



Parole Commissioners
for Northern Ireland

ANNUAL REPORT
2025-2026



Parole Commissioners For Northern Ireland

Annual Report 2025/26

Report for the year end 31 March 2026

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.

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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 2025 to 31 March 2026.

I was appointed as Chief Commissioner on 9th September 2019, reappointed in September 2022 and in September 2025. This is therefore my seventh report as Chief Commissioner.

Last year I wrote in my Annual Report that I believed the parole process in Northern Ireland was not working properly and this presented serious issues in terms of public protection and the rehabilitation of prisoners. I set out my reasons for coming to this view in last year's report and I regret to say that those reasons remain largely unchanged.

I updated you in person on these matters when we met in February.

The number of referrals we are receiving has continued to increase and in fact last year saw the sharpest increase in the last five years. I want to pay tribute to my Commissioner colleagues and the secretariat for their continued efforts to ensure we deal with the difficult cases we are sent in a timely, appropriate and fair manner.

I asked the Department to begin to recruit new Commissioners in October 2024 due to my concern at the increasing number of referrals and our capacity to continue to deal with that increase. Despite that request being made more than 20 months ago, the recruitment process is yet to begin.

I commend this Report to you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Hogg'.

Chief Commissioner

Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland

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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 two 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.

During the reporting period we received 75 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 15th 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 two years. A referral will be made to PCNI by the Department of Justice to consider release approximately six 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 two 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 ten 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.

During the reporting period we received 22 referrals of ICS prisoners, 21 under Article 18 and 1 under Article 28(4).

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 15th 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 one 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 six 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 two 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.

During the reporting period we received 116 referrals of ECS prisoners, 98 under Article 18, 15 under Article 28(4) and 3 under Article 20A.

Determinate Custodial Sentences (DCS)

If imposing a Determinate Custodial Sentence (DCS) the court 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.

During the reporting period we received 328 referrals in DCS cases, 239 under Article 28(4), 86 under Article 29(6) and 3 under Article 20A.

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.

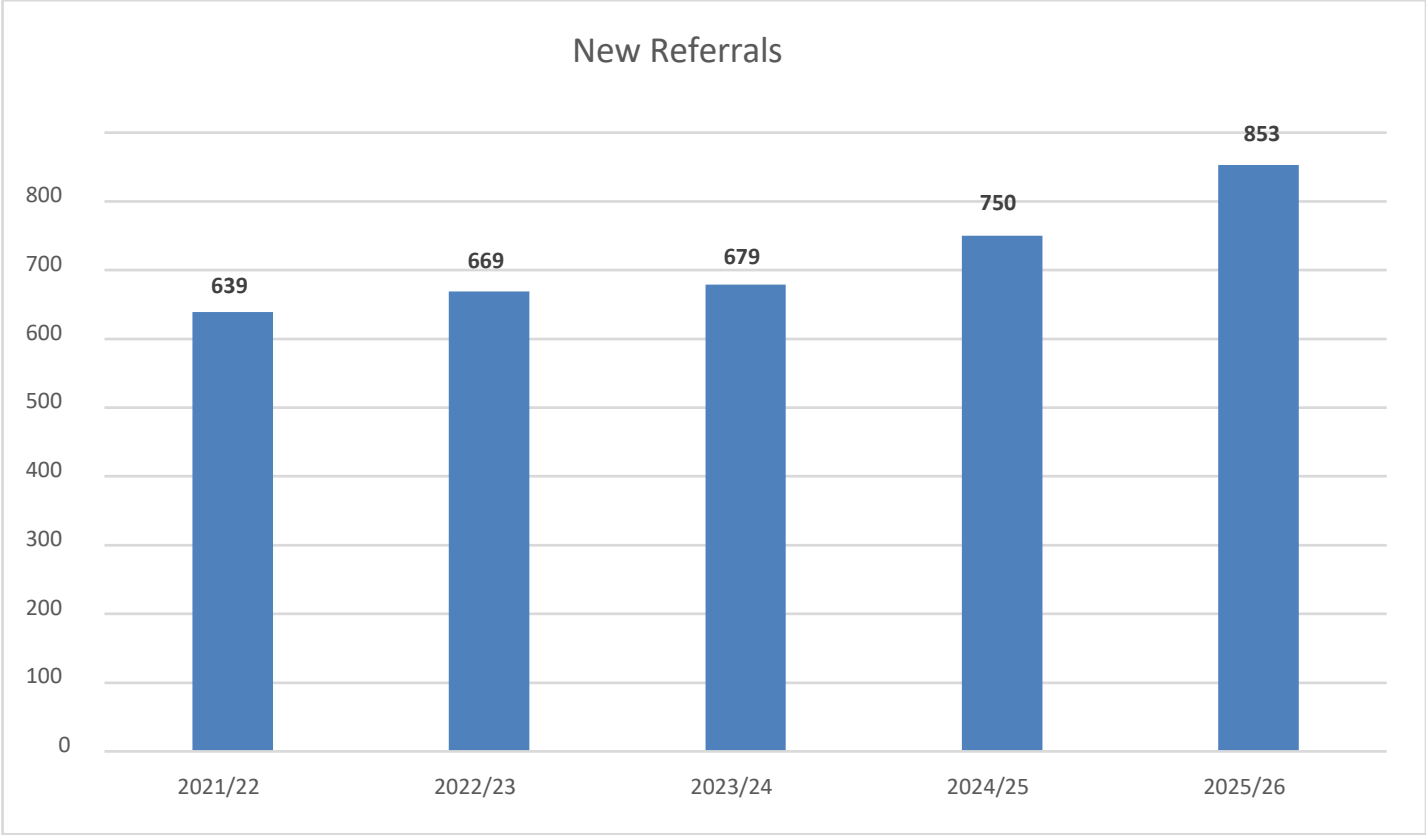
During the reporting period we received 272 requests of this nature. The vast majority of this number were DCS cases.

