



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Probation Board for Northern Ireland

14 March 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Justice

Probation Board for Northern Ireland

14 March 2024

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Joanne Bunting (Chairperson)
Miss Deirdre Hargey (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Mr Maurice Bradley
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Sinéad Ennis
Mrs Ciara Ferguson
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Mr Stephen Hamilton	Probation Board NI
Ms Gillian Montgomery	Probation Board NI
Ms Amanda Stewart	Probation Board NI

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): I welcome the members of the Probation Board delegation, and I apologise for the delay. We have with us today Amanda Stewart, who is the chief executive, Stephen Hamilton, who is the director of operations for prisons, programmes and public protection, and Gillian Montgomery, who is director of operations for community and courts. You are all very welcome. Thank you for taking the time to come and brief us today. We look forward to hearing what you have to say, and then we will have time for questions.

Ms Amanda Stewart (Probation Board NI): Good afternoon, Chair and members. I am very pleased to be here to provide an overview of the work of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland. Ordinarily, I would be joined by our board chair, Max Murray. Max sends his apologies; he is chairing a partnership-themed board meeting at Ulster University, with participation from the Courts Service, the Department of Justice and the PSNI, and he is unable to be here. I am joined by our directors of operations: Gillian Montgomery, who is responsible for our work in the community and the courts, and Stephen Hamilton, who is responsible for prisons, public protection and —.

Mr Stephen Hamilton (Probation Board NI): Psychology and programmes.

Ms Stewart: Thank you. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): All the Ps. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Stewart: Exactly. I was appointed chief executive in October 2021, and, shortly after my appointment, I came to the Justice Committee to give an overview of the budgetary challenges facing the organisation. You will not be surprised that many of those challenges have now been realised, and I will touch on them shortly. However, today, I want to talk to you under the umbrella of the four strategic organisational priorities that the board has set for us to deliver: services, people, funding and partnerships.

In public service, we provide probation works to protect the public and to reduce reoffending by supervising those who have offended in the community whilst overseeing their rehabilitation and resettlement. Sometimes, it is really difficult for us to articulate to the public exactly what probation does. The best way of describing it is that we help people to change their lives. We aim to provide an individualised and trauma-informed approach to tackle the causes of offending, which can be different for every individual who walks through our door. There is real evidence that the relationship that our probation officers have with people subject to supervision makes a real difference in reducing the risk of reoffending and creating further victims of crime.

As well as supporting people to change, probation officers hold people to account. There is a dual role of supporting people to change when they want to do so but also holding them to account and taking enforcement action if they are not complying with the terms of their community sentence or a licence condition. That is an important part of our job, and it gives the public confidence that an individual who disregards or fails to comply with their community order is dealt with appropriately.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that, in certain circumstances, community sentences are more effective than short-term prison sentences at reducing reoffending. In nearly every jurisdiction, research has shown that community sentences are more effective than a prison sentence of less than 12 months. Probation is, therefore, very clear that crime and reoffending can be reduced through effective and rigorous sentences served in the community. With the right investment, community sentences can succeed where short prison sentences cannot. That is why, for example, we have developed the enhanced combination order, which is an alternative to a short prison sentence, and which was highlighted last year by the Northern Ireland Audit Office as an example of good practice in its 'Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland' value for money report.

We would like to see an increase in the use of community sentences, because they are demanding. We believe that that will lead to better outcomes for individuals who have offended, victims of crime and communities. We do, however, need the right investment to provide rigorous community sentences, and we need to continue to build awareness of and confidence in the effectiveness of community sentences. A key priority for us, therefore, is to develop our services, and that includes taking forward the recommendations in the Criminal Justice Inspection report on probation practice, which was published in 2020. It also requires us to work with the judiciary and others, including the wider public, to continue to build public confidence in probation's ability to protect the public and keep communities safe through the work that we do.

Linked closely to the delivery of our services is to ensure that our staff are developed, supported and empowered to maintain good-quality service delivery. The briefing document that we have provided to the Committee outlines some of the challenges that we have faced in retaining staff, particularly our qualified social work staff. We have lost a considerable number of experienced staff, mainly because of the pay differential between social workers in probation and social workers in other sectors, particularly in the health trusts. That has, undoubtedly, left many of our staff feeling that they are not valued in the justice system. Our average rate of attrition in 2023 was 11%, and, at its worst, in May 2023, it was 13%. That is creating significant organisational staff turnover and churn and is having an adverse impact on staff workloads and on how we deliver our services.

