



Parole Commissioners
for Northern Ireland

ANNUAL REPORT
2024-2025



Parole Commissioners For Northern Ireland

Annual Report 2024/25

Report for the year end 31 March 2025

Laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly pursuant to Paragraph 7(2) of Schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. Amended by the NI Act 1998 (Devolution of Policing and Justice Functions) Order 2010.

24 July 2025



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Foreword

Minister Naomi Long MLA
Department of Justice
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Dear Minister

Paragraph 7(1) of Schedule 4 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, as amended, requires that as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of each financial year the Chief Commissioner of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland shall submit a report to the Minister of Justice on the performance of the Commissioners' functions during that year. In compliance with that requirement, I am pleased to submit my report to you in respect of the financial year 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

I was appointed as Chief Commissioner on 9 September 2019 and reappointed in September 2022. This is therefore my sixth report as Chief Commissioner.

I have remarked in previous reports on the increasing workload faced by Commissioners due to a regular year on year increase in the number of referrals we receive from the Department of Justice. That increase is again apparent this year but is even more marked and further information on this and the challenges it brings can be found in the body of the report.

I have also previously raised in my reports what I characterised as a "marked deterioration" in the level of service provided to the Commissioners in terms of the quality and timeliness of the information we need in order to conduct hearings expeditiously and fairly. I regret to report that despite regularly raising concerns with the Department and others, this issue has not been resolved, and I address that matter further below.

During the course of the last year Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) carried out an Inspection of the Governance and Operation of the Parole Commissioners. I welcomed that inspection and the recommendations that followed. I discuss this in more detail in the body of the report but CJINI did recommend that our Annual Report should provide more information about issues such as cost of cases, release rates, duration and adjournments. I have tried in this report to meet the substance of that recommendation.

I would like to thank my Commissioner colleagues for the work they have done in the last year. They have continued to deal carefully and professionally with the increasing number and the complexity of the cases that we receive despite a range of challenges which I discuss below.

I commend this Report to you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Horgan', written over a white background.

Chief Commissioner

Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland

Contents

Background	8
Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008	8
Current Legislation	8
Types of Sentences	8
Life Sentenced Prisoners	9
Indeterminate Custodial Sentences	9
Extended Custodial Sentences	10
Determinate Custodial Sentences	10
Recalls	11
Workload and Key Statistics	12
Judicial Challenges/Reviews	23
Issues of Concern and Stakeholder Relationships	25
Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland - Report	27
Victims	27
Governance	27
Progress Report 2024/25	28
Managing Risk and Governance	29
Resources	29
Fees and Expenses	30
Appendix A - Commissioners	33

Background

Due in large part to the coming into effect of the Human Rights Act in October 2000 and the report of the Criminal Justice Review in March 2000, it was considered that decisions with regards to the release of life sentence prisoners should be taken, not by government, but by a judicial body. To have judicial character, the body would need to be independent of the executive (and of the parties concerned); impartial; and able to give a legally binding direction regarding the prisoner's release.

The Government therefore brought forward legislation that required all life sentence prisoners to have the punitive element of their sentence judicially determined and their suitability for release independently assessed and directed at the appropriate time by an independent body of judicial character. The legislation in question was the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 (2001 Order) and the Life Sentence Review Commissioners' Rules 2001 (2001 Rules). The Order came into force in October 2001.

The Criminal Justice Act 2003 made a number of significant changes to the sentencing framework for England and Wales. In March 2005 the Northern Ireland Office published a consultation paper on the sentencing framework in Northern Ireland which considered new measures to enhance public protection. The exercise was largely informed by provisions contained in the Criminal Justice Act 2003, particularly the introduction of indeterminate and extended public protection sentences for dangerous sexual and violent offenders.

Ministers concluded that the sentencing framework should be revised and that legislation should be brought forward to provide for the introduction of indeterminate and extended sentences for dangerous sexual and violent offenders allowing individuals posing a risk of serious harm to be detained indefinitely or to the end of their extended sentences.

Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008

The relevant legislative provisions are contained in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 (2008 Order). Among other things it provided that the Life Sentence Review Commissioners be renamed the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland and that the responsibilities of the Commissioners be extended to include decisions as to the release and recall of prisoners sentenced to indeterminate and extended custodial sentences and the recall of prisoners who receive determinate sentences.

The Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009 (2009 Rules) came into operation on 1 April 2009. These Rules replaced the Life Sentence Review Commissioners' Rules 2001 and apply to both the 2001 Order and the 2008 Order.

Current Legislation

The work of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland is therefore governed by two 'Orders' and one set of 'Rules' - the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008*, the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 and the Parole Commissioners' Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009.

Types of Sentences

Under the above legislation, the Commissioners deal with a number of different types of cases depending on the sentence that the prisoner has received.

The type of sentence imposed will determine when during the sentence the Parole Commissioners will consider release, and under what procedures the review will take place.

* The NI Act 1998 (Devolution of Policing and Justice Functions) Order 2010, provides for the continuing role of the Secretary of State in cases where national security is involved.

Life Sentences

In the event that a prisoner is given a life sentence, then s/he will be given a “tariff” date which is the earliest date that they may become eligible for release. The tariff is set by the Court. A referral will be made to PCNI by the Department of Justice to consider release approximately 6 months before the tariff expiry date under Article 6 of the Life Sentences (NI) Order 2001 so that the PCNI decision will be issued in and around the tariff expiry date.

The Commissioners will conduct a three-year pre-tariff review in every Article 6 case. This will involve a Commissioner interviewing the prisoner and a different Commissioner considering the results of that interview, reviewing the papers and making recommendations about preparing the prisoner for their first proper review by the Commissioners three years later. The prisoner cannot be released at the three-year pre-tariff review stage.

