

Twenty Years A-Growing: Reflections on Two Decades of the *Irish Probation Journal*

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Summary: This brief commentary recalls the origins of North–South cooperation in probation work and, in particular, references the evolution of the *Irish Probation Journal* (IPJ) since its launch in 2004, acknowledging the contribution from various editors, editorial committees, advisory panels and contributors, as well as support from ministers and departments of Justice. Reflecting on significant trends in the justice world internationally, with a particular focus on probation, the paper sets out the contribution of *IPJ* to probation policy and practice on this island. This includes remembering where the two services, the Probation Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, have led the way – in relation to rehabilitation and reintegration, restorative justice, problem-solving justice, community service/unpaid work, addressing victim issues, service-user involvement, community engagement and their shared commitment to social work. The authors acknowledge the impact of significant political developments, including Brexit, devolution of justice in Northern Ireland (NI) and the changing patterns of crime in both jurisdictions. Finally, the paper anticipates some of the challenges and opportunities for both services over the next twenty years and the authors' thoughts on how the *Irish Probation Journal* can play a role in shaping that future. The authors approach subjects covered and offer reflections and opinions from our own respective and unique positions as inaugural editors of *IPJ* and experience in the fields discussed.

Keywords: Criminal justice, probation, North–South cooperation, research, victims, community, sanctions, supervision, social work.

Introduction

There is a now well-established commitment to cross-jurisdictional co-operation in probation work between the Irish Probation Service (PS) and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), as outlined in Doran (2015),

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Donnellan and McCaughey (2010) and Lamont and Geiran (2017). This co-operation has been evidenced in practice through cross-border contacts and collaboration at all levels, including annual joint senior management meetings, participation in joint training and other events and co-working in individual cases.

While occupying a uniquely 'insular' reality, in the sense of sharing the same land-mass, probation on this island has long been outward-looking too, in the sense of connecting with, learning from and contributing to probation and all it means, in the international context. For example, the heads of the two services were founder members of the Confederation of European Probation (CEP), established in 1981. The practical manifestation of joint working at organisational and 'frontline' level, North and South, as well as in reflecting on and developing good practice, was given new effect and impetus with the launch in 2004 of the *Irish Probation Journal (IPJ)*.

In our editorial in the first edition of *IPJ*, we expressed a hope that the Journal would become an annual record of issues facing probation staff in the two services and help the development of professional practice within the overall objective of reducing crime and the harm it does. Following the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a review of criminal justice recommended closer co-operation between the services but the success of *IPJ* has been down to the practitioners, editors and authors who have taken responsibility to make this co-operation a reality.

Our founding vision was to provide a forum for Probation Officers to share good practice and evidence of research-led effective initiatives, especially among a profession who were traditionally reluctant to highlight and record success in writing. We had contact with the *Probation Journal*, published by the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) in the UK, but wanted to establish a unique journal on the island of Ireland, reflecting our strong relationship despite the different legal jurisdictions, and sponsored directly by the two services. To that end, we recruited an editorial committee of practitioners and an advisory panel of academics with strong connections to criminology and social work. These groups have played the role of 'critical friends', which is important in ensuring community awareness and support for the work of probation, as well as reflecting contemporary developments in criminal justice. We also persuaded our heads of service and sponsoring departments to support the initiative and finance the 'product'.

International developments

The last twenty years or so have seen huge changes in politics, technology and responses to crime throughout the world. At a European level, a number of transnational organisations and networks have contributed hugely to the growth and strengthening of probation practice across the continent, and committed individuals from Ireland, North and South, have contributed to the bodies promoting this development. Such bodies include the European Union (EU), as well as Council of Europe (CoE), Confederation of European Probation (CEP) and the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ), among others. We would argue that this island has 'punched well above its weight' in its contribution to probation policy and practice internationally, through those European entities, to the enhancement of probation as a professional practice in this part of the world and to how probation is perceived internationally.

Some significant developmental themes have been the growth of research-based interventions, increasing professionalisation of probation work and the growth of focus on 'who works?' (e.g. Durnescu *et al.*, 2020) in addition to 'what works?', as well as the greater involvement of victims and communities, particularly in restorative justice, and the importance of the voice of service-users and all those experts by experience. The two services have been at the centre of these developments, and we are delighted that *IPJ* has featured and highlighted significant research initiatives and other milestone developments.

When Probation Officers wish to consider the context of their work or seek guidance on effective practice in a specific area, they have an easily accessible resource at their fingertips, particularly as all editions are available online from the respective service websites. *IPJ* has facilitated and nurtured writing by Probation Officers and provided a strong platform for those researching probation-related subjects to have their work published in a respected and peer-reviewed journal. The voice of Irish probation staff, experts and academics has been heard throughout these islands, Europe and beyond and we are confident that this will continue in future years despite the challenges from Brexit, the growth of populism and changes in attitudes to people who offend, as well as through the need to learn from the views of victims and an often critical media.

