

Reducing Reconvictions: the training challenge

Jill Shackleton offers a view from the 'What Works' team in the National Probation Directorate

The Prison and Probation Services of England and Wales are gearing up to large-scale delivery of accredited programmes. These are programmes based on research about what is effective in reducing reoffending, which have been scrutinised and approved by a Joint Accreditation Panel (JAP). The JAP is a body of national and international experts in the field of corrections.

The research underpinning the programmes indicates that they can only be properly delivered by staff who have been specifically trained for the purpose and who are highly motivated and enthusiastic.

The prison service has been delivering accredited programmes to offenders in establishments for some years and has developed its own strategy for training and supporting programme tutors. The probation service also has a long history of providing groupwork for offenders based upon the principles of effective practice but has only latterly, over the past three years, come to fully embrace the discipline of delivering programmes accredited in design and manner of delivery.

Not only has the probation service come later to the concept of implementing nationally accredited programmes which must be delivered as designed, but it is also undertaking implementation on a scale unsurpassed anywhere in the world. The Government has set the National Probation Service the target of reducing the reconviction rate of offenders under our supervision by 5 per cent by the year 2003-4. In order to achieve this we must, by the same time scale, ensure that 30,000 offenders complete accredited programmes.

And accredited programmes are only part - a very major part - of the 'What Works' changes. Developments in delivering Community Punishment Orders and in services that support offenders' community integration raise new training needs in these directions as well.

Programme training

The training implications of the enterprise are huge. The most straightforward aspect of the training strategy is that we need to be able to train enough tutors to run programmes sufficient for 30,000 offenders to complete. In addition however, the implementation of these programmes requires fundamental organisational change so there will be no member of staff in a modern probation area who

has not had some level of input in relation to accredited programmes and, in time, other elements of the What Works programme.

Starting from a zero base it will take time before the training strategy can be fully in place because some of the roles in the implementation strategy require experienced and competent tutors to receive further training. For instance:

- each programme must be monitored by a treatment manager to ensure that the programme is being delivered as intended. The treatment manager must be an experienced and competent tutor who maintains a degree of programme delivery;
- trainers who deliver tutor training must have programme knowledge. Each training pair must include at least 1 experienced and competent tutor who has also undertaken a training skills course.

It is not only tutors, treatment managers and trainers who need programme knowledge. PSR writers and case managers need it also. PSR writers have a critical role to play in engaging the motivation of offenders and in putting forward well-argued proposals to courts. Case managers have an equally critical role in ensuring that offenders are 'programme ready'. Not only do they need to ensure that any obstacles to attendance are dealt with but they must be able to work with the offender to identify opportunities to practice and reinforce skills learned on the programme.

Some accredited programmes may be run by other organisations, including voluntary organisations. This recognises that other organisations also have relevant skills and expertise, for example in substance misuse groupwork. Where this is the case the delivery and management requirements are the same as for probation staff and they will undergo the same training.

Each programme also has its own set of psychometric tests, which are administered to the offenders before the programme and at the end. The purpose of the tests is to measure the extent of any attitudinal change. To date 1,000 members of staff have been trained in the administration and scoring of these tests.

Monitoring and evaluation

There would be absolutely no point in undertaking an enterprise on the scale of the What Works initiative without an evaluation project to assess its impact. Several evaluation contracts have been let to academic institutions and a database - the Interim Accredited Programme Software (IAPS) - will allow each aspect

of implementation to be monitored. IAPS will capture information as broad as the individual criminogenic needs of a particular offender to the date on which a tutor passes their training programme. Naturally the implementation of IAPS brings its own training requirements and briefing days have been held as well as training sufficient to allow recipients to train others in their areas.

Offender Assessment System IAPS is an interim software package because the Offender Assessment System (OASys) will replace aspects of IAPS when that is introduced. OASys is a structured assessment system, developed jointly by the prison and probation services, which assesses likelihood of reconviction and risk of serious harm. It aids supervision/sentence planning by identifying those aspects of offending-related need that are a priority for an individual offender. OASys will be used in areas by a variety of staff and the estimated number of staff to be trained is 10,000.

As mentioned in the introduction the implementation of accredited programmes impacts on every aspect of probation organisations and so all staff, from senior managers to administration, are required to undergo some level of briefing to enable them to understand what contribution their role makes to the overall plan. One significant difference of the accredited programme training from what has occurred in the past is that the training is assessed. Assessment currently takes place at two initial points and thereafter on an ongoing basis:

- prospective tutors have to go through an assessment centre before being accepted for training
- progress on training is assessed throughout and only those participants who are deemed to be competent at the end will be able to deliver programmes
- tutor competence to deliver programmes is assessed on an ongoing basis, and accreditation to deliver can be removed.

Community punishment and integration

The Probation Service is also aiming to improve the effectiveness of Community Punishment in reducing reoffending. The JAP is considering how accreditation can be applied in the context of community work, and the aim is get a further 30,000 offenders into accredited punishment orders. Effective delivery demands skilled staff and training, particularly to model and reinforce pro-social behaviour. Skills in guiding work-based learning and in reinforcing accredited programmes are also important for some staff.

Improving offenders' literacy skills and employment prospects is another area where the government has set targets for the Prison and Probation Services. Provision will need to meet recognised national standards in these fields, and the Probation Service will draw on the expertise of

other organisations to meet them. There are additional training needs in assessment and in providing services that engage offenders in probation settings while providing access to mainstream services.

The first target is to improve the basic skills of 18,000 probationers, and a consultation document about a strategy to achieve this has been issued. The support of trained mentors is also likely to be important in basic skills work, resettlement and supporting offenders' community integration in other ways. And there are other developments underway as part of 'What Works', in hostels programmes, housing and resettlement which will raise training needs as plans for their implementation unfold.

Training into the future

The initial training roll-out is intensive but in time it will be absorbed into mainstream service activity. For instance, assessments through assessment centres are required at the moment for current staff but they will become standard practice at recruitment stage and so all new employees will have completed one. Similarly the academic curriculum for Trainee Probation Officers (TPOs) has been amended to ensure that it covers the What Works research and all TPOs from this September will undertake the delivery of an accredited programme as part of their NVQ element.

Some aspects of the What Works programme are at an earlier stage of development and evaluation. As they develop, staff selection and training needs in community punishment, employment programmes and other fields will be refined and planned.

Despite the enormity of this training process, however there will still be a need for regional and area training in supporting skills. For example, accredited programme training does not teach groupwork skills or interviewing skills. The in-service training programmes of the future will have to be very closely structured and monitored to ensure that they do provide staff with the skills to successfully manage What Works in the community.

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