Article 6 states that the Commissioner shall not release a life sentence prisoner unless they are satisfied that it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public from serious harm that the prisoner should be confined.

Where the decision has been taken not to release a prisoner at the tariff date, the Department of Justice must refer the case to the PCNI within 2 years, or sooner if recommended by the panel. It is common practice for the Commissioners to recommend a review period which is one year or less than this. At the subsequent review the Commissioners must apply the same test as set out above and if the prisoner is not released then s/he will be reviewed at intervals as recommended by the Commissioners.

Life sentence prisoners who are released will be subject to what is called a life licence which will remain in place for the rest of their lives. Licence conditions may be added, varied or cancelled in consultation with the PCNI. An offender is liable for recall to custody depending on their behaviour on licence. If recalled they cannot be re-released unless by direction of the Commissioners.

Last year we received 73 referrals under Article 6 of the Life Sentence (NI) Order.

Indeterminate Custodial Sentences (ICS)

In any case where a life sentence is not appropriate for a person convicted of a serious sexual or violent offence, the court can impose an Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS) or an Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS). Where the court deems that an ECS would not be adequate for the purposes of protecting the public, then an ICS will be imposed.

An ICS is a public protection sentence introduced for offences committed on or after 15 May 2008, where an offender has committed a serious sexual or violent offence listed in schedule 1 of the Order and the court believes that the offender is likely to commit similar offences in the future.

No release date is given for an ICS. Offenders serving an ICS will be given a “tariff” date by the sentencing court which is the earliest date that they may become eligible for release by the PCNI. The tariff is a minimum of 2 years. A referral will be made to PCNI by the Department of Justice to consider release approximately 6 months before the tariff date, under Article 18.

The test for the release of an ICS prisoner is in Article 18 of the 2008 Order and states that the Commissioners shall not release unless they are satisfied that it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public from serious harm for the prisoner to be confined, the same test as for life sentenced prisoners.

Where the decision has been taken not to release a prisoner at the tariff date, the Department of Justice must refer the case to the PCNI within 2 years, or sooner if recommended by the panel. Again, it is common practice for the Commissioners to recommend a review period which is less than twelve months and again as with life sentence prisoners, cases where release is not recommended are then reviewed at intervals as recommended by the Commissioners.

ICS prisoners who are released will be subject to standard licence conditions as well as bespoke conditions prescribed by the Department of Justice, which will remain in place for at least 10 years after the release date and potentially for the rest of their lives. During the licence period, conditions of a licence can be added, varied or cancelled in consultation with the PCNI. An offender is liable for recall to custody depending on their behaviour on licence.

If recalled an offender must remain in custody until release is directed by the PCNI.

Last year we received 24 referrals of ICS prisoners.

Extended Custodial Sentences (ECS)

An Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS) is a public protection sentence which can be imposed when an offender has committed certain violent or sexual offences listed in schedule 2 of the Order, on or after 15 May 2008, and the court believes that they are likely to commit further similar offences in the future.

The sentence involves a portion of time spent in custody (at least 1 year) and a period of time under licence conditions (extension period). The judge will set a period of custody appropriate for the offence and will then add to this a further period in which the offender will be supervised on licence in the community after they have been released.

ECS prisoners will be referred to the PCNI approximately 6 months prior to the mid-point of their sentence. The test for release is the same as for ICS prisoners set out in Article 18 of the 2008 Order. If PCNI direct release, the prisoner will remain on licence for the remainder of the custodial term as well as the licence period set by the court and again are subject to recall to prison until the expiry date of their licence.

Where the decision is not to direct release, the case must be referred back to PCNI within 2 years, if an earlier date has not been recommended. However, the Department of Justice is obliged to release the prisoner when the custodial part of the sentence has expired and the prisoner will be subject to standard licence conditions as well as bespoke conditions, if required, prescribed by the Department of Justice.

The Department of Justice will consult the PCNI in regard to the bespoke conditions before release.

Last year we received 84 referrals of ECS prisoners.

Determinate Custodial Sentences (DCS)

If imposing a Determinate Custodial Sentence (DCS) a Judge will fix a period of time which must be spent in custody as well as a period on licence. The custody element of the sentence cannot be greater than half of the overall sentence. DCS Prisoners are released on licence at the end of their custodial period without reference to PCNI.

However, when on licence DCS prisoners are subject to recall if their behaviour is such that it is felt they cannot be safely managed in the community. If recalled, an offender may have to serve the rest of their sentence in custody. All recalls are reviewed by the PCNI who can re-release an offender before the end of the licence period if it is appropriate to do so. In these cases, which are by their nature, lower risk than Lifer, ICS and ECS cases, the Commissioners shall not release unless they are satisfied that it is no longer necessary to protect the public from harm that the prisoner needs to be confined. This test does not refer to "serious" harm.

Last year we received 278 referrals in DCS cases.

Recalls

As is made clear above, when released on licence Life Sentence, ICS, ECS and DCS prisoners are subject to recall.

