



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Overview Briefing on the Reducing Offending
Directorate and the Youth Justice Agency

6 February 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Ms Linda Dillon (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Mr Pat Sheehan
Miss Rachel Woods

Witnesses:

Mr Ronnie Armour	Department of Justice
Mr Paul Doran	Department of Justice
Dr Geraldine O'Hare	Probation Board NI
Mr Declan McGeown	Youth Justice Agency

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): I welcome Ronnie Armour, director of the Department's reducing offending directorate. Ronnie, are you the directorate's overall boss, if you want to call it that?

Mr Ronnie Armour (Department of Justice): Well, I am the director of reducing offending, but reducing offending is about much more than —

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Just your directorate.

Mr Armour: — my directorate. That is why I have brought with me colleagues from across the Justice Department.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): I know who they all are, but I will let you introduce them for me.

Mr Armour: Chair, first of all, I am grateful for the opportunity to come and brief the Committee on the work that we are taking forward across the Department and its agencies in an effort to reduce reoffending. I am joined by Paul Doran, director of rehabilitation in the Prison Service; Declan McGeown, chief executive of the Youth Justice Agency; and Dr Geraldine O'Hare, acting director of rehabilitation in the Probation Board.

Some Committee members will be familiar with the important work undertaken by the previous Justice Committee in bringing forward its report entitled 'Report on Justice in the 21st Century: Innovative Approaches for the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland'. One of the important principles that

that Committee set out was to encourage the Department to build on the strong foundations which had been laid for collaboration between those working in the various aspects of the criminal justice system, and to continue to provide opportunities for innovative thinking on creative approaches to the many challenges that we face in Justice. Today, joined by my colleagues from across the Justice family, I want to set out how we are attempting to build on the Committee's vision for a criminal justice system that works in partnership to challenge individuals to address their offending behaviour and support them to live lives free of further offending. Each organisation represented here today will, over the coming weeks, have the opportunity to brief you on their work, but today our focus is on how we are working together to tackle reoffending.

Our aims for the Department, agencies, non-departmental public bodies and other partners, particularly those in the voluntary and community sector, are to align activities, support rehabilitation, improve outcomes for offenders and, ultimately, build a safer Northern Ireland through a long-term reduction in offending behaviour. Evidence shows that it is only by working with those who offend that we can make communities safer and reduce future harm to victims. However, the criminal justice system on its own, as the Committee acknowledged in its report, cannot provide the knowledge, expertise or access to the services needed to truly reduce reoffending. A range of socio-economic factors have been shown to have an impact on reoffending, including poverty and social deprivation, mental health issues, substance misuse, homelessness and a lack of educational attainment and employment opportunities.

To give some context: of today's prison population, one third had mental health issues prior to entering custody, 21% were homeless or living in a hostel, two thirds believe drug or alcohol contributed to their offending, and 55% have a history of self-harm. These factors contribute towards the reasons why people become involved in crime in the first place, and they are often exacerbated through contact with the criminal justice system, leading to a cycle of offending that causes significant harm to victims and communities. Addressing reoffending means not only tackling these issues but creating positive connections back into supportive families and communities so that they become enablers of change.

Within the broad category of people who have offended, there are groups that have additional needs and so require further support in specific areas in order to address their offending behaviour. One such example is children, whose offending is often a manifestation of underlying issues, such as problems within the family home, disengagement from the education system, poverty and social exclusion. Likewise, women who offend often face similar challenges, such as a history of suffering from domestic and sexual violence, so a gender-specific approach to reoffending is needed to support them.

I want to be clear that taking this approach requires major and sustained effort from across a partnership of Departments, statutory agencies, the private sector, the voluntary and community sector, and wider society, and that this is not a soft option. Addressing the underlying causes of offending often involves opening up aspects of the past that are deeply uncomfortable and painful, as well as giving people skills and ability to behave differently now and in the future. We also need to be realistic. Not every offender will desist immediately as a result of this approach, but the agencies represented here today believe strongly that we need to go beyond punishment for the crime committed to tackle what caused that offending in the first place. For every person who acts to turn their life around, there are multiple benefits in terms of the useful contribution that person can make to society and in reducing the risk of creating further victims of crime. In order to reduce reoffending, the Department and its agencies have applied the core principles set out in the strategic framework for reducing offending, and are taking on board the findings and recommendations in the Committee's report.

Our approach has been based on adopting a welfare-based rather than a punitive approach to children engaged in offending behaviour. Working with the Department of Health, the Youth Justice Agency is developing a joint multipurpose care and justice campus to provide a short-term safe space at one end of the spectrum, through to longer-term high-intensity therapeutic support for children with serious issues relating to mental health, substance misuse and childhood trauma. The Youth Justice Agency is also developing a new model of practice based on the Children First, Offenders Second approach, including a focus on adverse childhood experiences, trauma-informed practice and signs of safety.

The Probation Board is playing a key role in the development and delivery of problem-solving approaches as a means of dealing more effectively with the root causes of offending behaviour in a range of areas — including both domestic abuse and substance misuse — and an enhanced combination order which aims to divert offenders from short-term custodial sentences by offering the

judiciary a community order with a more intense package of rehabilitation, reparation, restorative practice and desistance.