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. However, 2025/26 saw the highest increase in the last five years in the number of new referrals received, +14% (103 referrals).

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

New Referrals					
Article	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
6	72	77	70	73	75
7(2)	0	0	0	1	0
8(3)	29	16	4	6	8
9(1)	3	6	3	5	2
9(4)	3	4	4	7	1
18	80	85	92	107	119
20	0	0	0	0	0
20A	2	2	8	3	6
24(5)	27	16	15	23	24
28(2)(a) ECS/ICS	16	16	18	12	14
28(2)(a) DCS	166	184	194	209	256
28(4) ECS/ICS	17	15	15	16	16
28(4) DCS	148	166	180	198	239
29(6)	62	70	70	77	86
46(3)	14	12	6	13	7
Total	639	669	679	750	853

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. The table shows a continual increase in the number of cases referred year on year with an increase this year of 21%. It can also be seen that recall was recommended in the vast majority of cases (99%). Out of 270 recalls completed Commissioners did not recommend recall in four cases.

Recalls

Recalls Completed*										
	2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25		2025/26	
Article	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled	Recall	Not Recalled
9(1)	3	0	6	0	3	0	5	0	2	0
28(2)(a) ECS/ICS	14	2	16	1	17	0	13	0	14	0
28(2)(a) DCS	163	2	176	6	192	5	201	3	250	4
Withdrawn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Total	180	4	198	7	212	5	219	4	266	4

**Figures are for recall recommendations completed within the year and may differ from "New Referrals" received*

Single Commissioner Stage

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

There were 193 cases completed at the Single Commissioner stage, which is an increase from the previous year of 22% (35 cases). As is apparent from the table, there was a significant increase in the number of Article 18 cases (ICS/ECS).

Single Commissioner Decisions

Cases Completed at Single Commissioner Stage					
Article	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
6	9	10	9	9	12
9(4)	0	1	0	0	0
18	13	10	5	21	30
20A	-	0	1	0	2
28(4) ECS/ICS	5	5	3	1	3
28(4) DCS	90	85	98	97	104
29(6)	25	30	39	30	42
Total	142	141	155	158	193

Panel Stage

Cases referred to panel

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.

The number of cases referred to a panel decreased significantly this year by 50% with only 13 being referred in contrast to 26 referrals last year.

