



**Public Accounts Committee**

# **Report on Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland**

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Report: NIA 85/22-27 Public Accounts Committee

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# **Powers and Membership**

## **Powers**

The Public Accounts Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Standing Orders under Section 60(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is the statutory function of the Public Accounts Committee to consider the accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly.

The Public Accounts Committee is appointed under Assembly Standing Order No. 56 of the Standing Orders for the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has the power to send for persons, papers and records and to report from time to time. Neither the Chairperson nor Deputy Chairperson of the Committee shall be a member of the same political party as the Minister of Finance or of any junior minister appointed to the Department of Finance.

## **Membership**

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)
- Ms Cheryl Brownlee MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
- Mr Tom Buchanan MLA
- Mr Pádraig Delargy MLA
- Ms Diane Forsythe MLA
- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
- Mr David Honeyford MLA
- Mr Colin Crawford MLA<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>With effect from 5 March 2024 Mr John Stewart replaced Mr Robbie Butler

<sup>2</sup>With effect from 21 October 2024 Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr John Stewart

# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

the Assembly	The Northern Ireland Assembly
C&AG	Comptroller and Auditor General
The Department	Department of Justice
DE	Department of Education
DfC	Department for Communities
DfE	Department for the Economy
ECO	Enhanced Combination Order
EM	Electronic Monitoring
NI	Northern Ireland
NIAO or audit office	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIPS	Northern Ireland Prison Service
PBNI	Probation Board for Northern Ireland
RoI	Republic of Ireland
SMC	Substance Misuse Court
The Commissioner	The Commissioner for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland
The Committee	Public Accounts Committee
UK	United Kingdom
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector

## Executive Summary

1. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 3 April 2025 and 10 April 2025 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG's) Report "Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland". The main witnesses were:

### 3 April 2025, the Department of Justice (DoJ)

- **Hugh Widdis**, Accounting Officer, Department of Justice;
- **Beverley Wall**, Director of Reducing Offending Division and Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Department of Justice;
- **Sean Holland**, Director of Access to Justice, Department of Justice;
- **Amanda Stewart**, Chief Executive, Probation Board for Northern Ireland;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.

### 10 April 2025, Extern and NIACRO

- **Patricia Devlin**, Programme Manager, Criminal Justice Services, Extern;
- **Emma Purdon**, Director of Communities and Family Services, Extern;
- **Fiona Greene**, Chief Executive, NIACRO;
- **Rachel Long**, Director of Operations, NIACRO;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.

2. The Committee also sought written evidence from the Commissioner for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland, as well as requesting subsequent written clarification from the Department of Justice on a number of matters raised during its initial oral evidence session.

## Background

3. The Committee is well aware of the huge impact that adult reoffending has on peoples' lives and wider society. Too many people find themselves the victims of crime and having to deal with both the serious physical and psychological

repercussions. In addition, from a purely financial point of view, work recently completed by the Department of Justice (the Department) has estimated the total economic and societal cost of crime in Northern Ireland (NI) for 2021-22 at around £3.4 billion, with the annual cost of reoffending alone standing at £374 million, highlighting why progress is needed in these areas.

4. Addressing adult reoffending is complex and cross-cutting. Many influencing factors are outside the direct control of the justice system and require cross-government actions. These include stable family environments, poverty levels, accommodation, educational and employment attainment, and physical and mental health. The Committee firmly believes that more cross-government collaboration is required to meaningfully address these issues. Preventative work by all parts of government around these issues is needed to try and reduce the numbers of people who become trapped in a cycle of reoffending and to lessen its impact of it on both wider society and offenders.

### **The reoffending rate in NI has largely remained static for the last decade**

5. The percentage adult reoffending rate has largely remained unchanged for some time. This currently stands at 17.4%, having remained between 16% and 18% for the last decade. Making progress has proved problematic, and reducing this rate must be a key objective for the Department and wider stakeholders. However, the local justice system continues to be faced with a very challenging residual cohort of hard-to-reach offenders, predominantly young males who repeatedly commit acquisitive crimes such as burglary, robbery and theft.
6. The Committee heard that it is still not possible to benchmark offending and reoffending rates in NI with the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI). This is a key information gap, and further work in the area along with wider benchmarking is required to objectively monitor performance in this important area.

## **A cross-departmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending, and a real focus on action, is long overdue**

7. The Committee welcomes that the Department eventually formally reviewed both the longstanding 2013 Strategic Framework and 2015 Desistence Strategy documents. A considerable period had passed since these were developed and witnesses acknowledged important weakness within these.
8. Within the new Programme for Government 2024-2027, the Committee heard that the Department is now leading the development of a revised cross-departmental strategy to address offending and reoffending and is working with other key government departments to develop this. This new joined-up approach is positive but again should have been in place much earlier, given the major impact issues such as health, accommodation and employment have on reoffending. It is imperative that the new strategy includes a detailed, time bound action plan.
9. It is essential that the pace of action in this area is quickened significantly, and in this context the Committee was pleased to hear that the Department intends to finalise the strategy in the next six months.