We are pleased that the Department of Justice recently signed off on our business case for pay modernisation, which reforms our outdated pay structure, and it is now with the Department of Finance. We are hoping for a speedy resolution to that matter. We now need to be able to stabilise our workforce and invest in our training and development to deliver good-quality probation practice that will keep our staff and community safe, as well as looking after our more experienced staff, who can really feel the weight of supporting their less-experienced colleagues.

To do that, we need to secure sufficient funding, which is our third priority. That has been an ongoing challenge. In the last 12 months, we have had a real cut to our budget of 6.1%, which has fundamentally impacted how we deliver our front-line services. The challenging budgetary position has meant that we have had to take some very difficult decisions. We have already reshaped our services, revised our practice standards, reduced our estate, cut back office posts and reduced funding to the

community and voluntary sector in order to live within the available budget and maintain a focus on public safety and front-line service delivery to local communities.

I do not believe that, as an organisation, we can sustain any further reductions. Indeed, at this stage, we need investment to ensure that we can meet the increasing demands on our service and have a workforce that can manage the complexity of the caseload that we are working with. Evidence shows that investing in probation has the potential to save money throughout the criminal justice system. I was pleased to hear the permanent secretary say, when he came before the Committee last month, that he wanted to invest money in the probation service and youth justice. Those were very welcome comments, because, while the most intensive community orders can be expensive to deliver, they typically cost less than custody.

Our fourth and final priority is our partnerships. As an organisation, we have built some impactful partnerships across the justice system, with the police, prisons, parole commissioners, youth justice, the courts and the community and voluntary sector. For example, we work closely with NIACRO, Women's Aid and a range of other community and voluntary sector partners. Indeed, we could not fulfil our functions without their assistance. Each organisation provides us with services and support to help us in our work in the courts, in communities, with custodies and with victims of crime.

Many of the factors that prevent reoffending, such as physical and mental health, accommodation, education and employment, sit outside the scope of the justice system. Therefore, our partnerships need to extend across Departments. We believe that there is a requirement for cross-government working in order to holistically tackle reoffending. That was a recommendation in the Audit Office report on adult reoffending, and we wholeheartedly support that recommendation. More work is needed, however, to achieve that joined-up approach.

I will finish by saying that, as its chief executive, I am incredibly proud to lead the Probation Board. The context that we work in can make it difficult for the positive work that we are involved in to be amplified. The mark of success of the services that we deliver is often explained in the numbers of people who complete community sentences, the proven reoffending rates and/or the quality and timeliness of the reports that we provide to sentencers, parole commissioners and other partners. However, the real impact is the difference that my staff make to people's lives every day, and the feedback that I get from the people whom we work with. We are a value-based organisation, and every person who comes through our door is treated respectfully. Our staff work tirelessly to do their very best for them in helping them to turn their lives around to keep communities safe. I reference the complexity of substance misuse and mental health issues in the briefing document. Everything that we do in probation is about preventing people from becoming victims of crime and making our community safer.

Chair, thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to be here. I look forward to ongoing engagement with the Committee throughout the mandate.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Thanks very much, Amanda.

Miss Hargey: Thanks very much for your presentation. What is in your briefing paper, and what you said, has come up across the board from a number of bodies and agencies. It is playing out in the stats that we are seeing as well.

Your paper states that you have just over 4,200 service users of which 89% are presenting as male. What is the overall cost of running that programme? Do you have a further breakdown on the profile of those people in addition to their being predominantly male — their class profiles and community background — to give an understanding of who is coming in? If you are looking at the more preventative side, are there patterns that we need to identify or be aware of?

I do not know whether you want all the questions at once.

Ms Stewart: Will we deal with that one first?

Miss Hargey: Yes, of course.

Ms Stewart: I will set the context for that and maybe lean into my colleagues for some of the detail on the breakdown, which we may not have.

One thing that has become quite apparent to us is the change in the profile of people whom we are working with. We are not entirely sure what is driving that. The vast majority of the people whom we work with are in the age profile of 30 to 39. Previously, age 30 would have been the point at which we would have seen reoffending starting to reduce. That might be due to early intervention work, particularly the work of the Youth Justice Agency, which the permanent secretary referred to. That shows that early intervention can make a real difference. Unfortunately, we do not have the funding to invest in some of that. We have probably only one early intervention programme — the promoting positive relationships programme. That is an early intervention domestic abuse programme, where we work with non-adjudicated caseload, along with Women's Aid and the health trusts. It is proving to be effective in stopping people from coming into the system in the first place. Ultimately, that is what we want.

