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Recruiting & Training Probation Practitioners in England & Wales

Theory & Practice: The Ideal Mix

Today it is my considerable pleasure to be speaking to you on behalf of the Probation Chiefs Association of England & Wales. I have worked in the Probation Service for 32 years and in all honesty I can say that there has rarely been a day when I have regretted my early career choice.

My current role has taken me some distance away from day to day offender contacts and I now find myself responsible for delivery of staff training within the South West Region of England. For those with knowledge of the area, this comprises the counties of Gloucestershire, Avon & Somerset, Wiltshire, Dorset and Devon & Cornwall. It is also my privilege to chair the national meeting of my 8 other counterparts across the whole of England & Wales.

It is my close involvement in training that has led to my nomination to address the conference. I do think that the England & Wales experience has some important messages to put across but equally I'm very interested to learn of the approaches adopted elsewhere. The particularly exciting thing about working with you today however is that I do so at the very time when we in England & Wales are embarking on a radical overhaul of our Probation Officer recruitment and training. The information that I shall be putting across will thus be very "hot off the press".

I'll begin my presentation by giving a broad overview of the National Probation Service (NPS) and I'll then move on to talk about the highly regarded Probation Officer training programme that we have been running for the past 11 years. From there I shall detail how we now plan to take the best of this and to improve on it further in the new Probation Officer training programme, due to be introduced on 1st April 2010. I'll conclude with brief reference to the links that exist between our recruitment practice and our training programme.

The National Probation Service in England & Wales

In our country it is the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) that is responsible for the provision of Probation Services. Within the Ministry there is the recently created National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Broadly this government agency oversees the work of Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMPS) and the National Probation Service (NPS). After years of working in parallel with one another, HMPS and NPS have been brought closer together under NOMS with the deliberate intention of promoting the concept of "end to end offender management". In essence this seeks to ensure that from almost the moment of arrest, through sentence and perhaps a period of time in custody, right up until the very end of any post-custodial or community based sentence or licence conditions, the offender is treated as if on a single journey, designed to reform and bring about a cessation of offending. The clear intention here is that all interventions should build upon one another. For example, if drug treatment is provided in custody, it is nearly worthless if matching services are not then provided at the critical stage of release back into the community. As you will know, this is an approach which is now the subject of a Europe wide project.

So Offender Management is a pivotal underpinning philosophy designed to bring about the overall NOMS aims to:-

- Protect the Public
- Reduce Re-offending
- Punish Offenders
- Rehabilitate Offenders
- Ensure Victims feel Justice has been done

Having highlighted the close proximity between HMPS and NPS I should now tell you that in actual fact despite the close co-operation that characterises their work together, these two agencies operate as largely separate organisations. Whilst HMPS is centrally managed, the NPS currently comprises 42 separate Area Probation Services. Each Probation Service is a separate employing body and whilst each has a degree of autonomy in order that it can respond to local needs and circumstances it does nevertheless operate in accordance with standards established at the Centre (the MoJ) and enforced through a national commissioning and inspection programme, again imposed by the Centre. This model of establishing and setting the required standards applies equally as much to offender interventions (e.g., expected frequency of contacts or content of cognitive behavioural programmes or even time allowances for lunch during unpaid work) as it does to Human Resource policies (e.g., employment terms & conditions, sickness absence management, or indeed the contents of training courses and the qualifications required to undertake the face to face supervision of offenders).

To complete my context setting for the NPS I can tell you that overall its 42 Services employ 21,000 staff, this compares with 50,000 in HMPS. Approximately 7,000 of the NPS staff are Probation Officers and a further 6,100 of the NPS staff are Probation Service Officers. Both these posts are operational roles involving direct face to face contacts with offenders. The former are the more qualified and as such concentrate upon working with offenders presenting the highest levels of risk.

The remaining staff in the NPS are primarily managers, administrators, trainees or specialists.

As to workload, the NPS works with approximately 244,000 offenders. (This compares with 75,500 currently serving custodial sentences).