## **There is also a clear need for an updated outcomes measurement framework**

10. Major improvements are also required to the Department's outcomes measurement framework. For too long there has been insufficient clarity on which measures aimed at addressing reoffending are achieving greatest impact and should be further supported and the Committee also learned from the Department that better data linkages are needed between other government departments.
11. Work ongoing between the Department and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to develop outcomes dashboards around accommodation, addictions and learning and skills is however welcome.

## **Rehabilitation provision for short-term prisoners needs to be improved**

12. The proportion of short-term prison sentences in NI continues to be much higher than the rest of the UK and the RoI, with the latest available data showing that 28% of the local prison population were serving a short-term sentence compared to only 5% in England and Wales, 18% in Scotland, and 11% in the RoI. The Committee considers that the larger proportion of short-term prison sentences imposed in NI coupled with related gaps in rehabilitative support have contributed significantly to a high reoffending rate of 51 per cent amongst this group.
13. The Audit Office had identified that short-term prisoners in NI have tended to only receive limited support on a 'through the gate' basis approaching release, or upon actual release back into the community, with such support more advanced elsewhere in the UK. However, the Committee heard about some recent progress in this area including a pilot prisoner support project, learning and skills training, the provision of housing advice approaching release and employability and skills coaching.
14. The Committee welcomes all such initiatives but notes that many of them are at a very early stage and are being piloted and not available to all prisoners across the estate. It is therefore essential that the success of the various initiatives are assessed quickly so that they can be rolled out to all prisoners.

## **Short-term custodial sentences are costly and more needs to be done to develop alternatives**

15. The Committee heard that while there will always be a need to impose short-term prison sentences in some cases, there is substantial evidence that alternative disposals and sentencing options, particularly those centred in community settings, are more effective in promoting rehabilitation. In contrast, short-term custodial sentences can have criminogenic effects which increase the risk of reoffending and are considerably more costly.
16. The Committee considers that the development of such community sentencing initiatives in NI has been much too slow and once again has lagged behind the

rest of the UK. The Department began a sentencing review in 2016, and it is very disappointing that this has not yet developed to the stage where legislation has been introduced to widen the sentencing options available to the local judiciary.

17. The Committee also heard about other initiatives such as the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) programme which have shown considerable promise by reducing reoffending and which would provide savings in the medium-term but which have only been rolled out in limited areas because of immediate cost concerns.
18. Other options presented to the Committee to reduce the need for short term sentences included Electronic Monitoring which has been widely used in the UK, but which has only been used on a limited basis in NI, and the greater use of restorative justice programmes as part of the rehabilitation of offenders.
19. The Committee considers it essential that all of these areas are followed up urgently, with a view to reducing the extent of short-term prison sentences in NI. In the absence of this, the related dis-advantages, challenges and costs these bring to the justice system, and to wider society, will likely remain unchanged.

### **Remand levels in NI are too high and are having major implications on reoffending**

20. The Committee is also concerned at the high level of remand prisoners in NI. The most recent data for 2023-24 shows that 37% of the local prison population were on remand, compared to 18% in England and Wales and just under 28% in Scotland. Similar to short-term prisoners, there is limited time available to work with this group on rehabilitation and existing pressures within the prison estate are further reducing opportunity for such work to be undertaken. It is no surprise therefore that the reoffending rate for those placed on remand is also high.
21. In 2020, 47% of remand prisoners in NI ultimately did not receive a prison sentence. As the annual costs of custodial options (around £54,000 per prisoner) are much higher than community sentences or bail, lower numbers of

both short-term and remand prisoners would likely improve of-fender outcomes and deliver significant cost savings.

22. While the decision to place individuals on remand lies entirely with the judiciary the Committee heard that NI has been slow in developing and implementing initiatives which would allow the judiciary to safely grant bail in an increased number of cases. The Committee considers it essential that this area is addressed by the Department through the provision of better bail support services and bail information.

### **The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) has a vital role in rehabilitating offenders, but its work is being hampered by funding uncertainty**

23. The Committee heard evidence from the Department that the VCS is essential to the delivery of rehabilitation work as they have the right expertise and skills sets to oversee and interact with what is a challenging and complex client group, as well as crucially gaining their trust.
24. However, a lack of long-term funding continues to impact on the valuable work done by VCS organisations. The VCS told us that the ongoing absence of multi-year funding creates significant challenges for planning and the delivery of many VCS rehabilitation programmes is frequently undermined by the 'cliff edge' position that can arise as single-year funding draws to a close.
25. The Committee considers that the services provided by the VCS are critically important to addressing the root causes of reoffending. It is therefore essential that the Department consider how it can provide more certainty to the sector, particularly if multi-year budgets become available in the future.

