

Developments in Probation in UK

My theme for today is, once again, pain and change in the Probation Service in the UK.

Last year I talked of a number of events that involved change, starting in 2001 when the Probation Service moved from being 54 semi-autonomous Probation Services to being 1 National Service with 42 Areas and one National Directorate exercising a large amount of control over all the Areas, including monitoring performance in a way that had never been done before. Fortunately, South Yorkshire was not one of the Areas affected by amalgamation, which by all accounts was very painful.

In 2003 a new Criminal Justice Act was passed which changed the entire sentencing framework for the Probation sentence, but only for offences committed after the beginning of April 2005. So for the last year we have been dealing with two sentencing frameworks, with one gradually fading as the other grows.

With the new sentences it was necessary to have new national standards for working with offenders. We have had national standards for 10 years, but the new ones were complicated in the area of contact with offenders. Because they are complicated, they are not well understood by Probation Officers and therefore not followed very well.

The final part of the new Act is due to be implemented in November this year. This new sentence will bring on extra 50,000 people a year under the supervision of the Probation Service. In South Yorkshire this will be 1,500 and at any one time this will be the work of between 10 and 15 Probation Officers, but no extra resources to employ them.

The next event was the publication, in the autumn of 2004, of a very influential report on the management of offenders. The Prison Service and Probation Service have always been separate. This report recommended that they were joined under one management system, called the National Offender Management Service, or NOMS. There would be one National Offender Manager, with 10 Regional Offender Managers who would control the Offender Managers. The ROMs would contract with the Prisons to provide beds and programmes and with an Interventions Directorate to provide similar things in the Community, Programmes, Community Service, drug treatment etc. The interventions would also be put out for competition; not privatisation they say because if Probation offered the best value for money we would keep the work.

These plans need legislation to be put in place properly, particularly putting services out for competition. The legislation has been greatly delayed and has not yet come before parliament. This has not stopped the structures being put in place, with the NOM and ROMs there for almost a year now and there being over 1,300 people employed by the new organisation – which has yet to supervise a single offender!!

One of the reasons for the delay in legislation is the massive opposition to the plans. A national consultation on the plans got 748 responses, only 8 of which were fully supportive. The opposition came from all sectors – judges, politicians, unions, staff organisations. Did this change anything? Only, it seems that the Offender Managers will remain in the Probation Services rather than be directly controlled by the ROMs and the interventions will be a slightly separate part of the Probation Service.

Now, forgive me if I seem to go off at a tangent. I know, and you all know, that it is impossible to totally eliminate risk from the people we supervise. The best we can do is to try and manage it to the lowest level possible, but some offenders will re-offend, sometimes seriously and with terrible consequences. Ultimately though, it is often quite unpredictable and we know that 80% of serious new offences are committed by people assessed as low or medium risk. Every year there are a number of very serious offences, murders, rapes committed by people under supervision.

Normally this gets a little media attention nationally. In 2004 and 2005 there were the normal events and the normal attention. However, and you can say I am very cynical, but in the last 3 months these events have been the subject of a series of major national headlines, being used by the government to say that the Probation Service is failing and in need of major reform and that the way to do it is by way of NOMS! Coincidence?

It has, of course, left the Probation Service very battered, bruised, demoralised and angry for we feel that we have been turned upon by our political masters.

This all adds to the sense of unsettlement and uncertainty and a loss of confidence. For while the changes to the way we work are fundamentally sound, the transition is difficult.

Some years ago Probation Services split into functional specialist – Community Supervision, Through-care (during and after custody), Community Service etc. Now we are changing to end-to-end offender management – a phrase you may remember from last year. This means that an offender will be managed by one offender manager (Probation Officer) for the whole time that they are in contact with the Probation Service and sentence after sentence, until they stop offenders or die, or the OM retires. Very sensible, very sound. The Offender Manager would assess the needs and co-ordinate the interventions, but do relatively little of the work themselves. Fortunately, we still only deal with adults, for very different skills and methods are required for working with young people and the two are difficult to mix. It is also an accepted principle that different Offender Managers will manage different people in the same family for we recognise that if one Offender Manager has everyone in a family there will be conflicts of interest, for how can a child tell the person who is also working with their father that they are being abused or a wife that they are being beaten? How can the Offender Manager help them and still retain the trust of the perpetrator and be able to work effectively with him?

But end-to-end offender management is right, as well as putting the greater resources with those who pose the greater risk, better to control those risks. Hence, an Offender Manager will be given two, three or four times as much time to work with high risk people than low risk ones, obviously based on very good, highly structured assessment, based on a national assessment tool called OASys. The introduction of OASys has been uncomfortable for many long-serving Probation Officers, who prefer to trust their own judgement. But it is not judgement that is being replaced, but a consistent structure applied. OASys is now used nationally, with the next battle being to improve the quality.

Of course for many people who have specialised for years, end-to-end offender management brings many new challenges and much re-learning, indeed for staff who have joined in the last few years much new learning about sentences, different offence types and risk. All this is right, but very unsettling.

Next year we will introduce a new computer case management information system that will join the Probation and Prison Services. Bought from a Canadian company - thank you Canada - it will hold huge amounts of information about every offender and improve our ability to manage them and their risk immeasurably. But of course it will be a source of change and uncertainty and resistance from many people who do not have confidence with computers, even though we have had computers for 10 years or more for all staff.

So where does this leave us? There is a revolution going on in Probation in the UK and it will continue no matter what. Or maybe it is evolution, for I can see no end to the changes. Hopefully, some of the worse aspects will wither and die, become extinct. But I am convinced that all the changes, once they can be fully embedded, will serve to enable us to help offenders better, to manage the risks they pose better, to reduce their re-offending, minimise the number of victims and thus achieve our ultimate aim of protecting the public better and doing a greater service.

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