

Too little, too late?

Aaron Pycroft on service user involvement and the Probation Service.

The purpose of *Probation Circular 10/2006* is “to identify and promote best practice in the engagement of offenders in the delivery and development of services provided by local probation areas.” The circular argues that an approach that involves offenders and ex-offenders in the shaping of services may lead to greater responsiveness to offenders’ needs and thus lead to an improvement in retention and completion rates. Given the increasingly punitive nature of the criminal justice system, coupled with the abandonment of social work values in probation practice, what should be made of this circular and its message? What are the factors that might explain an interest in how offenders view the services that they receive and their effectiveness? Gibbs (2000) argued that the probation service had the capacity to be the humane face of the criminal justice system by adopting an empowerment focus, but hitherto there has been very little evidence of the kind of paradigm that Gibbs was arguing for.

In effect the National Probation Service reinvented itself on the basis of the ‘What Works’ agenda and what it saw as evidence-based practice. There is an argument (proposed by Mair, 2004 and others) that this agenda was primarily concerned with the National Probation Service (NPS) trying to demonstrate its legitimacy to key stakeholders. The NPS (partly) did this by taking ‘in house’ programmes that had been delivered by partner agencies (for example substance misuse and domestic violence programmes) and delivering them in a highly managerialist fashion. There was a concern with programme integrity, the use of manuals to ensure that ‘programme drift’ did not occur and a consequent standardised approach. This approach has been seen to be inflexible and in conflict with the other key ‘What Works’ principle of being responsive to individual needs.

The ‘What Works’ agenda is by definition an open-ended ongoing agenda that is concerned with an evidence base for effective interventions. However the NPS in its haste to

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In this respect criminal justice is the exception because across all other areas of social policy, social inclusion and an empowerment agenda that recognises individuals and consumers as repositories of expert knowledge have been viewed as the way forward in developing modern services (Pycroft 2005). This approach has been structurally developed in the form of national service frameworks (NSF) and policies that have that status of NSFs across health, education, housing, substance misuse, mental health and social services. This approach emphasises local accountability, multi-agency approaches and the need for services to be tailored to the people that it is actually serving; therefore the involvement of service users in the shaping, planning and delivery of those services becomes essential. Lead organisations such as the Housing Corporation and the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, as well as health and social services, have been required to work towards full service user involvement ranging from operational issues right through to board level.

Service user involvement requires organisations to value service users and their perspectives of the services they receive. In essence this empowerment approach values the mutually beneficial relationship between the parties concerned – a problematic issue for the probation service. The creation of a National Probation Service saw the abandonment of both the concept of an offender as a service user and the notion of the therapeutic relationship based upon empathy and “positive unconditional regard.” Instead the agency defined itself around the idea of enforcement and punishment in the community, and no longer having an advocacy role. Although there has clearly been a huge investment in the development and delivery of programmes of rehabilitation, these have been focused on a narrow cognitive behavioural approach which has been criticised for amongst other things failing to consider the context of offender’s lives in explaining offending behaviour.

achieve legitimacy in the eyes of its political masters effectively abandoned the wider available evidence from fields linked to, but not exclusively concerned with, offending behaviour. What these other approaches (for example in the substance misuse literature) demonstrate is that there is no one superior approach to changing problematic behaviour, other than a trusting, empathic relationship between worker and service user. Given that this approach and a meaningful approach to service user participation are grounded in similar values, does *Probation Circular 10/2006* then herald a flicker of hope in the development of the NPS into a more user-friendly, responsive and flexible organisation? It is to be hoped that this is the case, and that the NPS is reviewing the evidence base for effective practice and has a clear strategy for moving the organisation forward.

But upon reflection it may be seen that there is more than one agenda at work here. It is striking that this circular has come out of the blue and certainly for the trainee probation officers that I have been involved with over the last three years, the idea of service-user participation is an entirely alien concept. For the most part it is associated with probation ‘as it used to be’. Trainee probation officers today invariably view the victim, the police and the court as the service user. The idea of the offender as a service user is seen to have no place in contemporary probation practice. However not only are there clear parallels between greater service user involvement and effective practice, but some of the potential key competitors for the NPS in bidding to run services will have highly developed mechanisms for that involvement. In the era of ‘contestability’ it may be that the NPS has been so busy looking inwards that it has only recently recognised that in the delivery of public services other agencies are implementing a more robust evidence base. Does the message of this circular then represent a development of ‘What Works’ or does it indicate that the NPS failed to

recognise certain well established facts of behavioural change, or is the NPS simply trying to position itself in the market place? Whatever the reason, it sends out a message that is completely contrary to what has gone before, and will require a sea change in the thinking of probation officers trained since 1997.

In reality I would expect all of these factors to be having some influence, however it cannot be ignored that in the current climate the NPS is under increased political pressure. Despite the confusion over the introduction of the National Offender Management Service, and a lack of clarity over what shape it will take, it is clear that as with other public services, the intention of government is to introduce a mixed economy of service providers drawn from the statutory, not-for-profit and private sectors. Clearly to meet the target of a 10 per cent reduction in reoffending by 2010, the NPS needs to improve its retention and completion rates for programmes and orders. Service providers who currently work in the community justice sphere (through the provision of for example housing, substance misuse, mental health and basic skills programmes) and who may want to compete with the NPS for service contracts, will already be complying with organisational and in some cases occupational standards that require a commitment to and practice of service user involvement. Some of these larger organisations have become adept in the 'social market' and are entirely used to working in a competitive contracts culture. There is evidence that the implementation of service user involvement is problematic in practice (see Didlock and Cheshire 2005) and lacks consistency, but the fact that other organisations have started to engage seriously with these issues means they have an advantage over the NPS in effective practice which translates into commercial advantage as well.

It may be that the NPS has realised too late that in its efforts to secure its survival it has committed itself to a way of doing business that is ultimately self defeating. It is heartening even at this late stage to see interest in service user involvement in the shaping of services, but it may be too little too late to save the National Probation Service.

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agreement they could avoid serious public consultation. The quality of the Parliamentary debate, for example on terrorism, the expansion of summary justice, the creation of a DNA database and police amalgamations, have suffered as a result. The police service itself is constantly distracted from the professional work of policing to meet haphazard and unpredictable political demands, and the risk is that the public will become cynical and isolated.

The aim should not be to have a one-off debate and then draw a line under it. There needs to be a continuing discussion that draws in people from other countries as well as foreign nationals living in the United Kingdom. It should be able to influence other countries' approaches to policing and develop new and innovative ways of reaching wider audiences, including the disenfranchised, the marginalised and those who still believe that the police are more a service to be feared than a service that can help. But to achieve better policing, it will be important to go beyond consultation and debate and find new ways to involve the people in making decisions and holding the police to account for the service they provide. If, having read this, you would like to contribute to this debate, then visit the website www.thenationaldebate.org.uk – we would welcome your views.

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The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent those of the authors, nor do they reflect a consensus of those attending the Policy Forum event itself. The full report, setting out the main arguments and conclusions of the day, can be found on the Police Foundation's and the Centre for Criminology's websites: www.police-foundation.org.uk and www.crim.ox.ac.uk/CCR.

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