# Summary of Recommendations

## Recommendation 1

The Department must continue to work on identifying and implementing best practice services and initiatives from other jurisdictions to maximise reoffending outcomes. As part of this, work must continue to try to benchmark local reoffending statistics with other jurisdictions (including the UK and RoI).

## Recommendation 2

The Department must, before the end of the current financial year, set a challenging but achievable specific percentage target to reduce the reoffending rate over a set period of time and focus collective actions accordingly to achieve this target.

## Recommendation 3

The Department must finalise the development of its cross-government offending and reoffending strategy within the next 6 months. This should have a central focus on victims and aim to reduce the reoffending rate in NI. It should take cognisance of and align with all existing strategies and initiatives (for example, prevention, desistance and restorative justice) across key stakeholders. It should also:

- be underpinned by a detailed action plan of proposed measures to support the delivery of this strategy with target implementation dates and assigned responsibility for implementing each action;
- establish appropriate accountability arrangements for all stakeholders and regularly measure and report performance against established targets; and
- include the development and implementation of a data sharing agreement across all relevant departments to ensure data is collected, collated and reported on.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The Department must work to enhance its outcome measurement framework within the next 6 months. This should include finalising its development work with NISRA in relation to outcome measurement dashboards.

#### **Recommendation 5**

To reduce the reoffending rate for short-term prisoners, the Department must urgently work to fully roll out the delivery of its rehabilitation programmes across all of its prisons. It must also ensure that sufficient priority is given to rehabilitation in all custodial settings, particularly in the context of a growing prison population.

#### **Recommendation 6**

The Department along with its statutory and VCS partners must, within the next 6 months, introduce a framework to better measure and understand the proportion of short-term prisoners who receive rehabilitation support in custody to identify any ongoing provision gaps and how these can be addressed.

#### **Recommendation 7**

The Department should ensure that it develops a framework for its sentencing review urgently so that legislation, which includes proposals for alternative community disposals, is available for consultation within 6 months.

#### **Recommendation 8**

The Department must make the full roll-out of the ECO programme across NI a key priority to be delivered within the next 18 months and explore all options for securing funding to support this. In addition, other problem-solving justice initiatives, including sentencing options that address the issues of addiction and/or mental health, should be further designed and piloted with a view to assessing their cost effectiveness and wider viability.

### **Recommendation 9**

Electronic monitoring has been used widely and effectively in the rest of the UK as a means of reducing custodial sentences. The Department should ensure that contracts for the latest technology are in place and the associated monitoring is beginning to be used within the next 6 months.

### **Recommendation 10**

The Department should ensure that adequate priority is given to achieve improvements in the important area of restorative justice, and to deliver on its Adult Restorative Justice Strategy which it first launched in March 2022. The Committee would like to be advised of improvements achieved to date in the area of restorative justice once the 2024-25 Annual Progress Report is published.

### **Recommendation 11**

The Department must be much more ambitious in increasing the level of bail support and bail information schemes available to the local judiciary. The Committee recommends that within 12 months it should introduce bail support services and bail information aimed at the male prison population.

### **Recommendation 12**

The Department must now start planning for the possible introduction of multi-year budgets. This should include liaison with the VCS to assess how under these new arrangements it can maximise the benefits from longer-term budgets and prioritise key rehabilitation services with proven successful outcomes.

### **Recommendation 13**

The Department should, within 12 months, complete a VFM assessment of the outcomes achieved from funding currently allocated to the VCS for rehabilitation initiatives, with a particular focus on assessing if increased support for the sector would likely yield greater invest to save returns. As part of this work, the Department and the VCS sector should also look at the possibility of further funding opportunities with other jurisdictions.

## Introduction

26. The Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) met on 3 April 2025 and 10 April 2025 to consider the Comptroller and Auditor General's (C&AG's) Report "Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland". The main witnesses were:

3 April 2025, the Department of Justice (DoJ)

- **Hugh Widdis, Accounting Officer, Department of Justice;**
- **Beverley Wall, Director of Reducing Offending Division and Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, Department of Justice;**
- **Sean Holland, Director of Access to Justice, Department of Justice;**
- **Amanda Stewart, Chief Executive, Probation Board for Northern Ireland;**
- **Dorinnia Carville, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and**
- **Stuart Stevenson, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.**

10 April 2025, Extern and NIACRO

- **Patricia Devlin, Programme Manager, Criminal Justice Services, Extern;**
- **Emma Purdon, Director of Communities and Family Services, Extern;**
- **Fiona Greene, Chief Executive, NIACRO;**
- **Rachel Long, Director of Operations, NIACRO;**
- **Dorinnia Carville, C&AG, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and**
- **Stuart Stevenson, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Department of Finance.**

27. The Committee also sought written evidence from the Commissioner for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland, as well as requesting subsequent written clarification on a number of matters from the Department of Justice in respect of several issues raised during its initial oral evidence session.