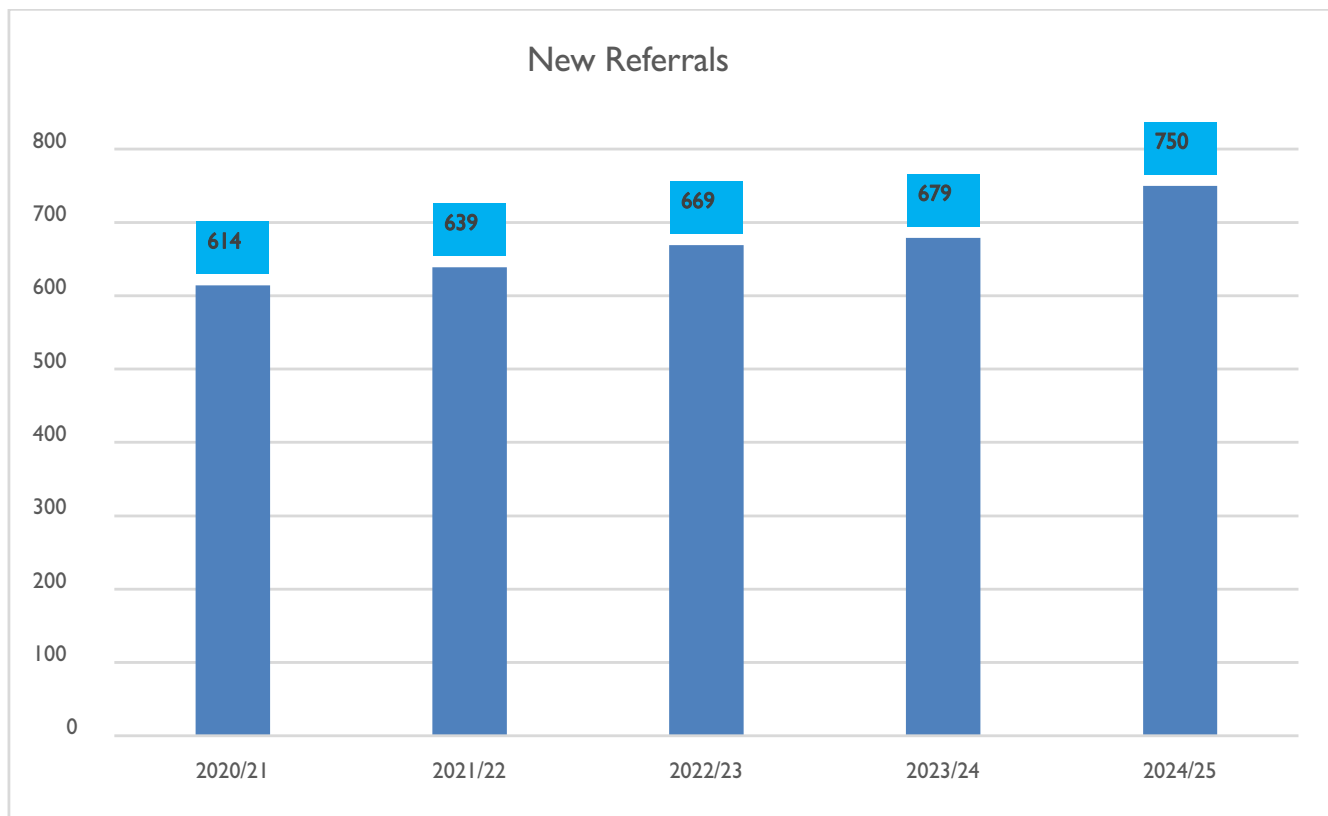
The general recall process is similar for the various categories of prisoner. An application is made by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (and in a very small number of cases by the PSNI) to an individual Commissioner for the recall of the prisoner based on their behaviour in the community. That Commissioner will consider the request and the accompanying papers and will (generally within 24 hours) either recommend or not recommend recall. The final decision is made by the Department of Justice. Last year we received 226 recalls of this nature.

When a prisoner is recalled to prison their case is then re-referred to the Commissioners and they become subject to the parole process as set out above.

Details on the parole process can be found on the Parole Commissioners' website at www.parolecomni.org.uk

Workload and Key Statistics

New Referrals



The table above shows that there has been a steady increase in referrals received over the past five years with a total increase of 22% (136 referrals). However, in 2024/2025 there was a sharp increase in the number of new referrals received, +10 % (71 referrals).

The breakdown of new referrals into each Article in the table below shows that referrals under most Articles are up, but that Article 18 referrals (ICS and ECS cases) and DCS recall referrals account for most of the increases.

New Referrals					
Article	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
6	61	72	77	70	73
7(2)	0	0	0	0	1
8(3)	18	29	16	4	6
9(1)	3	3	6	3	5
9(4)	4	3	4	4	7
18	87	80	85	92	107
20	1	0	0	0	0
20A*	N/A	2	2	8	3
24(5)	26	27	16	15	23
28(2)(a) ECS/ICS	28	16	16	18	12
28(2)(a) DCS	169	166	184	194	209
28(4) ECS/ICS	13	17	15	15	16
28(4) DCS	153	148	166	180	198
29(6)	45	62	70	70	77
46(3)	6	14	12	6	13
Total	614	639	669	679	750

* New Article introduced in 2021 following changes to the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021

The table below sets out the number of emergency type recall applications received by the Commissioners. These relate to applications by PBNl to have prisoners recalled to prison where the Commissioners have to recommend or not recommend recall. Again, the table shows a continual increase in the number of cases. It can also be seen that recall was recommended in the vast majority of cases. Out of 219 recalls completed Commissioners did not recommend recall in four cases.

Recalls

Recalls Completed										
	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25	
Article	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled
9(1)	4	0	3	0	6	0	3	0	5	0
28(2)(a) ECS/ICS	16	2	14	2	16	1	17	0	13	0
28(2)(a) DCS	167	9	163	2	176	6	192	5	201	3
Withdrawn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	187	11	180	4	198	7	212	5	219	4

Single Commissioner Stage

When a case is first referred to the Commissioners, it is considered initially by a single Commissioner.