Cases Referred to Panel					
Article	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
6	7	7	5	3	5
9(4)	1	0	2	2	0
18	8	3	6	5	2
20A	1	2	0	1	0
28(4) ECS/ICS	1	0	2	1	1
28(4) DCS	5	5	5	7	2
29(6)	12	3	6	7	3
Total	35	20	26	26	13

Oral Hearings

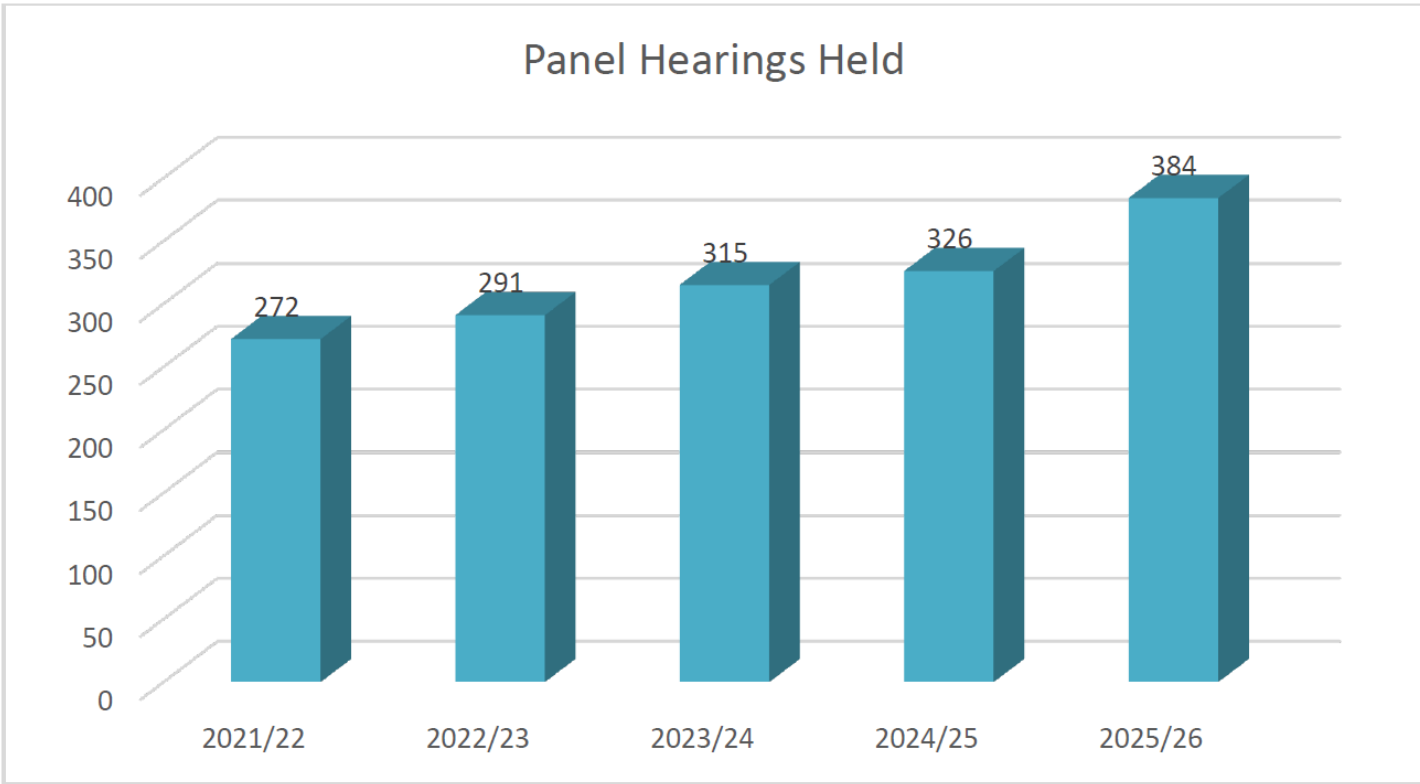
In Article 6 and Article 18 cases, if the single Commissioner decides against release the prisoner has a right to an oral hearing. If the decision is for release the case must go to a Panel. For this reason, the single Commissioner's decision in these cases is referred to as "provisional".