## Background

28. The Committee is very conscious of the significant impact that offending and reoffending has on peoples' lives. Too many people find themselves the victims of crime and consequently having to deal with both the serious physical and psychological repercussions. In providing evidence to our enquiry, the Commissioner for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland highlighted that "The lasting impact of crime on victims is often compounded by the persistent fear that perpetrators may reoffend. This concern can erode a victim's sense of security, amplify feelings of powerlessness and perpetuate cycles of trauma. Reoffending not only undermines trust in our justice system but also revictimises individuals who can feel that their needs and views are overlooked in efforts to address offending".
29. Work recently completed by the Department of Justice (The Department) has estimated the total economic and societal cost of crime in Northern Ireland (NI) for 2021-22 at around £3.4 billion, with the annual cost of reoffending alone in that year standing at £374 million. These estimated costs reflect the costs incurred by businesses and individuals in trying to prevent and protect themselves from crime, the costs which arise from the consequences of crime including damage to property and injury to individuals, and costs incurred by the justice system in responding to crime. These stark statistics highlight why progress needs to be made in reducing offending and reoffending.
30. Reducing adult reoffending however is complex and cross-cutting. Many of the factors which influence it are outside the direct control of the Department and the wider justice system and require actions across government. These factors include stable family environments, poverty levels, accommodation, educational and employment attainment, and physical and mental health. In our evidence session with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), witnesses strongly called for more cross-government collaboration to tackle these issues if reoffending is to be meaningfully addressed.
31. Given the clear impact of these factors, more preventative work also needs to be done 'upstream' by other parts of government around these issues to help

reduce the numbers of people who become trapped in a cycle of reoffending and to lessen the impact on both them and wider society.

**Despite the Department's efforts over the last decade, the reoffending rate in NI has largely remained static**

32. Positively, NI continues to have a much lower prison population per 100,000 population than the rest of the United Kingdom (UK), but a slightly higher population than the Republic of Ireland (RoI). The number of adult offenders and reoffenders in NI has also significantly reduced compared to the situation a decade ago, with the number of offenders having fallen from 30,000 to around 18,300, and the number of reoffenders reducing from 4,900 to just under 3,200.
33. The Committee is very concerned however that the percentage adult reoffending rate has essentially remained largely unchanged for some time. This currently stands at 17.4%, having remained in a range between 16% and 18% for the last decade. Witnesses acknowledged that this percentage rate has proved stubborn and problematic to make progress against.
34. The Audit Office reported that a key factor behind this is that the local justice system continues to be faced with a very challenging residual cohort of hard-to-reach offenders. Whilst the female prison population has recently been rising, the overwhelming challenge continues to be young males who are repeatedly committing acquisitive crimes such as burglary, robbery and theft. Going forward, reducing this rate must be a key objective for the Department and its colleagues and stakeholders across and beyond the justice system.
35. The Committee heard that it is still not possible to benchmark offending and reoffending rates in NI with the rest of the UK and RoI. This is a key information gap, and further work is now needed to ensure comparison of reoffending rates and data is possible. Without this, it is very difficult to firmly or objectively conclude on performance in this important area. It is however welcome that a five nations group has been established with government representation from NI, RoI, Scotland, England and Wales, to try and share mutual learning and wider best practice related to managing adult reoffending.

## **Recommendation 1**

**The Department must continue to work on identifying and implementing best practice services and initiatives from other jurisdictions to maximise reoffending outcomes. As part of this, work must continue to try to benchmark local reoffending statistics with other jurisdictions (including the UK and RoI).**

## **Recommendation 2**

**The Department must, before the end of the current financial year, set a challenging but achievable specific percentage target to reduce the reoffending rate over a set period of time and focus collective actions accordingly to achieve this target.**

**A cross-departmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending, with a real focus on action, urgently needs to be put in place**

36. The Committee welcomes the evidence from the Departmental witnesses that they recognised the longstanding 2013 Strategic Framework for reducing offending and 2015 Desistance Strategy documents which guided the strategic management of reoffending for many years were now outdated. Witnesses acknowledged that a considerable period had passed since these documents were developed and that much has changed since then, so this evaluation was well overdue.
37. The Committee considers that these outdated documents were allowed to guide the strategic management of reoffending for too long without being appropriately assessed. The result is a current approach which mainly involves various pilot programmes across limited locations and partial reviews of existing initiatives, which is fragmented at best.
38. When the Audit Office reported, it highlighted that the much needed cross-government arrangements to address reoffending had not sufficiently progressed. It stated that improvements were required, predominantly in areas such as accommodation and mental health support, where poor or complex

interfaces between these systems and justice were acting as significant barriers to resettlement. The Committee also heard evidence from the VCS which strongly supported this view.

