

Protecting the public: the police/probation partnership

David Walton reviews the development of provisions for monitoring prolific and dangerous offenders.

In the public's eye, police and probation have traditionally been juxtaposed – one for and the other against the offender.

In reality, this has always been a gross oversimplification. But the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* was a crucial milestone for strengthening interagency working. This provided key 'responsible authorities' such as police and probation with an unambiguous right to exchange information about individuals in the interests of community safety and crime reduction; on a basis proportionate to data protection and human rights safeguards.

This legislation endorsed innovations already in place for various police/probation partnerships in respect of prolific offenders and dangerous offenders and contact work with victims of serious crimes.

Prolific offenders

During the 1990s various probation and police services developed 'prolific offender' projects, the key hallmarks of which are careful screening and scrutiny of individuals who are known, or suspected to be, engaged in frequent crime, particularly theft, burglary, and robbery.

This was largely based on the innovatory Dutch "Dordrecht" police and probation partnership scheme. Typically, the courts, or the releasing prison, require the individual to understand that he/she will be subject to surveillance (covert or overt) and frequent supervisory contacts, normally four per week. The supervisory team normally consists of a probation officer, a police officer, and a community drugs nurse. They constitute a formidable trio, and many prolific offenders have experienced this as the essential prompt to going straight. If they don't they are aware that the likelihood of detection, reconviction and imprisonment is considerable.

Independent research conducted by the Department of Criminology at Keele University in 2001 (Professor Tim Hope *et al*) in respect of one of the earliest prolific offender schemes, at Newcastle under Lyme, concluded that, over a two year period, offenders had on average 53 per cent fewer convictions than a comparator control group of offenders of similar criminality.

By 2002/03 these projects had become a key feature of the Government's 'Narrowing the Justice Gap' programme which targets attention on the minority of offenders who actually commit the majority of convicted crime. They constitute a very sensible targeting of limited resources for the benefit

of crime reduction.

These schemes are now enshrined in the Home Office/National Offender Management Service/National Probation Directorate programme of 'Prolific and other Priority Offenders Schemes' across all 42 of the currently existing probation and police authority areas in England and Wales.

Dangerous offenders

Legislation in 2001 consolidated partnership arrangements between police and probation (and subsequently prisons) for the purpose of assessment, supervision and surveillance of high risk offenders in the 42 criminal justice areas – the 'MAPPPAs' (Multi Agency Public Protection Partnership Arrangements). The annual reports from the MAPPPAs, as required by law, have demonstrated to the public that very serious reoffending rates have, year on year, been as low as less than 1 per cent of the total population of probation supervised offenders.

But of course public confidence is a tough goal to achieve; and probation is currently subject to some unprecedentedly hostile media commentary, including the notorious quote, attributed to a source in the Home Office – "the dagger at the heart of the criminal justice system". Truly terrible crimes are committed and occasionally deficiencies in probation practice and procedures have been identified; and as a responsible public service these have to be addressed vigorously, but the best efforts of probation staff overwhelmingly deserves better than this. And our statutory partners in the MAPPPAs take no comfort from such attempts to discredit probation's core responsibilities for public protection.

Victims of serious crime

Following the inception of the Victim's Charter in the mid-1990s and then legislation in 2001, police and probation have undertaken work which rarely attracts public attention but which is of immense importance. Victims of serious crime are entitled to be kept informed of their offender's progress through the critical stages of custody and planning for release, and to comment about this. This entails incredibly sensitive joint working between the two agencies of the highest order, requiring mutual trust.

There is no doubt that all three of the areas of work identified above have derived huge benefit from structural changes in the past ten years, particularly common criminal justice area boundaries, cementing



closer links between probation and police management and front line staff. And of course probation has become much more explicitly defined as a community corrections agency whereby it sees itself as, alongside the police and other key players, primarily being in the crime reduction and public protection business. This has been for the good, for all. There has been a quiet revolution in pursuing better integrated effort across the criminal justice system as a whole (e.g. the 42 Area Criminal Justice Boards) and related fields, particularly community safety.

The Government is currently pursuing further major structural reform and reorganisation in respect of both police and probation; and many believe that the sort of progress described above could well be placed in jeopardy. There appears to be a desire to throw a lot of cards up in the air in the interests of alleged further modernisation. Specifically there are proposals for regionalisation, or sub-regionalisation, which are likely to fracture the agency co-terminosity which currently exists; and there are plans also to submit local probation services to an extended programme of 'contestability' against other possible service providers. The cards may well land in a jumble. This would be seriously damaging to the joined-up agency activity in high risk and sensitive areas of work, and the progress achieved in the past ten years or more.



David Walton was Chief Officer for Staffordshire Probation Service for fourteen years from 1990. He continues to work as the national Staff Side Secretary for the probation senior management trade union, GMB/SCOOP (Society of Chief Officers of Probation).