

The managerialisation of prisons - efficiency without a purpose?

Shane Bryans describes the forms of managerialism experienced by the Prison Service.

The rise of managerialism in the Prison Service has resulted in many governors wondering whether they are governing or managing their establishments. In 1979, the election of a Conservative government committed to a manifesto promising to reduce the role of the state, and reduce public expenditure by reducing waste and bureaucracy, resulted in a major reform programme which affected the Prison Service, like other central government departments. The reform programme included the importation of a number of management techniques new to the public sector. The new sets of tools, ideas, beliefs and behaviour grouped together became known as 'managerialism'. As Raine and Wilson (1997) point out: "to differing degrees, the organisational culture and ways of working of the criminal justice agencies, like all other public sector organisations, have been transformed in recent years by the wave of managerialisation in part promoted and imposed by 'New Right' politicians as they have sought to inject private sector principles and practices into the public sector."

Managerialism manifested itself in the Prison Service in a number of forms which included:

- creation of a statement of purpose, vision, goals and values

- strategic and business planning
- key performance measures
- centrally issued standards of performance
- introduction of auditing and monitoring systems
- restructuring of pay, grading and reward systems
- devolution of cash limited budgets
- professional management at the top (the Director General and two Prisons Board members were recruited from outside the Prison Service)
- management training replacing professional training
- clearly defined management accountability and responsibility.
- Home Office Business Plan 1999 - 2000
- Home Office — Aim 4 Business Plan 1999 - 2002
- Home Office Public Service Agreement
- Correctional Policy Framework
- Prison Service Framework Document
- Prison Service Corporate Plan 1999 – 2000 to 2001 – 2002
- Prison Service Business Plan 2000 – 2001
- Prison Service Vision
- Prison Service Aim
- Two Prison Service Objectives
- Six Prison Service Principles
- 15 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- 42 Key Performance Targets (KPTs)
- 67 Performance Standards

The introduction of these management tools and techniques fundamentally changed the work of governors and the way prisons operate. Bryans and Wilson (1998) point out that the reality of managerialism has "made the governor focus more on performance indicators, measures, business planning and budgets than ever before. The main result of this has been a reduction in the direct management of prisoners by governors. Governors have been forced to limit the amount of time they spend conducting adjudications, hearing applications and touring the prison. The days of the 'hands on' governor who knew the names of all their prisoners and staff are long gone."

The reality of managerialism

The consolidation of managerialism in the Prison Service over the last two decades has resulted in governors having to deal with a myriad of managerial tools and processes. For example, governors today will find their work constrained and directed by the following:

- Government's Crime Reduction Strategy
- Criminal Justice System Strategic Plan 1999 - 2002
- Criminal Justice System Business Plan 1999 - 2000

To ensure that establishments are performing effectively, data on each of the 15 key performance indicators and 42 key performance targets has to be returned to Headquarters each month. In order to monitor compliance with the 67 standards the Standards Audit Unit visits each prison every two years and self audits and cross establishment audits take place on a regular basis. Area Managers also visit monthly to monitor and audit. Vast amounts of time are put into preparing for the audit visit and dealing with its aftermath. There is no effective system in place at present to disseminate best practice identified during an audit, hence it is regarded as a very negative experience. In addition, the different approaches taken by the inspectorate and audit often result in an inconsistent picture being painted of an establishment. The plethora of data collected at establishments is collated and analysed at Headquarters. The audit and monitoring business is absorbing an increasing amount of staff time. The core business of the Prison Service is delivering in prisons, yet increasingly, thanks to the managerialist agenda, establishments are seen by some as serving the needs of Headquarters. Headquarters cannot be justified unless it is supporting and assisting establishment to deliver the core

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business.

The reality facing the governor is to try to understand the essence of the plans and indicators and to translate them into something meaningful for their staff and prisoners. Achieving a balance between the often competing indicators (staff training or searching cells, purposeful activity or budget targets) is far from easy. Care must also be taken not to take a short term perspective, which managerialism encourages. The performance of an establishment, and its governor, is now based almost entirely on whether it achieves its key performance indicators and targets. Governors therefore naturally focus on achieving things within a 12 month period. However, fundamental change takes much longer and often results in a short term reduction in performance in some areas. For example, a governor introducing offending behaviour programmes in the face of opposition from the prevailing culture may find staff resistance which results in a reduction in KPI/KPT performance, such as increased staff sickness. It is important therefore to take a holistic view of an establishment rather than focus on short term managerial indicators.

A further drawback of the managerial approach is to focus on process without looking at quality. Standards Audit, for example, is concerned with prisoners being given a reply to their request/complaint form within seven days. The quality and accuracy of the response is not measured. Would the prisoner concerned prefer a reply in two days saying ‘not our fault, no compensation’ or a reply taking 10 days which had thoroughly looked into the matter and giving reasons for the decision? A prison may have a race relations team, produce minutes of meetings and display photographs of team members, thereby meeting ‘process’ requirements but may not necessarily have good race relations. The quality of interactions is not measured.

Managerialism looks to quantitative

measures rather than qualitative ones, often because quantity is easier to measure than quality. For example, ‘time out of cell’ was a key performance indicator, and governors were encouraged to increase time out of cell. However, for many prisoners increased time out of cell with nothing productive to do other than be on ‘association’ increased monotony, the possibility of bullying, potential violence and institutionalisation. A better measure would be looking at the quality of what was done when ‘out of cell’. Similarly, members of the public are more interested in the quality of the reply they receive rather than the fact that a reply comes by the target date of 20 days (KPI 14), or that the phone is answered within 12 seconds (KPI 15).

Humanitarian managerialism

Perhaps the biggest concern with the push to managerialism is that managerialism itself will become the end rather than the means. Governors are becoming increasingly concerned with process issues, ‘box-ticking’, efficiency and economy. The approach becomes one of ensuring through administrative and bureaucratic mechanisms that the establishment runs as smoothly and cost effectively as possible. As Rutherford puts it “The tenor is one of smooth management rather than moral mission.” There is a grave danger that adopting a managerialist approach to the running of prisons will ignore humanitarian, ethical and moral principles and concerns.

An organisation which focuses on cost and quantitative outputs, at the expense of treating individuals with humanity and respect, would be in danger of losing its moral legitimacy. Pressure to meet performance targets could for example result in making prisoners do offending behaviour courses which they don’t actually need to do or reducing budgets to the detriment of the quality of regime provision.

Managerialism, and the dogmatic

pursuit of efficiency, effectiveness and economy cannot be a legitimate end in itself. Managerialism should only be morally acceptable when it is “put to work in the service of human rights or other liberal or humanitarian goals” (Cavadino, Crow and Dignan 1999).

Few would argue with a form of managerialism which valued human rights, individuality and fairness. We all want to make the best use of resources available, reduce inefficiency and maximise the amount of resources available for positive regimes and offending behaviour programmes. Resources should not be squandered on programmes which do not work, but at the same time resources should not be wasted on hierarchies of bureaucratic auditing and monitoring procedures and systems which require large numbers of staff to service them.

Achieving healthy prisons

Strategic and business plans, key performance targets and indicators, audit and measurement are all useful tools but lack legitimacy unless they contribute to humane and purposeful prisons. It is reasonable to question whether managerialism has actually improved the performance of establishments, or absorbed resources and punished poor performance.

The challenge for governors, and the Prison Service, is to adapt modern management techniques and make them work towards improved custody, reduced reconviction rates and humanity. Management tools and measurement must not be allowed to become an end in themselves.

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