39. Within the new Programme for Government 2024-2027, the Department told the Committee that it is now leading the development of a revised cross-departmental strategy which will address both offending and reoffending. As part of this, it is working with the Department for Communities (DfC), the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for the Economy (DfE) to try and obtain their support for this approach. It is vital that the pace of action in this whole area is quickened significantly so it was encouraging to hear that the Department hope to finalise the development of the strategy within the next six months. It must now strive to achieve this deadline.
40. The Committee endorses this enhanced joined-up approach but again believe that it should have been in place much earlier, given the major impact issues such as health, accommodation and employment have on reoffending. Had this been the case, much more progress may have been made than has been the case to date. In addition to the need for improved cross-government work, the VCS told us that action plans and accountability across the area also needed to be considerably strengthened.
41. While the new strategy offers the potential for a new beginning in this area, it is essential that all parts of government, fully commit to its implementation including, where necessary, providing funding. The Department acknowledged that a key challenge is to turn a willingness from others to assist in developing the strategy into hard actions and investment in the right areas to ensure it does not under-perform.
42. As part of the development of the new strategy the Committee considers it important that the Department looks at best practice from other countries, so it has a better idea of 'what good looks like'. The Committee was unconvinced by the evidence provided by the Department which referred vaguely to work done in Nordic countries but was unable to provide any specific details of actual best practice examples.

43. The recent work undertaken by the Department to estimate the total economic and societal cost of crime is welcomed. Overall, as noted earlier in our report, this has estimated that the annual cost of reoffending alone in 2021-22 stood at £374 million. This work places the Department in a better-informed position to identify whether the estimated £16 million annual funding currently invested directly by NIPS and PBNi to reoffending initiatives represents a sufficient response to this. The high costs associated with crime and reoffending also clearly shows the potential for invest to save benefits which could be realised, and how an intelligent, refreshed, and targeted strategy could contribute to achieving these.

### **Recommendation 3**

**The Department must finalise the development of its cross-government offending and reoffending strategy within the next 6 months. This should have a central focus on victims and aim to reduce the reoffending rate in NI. It should take cognisance of and align with all existing strategies and initiatives (for example, prevention, desistance and restorative justice) across key stakeholders. It should also:**

- **be underpinned by a detailed action plan of proposed measures to support the delivery of this strategy with target implementation dates and assigned responsibility for implementing each action;**
- **establish appropriate accountability arrangements for all stakeholders and regularly measure and report performance against established targets; and**
- **include the development and implementation of a data sharing agreement across all relevant departments to ensure data is collected, collated and reported on.**

## **The enhanced strategic direction needs to be supported by a much stronger outcome measurement framework**

44. The Committee also considers that major improvements are required to the Department's outcomes measurement framework. The Audit Office report highlighted the need for improved performance measures within the Department that indicate achievement of longer-term outcomes, to allow assessment of the effectiveness of service provision and to plan future delivery and resourcing. For too long there has been insufficient clarity on which measures are achieving greatest impact and should be further supported, or others which might potentially be discontinued. This is important in maximising benefits in times of finite resources.
45. The Committee was surprised to learn that outside of the recently introduced prisoner support programme, limited information or tracking is available to monitor the progress of short-term prisoners after they leave prison. This area must be strengthened as a priority if outcome measurement is to become much more mature and effective, but this will clearly require better data linkages with other government departments. More positively, the Committee was encouraged by the evidence that the Department is currently working with NISRA to develop outcomes dashboards around the key factors of accommodation, addictions and learning and skills although noted that these are at an early stage.

### **Recommendation 4**

**The Department must work to enhance its outcome measurement framework within the next 6 months. This should include finalising its development work with NISRA in relation to outcome measurement dashboards.**

## **Rehabilitation provision for short-term prisoners needs to be improved**

46. When the Audit Office reported, it highlighted that the proportion of short-term prison sentences imposed in NI was much higher than the rest of the UK and

the RoI. The latest available data for 2023-24 underlines that this remains the case. This shows that 28% of the local prison population were serving a short-term sentence compared to only 5% in England and Wales, 18% in Scotland, and 11% in the RoI.

