
The research and evaluation programme for offender engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The Offender Engagement Programme (OEP) is a three year programme which started in early 2010 with the core purpose of improving the effectiveness of one-to-one engagement between the probation practitioner and the offender in order to reduce reoffending. The hypothesis on which the OEP is based is that the one-to-one relationship between the offender and the practitioner can be a powerful means of changing behaviour and therefore reducing re-offending. The aim of the programme, as well as reducing reoffending, is to increase public confidence in community sentences and make best use of staff time, especially given current financial constraints.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PROGRAMME

An early step was to establish a research programme to provide evidence about the quality and impact of offender engagement, and evaluation of the OEP pilots. This was achieved by two research contracts negotiated following a competitive tender: one with Birkbeck College London (ICPR: Institute for Criminal Policy

Research) and Leicester University, and a second with Sheffield University (with support from Glasgow University).

We have also pursued a wide range of other activities to capture and disseminate relevant academic expertise, including: establishing an Academic Reference Group to act as a critical friend; preparing a series of short research bulletins aimed at a practitioner audience; and organising research seminars to learn about the latest research and thinking on offender engagement as well as seek feedback on our own research activities. This paper was presented at our second research seminar, which provided an excellent opportunity for exchange and discussion between academics, researchers and policy leads within NOMS and the Ministry of Justice and Probation Senior Managers.

We have a number of inter-related research projects. *Developing OMFQ* (Offender Management Feedback Questionnaire) is an investigation by ICPR and Leicester University of offenders' and their supervisors' views of supervision and how they relate to better outcomes and lower reconviction. *Quality in Probation Supervision*

is an exploration by Sheffield and Glasgow Universities of practitioners' views, with the aim of producing quantitative ratings of dimensions of engagement. Both of these projects have informed the evaluation of the three OEP pilots.

DEVELOPING THE EVALUATION

The pilots are skills for effective engagement and development (SEED), the aim of which is to develop practitioner skills in offender engagement through training and continuous professional development; reflective supervision (RSM), which is investigating how support and leadership from managers and senior leaders within Trusts can enable the development of a culture that enables offender engagement; and sentence planning approaches (SPA), which is testing tools to engage offenders in sentence planning. These emerged from our collaborative approach with Probation Trusts to develop work which can support more effective offender engagement. Candidates for practice development were identified in early fieldwork, regional events, reference groups and literature review, and developed to maximise the opportunities for learning. Following strong expressions of interest, twenty two Trusts started pilots which began from March 2011 onwards and are due to end March-April 2012.

We developed specifications for evaluating the pilots alongside our detailed plans for taking the pilots forward, in collaboration with our research partners ICPR-Leicester and Sheffield University (supported by Glasgow University). The level of interest in piloting the three pilots meant that it was not possible to include all pilot projects in the external evaluation. We worked with Trusts and the external evaluators so that a total of nine Trusts were included in the external evaluation.

In the case of the pilots relating directly to how offender managers engage offenders, SPA and SEED, the external evaluation is collecting structured feedback from practitioners and offenders and data on supervision outcomes. In SPA, offenders who started supervision with a project practitioner between March 2011 and September 2011 are included in the external evaluation. In order to report findings by Autumn 2012, the evaluators – ICPR-

Leicester - will analyse supervision outcomes after six months on these offenders. They are also using a developed OMFQ to investigate offenders' and their supervisors' views of supervision and how these relate to outcomes. This data will be compared with equivalent data on a group of offenders who are not supervised by practitioners in the project (the comparison group).

A similar approach is being taken to evaluating SEED, although the timescale is longer to accommodate the continuous professional development envisaged in the project. Offenders starting supervision with SEED practitioners between March-April 2011 and March-April 2012 are included in the evaluation (pilot projects started immediately after Trusts completed the initial training), and supervision outcomes after one year will be analysed by the evaluators (Sheffield University, supported by Glasgow University) and compared with a comparison group. Given that the focus is equipping practitioners with *skills* to engage offenders, the evaluators are collecting feedback from practitioners after the initial and follow up training and observing training and supervision sessions to assess what practitioners were able to gain from the project. An interim report in Autumn 2012 will cover a great deal of learning from the pilot, and the final report on supervision outcomes is due in Autumn 2013.