The Probation Board is also undertaking early scoping work around the development of a mental health court, as you have heard already today. It is also engaged in the development and delivery of innovative approaches, including social enterprises, aimed at improving the resettlement and rehabilitation outcomes for people who have offended. That includes resettlement mentoring schemes and restorative practice interventions in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.

The Department and its agencies are also working to reduce reoffending in a partnership — the Reducing Reoffending Partnership — aimed at managing offenders who are at a high risk of offending and reoffending and who were causing significant levels of harm within their community. The reducing offending directorate is leading on efforts to extend restorative principles to the adult justice system through the delivery of an adult restorative justice strategy. In addition, we are also working to develop a centre of excellence for restorative practice.

We are addressing the complexities of the accommodation needs of offenders. Having a safe place to live is one of the most important factors contributing towards someone moving away from offending behaviour. Together with the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive, we are working to improve the support offered to offenders on their return to the community. In addition, we have undertaken scoping work in advance of developing a strategy on accommodation. We are improving access to, and opportunities for, education and employment. Increasing access to readiness for employment amongst those who offend, and ensuring that they are able to apply for jobs once they leave the justice system, makes it much more likely that they will have the stability they need in their lives to refrain from further offending. We are working with the Departments for Communities, Education and Economy to address economic activity amongst those in the justice system.

We are improving health provision in the criminal justice system. A significant number of offenders have underlying health needs. The Departments of Health and Justice are working to improve health outcomes for people in the criminal justice system, in particular, collaborating with social care professionals to improve services for people in the Prison Service, and delivering a renewed person-centred approach to supporting people at risk of suicide and/or self-harm.

The Committee, in its 2016 report, recognised the increasing importance across Government and society that providing early intervention and support to individuals, families and communities, and intervening early, before problems become entrenched, is the most effective route to positive outcomes in adult life. We are currently working across the justice system to deliver a coherent approach to early intervention, with the aim of creating a long-term whole-system approach in collaboration with wider Departments, criminal justice agencies and the voluntary and community sector.

Finally, the focus of the Prison Service's Prisons 2020 programme is on ensuring that rehabilitation is at the core of all that it does, so that it may effectively contribute to reducing reoffending. In order to achieve that, a programme to continue the journey of constant improvement within prisons has been developed in collaboration with our Justice partners. In terms of reducing reoffending, that has included, amongst other matters, the recent development of a strengthening family relations strategy, the reintegration of probation staff within the prisoner development units, and the current development of a new Justice-wide gender-informed strategy to support and challenge women, including girls, in contact with the justice system.

The Department has also been engaged in work led by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to develop adverse childhood experiences (ACE)-aware and trauma-informed systems, in conjunction with colleagues across education, social care, health and the community and voluntary sector. Within Justice, we are working proactively to create the best environment in order to mitigate the re-traumatisation of individuals who come into contact with our system.

In conclusion, I hope that that sets out the comprehensive range of issues that the Department and its agencies are undertaking. Naturally, we will be happy to take questions and provide any clarification that may be required.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Thank you, Ronnie, for giving us that overview. With regard to getting commitment from beyond the Department of Justice, whether it be from Health or employment, how are you getting the linkages with those Departments so that, when you are trying to take that approach, there is actually a requirement for them to engage? Often you end up with the Department

having to deal with it, and others do not come to the table in the way in which they should. What has been your experience of trying to take a cross-departmental approach to that work?

Mr Armour: First, I want to say that I think that we are getting a cross-departmental approach. We have put structures in place in each of the areas that I have outlined. Take, for example, homelessness or some of the other health issues: we now have structures in place that bring our colleagues in to work alongside us in a committee format, I suppose. We are seeing collaboration and getting the support that we require at this point, but there is still much more to be done.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Who leads on that, then? Take health, for example, within prisons. When a need is identified, and someone says, "Right, this is what is required" — whether that be a physical resource or financial resource — "and these are the programmes", who is the ultimate decision-maker who then triggers the other Departments to provide that support?

Mr Armour: We now have a strategy group in place, which I chair jointly with a deputy secretary from the Department of Health. That brings together a range of organisations. In the absence of the Assembly, that work has been overseen by the two permanent secretaries. It is through that mechanism that we can make things happen and encourage the development of initiatives and programmes.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Obviously, engaging in that work is not without its challenges. What kind of support is provided to ensure that staff in all those different organisations have the kind of resilience that they need? They are dealing with difficult cases. It can be emotionally, psychologically and physically demanding. What support is put in place for the staff who are engaged in that work?

Mr Armour: The different organisations can answer for themselves, but I would say that we take the well-being of our staff extremely seriously. We are working, for example, in the Prison Service, at different levels in the organisation to provide the support that staff need, from governors to staff throughout the organisation. Where there are specific needs, staff have access, for example, to counselling opportunities that can give them additional support should they require it. I do not know whether anybody else wants to comment.

Dr Geraldine O'Hare (Probation Board NI): Yes. In the Probation Board, we use external support services through counselling services. What is also really important for our staff in probation is the whole area of health and well-being. We have strategies to improve that and ensure that staff operate and deliver safe and effective practice. The important thing about that is the supervision of staff to ensure that they are being appropriately supervised and managed, and that they are not working outside their area of expertise etc. There is a big investment in probation in the well-being of staff, just as Ronnie has mentioned.