In fairness, when you are under such significant budgetary challenges, you automatically have to do the things that you are required to do and what is most effective for public safety. However, the early intervention pieces, particularly around the problem solving justice courts and some offender behaviour programmes, really demonstrate positive outcomes for local communities and for the people we work with.

I will ask Stephen to speak about some of the detail of some service users, particularly the profile of the male/female breakdown.

Mr Hamilton: To understand our caseload as best we can, we give every service user an ACE score. Essentially, that is a breakdown of a score against every offending-related factor: for instance, accommodation, community, how they make decisions, reasoning and thinking, anger — all those things. We are then able to produce a map, essentially, of what issues service users have and, therefore, what probation officers are dealing with.

It is probably too detailed to go into all of it. I have it here, but I am happy to furnish the Committee with some of that. By way of headlines, as Amanda said, the complexity piece is constantly growing. It is really difficult to measure complexity, but some measures are, for instance, drug typology, multiple diagnosis, dual diagnosis for the service users whom we have, and people presenting with more than one issue. Ten or 15 years ago, when we were probation officers, there was more of a singularity about what the issue was; now, it is a complexity.

On the numbers, 82% of our cases are presenting with a mental health and addiction offending-related score. It is the combination of those two things. For issues on their own, there is an addiction offending-related score of 76%. The vast majority of people who walk through the door have those issues to deal with. Amanda referenced our relationship with the third sector, and we absolutely rely on it to provide many services; it supports the work that probation officers do.

Do you want me to talk about the women piece — the 11%?

Miss Hargey: Yes, that would be good. Thank you.

Mr Hamilton: We recognise that female service users — people who have offended — very often offend for different reasons from men. Sometimes there is coercion, and sometimes there are social reasons or reasons related to poverty. Quite often, the women whom we supervise are victims of domestic abuse, which requires a very different approach from that taken when working with male service users. They are still subject to an order; we cannot ignore the fact that there is a court order that must be upheld. We try, where we can, to allocate female probation officers to work with the female service users. We have relationships with the third sector to help us with that work. We try to take a gender-sensitive approach to working with women. That is an ongoing focus for us, because we know that the remand population of women is disproportionately high. There are significant issues in that offending population.

Miss Hargey: On the increase in caseload, I know that some of that increase was related to COVID, but I want to find out whether that is the only reason and, if not, what the other factors are. I get that cases are more complex; we are beginning to see that across housing and health — right across the board.

The other concerning figure is that 70% of registered victims are female. What is being done to address that figure? There are strategies around ending violence against women and girls, which will start to align, but could we be doing other things around some of those issues? You mentioned the

case complexity around mental health and well-being. I am aware of some community research into suicide. One of the themes emerging from that is about whether people feel or do not feel connected to a community or whether they have a sense of community. I suppose that the big thing with all those budgets — some of the synergy that is coming up across Departments — is that the low-hanging fruit to be cut is the community and voluntary sector (CVS), which is often the lifeline for those people, giving them connectedness. I want to get your assessment of that.

Do you have memoranda of understanding (MOUs)? Is the work across Departments, particularly with the Department of Health, working, or does more need to be done around that?

Lastly, what is your view on the issue around retention of staff and the impacts, even within voluntary and community organisations, on recruiting and retaining? You said that a paper has gone to the Department of Finance. Is that about the levels in social work, or is it in other areas?

Sorry, I know that there was a lot there.

Mr Hamilton: Amanda, do you want to deal with the question around staffing, and Gillian, do you want to deal with the victims issue?

Ms Stewart: Yes. I will deal with the staffing issue. I can also touch briefly on the issue of funding for the voluntary and community sector.

In our briefing document, I said that we are a community-based organisation. We are hugely reliant on the funding that we give to and the support that we get — some of it unfunded — from the community and voluntary sector. The decisions that we took on the budget last year were largely driven by the direction we were given to stop non-discretionary spend. Our legislation does not give us enough scope to provide that funding. In fairness, the Department of Justice intervened at a point in the year to release that money, which meant that we were able to sustain those services, albeit at reduced capacity.