The Service writes a total of 140,000 reports for Courts and supervises over 8.4 million hours of Community Payback per annum.

The Current Model for Probation Officer Training

As emphasised by the title of my presentation, the essence of Probation training is a mix of academic theory and achieving competence by doing the job. The overriding aim is to produce “The Reflective Practitioner”. That is someone who undertakes the job by;

- Recognising the desired goal
- Understanding what factors impact on achievement of that goal
- Skilfully deploying carefully considered actions, techniques and programmes to achieve the goal.

It is thus not just barging into an offender’s life intending “to do some good” nor even “to hand out some punishment simply because his/her actions deserve it”. Rather performance of the role is very much based on the established evidence of what is most likely to be effective. It is in accordance with standards developed and owned nationally within the Ministry of Justice. Its delivery is influenced by models of human learning & behaviour (for example, learning or cognitive/behavioural theories) and it is underpinned by a set of values which crucially include;

- respecting the individual whilst at the same time recognising Society's right to hold them to account for their behaviour
- upholding justice and the laws of the land
- valuing difference and the diversity that exists within Society
- believing in the ability of everyone to make positive changes.

The practice/theory mix for Probation training is well established. The current required Probation Officer Award is the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS). This is approved by the MoJ and was introduced in 1998. It is built upon these twin foundations. As I mentioned earlier, come April next year we are replacing this with a new Probation Qualifying Framework (PQF). Again though this will very much take as its starting point the practice/theory mix. In introducing this change we believe it will bring about further improvements, flexibilities and economies.

To more fully describe the Probation Officer Qualification Framework that we are soon to introduce I shall tell you about our present award, the DipPS, and then describe the changes that we intend to make.

Principally in England & Wales there are two grades of operational staff who work with offenders:

- Probation Officers
- Probation Service Officers

The Diploma in Probation Studies was only ever designed for Probation Officers. It comprised an Honours Degree in Criminal Justice and a relevant National Vocational Qualification. The two separate components were undertaken in a challenging timescale of two years. Trainee Probation Officers were recruited as supernumerary members of staff. That is they were trainees employed by Area Probation Services who were expected to attend the work place and practice their Probation skills without the requirement to be ultimately responsible for a workload of their own. They were trainees engaged on a programme of learning.

I said it was a challenging programme. This is because in the allocated two years they have been expected to;

- Complete an Honours Degree involving submission of a number of assignments, reflective accounts and work based projects, and which normally, when delivered to a true student cohort, takes three years to complete, and
- Through engagement in supervised practice achieve a vocational award in Probation working, thus demonstrating that they have the necessary practice skills and knowledge, for example; motivational interviewing, assessment, team working, report writing, communicating and managing risk.

In engaging in this programme, Trainee Probation Officers have been supported by experienced qualified Probation Officers acting as Practice Development Assessors. Their role was to ensure the trainees had sufficient learning experiences, were helped to understand concepts and practices and met the required assessment standards. The academic input was provided by contracted Universities required to demonstrate that their courses contained the right curriculum content as required by the Service. Most commonly this was delivered by a mixture of; distance learning, often accessible via the Internet in the workplace, and occasional seminars, workshops and meetings with tutors. The link between academic learning and the practice based learning was cemented by the allocation of academic credits for the Vocational Qualification award. Thus whilst assignments on theories related to Criminology, Victim Awareness and, say, dangerousness would attract credits at each of three

levels of the Honours Degree, so too would demonstration of competence (and critically the underpinning knowledge on which it rested) following positive workplace assessments.

The DipPS is the Probation Officer qualification held now by the majority of Probation Officers in England & Wales. It was thus made up of :

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{Hons Degree in Criminal Justice (Theory)} \\ + \\ \text{Community Justice Vocational Qualification (Level 4) (Practice)} \\ = \\ \text{Diploma in Probation Studies. (Qualification)} \end{array}$$

At the time of its introduction the DipPS was seen as a ground breaking route to Professional Qualification. It was the envy of many other professions and has for example since been copied to quite an extent for nursing. It involved considerable theoretical input, much demonstration of understanding and the requirement to practice during a substantial amount of learning time. During its lifespan it has produced well over 6,000 graduates. It has also provided a clear demonstration of the forces and ideals of the State, Education and Employers coming together.

