

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN PRISONS AND PROBATION

Cross-National Learning Exchange

Phase 1 Briefing Report - 2025

In partnership with:



An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt,
Gnóthaí Baile agus Imirce
Department of Justice,
Home Affairs and Migration



An tSeirbhís Phromhaidh
The Probation Service



REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
MINISTRY OF JUSTICE
AND DIGITAL AFFAIRS



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The project was coordinated by the University of Gloucestershire. We hope this paper serves as a useful contribution to the ongoing development of restorative justice in prisons and probation across Europe and look forward to expanding this work in Phase 2.

1. Introduction to the Report

The use of restorative justice (RJ) in prison and probation services is growing across Europe, with increasing recognition of its potential to address harm, promote healing, and reduce reoffending. As criminal justice systems seek more person-centred and trauma-informed approaches, RJ is emerging as a credible and increasingly mainstream option. While implementation remains uneven, there is clear appetite for innovation and international, cross-jurisdictional learning on the development of effective and impactful services.

This briefing paper is the result of a collaboration between the Probation Service Restorative Justice Team (Ireland), the Estonian Ministry of Justice Social Insurance Board, and members of the advisory board for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Restorative Justice in the UK. Through a series of reciprocal visits, site explorations, and reflective discussions, the project has enabled a shared examination of how RJ is accessed, delivered, and understood within each jurisdiction. This paper shares innovations, sets out common challenges and opportunities, and aims to inform ongoing policy development and service design by drawing together comparative insights from practice.

It is organised across three themes that emerged from the partnership:

- i. **Access and availability** of restorative justice for those in prison and probation
- ii. **Awareness** of restorative justice in prisons and probation
- iii. **Evidencing impact** of restorative justice in prison and probation

After consideration of these themes, the paper concludes with a discussion of key considerations for the development and sustainability of RJ in prison and probation settings, alongside targeted messages for policymakers.

2. Access and Availability for Those in Prison and Probation

Across the three participating jurisdictions (England and Wales, Ireland, and Estonia), RJ is at different stages of development within criminal justice, prison, and probation systems.

Whilst England and Wales have the most extensive RJ practice base, it remains highly localised and uneven. Several prisons have adopted restorative practices, either as part of discrete RJ programmes or within broader restorative approaches to prison culture. These initiatives support people in prison to address their offending behaviour, reconnect with family or community, or reflect meaningfully on harm caused. RJ is not only used in the context of specific offences, but also to support rehabilitation and desistance more broadly. However, RJ in UK prisons lacks a national strategy. There is no unified policy or dedicated budget; services instead depend on the initiative of local prison governors and are funded from general prison budgets. Outside the prison estate, RJ services are typically funded by Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) depending on their regionally decided priorities, leading to a 'postcode lottery' in access. Some areas offer excellent victim- and offender-facing RJ services, while others have none.

In Ireland, RJ is more consistently embedded through national probation services. A range of community-based RJ services are commissioned centrally by the Probation Service, and there is

strong oversight and coordination from a central probation team within the Department of Justice. While fewer RJ programmes are currently embedded inside prisons, Ireland has invested in national structures to support RJ development, including a Ministry-led working group to advance restorative practices in justice settings. The approach is strategic, with emphasis on coordinated planning and evidence-based rollout.

Estonia is in the earlier stages of RJ development. The current provision is primarily prosecution-led and focused on youth diversion. Small-scale RJ initiatives exist in prisons, but national policy is still under development. Encouragingly, the Ministry of Justice has indicated a commitment to embedding RJ more widely and is actively developing frameworks to support consistent rollout across both community and custodial settings. Estonia's emerging model, like Ireland's, appears to favour a centralised, policy-led implementation strategy, though central growth models can sometimes be constrained by a shortage of appropriately trained and certified practitioners, which can affect the pace of service development.

One of the clearest strengths in both Ireland and Estonia is the existence of central teams or structures within Ministries of Justice and probation services that provide strategic direction and support for RJ development. This top-down coordination allows for more consistent implementation, more equitable access, and clearer lines of responsibility and accountability. Ireland's model, in particular, includes a hub-and-spoke structure that connects a national RJ knowledge centre with partner organisations across sectors, including policing, courts, housing, education, and social care.