47. The Committee considers that the very large number of short-term prison sentences imposed in NI allied with the longstanding and clear gaps in rehabilitative support have contributed significantly to the high reoffending rates amongst this group, which currently stands at 51%.
48. The Committee heard how several factors mean that delivering this support to short-term prisoners can be challenging. These include the short time they spend in custody (an average of around four months), and the statutory requirement placed on the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) to rehabilitate longer-term prisoners, meaning short-term prisoners frequently have lower priority.
49. The Audit Office report identified that short-term prisoners in NI have tended to only receive limited support on a 'through the gate' basis approaching release, or upon actual release back into the community, with such support more advanced elsewhere in the UK. This undermines offenders attempts to transition to community life particularly as issues can often arise upon release such as accessing sustainable accommodation, benefits, and healthcare, substantially increasing the risk of reoffending in the key three-month period immediately after release.
50. The Committee was encouraged to hear about some recent progress in providing rehabilitation support to local short-term prisoners. Various initiatives have commenced across custody, 'through the gate', and community settings. This has included a pilot prisoner support project delivered in partnership with Extern, learning and skills training, the provision of housing advice approaching release and employability and skills coaching. Importantly, exit passports, which are issued to prisoners close to release, and which are aimed at helping prisoners access essential services such as housing, employment, and healthcare, have also been enhanced, with the aim of ensuring all prisoners leave prison with the support they need for community rehabilitation.

51. The Committee welcomes all of these initiatives but notes that many of them are at a very early stage and are being piloted and are only currently available to prisoners in one NI prison. It is essential that the success of the various initiatives are assessed quickly so that they can be rolled out promptly across all prisoners.
52. The Committee also heard that the Department has commenced a review of the NIPS Prisoner Development Model<sup>1</sup>. In the context of managing complex prisoners with a range of issues, this appears to be a logical development. However, witnesses also highlighted that the effective delivery of the Department's ongoing rehabilitation work delivered within this model is being placed under significant strain, by the continued growth and complexity of needs of the local prison population.

### **Recommendation 5**

**To reduce the reoffending rate for short-term prisoners, the Department must urgently work to fully roll out the delivery of its rehabilitation programmes across all of its prisons. It must also ensure that sufficient priority is given to rehabilitation in all custodial settings, particularly in the context of a growing prison population.**

53. The Committee was surprised that whilst every local prisoner has access to the rehabilitation and resettlement initiatives referenced above under the Prisoner Development Model, the Department was not able to tell us what proportion of short-term prisoners availed of this and received meaningful support in practice.

### **Recommendation 6**

**The Department along with its statutory and VCS partners must, within the next 6 months, introduce a framework to better measure and understand the proportion of short-term prisoners who receive rehabilitation support**

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<sup>1</sup> The NIPS Prisoner Development Model (PDM) identifies individual prisoner's risks, needs and strengths, and involves Personal Development Plans (PDPs) being agreed for each offender. Nine key 'resettlement pathways', reflecting the main barriers to desistance, guide prisoner needs assessments and aim to reduce the likelihood of reoffending, alongside preparing offenders for release.

**in custody to identify any ongoing provision gaps and how these can be addressed.**

**Short-term custodial sentences are costly and more now needs to be done to develop viable community alternatives**

54. The Committee recognises that courts will always need to impose some short-term prison sentences as individual cases must be assessed on their respective merits and public safety must also be considered and protected. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence that alternative disposals and sentencing options, particularly those centred in community settings, are more effective in promoting rehabilitation. In contrast, short-term custodial sentences can have criminogenic effects which increase the risk of reoffending and are considerably more costly.
55. The Committee considers that the development of such community sentencing initiatives in NI has been much too slow and once again has lagged behind the rest of the UK. Based on our evidence session, it is also apparent that, since the Audit Office reported, further progress which would provide the judiciary with effective alternatives to short-term prison sentences has been limited.
56. Having been announced in 2016 and concluded in 2021, the Committee views it highly unsatisfactory that work undertaken as part of a Department-led sentencing review has not yet developed to the stage where legislation has actually been introduced to widen the sentencing options available to the local judiciary.
57. The Department told us that as part of the development of new legislation it is examining community disposal proposals with a particular focus on those who are awarded suspended sentences. It considers that this should achieve the greatest payback as this group of offenders are often at the threshold of receiving short-term custodial sentences. The option being assessed would provide the judiciary with the alternative option of imposing a suspended sentence with a community sentence element added onto it. The Department is also assessing the merits of adopting the concept of prison as a measure of last resort and anticipates bringing legislation outlining proposals for alternative community disposals to the Assembly this Autumn. Given the long time taken to

progress the sentencing review, it is crucial that the Department now delivers some form of positive change in this important area.