Mr Paul Doran (Department of Justice): In the Prison Service, one of the four pillars of our 'Prisons 2020' document is our people. We recognise that, without people, we cannot do anything. A very innovative Prisons Well project has been commenced under Prisons 2020, which has been well received by staff, although it remains a challenge.

Another issue is that we are now more and more aware of the impact of adverse childhood experiences on people who come into our care. I know that a number of the parties, including your own, Chair, have taken an interest in that. Equally, that applies to our staff. Our challenge is to build resilience in staff so that, as well as training people to become aware of adverse childhood experiences, we have been exploring ways to develop that resilience in prison staff.

Mr Declan McGeown (Youth Justice Agency): Again, Chair, first and foremost, the Youth Justice Agency's front-line staff are social work or youth work trained, so they have gone through extensive training. We overlay that with a quite extensive training programme for our staff, and we also provide a well-being strategy to make sure the well-being of our staff is as it should be.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): In all the work to try to reduce offending, is there a baseline figure you are able to measure against so that you know progress is being made?

Mr Armour: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) produces a report each year on reoffending. The figure for 2016-17 for the overall reoffending rate was 18%. That is the figure we are currently looking at. We have been measuring that from around 2015-16. At this stage, we are

not seeing a significant difference in the rate, but it will take time for a lot of the work we are doing to bed in and start to have an effect. The overall rate at the moment is 18%.

Ms Dillon: I suppose, to be fair, you are not going to see a difference in the statistics until it is more than a pilot and has been rolled out to everybody. Everybody is entitled to the service and its benefits.

I have a couple of questions. I like everything I heard in what you said. It is the kind of stuff I want to hear, but I am a wee bit concerned about, first, whether you are getting the finances and support to be able to deliver on all those things and, secondly — this is particularly for the Prison Service — whether some people are not getting the same service, because it is about looking after and re-educating them and ensuring that, whenever they come out, they do not reoffend. When I say that, I am probably talking specifically about Roe House, because I have had some issues raised about it.

I am very new to the Committee, so a lot of this is new to me, but I have been contacted already about that matter not by families but by legal representatives who were not happy with what they were seeing there and had some concerns. Obviously, part of our work here, and the work that is coming under the Executive, is about tackling paramilitarism, but we are not going to deal with that unless we deal with every single aspect of it. Our prisoners are part of that, and we need to look at whether we are equipping them so that, whenever they are released, they are able to see that there are opportunities out there for them and that a different life is open to them.

I will let you answer those first; I have one or two others to ask.

Mr Armour: I will deal with the Roe House issue first. I would say that, yes, we are addressing those issues. If you look at our 'Prisons 2020' document, you will see reference under the services pillar to separation. We are very committed to enhancing the provision that is in place in the loyalist and in the dissident republican units in Bush House and Roe House. We are implementing a report that was completed for us last year under the Fresh Start Agreement on education and training for separated prisoners, so we are working with Belfast Metropolitan College to enhance the provision for the loyalist and the dissident republicans there. That has been going on since September last year with, I would argue, some success.

We have also put in place a very robust programme of purposeful activity, where we have been bringing the GAA and the IFA in alongside the Prison Arts Foundation, which works in those units as well. There is a very full curriculum in place, and I think it has progressed well over the past number of months. I will say more about that next week when I am here to talk about prisons, but the answer to your question is yes, we are making progress.

Ms Dillon: I intend to inform myself as well and not just take it from others. I wanted to raise the issue because it had been raised with me. I certainly will be looking into it further to inform myself about what is happening.

My other question was about funding. Are you getting the funding to be able to deliver on what you have talked about?

Mr Armour: We have received the funding required to deliver the pilot projects on problem-solving justice we are referring to. The Department does not have its budget for next year yet. We are committed to continuing with those pilots, but it is not yet clear what funding will be available to further expand on that until we get our budget. Certainly to this point, we have been getting the funding we require for the pilots.

Ms Dillon: I have one question about youth services. You said that all those who work in your agency are either Youth Service or social work trained. This is an issue I know we worked on previously. Health and the PSNI were working together on a number of issues, and I raised with them that many of those who were working with young people do not have Youth Service training, despite being social workers. Many of them are coming out of university and are social workers for whatever field they go into, whether that is working with older people, working with people with mental disabilities or whatever it is. Many social workers, with the best will in the world, do not have that specialist training in working with youths, and I think that you need it. If you do not have that kind of training, working with young people becomes very challenging because you are not able to communicate with them in a way that they understand and appreciate. I am quite sure Youth Service would be prepared to work with you on doing some training of social work staff. Are there any plans to do that? I have worked with young people in care, and some of them said they had a better relationship with the police officers who were

picking them up than with the social workers who worked in the care homes. Obviously, a lot of these young people will come into contact with you at some stage; unfortunately, that is what the statistics tell us. I think that comes back to the fact that they do not have Youth Service training and do not understand the issues these young people have.