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 granted hearings in all but one case.

The table below shows that the number of DCS oral hearing requests has increased significantly by 42% (48 requests). Each of these requests is considered by a legally qualified Legal Commissioner.

DCS Oral Hearing Requests										
	2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25		2025/26	
Article	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted	Refused	Granted
28(4) DCS	0	63	1	61	1	74	1	81	0	118
29(6)	0	24	0	24	1	27	0	31	1	42
Total	0	87	1	85	2	101	1	112	1	160

The graph below shows how the number of oral hearings has steadily increased from 2021/22



Hearings broken down by Article

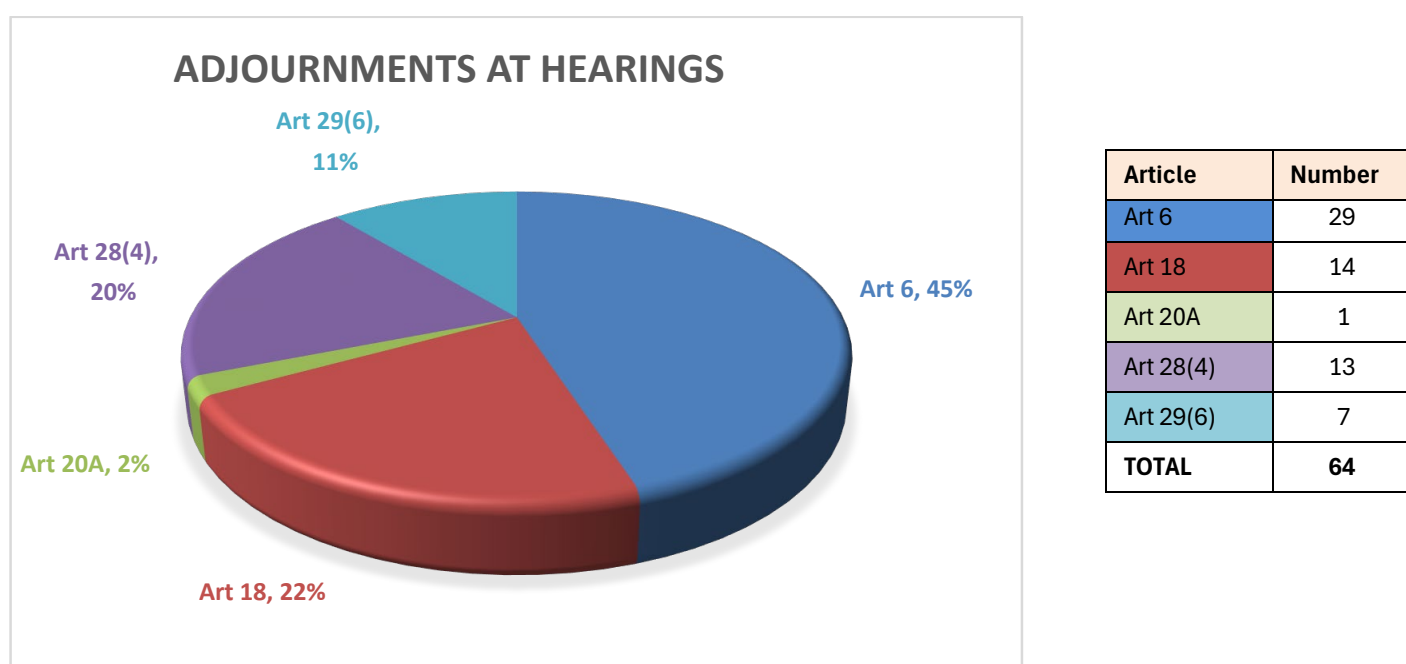
Panel Hearings Held					
Article	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
6	66	77	78	79	88
9(4)	7	3	6	5	2
18	68	87	88	95	96
20A	1	1	3	8	5
28(4)ECS/ICS	13	9	13	11	20
28(4) DCS	83	72	98	85	121
29(6)	34	42	29	43	52
Total	272	291	315	326	384

As can be seen from the above table, Commissioners completed 384 panel hearings in 2025/26, which is an increase of 18% (58 cases) from last year.

