

Co-operating out of crime?

Dave Nicholson looks at mutual and co-operative ways of managing services.

Right across the political spectrum all the talk today is of co-operatives, mutuals, and co-production as the solution to everything from public service reform to the economic crisis and the problems of 'broken Britain'. Labour talks of 'John Lewis-style' and mutual public services and holds up Lambeth Council as an example of how a 'co-operative council' could work. 'Red Tories' (Blond, 2010) call for an ownership revolution where ownership and control of public services is vested in those who work in and use them. Meanwhile Vince Cable for the Liberal Democrats extols the virtues of 'mutualising the banking sector' and becomes the darling of the Cooperative Movement at their 2009 Conference and a member of the Cabinet in the Con-Dem Coalition of 2010.

But what exactly are these mutuals they're all talking about? And is anyone talking about mutuals in the criminal justice system? Hunt (2006) sees control and ownership by staff, service users, and, where appropriate, the wider public as the defining characteristic of *mutual* public services and ownership by consumers and workers as the defining characteristic of the different forms of *co-operative* enterprise. Boyle and Harris (2009), however, specifically rule out mutuals and co-operatives for policing and justice, but then go on to claim that the specialised public services for *preventing and dealing with crime* 'rely on an underpinning operating system that consists of family, neighbourhood, community and civil society'. The call is for public services to operate along lines of 'Co-production' in which all these stakeholders work together with service users and professionals;

in other words, co-ownership and co-control – *mutual structures for preventing and dealing with crime.*

Readers of a certain age may recognise here echoes of the much vaunted (but little delivered) 'community probation' of the 1970s and 1980s (Henderson, 1986) and Bottoms and McWilliams' (1979) argument that instead of offenders being passive recipients of expert advice, they should be encouraged to act as active agents in their own rehabilitation – they should co-own their own rehabilitation.

But the co-control involved in specifically *mutual* solutions to offending has much more radical implications. User Voice (www.uservice.org) is one example of such a mutual solution. As a national membership organisation set up and run by ex-offenders, it claims that 'getting offenders to devise their own rehabilitation programmes is the best way to reduce crime' and they are piloting elected prisoner councils in three prisons as a means of moving towards this goal.

Mark Johnson, one of the founders, provides an eloquent picture of what mutual reducing reoffending services could look like:

We're about user engagement. We believe that only offenders – that is users of the criminal justice system – can reduce reoffending. And we believe it's time for society to take stock of our burgeoning prison system. It does a great job of containing people, but fails almost totally to enable the change that many inside are ready to embrace, given the chance ...

If we want effective rehabilitation programmes inside our jails,

they must be devised with the input of the people who'll be benefiting from them. We need a structure that enables prisoners to participate, that uses their skills to add value to the criminal justice system and ultimately to cut crime. So our main project at the moment is prison councils, which we're piloting in three jails and hope to roll out across the country. Next week, hundreds of prisoners will be invited to fill in ballot papers and elect their own representatives. For most offenders, it will be the first election in which they have ever cast a vote. Since offenders generally live on society's margins, they have rarely been engaged to participate as citizens before. Now they are being handed some personal responsibility – an important new experience for those trapped inside a system that perpetuates their powerlessness.

(Johnson, 2009)

Will the Con-Dem coalition embrace this sort of mutual user involvement in their much trumpeted 'rehabilitation revolution'? Will their 'Prison and Rehabilitation Trusts' be multi-stakeholder mutuals with offenders and ex-offenders as co-owners and in co-control?

Why not? There are examples of similar multi-stakeholder mutual solutions to offending operating successfully throughout the European Union. 'Social co-operatives' of ex-prisoners, offenders and rehabilitation professionals provide a successful model of the co-ownership and control by offenders of their own rehabilitation. Originating in Italy and now to be found throughout the EU, these are essentially mutual reducing reoffending services, where offenders create their own employment and deliver their own resettlement services to each other through their membership of the social co-operative; and where the role of the professional is to facilitate the promotion, development, and success of each social co-operative rather than simply providing either expert assistance or 'offender

management' to individual offenders (Thomas, 2004).

But is there any sign of this sort of thing in the UK? Or any UK evaluation of their effectiveness? NOMS has recently published a report on *Reducing Re-offending Through Social Enterprise* (2010), which maps the involvement of social enterprises with prisons and probation services. But what the report doesn't do is differentiate between the work of specifically *mutual and cooperative social enterprises* and the work of the wider social enterprise sector.

