

The Future of Probation: Making Society Safer

- Outline Presentation

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Speech Roger Hill, by David Griffith

Ladies and gentlemen, etc

It is a great honour to be addressing you, such a distinguished audience, on such an important topic. As you maybe aware I am presenting on behalf of Roger Hill, National Director of Probation for England and Wales, as he was detained on government business at the eleventh hour. In so doing he has asked me to express his sincere regret for his absence but to wish you all every success in your endeavours.

Making society safer has been at the heart of the work of probation since its inception and in England and Wales this subject has received increasing political and public attention in the past year which, coincidentally, is the year before we celebrate our centenary..

Let us consider for a moment how things have and have not changed during that time. Throughout the last 100 years there has been a constant articulation of society's fear and victim's anger at the outrage of crime and the need that "something must be done" to protect the weak and vulnerable from antisocial and dangerous individuals within our communities. During this time there has been a revolution in the role of the media and with it an increasing concern and at times fascination with crime.

Whilst it is right that we criticise inaccurate or prurient reporting it is right that the role of probation and the wider criminal justice system is scrutinised by the media and that we are held to account for our work on behalf of the communities we serve. For if they are unaware, misinformed, or lack confidence in our work then it is us, not the media or the public, who are to blame for this and it us who must address the deficiencies in our performance.

This is not to say that we must be dictated to by every passing headline or news story or by any vigilante response to a particular tragedy. There is a need to balance our emotions with evidence if we are to achieve our goal of making society safer.

Throughout the past 100 years probation has sought to strike this balance between care and control, between rehabilitation and punishment. This has never been static it rightly shifts in response to the sentiment of the age and to changes in the nature of crime.

Probation has always been at the forefront of creating that middle ground between simple fines and imprisonment that is appropriate for the more serious but not so dangerous offenders. Aiming for a constructive alternative for those who can be punished in the community through restrictions on their liberty but aiming to achieve their rehabilitation without the inevitable negative impact of imprisonment.

This middle ground is no comfortable place to be as it is never without risks, for when mistakes are made the consequences are appalling for individuals and their families.

The consensus on where this balance lies is always shifting and it is our role to provide the evidence to inform a rational debate but also for us to respond to that consensus as it changes. This is the only way we will achieve our goal of a safer society that is just and fair.

So how safe is society?

The reality is that crime rates in the England and Wales are down and our chances of being a victim are at the lowest for a quarter of a century. Yet the public's fear of crime continues to increase and their confidence in the criminal justice system declines.

Underlying this are, in part, confused expectations of the probation service. There is a belief that when an offender is under supervision that this can be intensive, if not 24 hours a day, and that re-offending can be accurately predicted and should always be prevented. It is as if the scenario presented in the film "Minority Report" where every individual is monitored continuously and incarcerated before they even think of committing an offence can be a reality.

It is not as if there has been no response to the growing public concerns on crime. We now imprison more offenders per head of population than any other European country with almost 78,000 imprisoned at the last count and desperately close to the maximum capacity of 80,000. This growth has been driven by tougher sentencing from courts - sentencing more offenders to prison for longer. The increase has been greatest with those sentenced to indeterminate or life sentencing representing a 20% increase since April 2005.

The growth in community supervision has been equally dramatic with 220,000 offenders under supervision in the community by 2005, representing a 34% increase in the past 10 years, and with proposals to increase this still further by at least a further 50,000. Of this supervised population approximately 200 will commit a serious further offence during the period of supervision - a tiny proportion that is of no comfort to the victims of such crimes.

Whilst at the same time we have seen a decline in the use of fines by more than a third resulting in many more low risk offenders on probation supervision.

So are we any safer?

Comparing the service delivered to offenders in the previous decade to that delivered now - there has been a dramatic improvement. There has been successive legislative reform granting wider powers to the courts to address public concerns on crime. For the probation service there has been a sustained period of investment of at least 60% in real terms. This has delivered real improvements in both performance and the quality of work undertaken.

We can now point to with pride our implementation of OASys - a standard structured assessment tool, supported by IT, that will support better assessment of risk and need of offenders at an individual level. But equally importantly it will provide accurate information on regional offender needs to inform commissioning of services to better protect the public and reduce reoffending.

Added to this is our implementation of a suite of interventions to meet offender needs enabling the courts to impose community sentences with up to 12 separate requirements: from accredited programmes, to drug treatment, mental health treatment, unpaid work, and employment.

For the small minority who are assessed as posing a high risk of harm to the public we have implemented Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements that require local agencies such as the police, prisons and others to work with the probation service to ensure every possible effort is made to protect the public. As a result we have seen the rate of reoffending by this group fall to 0.6% during the period of supervision - that is 99.4% who do not re-offend.

Yet this is not enough! Despite these successes we have been severely criticised for a series of dreadful crimes committed by offenders under probation supervision that have caused consternation and anger in the public and the media. In at least one of these cases it was found that we “were not doing the job properly”, that the quality of assessment was poor, that the management of risk was inadequate, and that necessary actions were absent.

It is now clear that despite the dramatic improvements in the probation service over the past decade that the bar has been raised and that “doing a good enough job most of the time” is not acceptable to the public - and nor should it be.

So what are the challenges and how do we face them?

Firstly, it is clear that we have to make significant improvements in how we assess and manage risk. We must achieve a position where individual staff make good enough assessments all the time. That the sentence planning is appropriate to the risk posed and that it is delivered to the required standard. This will require action on performance management as well as staff training.

Secondly, there is no blank cheque to achieve this. We must improve the efficiency through being more business like in how we undertake our work, how we allocate resources, and how we manage performance. The implementation of a single IT case management system, C-NOMIS, will enable much of this, but it will also enable, for the first time, true end to end offender management of those sentenced to imprisonment.

Thirdly, decisions on how resources are allocated must be re-prioritised to ensure the delivery of good offender management to protect the public and reduce reoffending. These national commissioning priorities must reflect the need to ensure adequate resources are available for the most dangerous and higher risk offenders to deliver both effective offender management and interventions. This will inevitably mean that we move from delivering “something to everyone” to “everything to some”; identifying who those few are is the challenge for the probation service and the criminal justice system as a whole.