Panel hearings are now almost always conducted remotely through the use of WebEx video conferencing. Two hearings were held in person following a request from the prisoner and 14 hearings were paper-based, which means they took place without hearing oral evidence or submissions. Such hearings only take place when both parties agree.

Adjournments at Hearings

This year adjournments of hearings increased by 19% (10 cases) to a total of 64.



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.

There can be more than one reason for an adjournment but the main reasons for the 64 adjournments this year were:

Reason for Adjournment	Number of Cases
Witness required	17
Outstanding reports not provided	4
Additional reports or information required	9
To allow prisoner to complete courses/progress	5
Outstanding criminal proceedings or information on new charge required	6
Legal rep requires more time or instruction	3
Prisoner left hearing	1
Risk Management Assessment or VRA required	6
Prisoner sacked Counsel at hearing	1
Witness sick	1
To await outcome of JR proceedings	1
Panel member not available due sickness or bereavement	2
Legal rep did not appear at hearing	4
Prisoner decided he wanted to appoint a Legal rep	1
Prisoner not fit to attend	2
Counsel had not received papers	1

Release Decisions

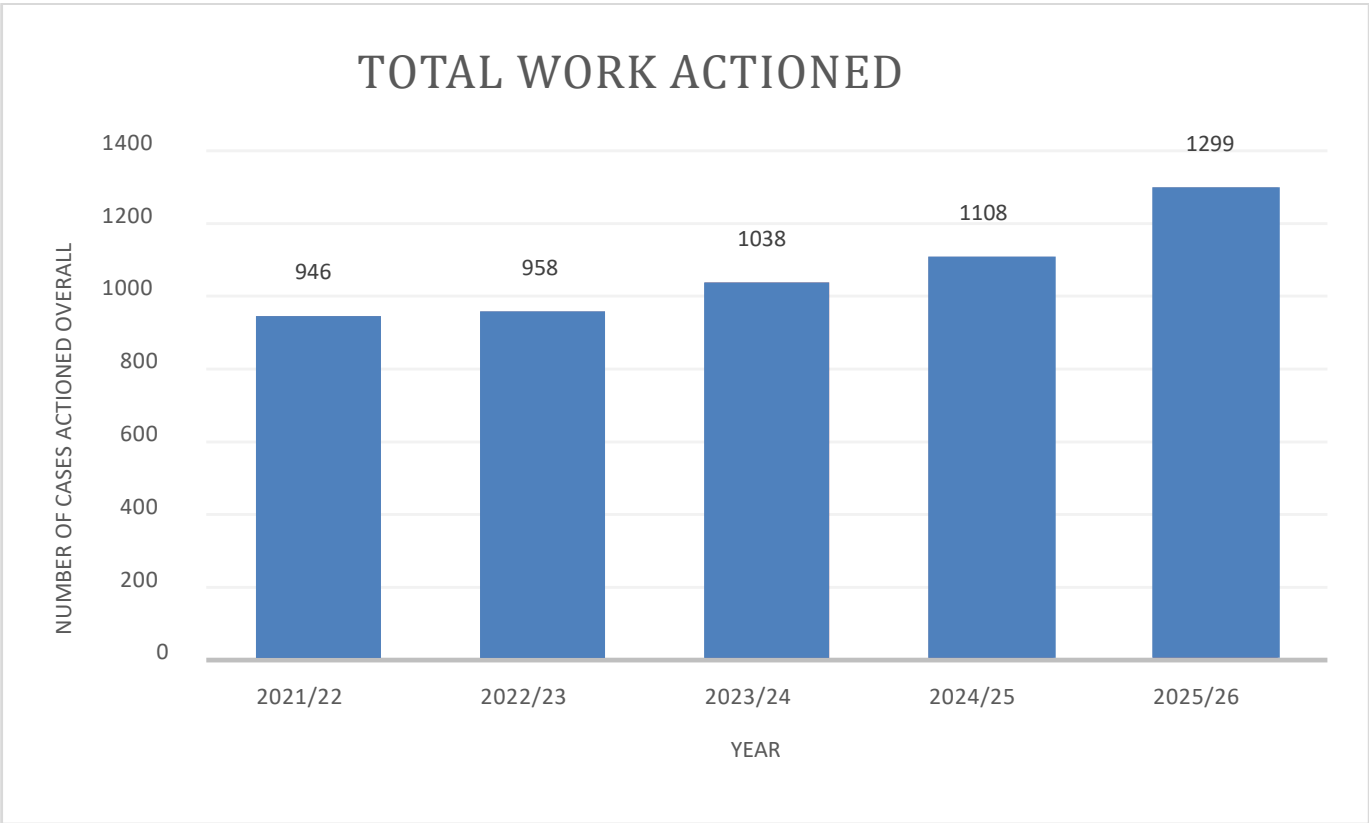
Overall, the number of release decisions is up from 51 to 56 (5 cases) as outlined in the table below. However, it is important to note the context of an increased number of referrals. The percentage of releases at single Commissioner and Panel stage has not increased (see below).