There were 158 cases completed at the single Commissioner stage, which is a slight increase from the previous year +2% (3 cases).

Single Commissioner Decisions

Cases Completed at Single Commissioner Stage					
Article	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
6	11	9	10	9	9
9(4)	0	0	1	0	0
18	16	13	10	5	21
20A	-	0	0	1	0
28(4) ECS/ICS	5	5	5	3	1
28(4) DCS	73	90	85	98	97
29(6)	14	25	30	39	30
Total	119	142	141	155	158

Panel Stage

Cases referred to panel

The number of cases referred to a panel has remained the same at 26 cases. Generally, the single Commissioner should make a decision on the statutory test for release but in certain circumstances, for instance where there is a dispute of fact that can only be resolved by hearing oral evidence, the single Commissioner may refer the case to a Panel.

Cases Referred to Panel					
Article	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
6	7	7	7	5	3
9(4)	0	1	0	2	2
18	9	8	3	6	5
20A	-	1	2	0	1
28(4) ECS/ICS	0	1	0	2	1
28(4) DCS	11	5	5	5	7
29(6)	8	12	3	6	7
Total	35	35	20	26	26

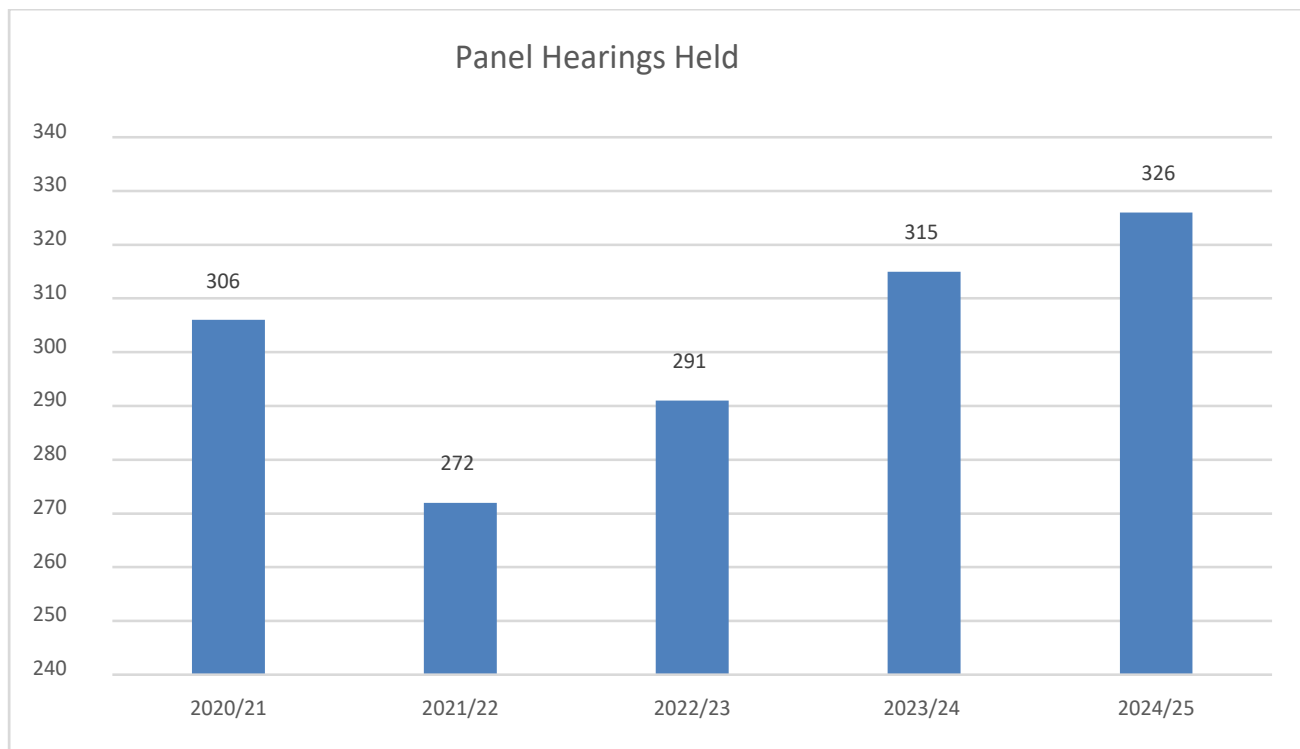
Oral Hearings

In Article 6 and Article 18 cases, if the single Commissioner decides against release the prisoner has a right to an oral hearing. If the decision is for release the case must go to a Panel. For this reason the single Commissioner's decision in these cases is referred to as "provisional".

However, in DCS cases if the single Commissioner directs release, the prisoner is released without reference to a Panel. If the single Commissioner has refused release in a DCS case, the prisoner may request an oral hearing. There is no right to such a hearing. However, the Supreme Court has made clear that the Commissioners should be slow to refuse such a request and, as can be seen below, we grant hearings in almost every case. The table below shows that the number of DCS oral hearing requests has increased by 9% (9 requests).

