

**Address by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Mr. Brian
Lenihan, T.D.,
at the
launch of the Probation Service Annual Report for 2006
23 October 2007**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to be here this afternoon to join the Director of the Probation Service, Michael Donnellan and his team to launch the 2006 Annual Report of the Probation Service.

The title of the Annual Report ‘Transformation - A Journey, not a destination’ is apt. The criminal justice system must be responsive to the demands that are placed on it and the Probation Service, as a key component of the justice family, has shown itself willing and able to accept and implement change.

This annual report sets out some of the key developments. During 2006, for example, the Director, with the support of my Department restructured the senior management of the Service with the appointment of 3 Deputy Directors and 2 Assistant Directors to drive out key areas of change. In tandem with this restructuring and recognising that additional resources were needed to support them in their work I was able to secure additional resources for the Service – amounting to 71 new posts.

The key areas of change include:

- Refocusing the core work of the Service in a strategic way;
- Establishing a Young Persons’ Probation Division to drive out the implementation of the Children Act and to work closely with the Irish Youth Justice Service;
- Developing an enhanced basis for funding to community based projects; and
- Reviewing its internal structures to make best use of its resources so that it can respond in a meaningful way to its client group.

The report gives us a good overview of the core work of the Service, namely the assessment and supervision of offenders. The assessments done by probation officers inform decisions on sentencing and risk management – both in the community and in custody. In 2006, close to 9,000 assessment reports were prepared by Service personnel. This is quite a significant figure and highlights, if that is needed, the importance of having such reports available to the courts and other bodies such as the Parole Board and my Department.

A second important strand of the work of Probation Officers is the supervision of offenders in the community either on Probation, Community Service, Deferment of Penalty or Supervision of ex-prisoners.

In 2006 almost 9,000 cases were referred to the Service for supervision, again reflecting the central role which the work of the Probation Service has in the Criminal Justice System.

As well as the community aspect of supervision Probation staff also work with offenders in custody – with 20,000 interviews conducted with prisoners last year within our prisons - assisting them in coping with the impact of imprisonment and also preparing them for release into the community where supervision may, on occasion, continue under:

- Post Release Supervision Orders;
- Part-Suspended Sentences; and
- Temporary Release.

I am glad to see that interagency communication and co-operation with other partners such as the Irish Youth Justice Service, the Courts Service, the Judiciary, the Irish Prison Service and An Garda Síochána was an issue prioritised by the Director and his management team during 2006. It is vital that agencies work together and are willing to listen and respond, where possible, to the views of all the different elements that make up the criminal justice family so that we can be more strategic and responsive. The overall aim of this enhanced co-operation must be, of course, to improve public safety, reduce re-offending and promote social inclusion of offenders and those ‘at risk’ of offending in their communities.

I am glad to note that the Probation Service partnership approach to public safety has included co-operation with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. Indeed, the respective heads co-chair a working group looking at public protection. This work in ongoing and will, I am sure, contribute to workable solutions and sharing of best practice.

I mentioned earlier that a Young Persons’ Probation Division had been set up to work with children and young people under 18 years of age who come before the courts.

During 2006, over 1,100 reports were prepared for young people under 18 and the Service supervised over 600 Court Orders for this age group. I know that we can make great in-roads into tackling juvenile offending when we target, prioritise and work collaboratively with the key statutory and voluntary agencies. I am confident that the increased resources which I mentioned earlier will greatly contribute to the work of the YPP Division in supporting the work of the Irish Youth Justice Service.

In closing I want to thank the Director, Michael Donnellan and all his staff for their work during the past year and wish them continued success in their journey of transformation and change so eloquently set out in the 2006 Annual report.

Thank you.