Release Decisions					
Article	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
6	7	10	10	7	7
9(4)	1	0	0	1	0
18	7	4	6	4	3
20A	1	2	2	6	3
28(4)ECS/ICS	2	2	3	3	5
28(4) DCS	38	19	26	15	22
29(6)	10	12	13	15	16
Total	66	49	60	51	56

Out of 304 single Commissioner cases that were eligible for release, eight decisions were made for release (1%) and out of 322 panel cases eligible for release, 48 decisions were made for release (15%). These percentages show little difference from last year (3% and 15%). Last year I made the point that the low release rate is at least in part due to continued difficulties with the availability of risk reduction work and that appears to be the case again.

Overall workload of Commissioners

Overall, 1299 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 a significant increase of 17% (191) 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 marked decrease in the number of new challenges this year from nine down to four. There were five judicial review challenges carried forward from 2024/25.

Out of a total of nine challenges, eight were completed by the 31st March 2026.

Of those eight cases:

- Four challenges were closed at pre-action stage as no proceedings were issued after PCNI had issued their response to the challenge;
- One challenge was dismissed by Court which refused an application for leave for a judicial review;
- One challenge was closed at pre-action stage as it was considered academic to issue proceedings as case had progressed and decision issued;
- One challenge was closed at pre-action stage as it was considered academic because the case had been referred again to the Commissioners and a hearing was imminent;
- One challenge from the Department (DoJ) was dismissed by the High Court but was successfully appealed by the Department to the Court of Appeal.

One case, involving a challenge to hearings being held in private, was carried forward into 2026/2027. A judgment is awaited.

Therefore, out of the eight applications for Judicial Review that have been completed, only one case resulted in an adverse ruling for PCNI and that was in a challenge taken by the Department. The challenge concerned a Panel decision which released the prisoner contingent on appropriate accommodation being found. The Court of Appeal stated that the Commissioners “cannot lawfully direct the release of a prisoner under article 28 of the CJ(NI)O 2008 on a conditional or contingent basis.”

No	Status	Decision Challenged	Stage reached as of 31/03/2026	Outcome or Current Position	
1	BF	Panel Decision – Rule 22, attendance at hearings	JR – leave only granted to challenge failure to make provision for applicant to attend hearing	Judgement awaited	CF
2	BF	Panel decision for a conditional release challenged by DoJ	Case had been dismissed by High Court but DoJ appealed. Case now closed.	The Court of Appeal decided against PCNI regarding the conditional release. Court of Appeal decision was not challenged by PCNI	Closed
3	BF	Panel decision not to release and length of time before next review	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	Application for leave to apply for a Judicial review was refused.	Closed
4	BF	Panel decision not to release	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	No proceedings issued after PCNI response to challenge was issued.	Closed
5	BF	Panel decision not to release	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	Leave hearing was dismissed as view was taken that it would be academic as case had been referred again to PCNI and hearing was imminent.	Closed
6	New	Panel decision not to release	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	No proceedings issued after PCNI response to challenge was issued.	Closed
7	New	Case being stayed by Single commissioner (SC) until MARA provided outstanding report.	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	No proceedings issued as it was considered academic as SC decision had since been issued.	Closed
8	New	Panel decision not to release	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	No proceedings issued after PCNI response to challenge was issued.	Closed
9	New	Panel decision not to release	Closed at Pre-Action stage.	No proceedings issued after PCNI response to challenge was issued.	Closed

