

Probation Working in Local Communities

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Summary: This paper examines the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's work within a community setting, specifically as a designated partner in the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) as created by the Justice Act (NI) 2011. It also looks at how PCSPs work to tackle local issues in order to reduce the levels of crime and improve community safety.

Keywords: Policing and Community Safety Partnership, crime, community involvement, Probation Board for Northern Ireland, community safety, partnership.

Introduction

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland attaches immense value to its working relationship with local communities. In the decades often referred to as 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland, probation was one of the few criminal justice organisations that had a presence in every local community and attracted the confidence of local communities.

In recent years it has continued to hold dear the importance of community involvement. It provides over £1 million of its annual budget to community grants, has over 240 community partners and provides over 185,000 hours of unpaid work to communities through community service. Alongside this, innovative projects such as the Inspire Women's Project and Reducing Offending in Partnership draw on community partners and community facilities to provide interventions and programmes to specific offenders.

Recognising the importance of community involvement to preventing reoffending, and PBNI's long experience of working in local areas, the

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Probation Board firmly advocated that it should have a role in new community partnerships that were being legislated for in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive through the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

This paper looks at how PBNI came to have a key role in the new statutory community partnerships – Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) – and what impact this involvement has had on developing probation practice and enhancing community safety in Northern Ireland.

Background to PCSPs

Following the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland in 2010, Justice Minister David Ford MLA made clear that one of his priorities as minister was to make provision for the establishment of new PCSPs to help build confidence in the justice system, and ensure that members of the community were empowered to help develop solutions to tackle crime, the fear of crime and antisocial behaviour. ‘The new Policing and Community Safety Partnerships ... are central to delivering community safety locally, and will work with communities to deliver local solutions, to make people feel safer and ensure that the voices of local people on community safety are heard’ (Department of Justice, 2012) The partnerships were aimed at bringing together and building on the work of the previous district policing partnerships (DPPs) and community safety partnerships.

There was a clear expectation that these partnerships, made up of elected representatives, independent representatives and statutory bodies, would contribute at a local level to the achievement of Northern Ireland-wide targets set in the Executive’s Programme for Government 2011–15, which included the following priorities: ‘protecting our people, the environment and creating safer communities’. The community safety strategy set out the strategic direction for the PCSPs, alongside the Policing Plan and the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s (PSNI) ‘Policing with the Community 2020 Strategy’. The minister made it clear that PCSPs were to ensure a joined-up approach to policing and community safety issues, developing holistic solutions to issues identified by local people and making a real difference on the ground.

PBNI had been a member of the previous community safety partnerships, but had no involvement with DPPs. Recognising the opportunities

for closer collaboration with criminal justice partners and the community, PBNI's board and senior management endorsed the view that PBNI should be a part of the new arrangements and made this case when giving evidence to the NI Assembly Justice Committee in 2011 and in representations to the Department of Justice.

One of the new features of PCSPs that aimed to enhance the effectiveness of joint working was the area of 'designation'. That feature was designed to formally recognise the contribution that statutory organisations and voluntary and community organisations can make to enhancing community safety. In practice, it means that the bodies that were designated would be fully immersed in the work of the partnerships, delivering with other partners to improve community safety. The representative of each designated organisation is given full membership of the PCSP or district PCSP (DPCSP) to which they are appointed. They would, as part of the PCSP, work to engage with the community to identify issues of local concern, develop plans and take action as needed.

The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 included two types of designation. The first was local designation, where each PCSP can select bodies that might potentially assist them in meeting their local objectives. Those bodies can hold membership of the PCSP and contribute to the partnership's planning and delivery.

The second type of designation came about as a result of an NI Assembly Justice Committee amendment during the passage of the Justice Bill. It enabled the Department of Justice to list, in an order, a number of organisations that would be obliged to provide representation on all PCSPs across Northern Ireland.

A wide-ranging consultation exercise on the Implementation of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships was undertaken by the Department of Justice, with support from the Policing Board to determine which organisations should be listed as designated.

Paul Givan, MLA and Chair of the NI Assembly Justice Committee, commented on the consultation exercise: 'It was the Committee's clear view, strongly supported during the oral evidence event, that there was merit in designating a small number of named organisations, such as the Probation Board, to be represented on all PCSPs to ensure a consistent level of skills and expertise across the partnerships, rather than leaving it entirely to each PCSP to decide for itself which organisations should be represented on it' (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2013b).

Therefore the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 made provision for the designation of organisations onto PCSPs, both formally by the Department of Justice and locally by PCSPs. The bodies that were formally designated by the department onto all PCSPs in February 2013 were: the Police Service of Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; the Probation Board for Northern Ireland; the Youth Justice Agency of Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; Education and Library Boards; and Health and Social Care Trusts (excluding the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service). All of these bodies are listed in the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (Designated Organisations) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013.

For the first time in Northern Ireland, the Probation Board's role in working in local communities and delivering local solutions to local problems in partnership with communities was put on a statutory footing.

PCSPs in practice

Since formal designation in 2013 the Probation Board has allocated an area manager to sit on every PCSP in Northern Ireland. There are 26 PCSPs in total – one established by each of the Councils in Northern Ireland. Belfast has one overarching PCSP and four DPCSPs – one for North, South, East and West Belfast.