Mr McGeown: To reassure you, as I said, we made a decision as an organisation that any member of staff who comes directly into contact with children would be either social work or youth work trained. There is a blend of that, and, as well as continually refreshing and updating the training and work with the experts, including those in youth services across the board, we bring in experts from across the water and other places to tell us what the best practice out there is. Ronnie mentioned in his opening remarks the model of practice, and that is about developing a model of practice that is fit for the 21st century. It is a model of practice that will underpin the repurposing work Ronnie also mentioned in his opening remarks. That is to make it fit for purpose going forward so that our staff who are interfacing with the young people have the right skills and the approach to work with the children with their vulnerable needs. You have heard about, for instance, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma-informed practices and signs of safety. All that is gathered up and is part of the model of practice. To reassure you, our staff are very well-trained and will continue to train to make sure they have the skill set for going forward and in how the new dawn will look.

Mr Sheehan: Ronnie, I want to ask you about rates of suicide in prison. I mean not just in prison; there have been worryingly high statistics of prisoners or former prisoners who have been recently been released taking their own lives. What sort of work is being done around that?

Mr Armour: Since 2015, there have been 22 deaths in custody, nine of which we believe have been as a result of natural causes. That leaves us with 13 self-inflicted deaths. We have been doing a lot of work in the Prison Service with our colleagues in the South Eastern Trust to implement the towards-zero suicide programme. Also, we have put in place a very robust programme that we call supporting people at risk (SPAR) evolution. We are seeing very significant reductions in the levels of self-harm in the prisoner population as a result of the work we are doing. Every death in prison and every post-custody death is one too many.

On the post-custody side, I have been in discussions with the Prisoner Ombudsman, who investigates a post-custody death up to 14 days after the individual leaves prison. We have been working with our colleagues in Probation, the Courts Service, who were here earlier, and a range of others to put in place mechanisms that will ensure that people are supported when they leave custody. We have been working with probation and others to tackle people's drug addiction issues, and there is an issue sometimes when people leave the custody of the Prison Service where they, having not taken drugs for a period of time, think they can still take the quantities of drugs they were taking before they came in. We find that is an increasing issue in post-custody deaths. We are working, as I say, with probation, the health service and the Courts Service to identify and support those at risk as they leave the prison system.

Dr O'Hare: May I say something to follow up on Ronnie's point? That is a serious issue here in Northern Ireland. We have the highest rate of self-harm and suicide in the UK. As Ronnie says, there are significant causes of that. We see people who have self-harmed or committed suicide as a result of a constellation of factors, but serious drug-related issues are very high on that agenda.

In 2018-19, we had 34 service users who died whilst on supervision. Fourteen of them were suspected drug overdoses. Without getting into the debate about serious drug misuse in Northern Ireland, we know what the problems are. We know there is a serious rise in the types of the opioids people are using — heroin and crack cocaine — and that is where we need to act to tackle the problem. As Ronnie says, our interface and links with Health, the other agencies and the voluntary and community sector are critical and fundamental in ensuring that, when people come out of prison, they get the services they need quickly.

Mr Sheehan: Is any strategic approach being taken by all the agencies that need to be involved in tackling the abundance of drugs on our streets?

Dr O'Hare: Yes, the Chief Medical Officer chairs the new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol in Northern Ireland, and the new strategy has just been put out for consultation and launched. That includes all the Departments, all the agencies and the voluntary and community sector, so everybody is around the table. The other arm of that is the research, which is really important. There is a research

arm with that that is able to collect data on the particular types of drugs we know are used and on the incidence of suicide and self-harm. So, a very high-level strategic group is working on that.

Mr Frew: At the outset, I thank the people at the Committee today for the interaction that I, as the previous Chair, have had with you and for the work you guys have done over the last three years in, what I call, the lean period. You have always kept us up to date and informed. I have always been amazed with all my visits — I think I went with you, Chair, to visit a prison — at the work you do. There is absolutely no doubt about it: it is hard graft. It is non-glorious, low-level, hard, patient graft. You guys will not get front page for a success story — absolutely not. In fact, you get the front page when something happens to go wrong, usually through no fault of your own. There are weaknesses, of course, but the work you do on a daily basis is, I think, amazing. That is where all the cuddly stuff goes out the window, Ronnie. In all seriousness, I was always interested in the problem-solving courts and justice piece. How has that matured over the last three years?

Mr Armour: I will ask Geraldine to take that, but before I do, I thank you for your comments about the work each of the organisations does. I echo the words of tribute to our staff. Whether it is in prisons, Probation or the Youth Justice Agency, people are doing amazing things and are making a real difference in the life of the people who are placed in our care, and that is what we are here to do. It is important that we continue to develop that. I will ask Geraldine to answer your question about problem-solving justice.

Dr O'Hare: In response to that, I will say that it is embedding itself. It is still early days; there is no doubt of that. We know that, in order to tackle offending and, indeed, reoffending, but, ultimately, to drive down the numbers of victims, we must take that other approach, which is about getting upstream and targeting the very root causes. Paul talked about the trauma that people experience. People who enter the justice system experience significant levels of disturbance or mental health problems. We have a very high prevalence of drugs and alcohol in the justice system, and that is why we must target those areas. The problem-solving justice initiatives are going well. The enhanced combination order (ECO), which the Committee may be more familiar with, is an initiative that is an alternative to a short prison sentence of fewer than 12 months. Some 501 people have gone through that since its introduction, which is really positive. We have also had very positive evaluations over the last three years since its inception.