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 wrote last year that in my view the parole process in Northern Ireland was simply not working properly and that this presented serious issues in terms of public protection and the potential rehabilitation of the prisoner. Unfortunately, that remains my view.

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. This year saw the sharpest increase in the last five years. This puts significant additional pressure on Commissioners and our staff. In light of the increase in referrals over the last number of years, I wrote to the Department in October 2024 to request that it begin a recruitment exercise for new Legal and Criminal Justice members. Despite subsequently raising this with the Permanent Secretary and the Minister, the recruitment exercise is yet to begin. Even were it to begin immediately it is very unlikely new Commissioners will be available to take on cases until mid-2027, almost three years after I first made the request. This will present serious capacity problems for the Commissioners in terms of continuing to deal with all cases in a timely fashion.

I appreciate that the increase in parole referrals also puts pressure on all of the agencies involved in the process including the Commissioners. I was pleased to see that NIPS commissioned reviews into the operation of NIPS Psychology and also the Prisoner Development Unit model. While those have been completed and work is ongoing with regards to their implementation, the Commissioners have yet to see any benefit from this.

Indeed, the absence of intervention work from NIPS Psychology and the inordinate delay in Violence Risk Assessments being undertaken is leading directly to delays in processing cases, increasing numbers of adjournments and delays in prisoner progression. This has direct implications for public protection and rehabilitation.

This is not only however an issue with NIPS Psychology. We have seen repeated instances in the last year of prisoners being unable to gain access in an appropriate timeframe to less intense risk reduction work on issues like substance abuse. As I wrote last year, 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.

I should note that one positive development in the last year is the introduction by PBNI of its "Toolkit" which means that a range of risk factors can be addressed at an appropriate level by PBNI staff in the prisons and beyond. This is not a replacement for more substantive intervention but, especially for less risky prisoners, this is a useful initiative.

Another issue which has become more acute in the last year is the scarcity of hostel beds for prisoners who are released. It is now almost always the case that unless a prisoner is very high risk, they will not be offered a place in a PBNl hostel at release. This means for many DCS prisoners in particular that they are released without any accommodation and need to present as homeless. It is not surprising in these circumstances that many face immediate difficulties in the community, often relapsing into substance misuse, associating with negative peers and committing further offences. I am firmly of the view that the significant increase we have seen this year in DCS recalls is due at least in part to this issue.

The information that we have continued to gather this year in relation to reasons for adjournments underlines yet again the poor service being provided to the Commissioners. The significant majority of adjournments is because the Department has not provided the evidence required by the Panel, Departmental witnesses are not in attendance or risk reduction work is not 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.

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 with the Department at the highest level. 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 in 2024 on this matter and was disappointed that NIPS did not accept this recommendation. Nothing has changed on this issue in the last year.

Finally, I am obliged to raise yet again an issue that I have been raising in each year since my appointment which is the rate of remuneration paid to Commissioners. Apart from a one-off increase last year of 5%, the rates that are paid have not changed since they were set more than fourteen 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 an adequate 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 my view this issue now constitutes a risk to the continued proper functioning of the parole system.

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 28 requests for summaries, a significant increase from the previous year when only nine requests were made. All requests were granted.

In addition, and for the second successive year, 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 report which was published in 2024. It recommended a review of the status, oversight and governance of the Commissioners. Despite that recommendation being made more than eighteen months ago, it appears that nothing has been done by the Department to implement it. This is deeply disappointing.

I continued to work constructively with Mrs Catherine Rodgers, Head of Tribunals and Corporate Services within the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals. As our sponsor Catherine has a very proactive approach to engaging with us which is appreciated.