By contrast, in the UK, the lack of a centralised RJ strategy is a key limitation. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Restorative Justice has been working to address this policy gap, for example by advocating for a register of accredited RJ practitioners and clearer national guidance. However, the UK model has strengths too, particularly its extensive local practice base, which often responds effectively to the unique needs of individual prisons and communities, and provides a wide pool of increasingly experienced practitioners.

The hub-and-spoke model, used in Ireland, where a central RJ service connects with other relevant agencies, appears to offer the most promise. When RJ is developed in isolation, it can become siloed and underutilised. But when embedded within multi-agency ecosystems spanning youth and adult justice, housing, education, and social care, its potential to drive systemic change and long-term desistance is amplified.

Enablers of Effective Restorative Justice Practice

- **Strategic national coordination:** Dedicated teams or working groups within government or justice departments (as seen in Ireland and Estonia) provide structure, continuity, and accountability for the development of RJ services.
- **Policy-led or centralised models:** National policy frameworks help ensure consistency of delivery, enable long-term planning, and support standardisation across jurisdictions.
- **Hub-and-spoke delivery models:** Central RJ organisations that connect with other services (e.g. policing, youth justice, housing, education, and social care) foster integration, whole-system thinking, and broader cultural change.
- **Practitioner networks and cross-sector collaboration:** Strong working relationships between RJ providers and other agencies promote information sharing, effective referral pathways, and multi-agency commitment to restorative principles.

- **Responsive local innovation:** Where RJ is championed at the local level, such as by a prison governor or PCC, programmes can be tailored to community or institutional needs, often leading to strong engagement and creative practice.

Barriers to Effective Restorative Justice Practice

- **Postcode lottery and fragmented delivery:** The absence of national coordination (as seen in parts of the UK) leads to variation in access, quality, and practitioner support.
- **Limited or insecure funding:** Without dedicated commissioning streams, RJ services must compete for general funding, creating instability and short-term delivery cycles.
- **Lack of national standards and accreditation:** Inconsistent training, practitioner pathways, and delivery approaches can undermine quality, delivery, and public confidence in RJ.
- **Limited number of services and trained practitioners:** A shortage of appropriate knowledge and experience can impede the development and expansion of services.
- **Underdeveloped eligibility frameworks:** Ambiguity about who can access RJ, particularly in sensitive or high-harm cases, can lead to inconsistency and the exclusion of some groups.
- **Professional isolation and siloed delivery:** Where RJ services are not well-integrated with wider criminal justice, social care, or community systems, they can become marginalised or disconnected from the people they aim to serve.

3. Awareness of Restorative Justice in Prison and Probation Settings

Across all three countries involved in this collaboration (Estonia, Ireland, and the UK), a recurring theme has been the challenge of awareness and understanding of RJ. Despite decades of international evidence highlighting its positive impact on victims, offenders, communities, and broader justice outcomes, RJ remains inconsistently recognised and unevenly promoted, both within criminal justice systems and to the wider public.

Each country is at a different stage of development, with variable levels of public-facing engagement and professional buy-in. However, all three share a common need: a more strategic, coordinated approach to communicating what RJ is, how it works, and why it matters, both to the public and to professional decision-makers.

The academic and evaluative evidence base for RJ is well-established, demonstrating, among other things, improved victim satisfaction, reduced reoffending, and cost-effectiveness. However, these benefits are not always widely understood or reflected in commissioning and delivery priorities. The challenge is not simply promoting RJ but building coherent narratives that resonate with both public values and institutional goals.

Public Awareness

Public understanding of RJ remains limited and inconsistent across the three jurisdictions. In Estonia, there have been some targeted public-facing campaigns, particularly focused on RJ in youth settings; these have helped to build early-stage awareness but remain small-scale and under-resourced. In

Ireland, there is growing public literacy in certain sectors, particularly education and community services. Schools have played a significant role in normalising restorative practice concepts, although general awareness in the context of justice remains patchy. In the UK, public awareness is highly variable. In areas with strong local provision or longstanding services, communities often understand RJ well. Elsewhere, confusion or scepticism remains common, and RJ is sometimes misrepresented as a 'soft option', undermining confidence in its legitimacy.

Key opportunities and actions to strengthen public awareness include:

- **Build on existing momentum** in areas such as schools and youth justice to reach wider audiences.
- **Use storytelling and lived experience** to humanise RJ and explain its impact.
- **Develop national messaging frameworks** that clarify what RJ is, and what it is not.
- **Tackle misconceptions** around RJ as a soft or discretionary justice model.
- **Support local services** to communicate clearly and consistently with the communities they serve.