The community and voluntary sector is a really important partner for us. We need to get to a multi-year budget and multi-year funding agreement that will mean that they do not reach a cliff edge, literally, every six months. It is usually June before we give the money out, because we do not get a budget until May. In December, we are largely saying to them, "Come March, we can't give you a guarantee of anything", so they put their staff on protected notice. That is not good for the people whom we work with. They have a relationship with service users, and it is important that we get some sort of sustainability around that. We have tried to take some mitigations in rolling the funding forward, even if it is until June, to allow the CVS to adapt, and we do that at our own risk.

I hugely appreciate the difficulties that the funding issue presents. We did not take that decision easily, because we realise that the success of probation is that it is community-based. When we are not there, people go back into the community. The community and voluntary sector is picking up when our work is done, so it is really important to us.

I will touch very briefly on the issue of the retention of staff. The pay modernisation business case was largely driven around an outdated pay structure that was impacting on our retention of staff. To give an example, a probation officer's salary scale had 22 points, and it took them 22 years to get from one side to the other; whereas, in an equivalent job, for instance, in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, it would take three years. We took legal advice and were advised that that had the potential to create legal risks for us around age discrimination. We have put a proposal to the Department to modernise our pay. It has been a very collaborative effort along with our trade unions, and some of that is ongoing. It is not to mirror the health service, but it would put us on a more comparative basis in having a five-point salary scale. The pay scales are not increasing. It will just mean that staff are getting the pay that they are entitled to in time with others in other sectors. We are confident as an organisation. Most people say that they want to stay in the organisation but feel that they have to leave because of a cost-of-living crisis or because they want to get a mortgage. We want to stabilise the organisation to be able to further develop some of our services.

Ms Gillian Montgomery (Probation Board NI): In relation to the question about victims, as Amanda said, over 500 victims have registered with us and 70% are female. The victim information scheme is an opt-in service as opposed to an opt-out. We will contact every identifiable victim and ask whether they want to engage with the service, which then allows us to pass information over to them. If they do not register, we are unable to do that. Currently, that is being done by telephone call — we will,

unfortunately, cold-call people — but the response rate has significantly increased post COVID. We have a gender balance within our victim information unit to provide that service, and we will tailor the service to the needs of the individual victim. We also engage with other partners to make sure that they get the support that they need. If we are not able to give it, we will link in with other agencies. We are undertaking a storytelling project with victims, which allows them to tell their story and get their views across. It is very much an individualised approach that we take. We are very mindful of the fact that there are significantly more females registered than males.

Mr Hamilton: Chair, I will deal with the health question quickly. It is a statement of the obvious to say how important it is that Health works with Justice on the presenting needs of our population. To make it real, we have many probation orders or licences with an additional requirement that the person must complete something that is provided by Health. That could be a programme of alcohol counselling, submitting to alcohol testing or complying with a mental health treatment. We need to know about that because ours is the statutory organisation tasked with ensuring that a person completes their statutory requirements.

I want to pay tribute to Health: it has come to the table, and we now have proper information-sharing agreements in place with Health and all five of the trusts to ensure that the information flow is there. That was a blockage — there is no doubt about it — but we have made real progress with Health. There is a definite recognition in the substance misuse world and in mental health provision that probation — the community aspect of justice; not just prisons but community supervision — absolutely needs to be represented in any strategy or action plan to do with the provision of those services, which are particularly prevalent for those who have offended.

Miss Hargey: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Members, honestly, I hate it when questions are probing and are then stymied. I really do not want to do that, but I have a list of six people, and we have 20 minutes. If members can come to their question without commentary or with minimal commentary, that would be helpful. I also ask the witnesses to be concise with their answers. I do not want to stymie the debate either, but I am conscious that we need to get through the list, and we will have people waiting outside. Please bear with me, and thank you.

Mr Bradley: Thank you very much, Chair. I will cut out the waffle and be brief.

Thanks for your presentation. I have one comment about community service. In my opinion, having seen it in operation as a success, I wish you well with it.

You cited a shift to the 30-39 age group from the 18-30 cohort. What are the trends in behaviour in substance abuse and in antisocial behaviour compared with what they were 10 years ago, and has the change had an impact on the 30-39 cohort? Do you see a correlation between substance abuse and mental health? I have one more wee question; I will leave it until after this.