### **Recommendation 7**

**The Department should ensure that that it develops a framework for its sentencing review urgently so that legislation, which includes proposals for alternative community disposals, is available for consultation within 6 months.**

58. The Committee also heard about various problem-solving justice initiatives which have shown promise but have not been fully rolled out. In particular, the Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) programme has demonstrated significant benefits. An ECO is an alternative to judges imposing short-term prison sentences, which involves offenders completing unpaid community work, doing victim-focused work, and taking part in rehabilitation programmes. Evaluations have identified considerable benefits arising from the ECO pilots delivered to date, including significantly lower reoffending rates for offenders compared to those given short-term prison sentences, as well as much lower costs. Importantly, by not sending these offenders to prison, ECOs reduce the potential for offenders losing their job, accommodation, and family links, which are important considerations in lowering the risk of reoffending.
59. The ECO programme was initially introduced in three court areas in October 2015 and was later extended to another area in October 2018. However, whilst estimates indicate that full roll-out of ECOs across all of NI could deliver financial benefit in the medium term, immediate financial constraints have largely prevented any further expansion. Whilst we welcome plans for a further limited expansion to another court area in 2025-26, the Committee is very concerned that the very slow progress in ensuring full regional roll-out is a clear lost opportunity to address reoffending behaviour and achieve cost savings.
60. In relation to other problem-solving justice initiatives, the Committee was told that the Substance Misuse Court (SMC)<sup>2</sup> has not yet been expanded to any

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<sup>2</sup> The Substance Misuse Court was developed by NICTS to specifically target drug and alcohol linked offending behaviour within the community. The SMC involves intervention services delivered by PBNI and Addiction NI, including

other court area outside of Belfast despite it having been successfully piloted at Laganside Court, and that the concept of a Mental Health Court pilot was paused in 2023 and never recommenced. The Committee notes that these initiatives were designed to target individuals with addiction and mental health issues and the lack of progress in delivering them as alternatives to short term sentences is very disappointing.

### **Recommendation 8**

**The Department must make the full roll-out of the ECO programme across NI a key priority to be delivered within the next 18 months and explore all options for securing funding to support this. In addition, other problem-solving justice initiatives, including sentencing options that address the issues of addiction and / or mental health, should be further designed and piloted with a view to assessing their cost effectiveness and wider viability.**

61. Electronic Monitoring (EM) has been widely used as an alternative to short term custodial sentences in Great Britain. However, the Committee heard that its use in NI has remained much more limited. The Commissioner for Victims of Crime underscored why urgent progress is essential in this area, and how outdated the current technology used in NI is, being based around the use of the landline telephone system and how GPS based technology is required to manage and monitor offenders under licence conditions. The Committee noted that a recent bid for transformation funding to enable local adoption of newer EM technology was successful and considers it essential that this technology is introduced and used without further delay.

### **Recommendation 9**

**Electronic monitoring has been used widely and effectively in the rest of the UK as a means of reducing custodial sentences. The Department should ensure that contracts for the latest technology are in place and the associated monitoring is beginning to be used within the next 6 months.**

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substance testing, therapeutic intervention, access to social support and regular court. The Mental Health Court pilot proposed trying to tackle offending behaviour through tailored community-based orders providing specific support for offenders with mental health issues

62. Restorative justice is another element that can play a critical role in rehabilitating offenders. This concept provides an opportunity for the victims of crime and the perpetrator to come together to focus on repairing harm and minimising the impact of offending on victims. The Committee heard how this restorative work can be very powerful where there are willing participants on both sides. However, there has been limited progress in rolling out restorative justice programmes in NI, which is disappointing, particularly as, in the right circumstances it could provide the judiciary with a feasible alternative to imposing short-term prison sentences, and indeed enhance the opportunity for rehabilitation, accountability and community healing.

### **Recommendation 10**

**The Department should ensure that adequate priority is given to achieve improvements in the important area of restorative justice, and to deliver on its Adult Restorative Justice Strategy which it first launched in March 2022. The Committee would like to be advised of improvements achieved to date in the area of restorative justice once the 2024-25 Annual Progress Report is published.**

### **Remand levels in NI are too high and are negatively impacting on reoffending**

63. The Committee is also very concerned at the very high level of remand prisoners in NI. The most recent data for 2023-24 shows that 37% of the local prison population were on remand, compared to 18% in England and Wales and just under 28% in Scotland. There is limited time available to work with this group on rehabilitation (with the current average remand period being 58 days) and in many cases remand prisoners are reluctant to engage with rehabilitation services as it is viewed as an admission of guilt. For those prisoners who are ultimately convicted to a custodial sentence they can often leave prison after a very short time when their time already served on remand is taken into account, further limiting the possibility of rehabilitation work. The Commissioner for Victims of Crime told us that the lack of rehabilitative work undertaken with remand prisoners exacerbates reoffending risk.

