

Headline Comments Arising from CEP Conference in Agen: 17-18 December 2009

The Recruitment & Training of Probation Officers in Europe

Recent EEC decisions, notably Lisbon (article 61) and Stockholm (Dec 09) are pushing an agenda towards a common training framework for Probation Officers across Europe.

The Lisbon treaty seeks the “approximation of criminal laws” enabling transfer of sentences across national boundaries (framework decision 947) and to support this, the Stockholm agreement calls for a substantial number of Probation Officers to have been involved in a Europe-wide training scheme (by 2015).

The CEP Conference had been called to initiate debate as to how this move towards standardisation of training might be achieved. It was a stimulating and invigorating discussion to be party to.

The primary approach of the Conference was to enable different nations to share their current delivery approaches and the corresponding training designed to prepare operational practitioners. In doing so it took a useful matrix designed to analyse current provision in accordance with levels of interest and involvement in training arrangements from;

The State (Service direction)
Higher Education (academic knowledge)
Employers (required practice skills, competences and understandings)
Community (media, victims, public opinion)

What soon became apparent was;

- a) Probation is delivered in a wide variety of ways and indeed implies different things in different countries
and yet paradoxically,
- b) Most National Services are picking up on the same current issues, e.g., CBT, evaluation requirements, recruiting for diversity, the need to retain the credibility of community sentences, reduction in funding brought about by economic downturn, etc.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Services centred on the age-old conundrum of whether Probation was there to *rehabilitate* and to *punish* or whether it's function was centred around only one of these two areas. There was also the issue as to what degree the work of Prison Services and Probation Services was combined or at least brought together in the various countries.

In the light of the analysis permitted by the Conference, the notion of a common training framework looked like it might be harder to achieve than a first assessment might suggest. Nevertheless it stood out as an entirely proper (and economic) aim. It will be for the CEP and prominent academic community partners to pursue this agenda. At least one of the current Higher Education Providers in England & Wales (De Montfort) has indicated that it is keen to be involved in the debate. I have no doubt that Area Chief Officers and NOMS centre colleagues will hear more about it as the months go by.

Probably that is enough said about the Conference content. There were probably well over 120 delegates. European Services were all in attendance (plus Japan and Colombia!). The representation from England & Wales was quite slim, namely;

Myself as a presenter,
Brian Stout, De Montfort University, offering closing observations
Mark Gardner, Probation Officer, Leicestershire & Rutland Probation Trust, workshop facilitator
Coral Sirdifield, Research Assistant, University of Lincoln, workshop facilitator
Suzy Dymond-White, Probation Qualifications Framework Project Manager

Martin Smith, Consortium Director, South West Training Consortium