

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2010 No 192



Perrie Lectures 2010

Managing offenders through Probation Services

Beverley Thompson is the Acting Chief Executive of Northamptonshire Probation Trust.

This is the second time I have had the opportunity to give one of the Perrie lectures, the first when I was at Nacro about women in prison where I was highlighting the need to offer appropriately tailored support and activities to assist with successful resettlement. This lecture 12 years on has similar themes. The importance of timely support and joined up services for offenders and their families cannot be over stated. My work at Nacro and now in Probation supports this proposition.

I started my career as a Probation Officer in London in the 1980's the mantra then was advise, assist and befriend. 'Aftercare' was part of the lexicon of Probation language and it was permissible and even cool to care about offenders. There was even voluntary through care/aftercare in those days. Today the language has changed. But has the practice?

I want to illustrate this with a story. I remember many a long journey to some distant prison to meet with an offender to plan for their release — this was a legitimate activity fully endorsed by the Service, (there was still the essential car user allowance). I would **advise** the offender that the three bedroom flat with deep pile carpet (I did say it was the 80s) they were expecting was not likely to be possible. I would then **assist** the offender to complete the application form, for the hostel they were more likely to get, followed by the relevant housing department form which was often a mere formality — as they were never going to get a council property quickly particularly in South London. I would **befriend** with a packet of Benson and Hedges, hastily bought from the local garage to help this process of through care/rehabilitation/resettlement/aftercare take place smoothly. Whichever word you choose — depending on the era you relate to.

As I look back and consider, is what I have described in such crude terms really any different to what offenders experience today? We have changed the language but are the outcomes any different? Has the Probation role in the process been diluted through the 70+ indicators we are measured against? Is multi-agency working really worth the effort? Is it making a difference?

I want to start by considering what we think we are talking about when we talk about Resettlement, Rehabilitation, through care or even end to end offender management. None of the offenders I have ever worked with or spoken to has ever used this language other than as a means of communicating with us, the 'professionals'.

They generally say something like 'I need some help with housing or finding a job when I return home, Miss'. We however have taught them a language of our profession.

They have learnt the language we use to describe what we argue we do to them, and I do mean do to them as often we do not work 'with' despite what we claim.

I want to question when were these offenders ever 'settled into the communities we expect them to return to?' The majority of offenders have led chaotic lives prior to imprisonment, a third of prisoners have no permanent accommodation prior to imprisonment; two-thirds are unemployed prior to imprisonment; 40 per cent of prisoners lose contact with families.

Our contact with the offender is I suggest based on an implied assumption that we will settle them into communities through our intervention. This is what the language offenders have learnt from us; leads them to believe. They will 'settle', meaning put in order; or arrange in a desired state or condition. I would suggest that now is the time to re-think our language — we may be able to assist and guide in securing accommodation or employment, but this is not the whole picture, as left without meaningful support/contact or family support offenders can feel isolated leaving them vulnerable to return to previous routines or associates they are trying hard to move away from. Is there now a case for us to be clearer and more honest and transparent about — what we regard as a successful 'resettlement' outcome?

Has the Probation role in the process been diluted?

When I was preparing for this I asked my Treasurer to tell me what proportion of our budget was dedicated to resettlement activities? We didn't have a figure as we don't differentiate activities in that way any longer; it is now subsumed into general offender management (OM) activities. This confirmed for me one of the great frustrations I have currently with Probation activities. We are required to spend so much of our activities delivering outputs against standards that it appears we have forgotten those who should be at the heart of what we do: the offender. How do we know if what we do really makes a difference to the offender? The recent research on desistance theory would appear to cast doubt on the centrality of the Probation role in the process. In fact the materials on desistance leads me to believe that if the

investment we have made in accredited programmes over the years were a commercial product we might question the value of the return on our investment. I often considered what was so special about the one to one meetings I would have with offenders, did it really make a difference to them? Or was it just that they had grown up? Become a parent? Or left a dysfunctional relationship?

Today's OM does at least have the language of punishment enshrined through their work and well as the control aspect. I would argue that we still remain short on the helping aspect of our work. We are still too process-orientated and we need to have more qualitative outcomes. What do offenders think about the service they receive from Probation. Prisons at least have the MQPL (Measuring the Quality of Prison Life) survey to give them an indication and the British Crime Survey gives some indication to criminal justice agencies, but Probation is almost invisible in this arena. Yet we are measured on our contribution to reducing re-offending.

I would suggest that Probation is spending too much time counting completions, measuring outputs and managing risk processes — this I believe has caused an imbalance in our work. The offender is almost seen as secondary and wouldn't it be nice if the offender turned up for appointments on the right day at the right time, didn't have any issues going on in their lives which they chose to divulge toward the end of their thirty minute session. This must be the OM's worst nightmare as their already filled diary is thrown into chaos. I am acutely aware that the time constraints that OM's operate under now must impact on the quality of time they are realistically able to offer to offenders. Let me be clear I am in no way criticising the work of OM's as I am immensely proud of the work that my staff do in often difficult and challenging situations, as I am sure are my other Chief Executive colleagues across the country of their staff, but I am concerned by the restrictions that drive the performance mechanisms may be having an adverse impact on the quality of outcome.

Just recently in Northamptonshire we carried out a short exercise seeking the views of women offenders on how to improve attendance and thereby avoid breach action; the comments were revealing and in parts a stark reminder of how far we have potentially gone in forgetting basic issues. Some comments:

A survival guide written by women who experienced probation

Leaflets about what will happen on your first appointment would help (given out at court)

I would argue that we still remain short on the helping aspect of our work. We are still too process-orientated and we need to have more qualitative outcomes.