We cannot comment on reconviction rates because it is very early days, but we are seeing very positive outcomes beyond Justice. For example, people are not going to prison for fewer than 12 months; they are remaining in the community. We see the benefits of that, such as their ability to stay in their home, with their family and, perhaps, in their job. Through our work with Health and the voluntary/community sector etc, we are seeing very positive lifestyle outcomes that we do not always report on, such as, as I say, the restoration of families, where people who perhaps had not had contact with their family see their children again and those children go into a learning environment, so to school, with that mindset. There are very positive things coming out of that.

One of the nuggets, if I may say, of the enhanced combination order is that everybody who is sentenced to one must go through a psychological evaluation, so they get a mental health assessment. The reason for that is exactly what I just mentioned: we see a high prevalence of co-occurring disorders in justice. Carrying out a mental health assessment at the outset determines their levels of need and risk so that an intervention can be made to drive those down. Some 68% of people on ECOs have a mental health problem. That is high — it is very high — but, again, it is in common with what we know about mental health prevalence in Northern Ireland, but at least we know that and are dealing with it. That is a very positive development, and the Committee may know that that has been rolled out in three court site areas in Northern Ireland.

The other problem-solving justice initiative concerns domestic violence interventions. Along with our partners across Justice and Health, we have targeted those who have not come into the justice system. We refer to them as the unadjudicated people, and we know they have a propensity to commit acts of domestic abuse against their partners. We see children living in those environments, and it is about targeting them early in order to drive down the transgenerational cycle of domestic abuse. The Committee may be aware that we delivered a pilot in the Western Trust to men who social services identified as having the propensity to act in a violent manner in domestic situations. That was a huge success, and we have rolled out three more programmes in the area. Some 72% have completed successfully, so, in other words, people have not come into the justice system; we are targeting them early. As a result of that successful pilot, we are now delivering and rolling out the unadjudicated domestic abuse programme across all the trust areas in Northern Ireland. It is seen as getting in early.

It is early intervention in its absolute, true form, and it is effective through looking at those wider outcomes in health, education, justice etc.

We heard about the substance misuse court. It is certainly a very alternative approach, but we know from the evidence that it works and is effective in keeping people out of the justice system and targeting and tackling their drug misuse and health problems. We also see a high rate of mental health problems in the substance misuse court. We are into our second cohort, and the early findings of our evaluation indicate that people are not committing further crimes or taking the high levels of drugs they were, and they are getting and staying in treatment. There are early findings that are very positive, and it is true to the idea of investing in that early, early intervention so that we do not see people coming in and pedalling through the justice system time and again. It is working.

Mr Frew: Thank you for that very comprehensive answer. I want to ask about the Programme for Government. It strikes me that justice is the one sector that could benefit from a truly well-budgeted and well-run Programme for Government that is outcomes-based. The Chair touched on the collaboration with other cross-departmental bodies. How well is that working, and how much do you need an outcomes-based Programme for Government?

Mr Armour: We absolutely need an outcomes-based Programme for Government. As I said at the beginning of the session, we in Justice cannot do it on our own. It has been a struggle in the early days to get people to realise and accept that. But I believe we have made significant progress across government in bringing people together to work with us on what we are trying to do. The project I co-sponsor with my colleague from the Department of Health — Declan has responsibility for it — around the repurposing of Woodlands is a really good example of what we are doing. Do you want to mention that briefly as an example, Declan?

Mr McGeown: It absolutely is, Ronnie. At the heart of that initiative is saying that what we want to do across government is help vulnerable children and improve their life opportunities, which speaks to Programme for Government outcome 12. That is what we are trying to achieve. When we started on that programme in the Department, we knew, specifically from the youth justice perspective, the changes that needed to be made to our custodial environment, which is Woodlands JJC. I was taken by how quickly Health and Education came to the table with us to say, "How do we solutionise this? How do we work together moving forward?". That has given rise to the initiative called the repurposing programme. Essentially, the Department of Health and the Department of Justice have a programme team jointly funded that sits in situ and works to develop a new dawn, basically, and to develop the services for our vulnerable children to see how we can improve them and their life chances. It is targeted to happen by 2022, and the first stage is to bring forward design proposals over the first 12 to 18 months. We have already done that; we signed them off at our most recent programme board, which Ronnie chairs alongside the chief social worker in Health. I am quite taken by the fact that the Department of Education, the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities are all at the table, bringing ideas and helping us to develop solutions. That, to me, is collaborative working at its best, and it certainly augurs well for where we want to get to with vulnerable children.

Mr Frew: Are you getting the right people with the right clout in the room with the right money?

Mr McGeown: We absolutely are. It is chaired at Ronnie's level, and senior civil servants are around the table. We also have alongside that a stakeholder reference group that we established on which all the key voluntary and community sector groups are represented at senior level. Alongside that, the Children's Commissioner is there to mark our homework, so to speak, at key staging points to make sure that everything is on schedule. I am quite taken by how all those people have come to the table and continue to do so to help us shape it. It is quite impressive that, even in the first 12 months, we have design proposals that are being worked through by all those stakeholders.

Mr Frew: This is my final question, Chair. I am looking through the justice areas in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Have the authors missed a point somewhere? Of course, I support the PSNI increasing the number of officers to 7,500. Legacy is an issue, as is tackling paramilitarism and organised crime, but there does not seem to be anything specifically targeting your three branches here. Is that a lapse?