The functions of the partnerships are as follows:

- consultation and engagement with local communities, the statutory and voluntary sectors and other relevant organisations on the issues of concern in relation to policing and community safety
- identification and prioritisation of the particular issues of concern and preparation of plans for how these can be tackled
- monitoring performance to ensure delivery against the Partnership Plan – this will set out the issues for the local area and how they will be addressed; the Policing Committee, comprising political and independent members, will monitor the performance of the police to ensure that local policing services are delivering for local communities
- delivering a positive difference to communities, contributing to a reduction in crime and enhancing community safety in their districts.

Guidance on the role and responsibilities of designated bodies has been issued by the Department of Justice and Northern Ireland Policing

Board. The guidance states that the role of designated bodies including PBNI on the partnerships is to: contribute to enhancing community safety in the PCSP's area through their participation; work with the PCSP on achieving shared objectives; provide appropriate representation; and be accountable for the achievement of the Partnership Plan.

At the end of 2013 an internal survey of PBNI staff involved with PCSPs was carried out. It found that in the main, PBNI managers felt that the partnerships were working well. Some described 'rocky beginnings' where agencies and members were unsure of roles and responsibilities, but in the main the feedback was positive. One manager commented: 'There has been some good examples of action plans in local areas that have had a positive impact on the level of crime and visibility of the agencies. From PBNI's perspective I think it is a very useful forum to raise awareness of our practice and success.' Another said: 'Meetings are well organised and the co-ordinator/chair has sought to include all representatives in discussion. Acknowledgement that all representatives, elected, independent and statutory have an input.'

A manager in a Belfast Probation team said: 'The partnership was very active but the principal issues being raised are antisocial behaviour and preventative strategies around interface areas of the city.' Some less positive feedback was received from a small number of managers who had concerns about structure of meetings and the number of meetings.

A significant role for PBNI has been to make partners and members of PCSPs aware of what it is that PBNI can and cannot do. It has been important to manage public expectations about our role in working with offenders and making communities safer.

In terms of profiling of PBNI, as measured by the 2014 communications audit, media coverage of PBNI locally has increased due to participation in local events through PCSPs. There have been more opportunities locally to explain the work of probation and showcase successful practice.

In some areas probation has been able to provide a quick and effective solution to local problems in a co-ordinated manner with other criminal justice organisations and communities. One notable example is from Omagh PCSP. Following the tragic death of Jason McGovern, a 19-year-old who was assaulted twice on a night out in Omagh and was subsequently found dead in his home, there was local outcry about assaults relating to the night-time economy. Omagh PCSP took forward a range of targeted initiatives to improve town centre safety, co-

ordinating with a range of bodies to develop a holistic response to those local issues. This included securing funding to set up the volunteer or 'street angels' programme to assist vulnerable people and make Omagh feel like a safer place to be at weekends. PBNI has a key role in providing interventions for adults and young people around anger management and alcohol and substance misuse, and was part of the multi-agency approach to tackling local problems in the Omagh area.

PBNI has also played a key role within Newtownabbey PCSP, having been asked to help set up a consultancy group to determine where best to allocate resources/how to deal with offending by facilitating a meeting with offenders.

While it is early days for the operation of PCSPs, it is clear that PBNI is embracing its role within the partnerships and working hard to resolve local community issues. However, it is evident that members of the public need more information about PCSPs and the role they play. The 2013 Omnibus Survey asked the public if they had 'heard of Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs)?'. Just half of respondents (51%) had heard of PCSPs. Only one out of five respondents (18%) who had heard of PCSPs knew who their local members were. Therefore the partnerships need to continue to raise awareness about the role played in addressing community safety issues.

The future of PCSPs

The Review of Public Administration, which will significantly alter local governance in Northern Ireland, including the number of local councils, will impact on the operation and formation of the PCSPs. The number of councils in Northern Ireland will reduce from 26 to 11 in April 2015, and therefore the number of PCSPs will ultimately decrease. PBNI supports the reduction of the current number of councils and believes that a reduced number of PCSPs will help focus finite resources across the public sector where they are most needed. It is important, however, that the 'local touch' and local engagement are not lost in this process.

In 2014 Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland is carrying out an inspection and examination of the work of PCSPs. The inspector has described PBNI as 'a perfect partner',¹ committed to collaborative

¹ A speech at the Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland corporate plan launch event in 2013.

working and able to take the lead when necessary. This inspection will undoubtedly signpost agencies to improve and build on what has been achieved to date.

PBNI's corporate plan 2014–17 has a theme called 'rehabilitation through collaborative working and partnership'. It makes clear that PBNI's involvement and membership of PCSPs will enhance community safety and remains a future priority for PBNI. Indeed, it is hoped that partnership working will enable us to develop more innovative ways of using the community and voluntary sector to reduce offending and make communities safer.

Conclusion

PCSPs are one of the main strategic forums for delivering community safety across Northern Ireland, and they are here to stay. PBNI, as a key player in the criminal justice system, rightly has a place on those partnerships. To date membership of these arrangements has enabled PBNI to influence and debate decisions on issues relating to the prevention of crime in local areas. PBNI also brings vast knowledge and experience about effective intervention with offenders, and this is contributing to the reduction in crime in local areas. The PBNI Corporate Plan 2014–17 has a strategic theme around collaborative working, and PCSPs will form a key element of that work, therefore probation involvement will develop and continue at a local level.

While PBNI staff experienced some difficulties at partnership meetings in the early days, in the main the response from managers has been positive, indicating that they feel they are making a difference through participation. We look forward to the Inspection of the arrangements and hope that it will enable greater and more meaningful participation and increase awareness about the important role PCSPs play in reducing crime in local areas.

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