He has expressed an interest in further vocational training, and is actively looking at opportunities in this area. As a result of his cutting back on cannabis use, family relationships have improved, and he finds his parents encouraging and supporting him on his current pathway.

Mark’s progress to date has been considerable, and there is certainly room for optimism that this will be the turning point for him in building a life free from criminality.

Roll-out of ROP throughout Northern Ireland

The Multi-Agency ROP Steering Group agreed that the ROP initiative should be rolled out across all areas of Northern Ireland in 2013. As of March 2013 ROP is managing 420 priority offenders including 65 young people and 20 females. The agencies involved have agreed a ‘terms of reference’ document which sets out the responsibility of each agency. This is supported by an information-sharing agreement. The partnership now consists of PSNI, PBNi, Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and YJA.

Conclusion

The effective delivery of ROP will depend on multi-agency participation and ensuring that all agencies and stakeholders understand and are aware of the ROP process. There are real opportunities in terms of offering end-to-end management of offenders, ensuring a sharing of expertise among agencies and targeting finite resources where they are most needed. To this end there will be a strategy to build awareness internally and externally of ROP and to show the benefits in terms of reducing offending and preventing people from becoming victims of crime.
References


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