DCS Oral Hearing Requests										
	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25	
Article	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted
28(4) DCS	1	60	0	63	1	61	1	74	1	80
29(6)	0	22	0	24	0	24	1	27	0	31
Total	1	82	0	87	1	89	2	101	1	111

The graph below shows how oral hearings held have steadily increased from 2021/22



Hearings broken down by Article

Panel Hearings Held					
Article	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
6	71	66	77	78	79
9(4)	1	7	3	6	5
18	103	68	87	88	95
20A	-	1	1	3	8
28(4)ECS/ICS	16	13	9	13	11
28(4) DCS	84	83	72	98	85
29(6)	31	34	42	29	43
Total	306*	272*	291*	315	326

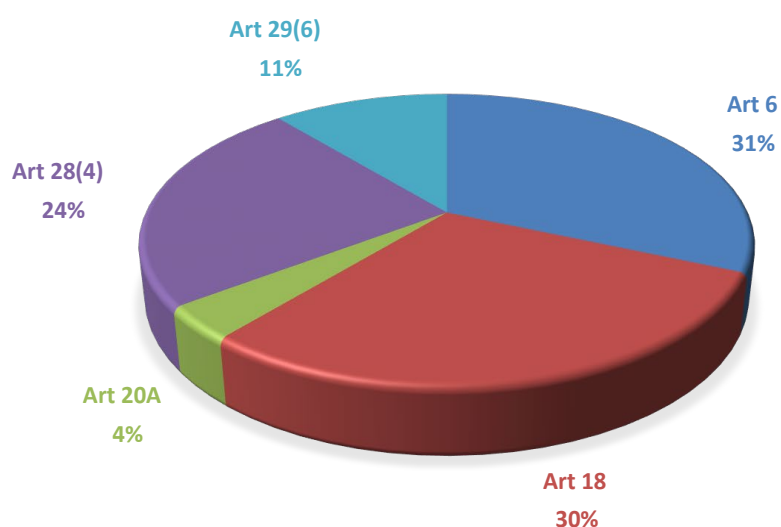
**Due to Covid -19, hearings in prisons were suspended with the majority held remotely.*

Panel hearings are now almost exclusively conducted remotely through the use of WebEx video conferencing. Commissioners completed 326 panel hearings, which is an increase of 3% (11 cases) from last year. Three hearings were held in person following a request from the prisoner. 18 hearings were paper-based, which means they took place without hearing oral evidence or submissions. These hearings only take place when both parties agree.

Adjournments at Hearings

This year adjournments of hearings increased by 13% (6 cases) to a total of 54.

ADJOURNMENTS AT HEARINGS PER ARTICLE TYPE



The adjournment of a case is not a decision taken lightly as Commissioners are aware of the impact such delays can have both in terms of costs to the public purse and also to the liberty of the prisoner, so they work hard to avoid adjourning cases. There are occasions when an adjournment cannot be avoided due to unexpected reasons, sickness of a witness for example, but as can be seen from the table below, most cases are adjourned because the Panel does not have all the information available that it requires either in writing or via the input of a witness to make a fair and informed decision. This reflects the continuing problems the Commissioners have faced in recent years in terms of provisions of proper dossiers, attendance of appropriate witnesses and the absence of risk reduction work. The reason for the 54 adjournments this year were:

Reason for Adjournment	Number of Cases
Panel needs reports/risk assessment/outstanding information	25
Witnesses required from PBNi/DoJ/Trust/MARA	11
Prisoner's solicitor requests further report	2
Prisoner Legal Rep failed to attend	5
Panel member or witness sick	2
Interpreter failed to attend	1
DoJ Legal Rep not available	1
Prisoner Legal rep had technical difficulties	1
Legal Aid issue	1
To allow Prisoner to progress	1
Issue relating to English sentence	1
Decision that in-person hearing was required	1
Further date required to complete hearing	2

Release Decisions

Overall the number of release decisions is down from 60 to 51 (9 cases) as outlined in the table below.

Release Decisions					
Article	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
6	9	7	10	10	7
9(4)	0	1	0	0	1
18	10	7	4	6	4
20A	-	1	2	2	6
28(4)ECS/ICS	2	2	2	3	3
28(4) DCS	22	38	19	26	15
29(6)	8	10	12	13	15
Total	51	66	49	60	51

Out of 243 single Commissioner cases that were eligible for release, 8 decisions were made for release (3%) and out of 278 panel cases eligible for release, 43 decisions were made for release (15%). This demonstrates the difficulties highlighted by the Chief Commissioner under the "Issues of Concerns and Stakeholder Relationships" section of the report.

Overall workload of Commissioners

Overall, 1108 provisional directions/directions, single Commissioner decisions, panel decisions, pre-tariff recommendations, licence consultations/variation/cancellation recommendations, recall recommendations and oral hearing requests have been actioned this year, which is an increase of 7% (70) from last year.



Judicial Challenges/Reviews

Prisoners who are not happy with the final parole decision can apply to the High Court for a judicial review of the decision.

There was a slight increase in the number of new challenges this year from 8 up to 9. There were six judicial review challenges carried forward from 2023/24.

Out of a total of 15 challenges, ten were completed by 31 March 2025.

Of those ten cases:

- Two were withdrawn by the prisoner at pre-action stage;
- One was withdrawn by the prisoner at Judicial Review stage;
- In one case the prisoner abandoned his application;
- Four challenges were dismissed by the Court and application for leave refused;
- In one case nothing further was received from the applicant after the commissioners response to challenge had issued and it was then out of time; and
- In one case the PCNI decision was quashed by court.

Five cases were carried forward into the 2025/2026 year:

- Case 1 - the challenge relates to hearings being held in private, a court date is still to be set;
- Case 11 - application was dismissed by the Judge on 11/04/2025 but the Department of Justice has submitted an appeal which is listed for 18/06/2025;
- Case 13 - whilst carried forward into the 2025/2026 year, the case is to be closed as application for leave was refused on 12/05/2025; and
- Cases 14 & 15 - are more recent challenges to panel decisions, which PCNI responded to in April 2024, rejecting the challenges in full. These are ongoing.

