

Resettlement, Parole and the Home Probation Officer

What a difference a solid release plan makes to Parole Board decisions. Jo Dobry tells the tale of two brothers.

In 'parole speak' we talk about a solid release plan: a home and job to go to; a probation officer who is alert to the risk and needs of the individual offender and who will provide him or her with the practical and sometimes psychological support they need. A solid release plan can make all the difference between staying in prison and coming out on parole.

Consider the cases of 'John' and 'Jim', identical twin brothers. They have identical entrenched patterns of offending linked to their drug addiction from an early age. Their offending history dates back to when they were twelve years old and were taken into care. Jim stayed in the Southeast of England where they had grown up. John moved to foster parents in a rural part of the Midlands.

18. He really seems to have turned the corner. She has liaised with a second stage rehab hostel where he can continue the work done in prison. The hostel has links with the local job centre where he will be able to get part-time work. She has just heard that the local authority have agreed to fund John's place at the hostel. She believes a longer period on supervision under such controlled circumstances will really help John live a crime free life. The panel of three board members considering John's case agree that the risk of John reoffending is manageable and parole is granted.

On the other hand, Jim's probation officer has never met him. She has managed to talk to him briefly on the phone, and looked at most of the papers. He has no home to go to or support in the community

The relationship between the individual offender and their supervising officer is key to any release plan.

With the exception of geographical location, the story of the twin brothers continues on parallel lines. By the age of 25 they had substantial criminal records. Over the years they had spent numerous short spells in custody. Repeated attempts to quit drugs had failed. In 2001 John and Jim pleaded guilty to a series of street robberies. Their M.O. involved targeting women with handbags in busy shopping areas. They were sentenced to seven years imprisonment.

This was by far their longest sentence. They have spent 18 months in a therapeutic community. There have been many setbacks, but they have now been drug free for a year and a half.

John and Jim are now half-way through their seven-year sentence and are therefore eligible for parole. If they get it, they will serve the rest of their sentence in the community. If they don't, they will spend up to another 18 months in prison.

The three member panel of the Parole Board who are due to consider John and Jim's separate applications will note that their age and offending history puts their actuarial ('static') risk of reoffending as 'high'. However the work they've done in prison has significantly reduced their dynamic risk. Everything hangs on the release plan put forward by the brothers' home probation officers who will supervise John and Jim if they are released.

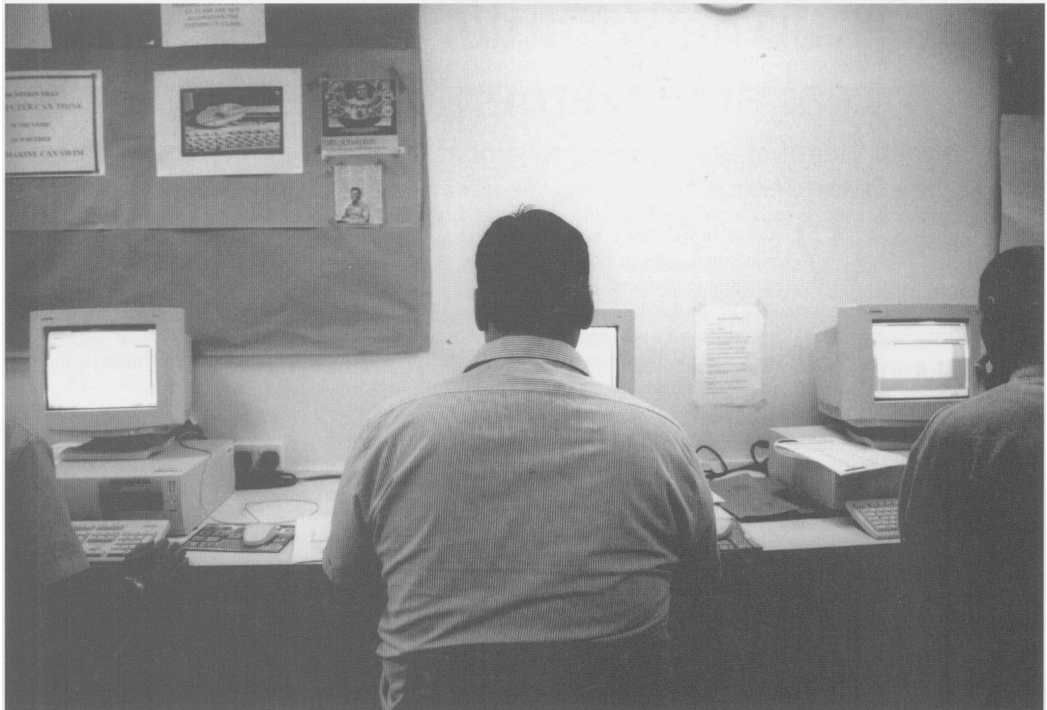
John's probation officer has produced a full and thoughtful report. She has known him since he was