Ms Montgomery: In many respects, the crime trends have been changing over the years. The vast majority of offences that we deal with are drugs-related or related to criminal damage and arson, violence against the person, or motoring and theft; they are the five key areas. That is changing. Whilst we have always worked with all offences, we see many more drugs-related offences than we did years ago, so that trend is changing. As Amanda said, we are not fully across the detail on why the age range is changing, but we could provide a more detailed breakdown if that would be helpful for members.

Mr Bradley: How important are pre-sentence reports in reducing prison sentences and the prison population and in leading people towards community service? Is the failure of the PSNI and the general population to tackle drugs gangs leading to the increase in the 30-39 cohort of service users?

Ms Stewart: In fairness, we probably do not know the answer to that. Gillian can talk about pre-sentence reports, but, in making sure that the judiciary has all the information that it needs to make the appropriate sentencing decision, there is a real dilemma for us. The more information that it has to hand, obviously, the better the outcome for communities and the individual, but that can take time. I noted some of the commentary this week about speeding up justice, and it can be a real challenge to provide in a timely way the right information to make the decision. We are doing some work with the judiciary, and Gillian has piloted a short adjournment report for some low-level crimes, where appropriate.

We probably cannot comment on the 30-39 cohort. We do not know what is driving that increase, but any decision across the justice system has a knock-on effect. I get a sense of that in probation more than anything else. I link with colleagues in England and Wales, and one of the issues that they identified is that increasing police numbers increases the prison population. That then increases the work of probation. All those decisions need to be taken in a joined-up way. In the same way, any decision that we take as an organisation to reduce our services has a knock-on effect in the courts and on the Prison Service in particular, and we need to be mindful of that.

Mr Dickson: I will attempt to be as brief as I can with two quick questions. You said that, as former probation officers, life was maybe simpler when you joined the service. Can you tell us about the complexity of the clients who are now presenting and how probation officers are prepared to deal with that by way of training and resources? My second question is about enhanced combination orders. By your admission, they are incredibly successful, but what is the impact of the budget cuts on that success?

Ms Montgomery: I will take the first question and pass to Stephen for the second. We see complexity, primarily linked to substance misuse and mental health issues. We see the effects of intergenerational trauma — trauma that is literally passed down the generations — on service users, and we also try to address in our work the impact of domestic abuse, which is increasingly prevalent. Our probation officers are all social-work qualified, so they have that core qualification in working with people, and they bring with them a really strong value base to allow them to carry out the work, which is challenging. We also provide a detailed and in-depth training programme while they are with us and at work. We offer that across the organisation so that, if we need to offer something specific, such as training related to domestic abuse, it is offered to all our probation officers and our support staff, who are our probation services officers.

Mr Hamilton: I will address the enhanced combination order (ECO) project. Amanda referenced in her initial comments the difficult decisions, which neither we nor the board wanted to take, in order to live within the budget. Part of that related to two key areas, one of which was the ECO project. It was a specialism, and we made it cheaper by integrating that service into our generic geographically-based teams. Effectively, that part has no impact on the service user. We took managerial costs and office costs out of it and made it a generic function while retaining the added benefit of ensuring that every person with an ECO has a psychological assessment, if they need it, a probation officer and a support officer. Those are the key differences: this is the hand holding and the support that the "revolving door" people, who are more chaotic, need to get them through. You referenced the fact that it has been shown to be very successful.

To live within the budget, however, we had to look at matching resource to risk. We made absolutely no change to the arrangements for those assessed as high risk, but we made a change in relation to those assessed as moderate risk. Today's low-risk person is tomorrow's high-risk person —

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Hamilton: — so it is not a comfortable position. We want to try to reignite that, if we can, to ensure that the service is what it is. This year, we are conducting an evaluation of the current set of arrangements to learn about what is the good stuff and what we will have to build back up again.

Ms Stewart: I want to make members aware of a final point about the ECO. It is available only in certain court areas at this point. We would like to roll it out across all court areas — doing so is one of the recommendations in the Audit Office report — because of its success. We do not, however, want to roll out something that does not work effectively. We need to understand the decision making around some of the reductions that we made in the enhanced combination orders if we are to ensure that they offer something different from a combination order.

Mr Easton: I will be very quick. I see that you have 394 staff and that 45 have left in the past 12 months. What are you doing to retain staff, and how many vacancies do you currently have?