Mr Armour: You are correct in saying there is nothing in the document in relation to us. Yes, we would have welcomed commitment, but I do not think that should take away from the work we are doing across government. We have tried today to give you a flavour of what we are doing. I am not here to say this is easy; it is challenging. Bringing together different Departments and the voluntary and community sector, even the agencies in the justice family, is challenging because we all have our

different priorities and key areas, but the message I want to bring to you is that it is working. Whether or not there is a reference in the document, we are taking the previous Committee's report seriously, and we are trying to drive that forward in a collaborative way. We are beginning, I think, to see very positive outcomes from that. The repurposing of Woodlands in a relatively short space of time will be a very visible manifestation of that.

Mr Dunne: Thanks, Ronnie and your staff, for coming in today. It has been interesting for me as a new member.

As a North Down representative, I will follow up on the Woodlands juvenile justice repurposing, which sounds like a great term. We see that building and facility as being relatively new, but time marches on. Will there be a need to reinvest in that site, or is it early days?

Mr McGeown: The building has been in existence for about 13 years, so it is still relatively new. The plan is a repurposing, not just of the bricks and mortar in the Bangor area — that covers not only Woodlands but Lakewood, the secure care facility nearby — but of the services that are provided across the region. The idea is that we will look at how we can start to blend existing services and repurpose them in a better way so that we can get the best for our vulnerable children.

The ambition and hope for the repurposing programme is that it will be as close to cost neutral as possible, given that we, the Department of Health and others already put a large amount into these facilities and into the services across the region. The idea is to make better use of that money and target it better. Geraldine talked about early intervention, and we will put more money into early intervention streams in the community.

I believe that we already have first-class health and education provision on the Woodlands site. That service will be rolled out to more children coming on that site, so we will make use of that. Lakewood has education and health provision as well. Without getting into the economics of it, it is about economies of scale by way of those services and redistributing that money back to where it is needed on the ground. It might need a small injection, but the hope is to be as cost neutral as possible.

Mr Dunne: The average daily population of the JJC at Woodlands in 2018-19 was 18 young people — which sounds relatively low.

Mr McGeown: That is right.

Mr Dunne: — which sounds relatively low.

Mr McGeown: It is. It is a 48-bed facility. Five years ago, the average daily population was around 27. We felt — certainly I felt, as the accounting officer — that some of the children there did not have to be there and could be better dealt with in the community with the services provided there by my staff and others. The hope and the aim was to try to target early intervention programmes towards vulnerable children: first and foremost, to stop them coming into the justice system, if we could; then, if they did, however far entrenched they became, to try to make their coming to Woodlands a last resort.

Yes, we have had a 50% fall in the average daily population. Therefore, you could look at it from an economic perspective and say that now that there are 18-odd beds being used in a 48-bed facility, it does not look viable. However, the staff and the services are there for children who are quite vulnerable and complex and need a lot of help, so we continue to roll out the existing model with one eye, in the next couple of years, on repurposing it and making better use of those resources.

It has been a success story as far as early intervention is concerned. The statistics show a 54% fall in the number of children coming into the formal justice system. That means that the population will fall as we get to Woodlands. As Ronnie knows, that is the case at Hydebank as well, where there has been about a 60% fall in the number of young people moving there from Woodlands. That is all because of the early intervention work that we are trying to do.

Mr Dunne: The Bangor site is the only custodial service.

Mr McGeown: For young people. That is right.

Mr Dunne: Yet, you have people located across various sites:

"Youth Justice Services Directorate based in five Area Teams strategically located across Northern Ireland".

Mr McGeown: Yes. We have the custodial directorate, headed by Brian Ingram, which is the Woodlands building that you see in Bangor. The director of youth services, Mary Aughey, oversees offices in the community across Northern Ireland, and we have about nine offices spread across the region to provide services in each area.

Mr Dunne: There is just one final thing, Ronnie. The risk avoidance and danger awareness resource (RADAR) centre has been in the headlines recently.

Mr Armour: Yes.

Mr Dunne: I was at an event a few years ago that was attended by quite a lot of young people, local representatives, the police and so on. We were all struck by the facility and the potential for its use. Do you have any interest in making future investment in it or use of it?

Mr Armour: It is a very positive facility. I do not have responsibility for that; it sits under Anthony Harbinson in the safer communities directorate. It is certainly a very good facility, and I encourage schools, youth groups and others to visit it. That can only be positive, because they will get a very good insight there into the work of the Courts Service, the Prison Service, the police and others. I am very supportive of it, but I have no direct involvement in it.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Linda, do you want to follow up on Woodlands?

Ms Dillon: No. I have a quick question on something else. If somebody else wants in now, I will wait.

Miss Woods: I have only two questions. Gordon stole all my Woodlands questions.

You mentioned the adult restorative justice strategy and the centre of excellence. Have you any further update on that?

Mr Armour: Paul will speak on that.