and will need hostel accommodation. She is making inquiries about a bail hostel, but is not hopeful. Her report is sketchy. She apologises for this, but time and resources are limited in the busy metropolitan area where she works.

It is clear to the panel that Jim is not going to get anything like the support he needs on release. The exposure to drugs at a bail hostel, even if a place was forthcoming, may be little better than release to 'n.f.a.' (no fixed abode) which is the most likely outcome. Parole is refused. The panel note that Jim's case will be reviewed in a year's time. They hope a proper release plan will be in place by then, but for now Jim stays in prison.

These are extreme examples. But they are based on fact. There are numerous enterprising initiatives all over the country where local authorities, health services, criminal justice agencies, business communities and the voluntary sector combine to provide specialist support and real opportunities for resettlement and rehabilitation. But they are all too few. John was lucky to get a place and funding for such a specialist rehab hostel. He was lucky too to have a probation officer who knew him and was able to put together the best possible release plan for him.

The relationship between the individual offender and their supervising officer is key to any release plan. This fact is underlined by the new Secretary of State's Directions to the Parole Board (May 2004) which add "relationship with the supervising officer"



HMP Wormwood Scrubs

to the list of factors that the Board must take account of in reaching decisions on determinate sentence prisoners.

It is not uncommon, as in Jim's contrasting experience, for a newly allocated probation officer to make contact for the first time with an offender for the purpose of writing the parole report. There can be additional problems if the offender is being released to a new area and will be supervised by an officer who has not been involved at all in his risk assessment.

Over the last eighteen months, the problem of resources has become acute for the over-stretched probation service. Recently a number of areas have banned officers from travelling to interview prisoners in custody. This on occasion has created a very difficult situation for all concerned. The bottom line for the Board is that if the risk to the public of offending on parole is not manageable, that offender must stay in prison. There will of course be cost implications and no one wants to keep offenders in prison unnecessarily. However, risk decisions cannot be made on financial grounds.

The Board continues to work closely with colleagues in the National Probation Directorate and the newly forming NOMS (National Offender Management Service) to help probation officers in the field identify information which can be crucial to the Board's decisions. A recently published Probation Circular (*Ref 34/2004*) gives specific guidance on reporting for parole reviews and

minimum expectations of contact with offenders. The circular stresses the importance of personal contact between the Home Probation Officer and the offender and states that blanket bans on travelling to interviews are unacceptable.

The longer-term aspects of resettlement in terms of finding and keeping employment can also influence parole decisions. It is noticeable that links forged with local employers by open prisons regularly add strength to an offender's release plan, by providing not only valuable hands-on experience of working but often with jobs that will continue on release.

So much in this field depends on individual initiative and cooperation between resettlement officers in prison and the business community. In this context it is heartening to finish by mentioning an exciting project on the horizon. The idea is to create a self-supporting community based partly on the principles of an alternative to custody project called 'Delancey Street' which has been operating for 20 years in San Francisco, and partly on a self supporting therapeutic community in Italy. 'Project Radical' is being pioneered by the UK charity Tomorrow's People. The Parole Board has been happy to hear about the project and point them in the direction of key contacts in the new National Offender Management Service. We await developments with interest.

Jo Dobry is a full-time member of the Parole Board.