

Community Matters: making a difference to tackling youth crime

Karen Sharpe describes the training of the volunteers who will join the new Youth Offender Panels.

In April 2002, the Referral Order – a new primary sentencing disposal for 10-17 year olds pleading guilty and convicted for the first time by the courts – will be introduced nationally throughout England and Wales. The disposal involves the young offender being referred to a youth offender panel (YOP) consisting of one member of the Youth Offending Team (YOT) and (at least) two volunteers, known as ‘community panel members’ (CPMs), which will then agree a ‘contract’ with the young offender. Governed by the principles underlying the concept of restorative justice, defined as “restoration, reintegration and responsibility” (Home Office 1997), one of the purposes of the YOP is to engage local communities in dealing with young offenders. Responsibility for the recruitment, selection and training of community panel members is the statutory responsibility of the YOT. The draft Guidance (Home Office 2000) suggests that panel members should be ‘representative’ of the local community and that their selection is to be based on personal qualities rather than professional qualifications. (A copy of the Guidance is available at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/yousys.dgyot.htm). The provision of appropriate training for CPMs forms an “integral and compulsory part” of the process.

The training programme

The first cohort of CPMs began training in most of the pilot areas in May 2000 in readiness for the introduction of referral orders which was staggered over the summer of 2000. In this first phase, 225 recruits successfully completed the training with 117 of these also undertaking the panel leader training. Based on a training manual called *Panel Matters* that was commissioned by the Home Office and Youth Justice Board, the training of CPMs generally covered six days with the additional *training day for those training to be panel leaders*.

From the outset, the content and framework of *Panel Matters* was used in different ways. Some followed the programme quite rigidly, some were more selective in their use of the material (removing some sections and supplementing others), and some deviated quite significantly from the programme using it only as a guide. Moreover, the material in *Panel Matters* was given to trainees at different stages in the training programme, either immediately prior to the training session, or as background reading or ‘homework’ in preparation

for the next session.

Whilst many trainers felt that *Panel Matters* offered a relatively clear structure to follow, one of their central concerns involved the volume of information that the CPMs were expected to assimilate, and the emphasis on the acquisition of what appeared to be practitioner-based knowledge, rather than on the practical development of key skills. These key skills for panel members were identified by the trainers as: communication skills; mediation and/or negotiation skills; listening skills; confidence; the skills to manage emotion/anger; group dynamics; how to chair or run a panel meeting.

One of the main concerns was that there was insufficient time built in to the schedule for reflection and discussion of the some of the main issues. Concern was expressed that an over-emphasis on the wider welfare needs of young people was inappropriate as it detracted from the central issue of the offence (response and prevention), and that there was a lack of essential practical information given on some of the issues central to the work of the panels, notably victims’ issues, the content of contracts and guidance on proportionality. For a more detailed analysis, the first interim report *The Introduction of Referral Orders into the Youth Justice System* (2001) is available at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/index.html>. It should be noted that after the first wave of training, in light of comments made by YOT trainers and the evaluation team, the training programme has developed significantly.

The delivery of the training

Three different models were identified in the delivery of the training: (1) a ‘YOT led’ approach in which the training was organised and delivered primarily by YOT staff with the sporadic contribution of outside speakers for some specialist subjects; (2) a ‘partnership’ approach where the delivery of the training was shared by YOT staff and independent trainers; and (3) an ‘independent trainer-led’ approach in which the training was delivered by independent trainers (though with some support from YOT staff).

In all the models, the roles and responsibilities of the different parties did give rise to some tensions and conflicts over style, approach, methods and values. For example, although the use of independent trainers with experience of training in allied fields, such as restorative justice and mediation, made them particularly well placed to deliver the training to

CPMs, many did not always have a comprehensive background knowledge of the youth justice system and thus had difficulty putting the training material into context. Where the YOT staff delivered the training themselves, it allowed them to develop a strong working relationship between themselves and the CPMs and develop a mutual understanding of the respective roles and relationships.

One of the most complex issues involved in the training was that it was simultaneously a process of selection and assessment of volunteers. This potential conflict of interest was recognised by both the trainers and the trainees. Whilst many of the trainers felt that their role in the assessment process could confuse their role as trainer, many of the trainees expressed considerable reservations about the training being delivered by the very people who were assessing them. It was recognised that the blurring of responsibilities could be counterproductive to a healthy training environment, with trainees perhaps being more conscious of the need to try to live up to expectations (that is, to say what they think they are expected to say), rather than to risk making mistakes in the training environment.

Feedback and praise

Most of the CPMs recognised that the trainers were working with a new programme and praised the way in which the training had been delivered. In a survey of CPMs conducted almost a year into the pilot when most (if not all) had amassed some experience of working on the panels, 53 per cent of respondents reflected that they felt they were 'reasonably well prepared' by the training and 20 per cent felt that the training had prepared them 'very well'. 88 per cent of respondents felt that the principles behind referral orders were covered 'well' or 'very well'. (By April 2001 when the survey was conducted, some pilot areas had recruited and trained more community panel members. The questionnaire was sent to 369 CPMs and was completed by 218, a response rate of 60%. A more detailed analysis of this survey can be found in the second interim report to be published in September 2001.) The following two comments sum up the views of many CPMs: "*The panel can listen and try to comprehend all the relevant facts and background causes of the offending behaviour. The offender has to participate and start to take responsibility for their actions, through listening to those who have been affected by their actions.*"

"*I am very positive about the whole scheme. It brings young offenders back into the community to be dealt with in a friendly relaxed atmosphere, and includes victims, parents and other official agencies in a way that helps, not excludes, the young offender.*"

The successful recruitment and training of such a large number of CPMs represents a considerable achievement on the part of those involved in the training and is reflected in the overwhelming energy and commitment of those CPMS working on the community panels. The involvement of the local

community in helping to tackle youth crime is a potentially progressive development in youth justice policy. The personal qualities, skills and diverse experiences that volunteers bring to the process, both individually and collectively, is seen as an important factor in engaging young offenders, their families and the victims of crime in the restorative justice process.

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Referral Orders are currently being piloted in eleven areas: Blackburn with Darwen, Cardiff, Nottingham City, Nottinghamshire County, Oxfordshire, Swindon, Suffolk, Wiltshire and the West London sites of Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster. The evaluation is being undertaken by a consortium from Goldsmiths College, University of London (Tim Newburn, Arabella Campbell, Rod Earle, Shelagh Goldie, Guy Masters) and the Universities of Leeds (Adam Crawford, Karen Sharpe) and Kent (Chris Hale, Angela Hallam, Ann Netten, Robin Saunders, Steve Uglow).

References

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