Therefore, out of 11 applications for Judicial Review that have been completed, there was only one case where the High Court quashed the Parole Commissioners' decision. The Judge was concerned in that case that there was an internal inconsistency in the Panel decision and that the Panel had failed to have sufficient regard to the Supreme Court judgment in Hilland. He found these errors were sufficient to justify the quashing of the decision.

No	Status	Decision Challenged	Stage reached as of 31/03/2025	Outcome or Current Position	Carried Forward (CF)
1	Brought Forward (BF)	Panel Decision – Rule 22, attendance at hearings	JR – leave only granted to challenge failure to make provision for applicant to attend hearing	Ongoing regarding attendance at hearings – No review date set as yet.	Carried Forward (CF)
2	BF	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Case to be dismissed administratively.	
3	BF	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Application Withdrawn.	
4	BF	Panel Decision	Closed at JR stage	Application Withdrawn.	
5	BF	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Application dismissed by Court.	
6	BF	Panel Decision	Closed at JR stage	PCNI decision quashed by Judge.	
7	New	Decision made without all information from the Trust	Closed at Pre-action stage	Applicant abandoned his application.	
8	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Leave refused.	
9	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Application Withdrawn.	
10	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Nothing further received when PAP response issued. Challenge out of time.	
11	New	Panel Decision – conditional release	Ongoing at Pre-action stage	Court dismissed application for leave on 11/04/2025. DOJ appealing decision.	CF
12	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Leave refused	
13	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	Court refused leave on 02/05/2025	Closed
14	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	PAP response issued on 03/04/2025 – rejecting challenge.	CF
15	New	Panel Decision	Closed at Pre-action stage	PAP response issued on 18/04/2025 – rejecting challenge	CF

Issues of Concern and Stakeholder Relationships

I have been raising issues of concern for several years in this report and bilaterally with the Department and others regarding difficulties that the Commissioners are encountering in their work. I am afraid that things have not improved and unfortunately have continued to regress.

My candid view is that the parole process in Northern Ireland is simply not working properly and that this presents serious issues in terms of public protection and the potential rehabilitation of the prisoner.

As addressed earlier in this report, the number of referrals that the Commissioners have been asked to deal with annually has been increasing year on year for the last five years and there was another sharp increase last year. I recognise that this increase puts pressure on all agencies involved in the process including the Commissioners. I also recognise that NIPS has commissioned reviews into the operation of NIPS Psychology and also the Prisoner Development Unit model. I understand both have reported or are about to be reported. I hope that these will result in significant improvements in the service that the Commissioners get but more importantly in the provision of risk reduction work to prisoners.

I am clear that one of the reasons for the continued reduction in our release rate is because prisoners are very often not being afforded access to risk reduction work. In this I include NIPS Psychology, but the problem is now much broader than that. We receive regular reports from legal representatives, witnesses and prisoners that even less intense risk reduction work on issues like substance abuse is very difficult to access. If prisoners cannot get access to work to address their risk factors it makes it very difficult for them to persuade the Commissioners to release them. It also means that many prisoners will get out at the expiry of their sentences without risk having been addressed, thereby putting the public at risk.

It appears that resources in terms of psychological input are being targeted at the most high-risk lifer prisoners, but it is clear to the Commissioners that many high-risk offenders in the ICS and ECS categories are not being engaged in substantive risk reduction work and are being released with risk factors not being addressed.

I wrote last year about the poor service being provided to the Commissioners and this has continued this year with directions of the Commissioners regularly being ignored with no response received; directions being complied with beyond the timeline set with no explanation; poor communication between the various agencies and the Commissioners; incomplete dossiers being served on the Commissioners; and poor witness availability.

Once again, we have had to stay proceedings in some case until appropriate progress was made. This is a completely unsatisfactory state of affairs and deeply unfair to the prisoner. It increases delay in the system and adds to the costs of the parole process. We have also again seen a large number of adjournments and can now demonstrate that the reason for the significant majority of adjournment is because the Department has not provided the evidence required by the Panel either in written or oral form or witnesses or risk reduction work not being available. This results in a direct increase in the costs of the parole process and also to the legal aid fund and indeed to the caseload of individual Commissioners.

We have a positive history of working with our stakeholders, in particular NIPS and PBNI. However, the flow of information from the Department on critical issues is not what it should be and the Department has proven slow to respond to concerns that I have been raising for some considerable time including, but not limited to, terms and conditions for Commissioners which I have been raising with the Department for the last five years. The rates that are paid to Commissioners for the important and difficult work they undertake have not changed since they were set more than twelve years ago. That has resulted in a situation which is deeply unfair and, in my view, unsustainable. Commissioners are deeply frustrated with the lack of a proper response from the Department on this issue and it is a frustration that I share. This frustration has become all the more acute when there have been significant increases in remuneration for those representing prisoners at parole hearings and also increases for members in the vast majority of quasi-judicial tribunals in Northern Ireland.

In addition, I remain concerned at the absence of legal representation of the Department in most of the more serious PCNI cases involving Article 6 (life sentence) and Article 18 (ICS and ECS) prisoners. I have raised this matter in my previous annual reports and it remains a concern. It impacts both upon the parole hearings but also in my view leaves the public unrepresented at hearings designed to determine if prisoner applicants continue to pose a risk of serious harm to the public. I very much welcomed the recommendation made by CJINI (see below) on this matter and was disappointed that NIPS has not accepted this recommendation.

Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland (CJINI) Report

During the last year, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) carried out an Inspection of the Governance and Operation of the PCNI. Its report was published in October 2024. It made a number of recommendations, most of which are beyond the gift of the Commissioners to deliver. However, included in the recommendations which we could influence was the development of a framework on quality assurance which we would seek to report against in our Annual Report. We have made a number of changes to the report this year in an attempt to meet this recommendation. We have included more information about the cost of cases, reasons for adjournments and also raised our ongoing concerns around deprivation of liberty and protection of the public issues.

We are also seeking to re-establish a PCNI users' group as a mechanism to obtain feedback from users and stakeholders on the parole process. We have also begun to notify Commissioners of cases where prisoners they release have been recalled to custody and are developing a short policy note on the review of cases where serious further offences have occurred.

The other recommendations were mainly in the strategic areas around governance of the Commissioners and performance. These were directed at the Department. I have not heard anything from the Department about these recommendations since the CJINI report was published some nine months ago.

Victims

The PCNI Rules, as originally drafted, did not include any provision for the involvement of victims in the parole process although we did occasionally receive written representations from registered victims as part of the parole dossier in the more serious cases.

In 2022 the Rules were changed to allow registered victims and others the right to request summaries of PCNI decisions and such requests have to be granted unless there are exceptional circumstances. We developed new guidance for Commissioners and a short policy document on the rule changes. During the course of the last year, we received nine requests for summaries. All requests were granted.

In addition, and for the first time, the Commissioners have granted a small number of registered victims access to the Panel hearing to read out their representations.

Governance

We engage on a regular basis with our sponsors in both the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and the Department of Justice. However, I have long been of the view that the sponsorship arrangements for the Commissioners are not appropriate, and I was pleased that the CJINI came to a similar conclusion in its inspection. It recommended a review of the status, oversight and governance of the Commissioners. I very much look forward to that review starting.

I am pleased to welcome Mrs Catherine Rodgers, to the position of Head of Tribunals and Corporate Services within the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals. As our sponsor Catherine has a very proactive approach, and her engagement in the short period of time that she has been with us has been appreciated.

Progress Report 2024/25

The Parole Commissioners are appointed by the Department of Justice under Sch.4 para.1(1) of The Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 and are statutory office holders. All members, including the Chief Commissioner serve on a part-time basis and are paid a fee for each service they perform for the PCNI.

Once appointed Commissioners receive extensive training and development to ensure that they are fully equipped to fulfil their roles effectively. The induction training program has been designed to provide a thorough understanding of their responsibilities, our processes, and the tools required to succeed. The induction training program is supplemented yearly with training provided at a Plenary event.

Commissioners come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. The PCNI have three cadres of commissioners: legal commissioners, including one Judge, those from a psychology and psychiatry background and those from a criminal justice background. At present there are 38 Commissioners.

Two Commissioners resigned during this reporting period, Mr Ciaran McQuillan and Mr Jarlath Kearney and I would like to thank them for their service as Commissioners. In addition, two Commissioners currently remain on sabbatical.

The Commissioners continue to receive excellent support from our staff in the Secretariat. There have been some changes to personnel over the last 12 months but this has not affected the quality of the team. I also want to commend the team for the manner in which they have dealt with the increase in referrals over the last year.

The Commissioners' Secretariat are based on the 1st floor Mezzanine in Laganside Court, Oxford Street, Belfast. The Commissioners are supported by a Secretariat of 15 civil servants who are appointed to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Services.

During this reporting period, the Commissioners and the Secretariat continued to review their working arrangements adopting the best practice developed during the pandemic to ensure the most effective discharge of their statutory functions with reference to efficiency, fairness and costs. We continue to host the vast majority of our hearings remotely. This approach has been broadly welcomed by Commissioners, stakeholders and others. There have been no concerns raised with us by the legal profession or by prisoners. Where individual requests have been made for in-person hearings (in a tiny number of cases) we have facilitated those and will continue to do so.

Managing Risk and Governance

The risk appetite for PCNI is determined by reference to our statutory requirements and the degree to which the threats to our business can be adsorbed while maintaining our statutory requirements and maintaining the reputation of the PCNI. The Advisory Committee reviews and manage risks identified quarterly. When a risk starts to exceed the capacity of the Parole Commissioners to mitigate that risk then it is escalated to the sponsor organisation or to senior stakeholders who can contribute to the mitigation of the risk.

In addition, there are policies and procedures in place to manage:

- GDPR and Data Protection incidents;
- Information Security;
- Conflict of Interest; and
- Complaints

Sustainability Report

Sustainability has become a critical focus in modern business practices, with organisations striving to reduce their environmental footprint. One significant step towards sustainability is the transition to a paperless office. The digital tools and virtual platforms have enabled PCNI to operate efficiently without relying on physical documents. This shift not only conserves natural resources, but it also streamlines workflows, making information more accessible thus reducing the need for physical storage space.

Since the pandemic the PCNI relies heavily on digital ways of working with 99% of oral hearings now operating virtually with no physical documentation. This has significantly reduced our reliance on private cars and airline travel to bring Commissioners from all over these islands to the three prisons in Northern Ireland to conduct hearings in person. In addition, the PCNI continues to offer improved collaborative tools for staff to allow efficient and flexible working.

Resources

The Chief Commissioner and the other Parole Commissioners are Departmental appointees appointed under The Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008 and are therefore statutory office holders. All Commissioners serve on a part-time basis and are fee paid. They are supported by a Secretariat of 15 civil servants who are appointed to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Services.

This report details the expenditure incurred by the Department of Justice in providing for the work of the Commissioners in the year ending 31 March 2025.