Progress Report 2025/26

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 37 Commissioners.

One Commissioner resigned during this reporting period, Ms Maura Hutchinson, Ms Hutchinson was a Parole Commissioner for over 12 years and I would like to thank Maura for her dedicated service as a Commissioner. In addition, one Commissioner currently remains 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.

In January 2026 the Office of the Parole Commissioners moved accommodation. The Commissioners' Secretariat, which was previously based on the 1st floor Mezzanine in Laganside Court, Oxford Street, Belfast, has since moved to the 2nd Floor of the Royal Courts of Justice, Chichester Street Belfast. The Commissioners continue to be 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. 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 manages 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 2026.

Fees and Expenses

The Commissioners are paid on a case fee basis and a pro-rata fee for undertaking other non-casework business. The fees 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	£942.40	£959.72	£565.44
Article 8(3)	Variation of Licence (Lifer)	£376.96	-	-
Article 9(1)	Recall Recommendation (Lifer)	£188.48	-	-
Article 9(4)	Recall Review	£942.40	£959.72	£565.44
Article 18	ECS/ICS Release	£942.40	£959.72	£565.44
Article 20(a)	Terrorist Related Offences (DCS/ ECS) Release Decision	£942.40	£959.72	£565.44
Article 24(5)	Variation of Licence (ECS/ICS)	£376.96	-	-
Article 28(2)a	Recall Recommendation (ICS/ ECS/DCS)	£188.48	-	-
Article 28(4)	Recall Review (ICS/ECS/DCS)	£753.92	£719.79	£376.96
Article 29(6)	Further Review of Article 28(4)	£753.92	£719.79	£376.96
Article 46(3)	Pre-tariff Review:			
	• Single Commissioner	£565.44	-	-
	• Interviewing Commissioner	£565.44	-	-
Article 22(A)	Summary of Reasons	£141.36	£141.36	-
	Review request for panel hearing on DCS case	£188.48	-	-

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 yearly.

	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26
article 6	65	63	71	70	72	75
article 7(2)	0	0	0	0	1	0
article 8(3)	17	30	15	4	7	8
article 9(1)	3	3	6	3	5	2
article 9(4)	1	6	3	4	5	1
article 18	104	69	85	82	105	119
article 20	1	0	0	0	0	0
article 20a	0	1	2	4	8	6
article 24(5)	26	28	16	15	23	24
article 28(2)a ECS/ICS	18	16	16	18	13	14
article 28(2)a DCS	178	166	184	197	205	256
article 28(4) ECS/ICS	19	18	12	18	7	16
article 28(4) DCS	145	166	146	182	188	239
article 29(6)	42	52	69	64	70	86
article 46(3)	8	10	11	10	11	7
Total Cases	627	628	636	671	720	853

Expenditure - £(000)	£1,665	£1,715	£1,775	£1,818	£2,005	£2,219
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Cost per Case	£2,656	£2,731	£2,791	£2,709	£2,785	£2,601
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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 2026 is detailed below:

PCNI Expenditure – Financial Year 2025/26						
	2020/21 (£000)	2021/22 (£000)	2022/23 (£000)	2023/24 (£000)	2024/25 (£000)	2025/26 (£000)
Commissioners' Remuneration	£896	£911	£955	£1,018	£1,072	£1,267
Commissioners' Travel, Accommodation and Expenses	£4	£1	£6	£6	£4	£5
Legal Costs	£86	£101	£63	£70	£91	£62
Premises	£106	£117	£128	£121	£127	£129
General Administration*	£32	£32	£45	£67	£104	£137
Staff Salaries	£541	£553	£578	£536	£607	£619
Total Expenditure	£1,665	£1,715	£1,775	£1,818	£2,005	£2,219

**Of which £132,000 relates to IT costs*

Membership of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland at 31 March 2026

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
Mr Timothy Thorne	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
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		

Gender Balance of Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland		
Commissioner Cadre	Male	Female
Chief Commissioner	1	0
Judicial	0	1
Legal	10	4
Psychiatry/Psychology	5	7
Criminal Justice	2	7
Total	18	19

Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland

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