Mr Doran: I will address the centre of restorative excellence first. Members will know that this was recommendation A9 in the 'Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime' report that emerged from the Fresh Start Agreement. It is a two-part recommendation that brings in the Executive Office as well as the Department of Justice. That has been a bit of a challenge to us, which is why the permanent secretary said, a couple of weeks ago, that he welcomed the restoration of the Assembly and having a Minister in place. However, despite the absence of an Executive, we continued, and we had a multiagency group working on recommendation A9. You asked previously about the membership of that group. In addition to a number of directorates in the Department of Justice, we had the PSNI; the Department for Communities; the Housing Executive; the Department of Education; the Department of Health; and the two community-based restorative justice organisations in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland. We also work closely with Victim Support. It was unanimous that a centre for restorative action should have victims front and centre; it should be victim-centric. To achieve that, rather than having a virtual centre of restorative excellence, they wanted bricks and mortar — a building.

We were not sure whether we could take this forward in the absence of an Executive. As the permanent secretary said to the Committee, we were in the process of getting legal advice. We certainly welcome that the Committee, and the Minister, of course, can give us direction on this. It is a really good opportunity. I, personally, have seen the benefits that restorative justice can bring when the victim is very much at the centre. A restorative justice excellence centre would focus on issues such as training, developing capacity, practice standards and monitoring. It would build on the overall monitoring work that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) has done on various restorative justice organisations.

That folds nicely into the adult restorative justice strategy. In the absence of the Executive, we consulted internally with Departments and, in particular, with Victim Support Northern Ireland. We now have a draft strategy that we are about to launch, when the Minister gives us approval to do so.

Picking up on the point that Declan made about success, I believe that the reduction in the number of young people in the justice system, particularly in Woodlands, is a success. The Lord Chief Justice, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Executive, through the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, have recommended the development of an adult restorative justice strategy. As I keep emphasising, this should keep victims front and centre. It could also, for instance, incorporate some of the recommendations of the Gillen report that was published last year.

Mr Armour: As Paul said, we have that draft strategy ready. It will shortly go to the Minister for her consideration. In the fullness of time, we will, of course, come to the Committee with that.

Miss Woods: Thank you. It would be great to see that.

Finally, I have a comment on offenders and improving their access to opportunities post custody or when transitioning out of custodial care. You mentioned the good working relationship with other Departments, including the Department for Communities. An issue coming up in the advice sector is the five-week wait for universal credit. As offender applications for universal credit are made after they leave custodial care, that means another five weeks to wait, on top of everything else. I wonder whether there are any measures in place, or any measures that could be looked at, to start that process earlier, say, when somebody has suitable accommodation, an address and that kind of thing. We are dealing with a lot of people who come in without any ID. They might have moved around different parts of the country and are unable to access money or any form of benefit, which makes things a little more difficult in an already difficult situation.

Mr Doran: That is a fair question and a fair summary of the current position. In the spirit of the Programme for Government, we have been working very closely with the Department for Communities, and we now have work coaches coming into each of the three prisons. They start work with people in custody 16 weeks prior to release in order to ensure that when they come out of prison, they get the right advice about finding employment, which we strongly advocate. Also, if they are going back into the benefits system, their benefits should be in place.

We have also been working with the Electoral Office to ensure that people leaving custody have a form of ID that they can use, which can be helpful for opening bank accounts and so on. Everything that the Prison Service does now is about rehabilitation. I have seen a massive change in the attitude of staff from the days when it was all about security. Thankfully, we do not have the same challenges now, so the focus is on rehabilitation. When people leave custody, that is when the work should really pay dividends.

Ms Dillon: I am not opposed to restorative justice, and I think that it does work. It is a brilliant initiative that I would love to be rolled out further. I know that Judge *[Inaudible]* talked about making the funding statutory, which would be positive because groups and organisations would not keep having to reapply for funding. One of the things that we raised with him — this was in my previous life on the Policing Board — was the concern that it still needs to be community led. It needs to be run by the organisations that are there. It needs to be community up. It has worked so well because it is the community working with the community that is most impacted. That needs to be ensured. I agree with the victim-centred approach, but, again, the community element is why it has worked. The victims are in the community; the perpetrators are very often in the same community. So, it is important that whilst it is victim-centred, it is community led. All those restorative projects work for that reason.

A lot of work on domestic violence is done by this Committee, the Committee for Health, many other Committees, various agencies, the PSNI. Everyone doing that work realises how much of an issue it is. One problem is the lack of recognition in the wider community that it is a community problem, not a family problem. I do not know how you address that, which is really what I am asking for. I saw this when I went to events and asked people what were their biggest issues with policing in their community. Even when the rooms are full of women, many of whom might be the victims of domestic violence, women do not put domestic violence in their top five; even their top 10. Is there anything that we as a Committee or the Minister could be doing, or that statutory organisations and bodies should be doing, to ensure that those in the wider community realise the impact and knock-on effect of domestic violence? Of course, in a home where there is domestic violence, one parent is already involved in criminal activity, but children from such homes then come to the attention of the justice system. Is there something more we can do?

Mr Armour: The Minister has it as a top priority. I have not had an opportunity to discuss it with her, but I certainly will. Geraldine might want to comment on the community aspect.

Dr O'Hare: You are absolutely right, and it remains under-reported. There is a wide range of strategies involving the voluntary and community sector, Women's Aid and those working in health, justice and education. Everybody is involved, but it is also about raising awareness from a very young age, including in schools.