Defining social enterprise as 'independent businesses that trade for a social purpose', the report doesn't bring out the key feature of mutual and co-operative forms of social enterprise – the 'ownership question' – which differentiates them from other models of social enterprise. And such a wide definition of 'social enterprise' could in fact include many private sector businesses as well – the private prison operator Kalyx for instance describes itself as 'a business with social purpose' (www.kalyxservices.com)

As suggested above by Hunt (2006), ownership by staff, service users, and, where appropriate, the wider public is the defining characteristic of *mutual public services*, just as ownership by consumers and workers is the defining characteristic of the different forms of *co-operative enterprise*. But the NOMS report pays no attention to the actual and potential contribution of either *co-operatives* or *mutuals* to reducing re-offending or to the wider questions of offender management.

There are, however, some scattered examples of both mutual and co-operative solutions to offending in the UK. Thus the The Big Picture Cooperative provides one example of a co-operative approach as defined by Hunt (2006). This co-operative provides art materials and funding to organisations working with homeless children in Third World cities. The children use the

materials to create art works, which are then sold from the co-op's website. The pictures are mounted and framed by prisoners from a resettlement prison, who, as part of their preparation for release programme work in the co-operative for a four week period. During that time they are treated as members of the co-operative and have a full say in how the business develops. They learn about the co-operative movement, its values, and principles and receive genuinely democratic work experience (www.coopseurope.coop/spip.php?article544).

In a similar way Recycle IT! Is a co-operative of ex-prisoners in Manchester who provide employment and mutual support to each other through their co-ownership of their own IT recycling business (www.recycle-it.uk.com) Also in Manchester is a new initiative to provide a mutual approach through a prisoner and ex-prisoner savings and credit union, providing not just financial services for its members but also accommodation and employment services – an offender-run mutual Prisoner Aid Society.

More co-operative and mutual pilots are needed though, as is a rigorous evaluation of their effectiveness in reducing reoffending. More active promotion of the actual and potential benefits of a co-operative and mutual approach to reducing offending would be a useful start.

But is all this sensible? Is it sensible (or right) to have offenders co-owning and co-controlling their own rehabilitation? These examples and a wide range of other voices think it is – on both normative and empirical grounds. Thus the 'good lives rehabilitation model' (Ward and Maruna, 2007) carries on where Bottoms and McWilliams (1979) left off and actively promotes the involvement and *control* of the rehabilitation process by an *equal partnership* of offender and criminal justice professional.

Insofar as this approach can be shown empirically to reduce

reoffending then surely it should be regarded as a sensible idea.

In the same way it can be argued from a normative standpoint that it is right for offenders to be involved in the ownership of their own rehabilitation – if society wants offenders to act responsibly then they should be given the opportunity to be responsible for their own rehabilitation.

For User Voice it is also a matter of simple common sense belief:

We believe that only offenders – that is the users of the criminal justice system – can reduce reoffending.
(Johnson, 2009) ■

Dave Nicholson is Director of Ex-Cell Solutions Ltd (www.ex-cell.org.uk) with a Masters in Applied Criminology from Cambridge University.

References

- Blond, P. (2010), *Red Tory*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Bottoms, A. E. and McWilliams, W. (1979), 'A non treatment paradigm for probation practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, 9(2), pp.159-202.
- Boyle, D. and Harris, M. (2009), *The Challenge of Co-Production: How Equal Partnerships Between Professionals and the Public are Crucial to Improving Public Services*, London: NESTA.
- Henderson, P. (1986), 'Community work and the probation service', *Probation Journal*, 33(2), pp.49-53.
- Hunt, P. (2006). *In the Public Interest: The Role of Mutuals in Providing Public Services*, Manchester: Mutuo.
- Johnson, M. (2009), 'Prisoners are ready for a taste of democracy. Getting offenders to devise their own rehabilitation programmes is the best way to reduce crime', *The Guardian*, 16 September.
- NOMS (2010), *Reducing Re-offending Through Social Enterprise*, London: Ministry of Justice.
- Thomas, A. (2004), 'The rise of social cooperatives in Italy', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 15(3).
- Ward, T. and Maruna, S. (2007), *Rehabilitation: Beyond the Risk Paradigm*, London: Routledge.