Political Awareness

RJ also suffers from inconsistent political understanding and support. While individual champions exist in each country, RJ is not always visible in national justice strategies or funding priorities. In Estonia, policy development is in progress, and RJ is gaining traction at a central level, particularly around diversion and prevention strategies. In Ireland, the Probation Service has provided important leadership, and the RJ Steering Group has strengthened multi-agency engagement, though political messaging could be more prominent. In the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Restorative Justice has sought to raise RJ's profile, advocating for national coordination and practitioner registration. However, national-level policy integration remains weak, and provision is often seen as discretionary rather than essential.

Key opportunities and actions to strengthen political awareness include:

- **Frame RJ in terms of outcomes and value for money**, including reduced reoffending, increased victim satisfaction, and long-term cost savings.
- **Provide decision-makers with evidence-based briefings** and comparative models to support and inform commissioning.
- **Advocate for the inclusion of RJ** in national justice strategies, including funding frameworks and outcome targets.
- **Develop cross-sector business cases** showing RJ's benefits for health, education, and community safety.
- **Support political champions** with resources, language, and data to advocate effectively for RJ.

4. Evidencing Impact of Restorative Justice in Prison and Probation

A central enabler of public and political support for RJ is the ability to demonstrate its impact clearly and credibly. Evidence of effectiveness not only strengthens confidence in RJ as a legitimate intervention within the criminal justice system but also enhances the case for sustained funding and system-wide integration. Despite widespread recognition of RJ's value, including improvements in victim satisfaction, reductions in reoffending, and cost-effectiveness, robust, consistent, and comparable data on delivery and outcomes remains underdeveloped in all three countries. This gap impedes efforts to scale RJ equitably and integrate it into national justice reform agendas.

Indicators used to measure RJ activity and impact currently vary both within and between jurisdictions. While some national or regional systems collect data on aspects of RJ delivery, there are no universally adopted outcome frameworks or core metrics tailored to the unique nature of restorative processes. As such, it remains difficult to compare, aggregate, or narrate the value of RJ at a system level, though there are important lessons to draw from each partner:

- **Estonia** benefits from a mature and highly digitalised approach to public sector data. The Ministry of Justice operates a centralised data collection platform, which has the potential to underpin rigorous national RJ metrics. However, clear outcome indicators specific to RJ, beyond basic delivery numbers, have not yet been fully defined or embedded.
- **Ireland** is in the process of developing more structured evaluation and reporting frameworks, particularly within probation-commissioned services. There is growing recognition of the need to capture not just outputs (e.g. how many RJ processes took place) but also outcomes such as participant satisfaction, behavioural change, or harm repair. Commissioned services are increasingly required to provide accountability through feedback and reporting mechanisms, but approaches remain variable.
- **England and Wales** currently lack national-level data infrastructure to support or capture RJ activity and outcomes. Central justice data systems often reflect broader criminal justice metrics and fail to capture the qualitative and relational dimensions of RJ. However, many local and regional services, especially those funded by PCCs, do engage in detailed reporting. These datasets provide useful insights at service level, even as the absence of a national outcome framework limits the ability to tell a coherent story about the cumulative impact of RJ nationally.

Metrics Frameworks

While there is currently no single, widely adopted metrics framework for RJ across Europe, there are several valuable resources that can inform its development. The European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ)'s Manual on Restorative Justice Values and Standards for Practice outlines core principles and practice expectations that could be translated into evaluative indicators. The EFRJ's reflective guide *How to Evaluate the Social Impacts of Restorative Justice* provides practical insights into defining outcomes, selecting suitable methodologies, and maintaining a balance between accountability and learning. The Handbook on Restorative Justice Programmes from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) similarly emphasises the importance of outcome measurement frameworks to ensure consistency and comparability across interventions.

In England, the Restorative Justice Council (RJC) has developed detailed Practice Guidance, Standards, and a Framework for Practice, which set out what high-quality restorative practice should look like and support a more consistent and professionalised approach to delivery. These frameworks, while developed in the UK context, are increasingly being referenced, adapted, and adopted in other national settings across Europe, particularly in countries where RJ infrastructure is still emerging.