Ms Stewart: I do not know the current number of vacancies. The issue for us is not the number of vacancies but the churn in the organisation. As many people as we recruit, as many people leave. We find that those whom we recruit are inexperienced staff. They are largely newly qualified social workers. For the first time, as an organisation, we have had to take the decision to place those staff in some of our really complex areas of work, such as the supervision of sex offenders, and in our

prisons. Doing that would have been unheard of in the probation services, possibly even five years ago, but we are at the point where 30% of our probation officers, who are qualified social workers, have less than three years' experience. That means that they have protected caseloads, and that creates pressure on the experienced staff. It also creates issues around our staff not feeling safe in their practice. It is really important for social workers to feel that the organisation will have their back when something goes wrong and that they can do their very best for the people with whom they work.

Our objective through the pay modernisation exercise is to hold on to what we have, given that there are challenges to the availability of social workers across all parts and sectors in the North at the moment. It is the same in other jurisdictions. There is a lead-in with the training of new social-work-qualified staff. Even if the Department of Health took a decision to increase the numbers, there would be a lead-in of possibly three or four years before we would start to realise the benefits of that. As an organisation, a priority is trying to hold on to what we have and stop losing people after the second or third year. That is typically what happens: they come in, they do their training with us, we invest in them, and then they leave and go somewhere else because they can be paid more there.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Alex, do you have any more questions?

Mr Easton: That is me. Thank you.

Mr Beattie: I apologise for being late. My previous meeting overran. Chair, I apologise to you for being late. I will be very brief.

I have two very different questions. First, we talk a lot about pre-sentence reports, drug use and making sure that the judge understands about that. Have we also looked at speech and language difficulties? Do you have support in doing so? You will know that that is an issue with young offenders. In Hydebank Wood Secure College, 75% of the young people have speech and language issues. Do you have support for that, are you actively looking at that, and do you have the therapists to help?

Ms Montgomery: The short answer is no. At this time, we do not have direct access to speech and language therapists. We collate diversity needs at the very start of any intervention or involvement with an individual, so we will know the individual's needs, but we do not have direct access to speech and language therapists. We can make those referrals and encourage people to make the referrals themselves.

Mr Beattie: To that end, if they have a speech and language issue, is it made known in any pre-sentencing report, or does that slip through the gaps at the minute?

Ms Montgomery: It should become known through the assessment that we carry out. If the individual is aware of it or we assess that there is an issue there, we will absolutely flag that. However, at this time, a direct referral, or anything like that, does not happen, because we do not have direct access.

Mr Beattie: That is fair enough.

Listen: because I have been here for a while, I know the pain that you went through as an organisation three years ago, or maybe a little longer, over terrorist-related offences (TROs). Where are we now with that?

Ms Montgomery: Again, at this time, we have no direct involvement with individuals who have been convicted of a terrorist-related offence, but a number of staff are directly employed by the Department of Justice — probation officers who are not from Northern Ireland but from His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service in England — who directly supervise those individuals in the community and link with them while they are in custody, pre-release.

Mr Beattie: Do they link in to you? Do you have stats on that, or have you said, "That is no longer our issue. We have set that aside", meaning that you do not have statistics?

Ms Montgomery: I do not have statistics on that. The Department of Justice would have direct statistics on that.

Mr Beattie: I would be interested to try to get some of those statistics, if I can, Chair. It is important because, since responsibility for TROs was handed over from the Probation Board, we are now out of sight of that particular issue.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Would you like us to write to the Department and find out?

Mr Beattie: Personally, I would, if that is acceptable.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Mr Beattie: I would be interested to know how many there are, the process and even the company that deals with it. Is it based in England?

Ms Montgomery: They are probation officers from His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

Mr Beattie: It would give us a sitrep on that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): We can do that.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, Amanda, Stephen and Gillian. Of the 4,252 service users who are supervised by the Probation Board, 89% are male. Of the 522 victims who are registered with your victim information scheme, 70% are female. Is that not a worrying divergence?

Ms Stewart: In fairness, the figure of 89% of service users being male has probably been fairly consistent. That is not unusual, in a sense, compared with other probation services. To the best of my knowledge — I do not have the long history of being a former probation officer — the service provided has largely been male-dominated. In fairness, the age profile is probably the outworkings of decisions on a "children first" approach and trying to keep people away from the justice system. As Gillian said, we are starting to see more women coming through, but, again, we find that the profile of the women whom we work with has more to do with societal issues than violence against the person. I am not surprised that, with so many male perpetrators of crime on probation, there is a higher proportion of females in our victim information scheme. I would expect that, but we advocate for a change to that scheme so that it is an opt-out, rather than opt-in, scheme. Anything that the Committee could do on that would probably increase the numbers who use the scheme. Just by making it a different scheme altogether would give wrap-around support to victims of crime.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): That is helpful to know. Justin, are you finished or have you more?