This goes back to Mr Frew's question about the early impact, the interventions and how those are embedded. We see so many children who witness domestic abuse and live in homes where there is domestic abuse. You raised the issue of community norms — that sometimes domestic abuse is normalised, and people still fear reporting it. It is a case of communities being aware and being able to see the early warning signs, as well as ensuring that children are educated. We see so many children who live in homes where there is domestic abuse, and we then see that intergenerational cycle of domestic abuse. We see a significant increase in child-to-parent and child-to-grandparent domestic abuse. An awful lot is being done, but more needs to be done at that very early stage in education, and, as you say, educating communities to educate themselves.

Mr Beattie: More than 500 enhanced combination orders have been issued. I am a fan of these. Like Paul, I have seen how these work, and I am absolutely on board with them. You said, however, that we do not have any statistics on reoffending. Why not?

Dr O'Hare: We have lots of statistics, but there is a time lag on the reporting of reconviction rates. The statistics that we have are that 500 people have completed the orders, and there is a 20% decrease in custodial sentences of 12 months or less; from the evaluations, 85% of people on ECOs report enhanced relationships and positive family dynamics, and people are getting employment and becoming linked into health services; and 68% of people present with mental health and drug-related problems.

Mr Beattie: I suppose that reoffending is only one statistic among the many that you have just mentioned.

Dr O'Hare: Absolutely.

Mr Beattie: It is still an important part.

Dr O'Hare: Absolutely, and, in fairness, it is the obvious measure that we will look at. We cannot, however, just put that aside and wait for the statistics to come out, because we see huge numbers of other really positive outcomes that span the other Departments and agencies that are fantastic at reducing the number of people who reoffend, and which contribute to all those positive things such as keeping families together, giving people employment, linking them to health services and keeping them in treatment. All those statistics are there, but we will not get the reconviction figure until later. At present, we ensure that we keep the appropriate data, because data from each of the agencies that are at the touch points is so important to being able to realise that overarching outcome, which has multiple elements across all areas of people's lives in the justice system.

Mr Beattie: A perception among members of the public is that somebody who completes an ECO, will reoffend, go through the system again, and reoffend again. There is that concern. That is why I am asking whether we have that statistics, but I appreciate fully what you are saying.

Dr O'Hare: In fairness, you are absolutely right, and that will come later. It is about being able to ensure that people understand all those very positive outcomes that make up the bigger picture.

Mr Beattie: Secondly, may I ask you, Ronnie, for your view? The sentencing review has just finished. It looked at punishment, protection of the public, deterrents, rehabilitation and reparations. For the public, deterrents are really important, especially on, for example, vehicle crime, which they witness. Will that affect how you do business if, at the end of the sentencing review, there is a mass uptake of the view that there should be stronger, stiffer sentences, more focus on deterrents and a move away from rehabilitation? I am not saying that I want that; I am just saying that some are feeding into it. Have you a view on that at all?

Mr Armour: I certainly hope that people, when they look at this, will look at the rehabilitative work being done by the agency represented here today, and by others, and see the benefit of that. I deliberately said in my opening comments that rehabilitation is not a soft option, and it is not a soft option when you see it in practice. At the end of the day, we, as organisations, are statutorily obliged

to take the people who come our way. The Prison Service cannot turn anyone away. Irrespective of the number of people who come through our gates, I am clear that our responsibility is to work with them, challenge them, support them to change, and to do everything that we can so that when they leave our custody, they are better individuals than when they came in. It is the same for youth justice, and it is exactly the same for the Probation Board.

It is important that we work collectively so that the early intervention that Declan talked about is in place — we see the impact of that at Woodlands — so that we in the Prison Service have programmes and support mechanisms in place through learning, skills and all the work that we are doing to equip people for employment; and so that the Probation Board, when people leave our care, is ready to pick up those individuals, and the others for whom it has responsibility but who do not come into custody, and to work with them. I hope that all those things would be taken into account in a sentencing review. I would argue that rehabilitation is an extremely important factor. We talked about reoffending rates. Our job is to drive those reoffending rates down through the work that we do, to ensure that fewer victims are created.

Mr Beattie: Thanks, Ronnie. A good response, and you are absolutely right.

Mr Dunne: May I raise one issue?

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Briefly. I am conscious of the time. I know that some members are leaving at 4.00 pm.

Mr Dunne: It is the issue of missing persons. When someone goes missing, the first thing that can happen is that it is reported to the police. The police seem to be ending up with a growing problem that they find hard to address. Do you feel that there is a need for another agency to get involved in order to help to support the police on this ongoing problem?

Mr Armour: Many demands are placed on policing and on operational policing. Certainly, where people are going missing, the police need the support of everyone, particularly the community, in trying to address that. There is no one-size-fits-all solution or anything to say that it should be this organisation or that organisation. Of course, if the person happened to have left the prison system, we would have an interest in providing any information that we could. If it was someone with links to probation or youth justice, they would do that as well. However, I do not think that it is the case that any one organisation should be involved. I accept that it is a big challenge for the police.

Mr Doran: I do not know whether the supporting communities directorate has been in front of the Committee yet, but it or the PSNI might want to tell you about the multiagency support hubs. They address the issue of missing persons as well as other issues. The police have figures showing that six of 10 calls to the police are not about crime matters, so the multiagency support hubs are an attempt to deal with societal rather than crime issues.

Mr Dunne: OK, we will work on that.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Folks, thank you very much for coming to the Committee. It is much appreciated.