

Media Release



Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's criminal justice system needs to adopt a more targeted, strategic approach if levels of adult reoffending are to be significantly reduced. This is the conclusion of a report released today (Tuesday 13 June) by Northern Ireland's Comptroller and Auditor General, Dorinnia Carville.

The report on '*Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland*' considers how the Department of Justice and other key justice organisations have worked to develop strategies aimed at diverting adult offenders from crime. It highlights the current challenges that the Department now faces but also the initiatives and interventions which have shown encouraging results in potentially helping rehabilitate offenders.

Reducing reoffending was first identified as a key government objective by the previous Northern Ireland Executive, with overall performance to be judged mainly via a reduction in the reoffending rate. In Northern Ireland, this rate has been relatively consistent for several years, with the latest figures showing that 16 per cent of adult offenders reoffended within one year.

Commenting on the findings, Dorinnia Carville said:

"This report recognises that reducing reoffending is extremely challenging. Many factors that can prevent reoffending, such as good physical and mental health, accommodation, education and employment, sit outside the scope of the justice system. In addition, the Department of Justice and other key statutory stakeholders are facing major financial pressures. We note there is a strong commitment to tackling this issue, but increased cross-government working is now required, along with a more clearly defined strategic direction that identifies the key actions, targets and expected outcomes required."

Today's report highlights the need for the justice system to focus on the systemic issues which are making it more difficult to rehabilitate 'hard-to-reach' prolific offenders trapped in a cycle of offending and reoffending. It calls for a better-defined strategic approach, which takes account of the particular challenges associated with rehabilitating short-term and remand prisoners:

Short-term prisoners

A significant proportion (approximately 77 per cent) of those sentenced to custody in Northern Ireland receive short-term prison sentences of 12 months or less, with reoffending rates for these individuals currently around 52 per cent. The report acknowledges that these sentences can limit the scope for rehabilitation services to be provided (due to the short period spent in prison)

and can result in the loss of housing, employment and family contact, which can impact further on offending behaviour.

The report welcomes the introduction of more recent 'Problem Solving Justice' (PSJ) initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of offending behaviour, as well as improving the range of community-based sentencing options for the judiciary. The introduction of Enhanced Combination Orders in particular, has shown promise through positive evaluations. However, ongoing budgetary pressures have prevented this along with several other pilot initiatives being taken forward to wider application, meaning it has not been possible to properly assess their impact on reducing reoffending rates.

Remand prisoners

The proportion of prisoners held on remand has risen sharply in recent years and is now much higher in Northern Ireland (37 per cent of the prison population) compared to other jurisdictions (25 per cent in Scotland and 17 per cent in England and Wales). This provides further challenge as prisoners on remand have not been convicted of a crime and so tend to focus their efforts on their case defence, rather than their rehabilitation and resettlement prospects.

Today's report observes that, while other jurisdictions have introduced a variety of bail initiatives providing the judiciary with viable alternatives to remand, none of these have been implemented in Northern Ireland.

The Comptroller and Auditor General notes:

"A number of initiatives have been brought forward in recent years which appear to have had a positive impact, but these have generally been stand-alone pilots limited to specific regions. More generally, a lack of robust outcome measurement has made it difficult to measure real progress and offer clarity on which initiatives are achieving the greatest impact.

"Better data collection, analysis and benchmarking is required to inform future plans, and deliver cost-effective initiatives, particularly in targeting a remaining cohort of prolific offenders. Importantly, this should include steps to reduce the numbers and improve the rehabilitation of short-term and remand prisoners."

ENDS

Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.

THIS STATEMENT IS ISSUED ON THE STRICT UNDERSTANDING THAT IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR BROADCAST BEFORE 00.01 hrs ON TUESDAY 13 JUNE 2023

2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 13 June 2023.
3. The reoffending rate relates to a cohort of offenders who received a non-custodial court disposal, a diversionary disposal or who were released from custody during that year. They are then observed for one year plus a further six months to allow time for prosecutions to conclude and/or systems to be updated. The most recent DoJ statistics relate to the 2019-20 cohort. Today's report notes that, unfortunately, due to differences in the respective measurement systems and techniques, comparisons with reoffending rates in other jurisdictions was not possible.
4. The Enhanced Combination Order (ECO) was first introduced in October 2015 in the Ards, and Armagh and South Down court areas, and later extended to the North-West in October 2018. ECOs focus on restorative practice, desistance and victims, with offenders also completing unpaid community work. Mental health issues are assessed by PBNI psychologists, with a treatment plan or referral to appropriate health providers forming part of the intervention. Where necessary, parenting or family support work and accredited behaviour programmes are also included. Non-compliance with an order means offenders are returned to court and potentially sentenced to custody.