A more 'women friendly' reception area where men do not 'come on' to you

Reception is too small

Alcohol users in reception put you off coming in

It is scary being the only woman in reception. It gets better but the first few times are scary.

Providing childcare

Fear of coming in the first few appointments, feel as though everybody is looking at you

A clock in reception would be good

Resettlement or whatever word we choose begins at the start of the order not the end — Nacro and other organisations have long reminded us of this but it appears in our continual reorganisations we might have forgotten

— some of the more fundamental principles that used to embrace our work. I recognise the impressive work that has been undertaken in this area by many Probation Trusts but my view is that the experience of offenders still demonstrates patchy provision. I still find it astonishing that years after the Woolf report which set the new agenda around decency in prison and the need for proper resettlement activity which should start in prison we have still not been able to maintain a consistent and thorough approach to the issues.

Multi agency

Resettlement activities of any kind in my view is impossible without meaningful contributions from the voluntary sector. A recent piece of information from the Office of Criminal Justice states that 50 per cent of the resources required to assist in the resettlement of offenders lies outside of the criminal justice system (CJS). Therefore it is a no brainer to assume that we can undertake this responsibility in isolation. We know and recognise that many of the cost of re-offending is not easily quantifiable but can and does have devastating and long term implications.

An ex-prisoner's path back to prison is likely to cost the CJS an average of £65k. Prolific offenders cost even more. The average cost of a prison sentence imposed at crown court is roughly £30,500 made up of legal costs. The actual cost of keeping a prisoner in prison vary significantly, but on average £37,500k per year.

A case study from Northamptonshire illustrates:

Gerry (not his real name) sentenced to 16 months custody in September 2009 for Burglary. Is selected as a

Prolific and other Priority Offender due to his previous and current offending. Has entrenched offending behaviour largely related to general acquisitive crimes. Is a class A drug user. No employment history. Numerous previous sentences including both custodial and community sentences. All previous sentences have been under twelve months therefore not on the probation radar. He is also extremely unlikely to have benefited from any programmes in custody due to his sentence length. Six weeks after his sentence a sentence planning board is initiated by Northamptonshire. A number of individuals are invited including our PPO police officers, drug workers etc. Objectives are agreed and Gerry is given a copy of his sentence plan. Referrals are made to courses within the prison to address his thinking skills, drug and alcohol use, accommodation and employment, training and education. Gerry was prescribed drug treatment in prison and prior to release arrangements were made for him to attend the local drug and alcohol service as well as services to support him with relapse prevention. Additional licence conditions were added prior to release to address drug and alcohol use, PPO work and class A drug testing.

Gerry was released in March 2010. He has attended all appointments (55 in total), passed twice weekly drug tests and is attending appointments with all partner agencies to enhance his employment prospects through training and education. He remains on licence.

This case study is probably replicated countless times across the country, but I believe it is illustrative of the pivotal role that voluntary organisations and other partners play in our work with offenders.

As we move to an era of scarce public resources, where we are faced with looking at potentially delivering only our core business, the necessity to work with partners is even more imperative to ensure that resources are used to best effect to achieve outcomes that contribute to our overall business of protecting the public through the safe supervision of offenders in the community.

Barriers to Effective Resettlement

We all know the range of factors which contribute to effective resettlement and these have again been rehearsed through the lectures. A place to live, employment, family ties or at least good support mechanisms and help with health or substance misuse issues. We have known these factors for a long time and I have never heard anyone disagree with what needs to

be done. However there is not a one size fits all resettlement provision and the needs of women, men, Black and minority ethnic, faith groups, age etc all need to be considered in every case. We need to recognise that responses from some communities to the resettlement of certain groups are different and can fundamentally affect successful resettlement for example the stigma associated with imprisonment if a woman with children is sent to prison, those from some faith groups. An event at HMP The Mount recently around community links and effective resettlement, a prisoner said, 'it is difficult to pick up in society after release especially if you are pious and have a long beard — that will get you insults not a job' added to the fear and suspicions as to why such an individual might have gone to prison is only likely to further alienate the individual from his immediate community or the wider community. So our ability to effectively meet the differing needs is questionable if we choose to work in isolation. I don't believe anyone involved in the CJS process would

argue against multi-agency working however my experience is the practice often doesn't live up to the intention. Multi—agency work can be time consuming and difficult but it is effective in its challenge to agencies to define what they do and the resources applied it.

The impact of resettlement on families is often underestimated and we sometimes forget that we

are not resettling just the offender but also the family. Those groups in the community that work with families consistently remind they too serve the sentence and face the alienation from communities and suffer the stigma of having a loved one in prison. How can we address this within the safeguarding children responsibilities we face?

We cannot forget the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act and its impact on successful resettlement. However, we need to look closer to home about our own approach to employing ex-offenders. Why do we believe that any employer will want to employ ex-offenders if we equally are not prepared to, or our organisations have such restrictive policies that it would be impossible even for Nelson Mandela to gain employment? We need to examine our own policies and practices in this area.

We must maintain offenders being at the centre of what we do — that may be unfashionable as public opinion appears to have become more regressive over the years, but our contribution in preventing further victims and reducing crime must be to work more effectively with offenders.

Through care — who cares? I believe we all do — but we just don't remember for long enough.

. . . we sometimes
forget that we are
not resettling just
the offender but also
the family.