Taken together, these resources point to the need for metrics that reflect both the qualitative and quantitative impacts of RJ, grounded in values such as agency, reparation, and relational healing. Key takeaways include:

- **The need for shared metrics and definitions:** Consistent indicators across services and jurisdictions are essential to measure delivery, outcomes, and quality, capturing both system-level and individual-level change.
- **The opportunity to build on existing good practice:** While national-level data collection systems are inconsistent, well-developed local and regional reporting frameworks, particularly in the UK, can inform scalable models.
- **The value of incorporating outcome frameworks into commissioning:** Where RJ services are commissioned, outcome-linked reporting can drive quality and ensure accountability for public investment.
- **The potential of digital infrastructure and centralised data systems:** Estonia's Ministry of Justice operates a digital infrastructure well-suited to centralised data collection, offering strong potential for developing RJ-specific metrics.
- **The need to include participant experiences as core outcome data:** Quantitative metrics should be complemented with meaningful qualitative insights from both those harmed and those responsible, in order to capture satisfaction, healing, and behavioural change.
- **The importance of drawing on international frameworks and standards:** Resources from the EFRJ and the RJC offer structured starting points for building evidence-informed systems across jurisdictions.

5. Key Considerations for the Development and Sustainability of RJ in Prison and Probation Settings

Drawing together the themes of access, awareness, and evidencing impact, the following considerations reflect the shared learning from across the three jurisdictions. They are offered not as prescriptive recommendations but as a framework for reflection, recognising that effective RJ development requires both systemic commitment and sensitivity to local context.

1. **The importance of a unified national policy:** A coherent national strategy can enable consistent access, delivery, and funding of RJ, while still accommodating local adaptation and innovation.
2. **The importance of public and practitioner awareness:** Strategic awareness-raising across sectors and communities can foster public trust, practitioner confidence, and stronger engagement with restorative approaches.

3. **The need for consistent data collection and outcome metrics:** Shared frameworks for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data can demonstrate impact, support accountability, and underpin long-term system change.
4. **The need for equitable access based on need, not offence type:** RJ provision should not be determined by geography, organisational priorities, or offence-based eligibility criteria. Instead, access should be guided by need and potential for meaningful engagement, ensuring that those most likely to benefit are not excluded due to administrative or commissioning boundaries.
5. **The importance of consistent practitioner standards and training:** Robust, consistent training and professional standards safeguard quality and integrity, promote cross-sector confidence, and ensure ethical and effective delivery across all settings.
6. **The value of local innovation within national frameworks:** While national policies provide coherence, much of the strongest practice identified across the UK, Ireland, and Estonia emerges from local champions and site-level leadership. A key consideration is enabling bottom-up innovation within supportive top-down frameworks.
7. **The role of inter-agency networks and coordination:** Effective RJ systems are not standalone. Hub-and-spoke models (especially as developed in Ireland) illustrate how success often depends on multi-agency collaboration linking probation, prisons, police, social services, housing, and voluntary sector partners, alongside robust information-sharing agreements.
8. **Embedding RJ as both a service and a culture:** RJ is more than an intervention; it is also a philosophy and a cultural orientation. Embedding restorative approaches into the ethos and daily practice of prisons and probation services, as seen in 'restorative prisons' models, is a key enabler of system-wide change.
9. **The need for long-term, sustained funding and commissioning:** Many of the challenges around inconsistency, staff turnover, and variable service quality relate to short-term or insecure funding. Embedding RJ requires commissioning models that prioritise sustainability and continuity of service.

6. Looking Ahead: Messages for Policymakers

The insights gathered across the three participating jurisdictions converge on a shared set of priorities. While each country's context, history, and policy landscape differs, the following messages reflect cross-cutting lessons that are relevant to any national effort to develop and sustain RJ in prison and probation settings.

- I. **RJ is gaining traction in prisons and probation**, but access remains inconsistent and too often limited by geography, offence type, or commissioners' priorities and levels of professional buy-in.
- II. **Coordinated national strategies are essential** to embed RJ into mainstream criminal justice systems, ensuring consistency while enabling local innovation.

- III. **Public and political awareness must be strengthened** to build support, drive demand, secure sustainable investment, and develop and improve the evidence base.
- IV. **Shared metrics and robust evaluation are needed** to evidence impact, inform commissioning, and build system-wide confidence in RJ.
- V. **Equitable access should be based on need**, not on offence type, geography, or local commissioning variations.
- VI. **International learning and exchange offer critical value**, supporting the cross-fertilisation of ideas, models, and frameworks across jurisdictions.