The State, through government and sentencing policy and with an ear to the opinions of voters (recognising that the issue of crime and offenders is one that is almost guaranteed to get people talking and produce opinions) has set the parameters for Probation Work and thus the content of our programme. It manages the contract with the Universities and is thus the final arbiter in respect of curriculum content.

Universities through research have shown what is effective when intervening with offenders and have highlighted theoretical models of intervention.

And the employers have emphasised the particular skills sets, dispositions and knowledge required for the task.

The overall award has then been monitored at a National level by a Standing Panel comprised of representatives of each of these stakeholders.

This is not to say that the DipPS was without its flaws. Hence the move next year to the Probation Qualifications Framework

1. The DipPS was found to be unwieldy. It involved annual cohorts of trainee commencements. The ultimate effect was that whilst employers require new staff throughout each year, graduates of the programme all became available during the same month as their programme concluded.
2. The DipPS was expensive, costing in the region of £85,000 per trainee. Largely this was a factor of the substantial length of the programme and the supernumerary designation of the trainees.
3. Despite its design, to the frustration of employers, the DipPS did not always produce graduates who were immediately able to “hit the ground running”, picking up a full case-load on qualification. This was often because trainees had become too engrossed in the academic element of their course or perhaps because they had not been tested with a sufficient volume and variety of practice experiences.
4. And most of all, as I stated previously, the DipPS only applied to Probation Officers. Thus the other substantial grade of operational staff, Probation Service Officers, (some 6,100 you will recall) were by and large excluded from achieving any professional qualification. This was a significant flaw which opened employers up to very real business risks. Put simply, in cases where offenders under supervision and

in contact with Probation Service Officers, went on to commit further serious offences, there was the potential for newspaper headlines to shout that the person responsible for supervision of the offender had achieved no formal professional qualification. This is clearly very damaging in a business which is dependent on public confidence. Over the period of the DipPS, steps have been taken to address this most substantial flaw, but the need to professionalise all operational practitioners has been the greatest driver for our new Professional Qualifications Framework.

The New Model: The Professional Qualifications Framework

As stated earlier, the new PQF builds upon the DipPS. Again it is owned and approved by the MoJ following consultation with employers, academics and other stakeholders such as the judiciary. In overall content and indeed the fundamental methodology involving the practice and theoretical mix it is very similar to the DipPS. As such I do not need here to go into too much detail. Rather I shall draw out the key differences and similarities.

Differences between the PQF and the DipPS

1. It is a framework not an Award. Learners will embark on stages of the framework, perhaps seeing its entirety as a ladder to be climbed by separate steps.
2. It is open to all operational practitioners and indeed for the future they will be required to achieve minimum levels of practice and academic based qualifications.
3. Persons undertaking the programme will be employed as Probation Service Officers, required to be accountable for work with offenders and not seen purely as trainees.
4. Employers will have the freedom to employ staff to enter on the programme throughout the year, rather than on one specific date.
5. Beyond a minimum Level 3 Vocational Qualification, employers will be able to decide how much of the programme PSO learners will undertake. If they have sufficient Probation Officers to deal with the volume of high risk offenders, Employers may only train PSOs up to minimum levels of qualification and then deploy these staff only with lower risk offenders.
6. On completion of all elements of the PQF;
 - Stage 1 - A vocational Qualification at Level 3
 - Stage 2 - A foundation Degree (part 1 of a degree course)
 - Stage 3 - A Vocational Qualification at Level 5
 - Stage 4 - An Honours Degree (part 2 and 3 of a degree course)Probation Service Officer learners will be eligible to apply for Probation Officer roles, dealing with offenders assessed as presenting higher levels of risk.

