

The managerial impact of partnerships with youth offender teams

Jack Holland writes that developing YOTs provide a cutting edge example of the change from managing practice to managing outcomes, standards and contracts.

In all the many aspects of criminal justice work the impact of modernisation is arguably most strongly represented in the establishment of Youth Offender Teams (YOTs). From 1 April 2000 every local authority area is required to have a YOT and from June to implement all of the activities specified within the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. However for the last 18 months Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (Wessex) has been a pilot area for YOTs and this article explores the impact on management within the Wessex YOT.

Managerialism and YOT development

The YOT development encompasses new thinking about management of all public services as well as some of the specific criminal justice aspects. The most fundamental aspect of this is a change to managing outcomes rather than process. The Wessex YOT manager's duties outlined in the inter-departmental circular of guidance December 1998 involves an amalgamation of staff from five different agencies. The YOT manager for Wessex describes the

management task as co-ordinating the activities of staff from differing disciplines of which he/she might have little experience to achieve outcomes. Some outcomes are set by National Standards published by the Youth Justice Board in April 2000, but managing staff practice is a more complex business which does require management co-operation between 'parent' agencies.

In addition a plethora of other managerial relationships are necessary at the highest level in all of the agencies with the potential to occupy considerable management attention on structural planning rather than practice and service delivery.

Partnership working

Complex management issues in establishing the core organisation are exacerbated by the requirement to establish partnerships with the independent sector. Many of the elements of service delivery, particularly the new requirements of the Act, are candidates for being delivered by external agencies, sometimes local but more often large national organisations. To give a flavour, examples from Wessex YOT's annual plan submitted to the Youth Justice Board this year include:

Reparation Orders

- Crime Concern, SOVA and NACRO

Remand accommodation

- NCH Action for Children

Mentoring services

- Portsmouth Community Safety Partnerships

Wessex has service delivery partnerships with seven separate independent organisations involving a budget of several hundred thousand pounds.

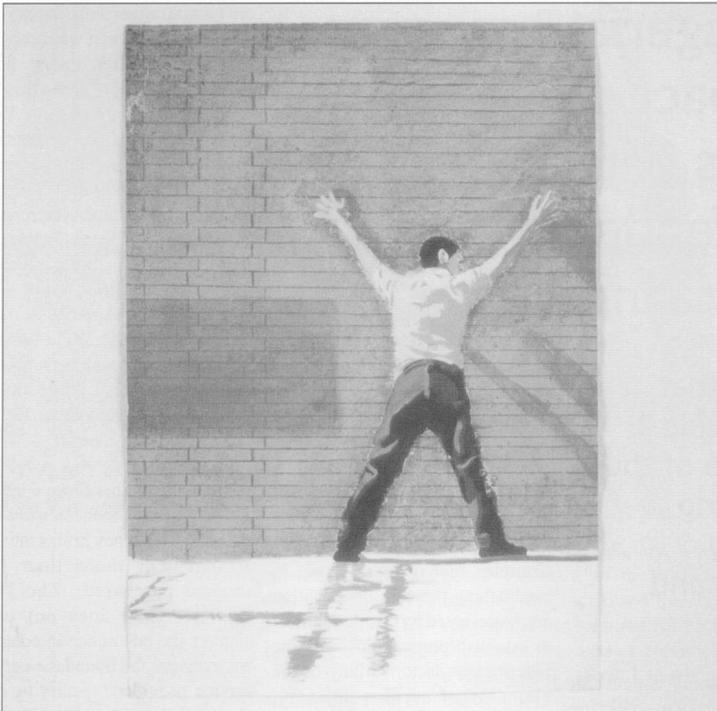
The question arises about the definition of these partnerships. There is nothing new in the concept of statutory/independent partnerships; the probation service has been required to spend a specified proportion of its budget

on such arrangements for several years. At one level it would appear that partnerships might be a euphemism for purchasing or commissioning, making the YOT manager responsible for contract oversight. This is indeed a major part of the task, drawing up specifications and the overseeing of a tendering process being the first stages. However the position is more complex than that. It is expected that the value in these partnerships is not just the outsourcing of chunks of work but the bringing in of additional experience and creativity as well as more flexibility.

Where the outcomes sought by the YOT are in harmony with the external agency, then it is often the case that the agency brings into the arrangement more than just services purchased. The YOT manager then does not only manage the adherence to contract but manages the boundaries of the service provided, specifying and clarifying standards but allowing for innovation, and for novel solutions to be tried. So here the YOT managers may have even less hands on knowledge and control of practice than is the case in the core team. This clearly calls for a brave and imaginative managerial style as well as exceptional organisational capacity. The trap is for managers to have too much of their time absorbed by endless 'liaison' meetings.

Problem solving?

In addition to the positive gains of this partnership approach there are problems. Both the large national and smaller local independent agencies have their own sometimes quite inflexible attitudes, beliefs and objectives. Much tension can be generated, and this has been observed in the Wessex YOT experience. Such organisations sometimes believe that they are selling their own predetermined product. Just as the YOT as a commissioner should not circumscribe the contractual arrangement so much as to squash creativity, so the external agency must be sensitive to the need of the



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YOT manager to ensure consistency, and to allow the YOT manager to ensure that the amalgamation of services provided by core and partnerships staff add up to a coherent whole consistent with the primary objective of the YOT. Despite the aforementioned tensions within the Wessex YOT the experience is proving to be productive with excellent examples of new ideas in Family Group Conferencing, mentoring of persistent young offenders and victim reparation, for example.

Other tensions

There are other tensions of course, not least ensuring that the core staff are not left feeling that all the new innovative work is being sold off whilst they are left with the hard core intractable and maybe less rewarding work. There is also an issue about finance with most of the partnership work being paid for with short term pump priming money from the Youth Justice Board. It is still far from clear how

to build the costs into longer term revenue budgets. This has consequences for the staff in the partnership projects who are usually on fixed term contracts. This coupled with the tendering process brings a smack of commercialism into the life of the YOT manager and, for that matter, into the lives of the managers in the independent sector, who increasingly work in a competitive environment.

The theme of this article has been the way in which managers in criminal justice agencies, in common with the rest of the public service, are having to move away from managing practice into the management of outcomes, standards and contracts. The experience of the developing Youth Offender Teams provides a cutting edge example of this change. The experience during the pilot studies of these YOTs provides useful examples of the pros and cons as well as highlighting some critical

issues, for example:

- How to manage the demand of extensive liaison/structure planning meetings apparently needed to support 'joined up' thinking?
- How to manage innovation so as to ensure consistency around core objectives and not leave some staff feeling left with the dross?
- How to manage the balance between a more competitive and commercial process and a truly equal partnership?
- Perhaps most importantly how to keep in focus the quality of service delivery practice in this complex managerial world.

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References

Inter Departmental Guidance Circular 'Establishing Youth Offender Teams', Youth Justice Board 22 December 1998.

National Standards for Youth Justice (April 2000), Youth Justice Board.

Wessex Youth Justice Plan (March 2000), Wessex Youth Offender Team.