Developments in Ireland

When the *Irish Probation Journal* was launched in 2004, powers relating to policing and justice had not yet been devolved to the Northern Ireland

Assembly.¹ However, by 2010, we had the unique situation where both justice ministers, North and South, were former social workers.

Despite the challenges from the financial crisis in 2008 and the following years, the Journal had become an indispensable guide to the study of contemporary criminal justice issues, and was without parallel among criminal justice organisations on the island. In a development arising from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the two services joined with other justice agencies to form the Public Protection Advisory Group (PPAG)² in 2010, under ministerial direction and jointly chaired by the heads of the probation organisations. This led to an annual PPAG conference, which has since served as a venue for the annual publication of the *Irish Probation Journal*. An important development was an increase in articles provided by partner agencies, particularly prison and police services, as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which in turn served as a backdrop for closer collaboration and an extension of the rehabilitation ethos across the justice systems.

The shared commitment to social work and community engagement by the two agencies has been consistently highlighted in articles and cited by colleagues across Europe as a model for probation practice grounded in research-led and community-focused practice. As well as increasing opportunities for practice-led evidence to be described and discussed, the Journal has led to a strengthening of the vital links between probation practice and academia, adding value to both.

Future challenges and opportunities

There is no doubt that the growth of populism has been a challenge to rehabilitation services throughout the world, and Brexit has served as a specific challenge in cross-border co-operation in Ireland. Some might argue that Brexit may result in opportunities for even stronger co-operation between the two probation organisations on the island. In a similar way, while the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on all of us, the lessons learned and adaptations made, including increased use of ICT in our work, create possibilities for enhanced communication and co-operation, and other benefits.

1 The Northern Ireland Act, 1998 (Devolution of Policing and Justice Functions) Order 2010 provided for devolution to the Northern Ireland Assembly of legislative power in relation to policing and justice matters.

2 The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA), signed on 10 April 1998, led to a review of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland from which a framework for co-operation between the two jurisdictions, North and South, was developed and the PPAG was established.

There will always be financial pressure on and within the parent organisations, and *IPJ* editors, in particular, have had to display many negotiating and social work skills – problem-solving, role-modelling and resilience – to ensure that the Journal is produced each year. One dilemma, for example, is whether to continue to produce a hard copy or move to an exclusively digital format; our bias as former Probation Officers of a certain vintage is to maintain a tangible product. Thankfully though, there are committed individuals and leaders who will guide future developments based on effective communications and media best practice.

In addition to providing an annual record of issues facing probation staff, *IPJ* has contributed to emerging evidence on contemporary criminal justice issues, such as restorative justice, problem-solving justice and service-user involvement. The COVID-19 pandemic has required fresh approaches in delivering services and, building on trust and confidence developed over the last two decades, the services have worked closely together in sharing best practice in the most difficult circumstances. This experience will be valuable moving forward, as one of the key lessons learned in producing *IPJ* is that complex problems require collaborative solutions.

New and emerging challenges will have to be grappled with and addressed. These include the growth in so-called ‘white collar crime’, cybercrime and the use of ICT and artificial intelligence (AI) in criminal justice and in probation work. Meanwhile, a range of longer-standing, and no less important, challenges – such as mental health and illness and the changing nature of substance misuse – remain as high on the probation agenda as ever. *IPJ* will undoubtedly maintain its importance and relevance as a forum for discussion of such issues, sharing research and learning, and for celebrating good practice and developing even better practice.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that our initial hope that *IPJ* would help to develop professional practice has been realised thanks to the efforts of staff in the two probation services and others, supported by the departments of Justice and ministers, and all who have contributed to *IPJ* over the years. Since 2007, after we stepped down as co-editors, the hardworking *IPJ* Editorial Board has been led by a series of co-editors – Jean O’Neill, Gail McGreevy and Lisa Maginnis (PBNI) and David O’Donovan, Suzanne Vella, Gerry McNally and Ursula Fernée (PS) – with the dedicated support of the advisory panel and external reviewers.

The *IPJ* has provided a valuable space and forum for ideas and discussion, sometimes reflective, sometimes challenging, but always informative and helpful. In the process, *IPJ* has earned an international reputation as a valued and respected source of knowledge and opinion and remains a unique example of North–South co-operation in the criminal justice field.

The original editorial committee was concerned that we would struggle to attract sufficient articles for the second edition: after twenty years of publications, including over 200 articles, not to mention numerous book reviews, practice pieces, practitioner reviews and comment pieces such as this one, we need not have worried.

While probation work recognises the impact of crime on victims, as well as the many adverse childhood experiences endured by people on supervision, it must also promote a sense of hope and belief in change for the better. The place and importance of the contribution of *IPJ* and all its contributors is well-established. The twentieth edition of the *Irish Probation Journal* is an occasion to be celebrated, as well as a strong and well-established foundation to build for the future.

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