The external evaluation of RSM is focussing on the experiences of the practitioners and managers in using the resources and activities involved in the model. A web based before and after survey for managers and practitioners will be followed up by interviews with a sample of manager and practitioners to investigate the issues in implementing reflective supervision and a discussion group with senior managers involved in the pilot. The final report – by ICPR-Leicester – will be available in Summer 2012.

A researcher from within NOMS was able to work with the team to develop an internal evaluation which sits alongside the external evaluation. Working with the external evaluators, we will extract management information to compare outcomes and process data between the project and comparison groups across all 22 projects. In addition, we have offered all

projects falling outside of the external evaluation the opportunity to work with the internal evaluator to explore specific aspects of their projects in more depth.

The internal evaluation has adopted a realist approach, the purpose of which according to Kazi 'is the development and improvement of the models of practice' (Kazi 2003:30). This fits with the whole ethos of the programme which has worked collaboratively with academics, trust senior managers and practitioners. Areas of interest identified include exploring the impact of adopting the model more widely across the Trust and looking in-depth at the pattern, rate and seriousness of reoffending and compliance. Practitioners and senior managers have had an opportunity to influence the style and content of the internal evaluation and the skills and local knowledge of Trust research and information managers have been incorporated into the data capture and design principles adopted. According to Sturgeon-Adams (2008:110), involving practitioners in the process can be empowering and move the evaluation purpose from simply a tool to demonstrate success to one that is viewed as contributing to learning.

Flexibility has been a key feature of the internal evaluation which has enabled us to respond to changes in the environment in which the programme is being piloted. Data capture for each trust comprises:

- Keeping a record of all offenders included in the project and comparison groups, with sufficient unique identifiers to enable central extraction of data from case management, offender assessment and interventions databases. The measures include outcome (successful completion of orders) and explanatory (number of offender manager changes) variables for both project and comparison groups. For one Trust where the project has been implemented across 75% of teams, this list also captures those offenders who were eligible but who were not included. This provides valuable data on unconscious bias when selecting offenders for inclusion.
- Keeping two diaries, one for senior managers and one for practitioners. These diaries are used

to record data about changes in the environment, such as management decisions that may impact on morale (e.g. announcement of redundancies), capacity (e.g. sickness of key individuals) or strategic direction (e.g. implementation of the new National Standards). Practitioners are also encouraged to record information about key benefits or costs associated with the project.

- Feedback from training events and group discussions (e.g. reference groups) will also be used when preparing the final report.

Most trusts have welcomed the opportunity to take part in the internal evaluation. Working with these trusts has added value to the external evaluation, for example, by accommodating variations in how pilots have been implemented. In one Trust, there has been a wide implementation of SPA but Offender Managers have had some discretion over whom to use it with. This enables us to explore issues related to wider implementation and also to explore any systematic differences between those offenders who were eligible but excluded from the pilot and those included. Some trusts have set up their own comprehensive data collection systems relating to the project, which will enable more sensitive analysis of the outcomes. Each trust will have its own priorities which may link with current performance or the need to implement other changes. Against this background, the internal researcher is working with local analysts and researchers to develop tools for local evaluation and analysis; this exchange of skills and knowledge is a further example of the offender engagement programme working in an environment where improved practice and outcomes has to be achieved within tight financial limits.

REFERENCES

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- Sturgeon-Adams, L. 'Evaluating Practice' in Green, S., Lancaster, E. and Feasey, S. (2008). *Addressing Offending behaviour: Context, Practice and Values*, Cullompton: Willan.