64. The Committee was alarmed at the number of local remand prisoners in NI who ultimately do not receive a prison sentence. In 2020, this amounted to over 1,300 prisoners (47% of those committed to prison), indicating how many remands may be avoidable. As the annual costs of custodial options (around £50,000 per prisoner place) are much higher than community sentences or bail, lower numbers of both short-term and remand prisoners would likely improve offender outcomes and deliver significant cost savings to the public purse.
65. The Committee was told that the decision to place individuals who have been charged on remand lies entirely with the judiciary who must consider important factors including potential public safety implications and the risk that suspects could attempt to interfere with evidence or witnesses, abscond, or reoffend. Whilst the absolute validity of these points is recognised, the fact remains that the level of local remand prisoners is far higher than the rest of the UK, and this contributes to higher reoffending rates.
66. The Committee heard that this has been driven by NI being much slower in developing and implementing initiatives which would allow the judiciary to safely grant bail in an increased number of cases. In particular, bail support services in NI are limited and there is no bail information scheme to provide assurance to the judiciary when considering bail applications that offending risks could be managed in the community. The Department accepted that bail support services in NI are behind other jurisdictions, with its current bail support efforts still at pilot stage, and currently only focussing on a minority cohort of female prisoners.

### **Recommendation 11**

**The Department must be much more ambitious in increasing the level of bail support and bail information schemes available to the local judiciary. The Committee recommends that within 12 months it should introduce bail support services and bail information aimed at the male prison population.**

## **The VCS plays a vital role in rehabilitating offenders but needs more certainty on funding**

67. The Committee heard evidence from the Department that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) is essential to the delivery of rehabilitation work as they have the right expertise and skills sets to oversee and interact with what is a challenging and complex client group, as well as crucially gaining their trust. The Committee therefore welcomes the introduction of the current short-term prisoner programme which is being delivered in partnership by the Department and Extern.
68. However, a lack of long-term funding identified continues to impact on the valuable work done by VCS organisations. The VCS told us that the ongoing absence of multi-year funding creates significant challenges for planning and delivering its work, impacting significantly on staff recruitment and retention. The delivery of many VCS rehabilitation programmes is frequently undermined by the 'cliff edge' position that can arise as single-year funding draws to an end, and uncertainty arises over longer-term sustainability. Some VCS initiatives and programmes also have limited life spans, so it is important that the Department liaises on an ongoing basis with the sector to manage the risks associated with this.
69. The VCS also highlighted that the rising prison population and increasing numbers of PBNi community licenses in recent years means demand for almost all its rehabilitation services now far exceeds the funded capacity available to the sector, with its resources instead having remained static. Currently, the VCS has insufficient resources to meet demand for most of its services, including those which seek to strengthen offenders' family ties, provide employability support, and offer financial advice. As a result, many people face lengthy waits to access these services. The Committee emphasises that these services are critical to addressing some of the key root causes of reoffending, and that whilst gaps in provision remain, these will simply not deliver the full benefits achievable. As the introduction of multi-year budgets now appears much more likely in the near future, the opportunity to better strategically plan and prioritise which rehabilitation initiatives most merit longer-term support will arise.

## **Recommendation 12**

**The Department must now start planning for the possible introduction of multi-year budgets. This should include liaison with the VCS to assess how under these new arrangements it can maximise the benefits from longer-term budgets and prioritise key rehabilitation services with proven successful outcomes.**

## **Recommendation 13**

**The Department should, within 12 months, complete a VFM assessment of the outcomes achieved from funding currently allocated to the VCS for rehabilitation initiatives, with a particular focus on assessing if increased support for the sector would likely yield greater invest to save returns. As part of this work, the Department and the VCS sector should also look at the possibility of further funding opportunities with other jurisdictions.**

# Links to Appendices

## Appendix 1: Minutes of Proceedings

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

## Appendix 2: Minutes of Evidence

[View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report](#)

## Appendix 3: Correspondence

[View correspondence issued and received related to the report](#)

## Appendix 4: Other Documents

[View other documents related to the report](#)

## Appendix 5: List of Witnesses that gave evidence to the Committee

- **Hugh Widdis**, Department of Justice;
- **Beverley Wall**, Department of Justice;
- **Sean Holland**, Department of Justice;
- **Amanda Stewart**, Probation Board for Northern Ireland;
- **Patricia Devlin**, Programme Manager, Criminal Justice Services, Extern;
- **Emma Purdon**, Director of Communities and Family Services, Extern;
- **Fiona Greene**, Chief Executive, NIACRO;
- **Rachel Long**, Director of Operations, NIACRO;
- **Dorinnia Carville**, Northern Ireland Audit Office; and
- **Stuart Stevenson**, Department of Finance



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