

The Resettlement Directorate: real achievement, new challenges

Peter Wrench identifies areas for improvement and progress on resettlement work for the Prison Service.

Without in any way minimising the continuing gaps in provision and the potential to do more, it is important to recognise that the Prison Service has made enormous progress with resettlement work in recent years. My predecessor renamed the Directorate of Regimes, transforming it into the Directorate of Resettlement, a change which signalled a new focus on outcomes and outward connections rather than process and internal procedures. We have been working ever more closely with colleagues in Probation and an increasingly wide range of other departments, agencies and voluntary and community organisations. The establishment of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) will bring structural changes, as the centre of the developing organisation takes responsibility for strategic policy. Quite when and how those changes will happen is not yet clear. But the establishment of NOMS is an important affirmation of the work we have been doing and an opportunity to take it to another level, through stronger and wider partnerships.

Well before the decision to establish NOMS, there has been an increasing acceptance that reducing reoffending is core business for the Prison Service.

The Social Exclusion Unit's report in 2002 on reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners spelt out the range of factors which impact on the likelihood of reoffending. The challenge – and excitement – of resettlement work is that progress in one area can tip the balance – as can failure.

Well before the decision to establish NOMS, there has been an increasing acceptance that reducing reoffending is core business for the Prison Service. Protecting the public is not just about providing secure custody, but also influencing what happens after release. At the same time as NOMS is affirming that organisationally, the *Criminal Justice Act 2003* is doing so legislatively: its definition of the purposes of sentencing specifically includes “reform and rehabilitation”.

In the last few years the Prison Service has put energy and effort into a broadening range of interventions:

- the £14.5m Custody to Work programme
- Jobcentre Plus surgeries across the prison estate
- basic skills awards
- drugs programmes
- offending behaviour programmes.

Our targets for the current year include:

- 7,000 completed offender behaviour programmes
- 3,900 completed drug treatment programmes
- 64,000 basic skills awards
- 120,000 work skills awards
- 38,000 prisoners with employment, training or education outcomes on release.

We also have a new shadow target on accommodation: the precise numbers will be confirmed in the light of this year's annual resettlement survey, but we are looking to increase by more than 5% the number of prisoners released with accommodation to go to.

The challenge now is to consolidate and move forward. The aim is to maximise effectiveness and value for money, and to develop a more coherent and predictable overall pattern. Increasingly, regional resettlement plans will provide the platform for wider engagement. This will also help to link up the Service's contributions to locally driven crime reduction initiatives, including the Criminal Justice Interventions Programme, the Street Crime initiative

and the new strategy for prolific and other priority offenders.

As well as joining up with other agencies, the Prison Service needs to improve the coordination of the interventions and support it provides for individual prisoners. The aim is increasingly to plan and deliver coherent packages to address their specific needs. The computer-based Offender Assessment System (OASys), which has been developed jointly with the Probation Service, is increasingly supporting improved sentence management.

Under the new sentencing structure in the Criminal Justice Act 2003, 'Custody Plus' will combine short periods of imprisonment with supervision in the community. Planning for the implementation of the Act is well underway, including the development of the shared systems for case management which will be critical to the work of NOMS. Pilots of intermittent custody – a form of 'Custody Plus' in which offenders spend either weekends or weekdays in prison – began at Kirkham and Morton Hall in January.

We know we have no monopoly of expertise – and the Prison Service has sought actively to engage with other organisations with different skills, ideas and connections. Prisoners have few unique needs, but prison provides a unique context in which to

address those needs. What happens in prison can contribute effectively to wider social policy objectives, as the success of our work on basic skills demonstrates. Can we use prison as a platform to make similar inroads on national strategic targets in other areas?

In joining up interventions, we must identify packages that will work for individuals: getting the right interventions, in the right order, at the right time. That is the essence of the vision for offender management under NOMS and an aim that we are already working towards.

Of course, none of this is straightforward. There are enormous pressures from a prison population of around 75,000. The numbers (and the additional movements they generate within the system) can impact on regimes and suck up resourcing that could be used more creatively. And the pressures to contain public spending are well known. The specific new money of recent years for education, drugs and Custody to Work is unlikely to be replicated in the current spending review. This increases the importance of improving efficiency and value for money: maximising the impact of the resources we have.

We must also cope with scepticism about the value of some of what we do. There were some disappointing results from research on offending behaviour programmes published last year. This evidence makes it clear that they can work for the right offenders, but not for all offenders, and not if

other needs – such as accommodation and employment – are ignored. Work is in hand to improve targeting and to join up offending behaviour programmes with other resettlement work.

It is frustrating that it takes a long time to show outcomes – the usual measure is reconviction rates two years after release. That in itself is a crude measure in that it doesn't show the nature of the subsequent offence or any other aspects of the ex-offender's welfare. We need to develop better ways of showing intermediate impacts.

Despite the difficulties and uncertainties this is an optimistic time for resettlement work. We have a lot of encouraging developments to build on and a lot of partners engaged and interested. The creation of NOMS genuinely does represent a 'once in a generation opportunity' to take this work to another level.

There is clearly no going back to 'nothing works'. But there is no simple answer to the question 'what works?'. We have to recognise that individuals all have their own combinations of needs, attitudes and motivations. We need a broad range of assistance and encouragement that can be played in at the right time, with the right people. NOMS must bring increasing sophistication, cross-referencing and management to what we do.

Peter Wrench is Director of Resettlement, HM Prison Service.

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