Mr McNulty: That is all, Chair, thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): First, I am glad to see that your pay situation is being sorted out. I am aware from meeting you previously that it was an issue. You mentioned the churn of probation officers and social workers. How important is the consistency of the probation officer and the social worker to your service users?

Ms Stewart: Very briefly, I will give my perspective. I will then ask Gillian and Stephen to comment. We are a relationship-based organisation. The success of our work is about the relationship that is built between the service user and the probation officer. Staff tell me that keeping the community safe is about knowing the people whom they work with. They know when things are unusual. They are in and out of houses, and it is one of the few services that continues to do home visits. They have a sense of professional curiosity that comes when you have a relationship over time, and that is why it is important for us to have stability in the service: to allow probation officers to stay with people throughout the entirety of their order, because it is a public safety issue.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Amanda, your briefing states:

"Probation believes that it can assist with solutions to the increased number of prisoners which is currently placing significant pressures on the Northern Ireland Prison Service."

In circumstances where even your services are pared down because of your budgetary situation, how can you assist in that context?

Ms Stewart: It is a fair point, and one of the challenges is that the system needs to be joined-up. There is no point in sorting out one part of the system and leaving another. I expect that, to some extent, there is huge challenge in the prisons at the minute. As an organisation, we have told our board that we need to be prepared to step up where we can to do whatever we can. We can do so only within the resources that are available to us.

The permanent secretary chaired a group with a number of leaders from across the various parts of the justice system to look at that, and we are scoping the things that we can do within our existing budget with minimal uplift and the longer-term systemic things that require additional resources. In fairness, we have put forward the roll-out of the ECO, because that is an alternative to a short prison sentence, potentially, that does not require huge amounts of money. It is a programme that works. It will definitely impact on those short prison sentences and stop people coming back into prison.

The other issues, such as bail information and bail support schemes, are definitely longer term. However, as a leader in justice, we need to step in and support each other. As I have said time and time again, there is no point in probation being OK and another part of the system being about to fall over. I would expect the same support, should I be in that position, from policing, the courts or prisons. We should come together and provide that joined-up approach to service delivery.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): That sounds like a helpful piece of work, and it would be good for the Committee to be kept apprised of how that is progressing and the options that are on the table.

I have two more questions. Stephen mentioned that there is now information sharing between you and the Department of Health.

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Does that extend to the prescription medication that people take?

Mr Hamilton: The information agreements are with the five health trusts, and they are largely about safeguarding and the services to do with mental health and substance misuse. Information sharing does not extend to GPs. We rely on the service user to tell us about prescription details, because it is by way of consent. Is that a fair summary?

Ms Montgomery: We can seek their consent to speak to their general practitioner. With their consent, we will receive that information, but it is not covered under the MOUs that we currently have with the trusts. With consent, we can access the information.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Will you follow up with me in writing on the types of information that you receive as part of the information-sharing protocol, please? We are all aware of the difficulties with information sharing in other places and what those can lead to.

My final question is about information and evidence that we have had from other places where difficulties have arisen because personality disorder (PD) is not recognised as a problem in Northern Ireland. Have you experienced that, and does it cause you difficulties?

Mr Hamilton: It does. There are no specific PD services in the pre-release stage. Post release, it is a particular issue where service users present with that complexity: personality disorders alongside, potentially, substance misuse issues and other mental health issues. Some of our service users create a very complex caseload. I do not think that I would be correct to say that there are no PD services, but the number is small. As I understand it, you have to be in incredibly high need to be accepted into those services. A lot of people presenting with issues do not receive services that would assist.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): Essentially, the numbers that we would expect to have PD are not reflected in the numbers that are receiving services treatment.

Mr Hamilton: Anecdotally, we see that, yes.

The Chairperson (Ms Bunting): That is helpful. That is great. Does anybody have anything else? No. On that basis, I thank you all for taking the time. We have really appreciated your information. If there is anything that occurs that you think we should know, please do not hesitate to get in touch. It is also helpful for us to have some idea of the things that we could do to help you. Thank you for providing us with that.