Fees and Expenses

The Commissioners are paid on a case fee basis and a pro-rata fee for undertaking other non-casework business. These rates were set in 2012 and have not since changed. They are set out below:

Article under CJO or LSO	Article Description	Single Commissioner	Chair of Panel (Legal)	Other Panel Member (Psych/ Criminal Justice)
Article 6	Lifer Release Decision	£898	£914	£539
Article 8(3)	Variation of Licence (Lifer)	£359	-	-
Article 9(1)	Recall Recommendation (Lifer)	£180	-	-
Article 9(4)	Recall Review	£898	£914	£539
Article 18	ECS/ICS Release	£898	£914	£539
Article 20(a)	Terrorist Related Offences (DCS/ ECS) Release Decision	£898	£914	£539
Article 24(5)	Variation of Licence (ECS/ICS)	£359	-	-
Article 28(2)a	Recall Recommendation (ICS/ ECS/DCS)	£180	-	-
Article 28(4)	Recall Review (ICS/ECS/DCS)	£718	£686	£359
Article 29(6)	Further Review of Article 28(4)	£718	£686	£359
Article 46(3)	Pre-tariff Review:			
	• Single Commissioner	£539	-	-
	• Interviewing Commissioner	£539	-	-
Article 22(A)	Summary of Reasons	£135	£135	-
	Review request for panel hearing on DCS case	£180	-	-

An average cost per case can be calculated by dividing the total PCNI budget by the number of cases completed each year:

Cost per Case calculated by total expenditure divided by number of cases completed each year.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
article 6	60	65	63	71	70	72
article 7(2)	0	0	0	0	0	1
article 8(3)	13	17	30	15	4	7
article 9(1)	5	3	3	6	3	5
article 9(4)	6	1	6	3	4	5
article 18	79	104	69	85	82	105
article 20	0	1	0	0	0	0
article 20a	0	0	1	2	4	8
article 24(5)	28	26	28	16	15	23
article 28(2)a ECS/ICS	20	18	16	16	18	13
article 28(2)a DCS	182	178	166	184	197	205
article 28(4) ECS/ICS	26	19	18	12	18	7
article 28(4) DCS	154	145	166	146	182	188
article 29(6)	36	42	52	69	64	70
article 46(3)	11	8	10	11	10	11
Total Cases	620	627	628	636	671	720

Staffing Levels	15	15	15	14.8	14.3	14.3
Staffing costs	£525,000	£541,000	£553,000	£578,000	£536,000	£607,000
Commissioners' Fees	£947,000	£896,000	£911,000	£955,000	£1,018,000	£1,072,000
Commissioners T&S	£64,000	£4,000	£1,000	£6,000	£6,000	£4,000
Legal Costs	£32,000	£86,000	£101,000	£63,000	£70,000	£91,000
Rental Costs	£111,000	£106,000	£117,000	£128,000	£121,000	£127,000
General Administration	£53,000	£32,000	£32,000	£45,000	£67,000	£104,000
Expenditure	£1,732,000	£1,665,000	£1,715,000	£1,775,000	£1,818,000	£2,005,000

Cost per Case	£2,793.55	£2,655.50	£2,730.89	£2,790.88	£2,709.39	£2,784.72
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Expenditure incurred by the Department of Justice in providing for the work of the Commissioners in the year ending 31 March 2025 is detailed below:

PCNI Expenditure – Financial Year 2024/25						
	2019/20 (£000)	2020/21 (£000)	2021/22 (£000)	2022/23 (£000)	2023/24 (£000)	2024/25 (£000)
Commissioners' Remuneration	£947	£896	£911	£955	£1,018	£1,072
Commissioners' Travel, Accommodation and Expenses	£64	£4	£1	£6	£6	£4
Legal Costs	£32	£86	£101	£63	£70	£91
Premises	£111	£106	£117	£128	£121	£127
General Administration	£53	£32	£32	£45	£67	£104
Staff Salaries	£525	£541	£553	£578	£536	£607
Total Expenditure	£1,732	£1,665	£1,715	£1,775	£1,818	£2,005

Commissioners

Membership of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland at 31 March 2025

Mr Paul Mageean is the Chief Commissioner for the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland.

Commissioners from a Legal Background	Commissioners from a Psychology/Psychiatry Background	Commissioners from a Criminal Justice Background
Mr Paul Mageean (Chief)	Mr Deepak Anand	Ms Alexandra Delimata
Her Honour Judge Smyth	Dr Kate Geraghty	Mr Mike Fowkes
Ms Anne Fenton MBE	Dr Micaela Greenwood	Ms Louisa Fee
Professor John Jackson	Dr Jeremy Kenny-Herbert	Mrs Debbie Hill
Mr Jeremy Mills	Professor Peter Hepper	Mrs Ruth Laird CBE
Mr John Gibbons	Dr Andrea Higgins	Mr Stephen Murphy CBE
Ms Maura Hutchinson	Mrs Claire Hunt	Mrs Vilma Patterson MBE
Mrs Marian Killen	Mrs Siobhan Keating	Ms Elaine Peel
Mr Niall Small	Dr Christine Kennedy	Mrs Elsbeth Rea OBE
Mr Noel Phoenix	Mr Emmet Murray	
Mr Mark Finegan	Dr Damien McCullagh	
Mr Martin O'Brien	Mrs Deborah McQueirns	
Ms Diane Nixon		
Mr Matthew Corkey		
Mr John O'Neill		
Mrs Tracy Overing		
Mr Timothy Thorne		

Gender Balance of Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland		
Commissioner Cadre	Male	Female
Chief Commissioner	1	0
Judicial	0	1
Legal	10	5
Psychiatry/Psychology	5	7
Criminal Justice	2	7
Total	18	20

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