Similarities of the PQF to the DipPS

1. The practice and theory mix
2. Workplace practice will be assessed and academic credits will be awarded for achievement
3. Learners will be supported by mentor/tutors based in the workplace.
4. Theoretical knowledge will be assessed by submission of academic assignments marked by Universities.
5. The curriculum will be based on employer needs, government (MoJ) expectations as to the role of the Service and research based academic understanding. It will be amended as new trends and themes are recognised (e.g., the extremism agenda, or better understanding as to Mental Health issues).
6. Completion of the entire programme and therefore eligibility to work as a Probation Officer will take at least two years.

Recruitment

I said I would conclude with reference to recruitment practices. Herein lies one further difference between the DipPS and the forthcoming PQF.

Involving an annual national intake, recruitment for the DipPS was designed around a National high volume, highly structured recruitment exercise. Routinely it sought to appoint at least 500 persons for any one yearly entry, but at its height, as many as 1,000 or more. Such numbers could attract at least 70 times that number of expressions of interest.

The recruitment process was designed to be consistent and fair across the whole of England & Wales. It was based on best personnel practice providing candidates with a number of differing opportunities to present evidence of their suitability for the post:-

- an application form
- a structured interview
- a presentation
- a written exercise
- a group exercise
- a semi-structured interview.

As a comprehensive and demonstrably fair form of recruitment it reflected exceptionally well on the NPS. It was however, highly resource intensive and therefore expensive, structurally complex and quite unwieldy. Yet still despite all the checks and balances it was as prone to producing misfits as almost any other recruitment process. Whilst its qualities were well recognised it was not well loved by employers.

The PQF will therefore not be accompanied by a proscribed recruitment process. It will not be so necessary as annual cohorts will be a thing of the past. Rather employing Areas will be presented with the following set of criteria for new Probation Service Officers embarking on the PQF.

1. Evidence of understanding of and interest in working with offenders or other vulnerable groups .
2. Ability to handle difficult situations and manage self in pressurised circumstances.
3. Values and beliefs compatible with the ethos of the NPS.
4. Demonstrable ability to work flexibly and co-operatively as part of a team and to motivate self.
5. Ability to establish and maintain effective working relationships within and without the organisation.
6. A demonstrable commitment to implementing equality of opportunity policy and practice together with a belief in the value and effect of diversity.
7. Effective oral, written and interpersonal skills including the ability appropriately to influence.
8. Proven analytical and reasoning skills sufficient to write and present reports to enable sound judgements and decisions to be made.
9. Effective organisational, administrative and time management skills. Capacity to prioritise and meet deadlines and self-sufficient IT skills.

In the future it will be for employers to devise how they will test for these criteria. They may well opt for a less complex process than that conducted for the DipPS and it will no longer be standard across all employers. Each of the criteria will though be critical to the role and will be assessed during the training programme. The only firm requirement will be that in agreement with the University provider for the academic element of the PQF, Employers will need to construct a mechanism for testing the applicant's capacity to study to honours degree level. Given that not all new PSOs will go on to take all elements of the PQF this may not be necessary prior to appointment. It will though be a factor that will have to be borne in mind. Previous academic qualifications will be an obvious gauge but given that as employers NPS believe that life experiences can be as informative as educational attainment, it is probable that this will not be the only measure used. We have had success in the past of working with Universities to construct a pass/fail written exercise. It is likely that we shall continue to use this method as necessary in the future.

Conclusion

I hope this account of recruitment and training in NPS England & Wales has been of interest and informative. We believe that in mixing theory and practice we have formed a golden thread. At a difficult economic time in which recruitment is expected to fall dramatically we are about to embark on an improved training programme, the PQF. It has been designed to meet the needs of the employers and the vision of government, whilst at the same time taking account of academic understanding. It will introduce a more flexible approach but fundamentally it will lead to the overriding, and some would say long overdue, goal of a fully professionalised practitioner workforce.

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