

The Importance of purpose, vision and values in improving offender management performance¹

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Welcome to the Conference. It is good to see so many partners from the voluntary and private sectors as well as representatives from the wider criminal justice system. This is the second NOMS Conference at which we have brought prison and probation managers together. It is a key event in the process of reorganising the National Offender Management Service.

The reorganisation of the National Offender Management Service – to integrate the work of the prison and probation services and to make best use of the contribution of the private and third sectors – is going well and we have just published our first NOMS Strategic and Business Plan which sets out how we want to take NOMS forward. I am pleased that, as we make these changes, the performance in both the prison and probation services is holding up well with good performance against all our key targets.

Rather than dwell on the important detail of the reorganisation here, however, I would like to concentrate on our Purpose, Vision and Values and how we can best improve our performance in reducing reoffending. These are difficult times; as

we look forward to next year and beyond. Cash is very tight and we face uncertain politics as we approach an inevitable General Election by the late spring of 2010.

The world has changed.

- As a result of the economic slow down, resources will be scarcer and continued growth in our core funding, which we have all become used to, is unlikely.
- Also, in my judgement, the public mood has shifted and the public are more risk averse, more frightened of crime than was the case a decade or more so ago. A 24 hour competitive media battle for readers, listeners and viewers gives crime a very high profile and encourages a focus on punishment and heightens the fear of becoming a victim.

We need to recognise these realities but, in planning for the future, we will not be successful unless what we do is grounded in a clear sense of purpose which offers the public and our staff a vision of what we are striving to become, a vision which is widely shared and empowering to those who work for or

with us. I also believe that it is essential in the work we do in probation and prisons, both public and private, that our individual decisions and management judgements are consistent with, and informed by, a clear and consistently applied set of values. I want our staff, wherever they work, to know that what they do contributes to preventing victims by changing lives.

This Statement of Purpose, Vision and Values, clearly spells out what we are aiming to do, what we intend to become and what values we want our work to be based on. As a Statement of Purpose, Vision and Values, it was not just dreamt up, but is a product of discussion and consultation and I believe it is stronger because of that consultative process.

It is, unashamedly, an integrated vision of our work, recognising that we work in prison and probation with a variety of providers and partners. If we can truly integrate our work, we are better able to protect victims, reduce reoffending and make communities safer.

Protecting the public and reducing reoffending is achieved by delivering the punishment and orders of the court and by helping offenders to reform their lives. In both prisons and probation, we have often been reluctant to acknowledge our role in punishing offenders. I think this is a mistake. Some of the language that we adopt as a consequence and the way we talk about our work, almost hides our punishment role. Therefore it does not make clear to the public that offenders, both in prison and in the community, feel punished as a result of the sentences they have been given. That is not to say that it is our role to add to the punishment of the court by unnecessarily unpleasant, abrupt or abusive behaviour. It is, however, to acknowledge that being in prison and deprived of much of the freedom that we all take for granted, or being on a community punishment and having to accept restrictions and impositions on their time are seen by most offenders as a “punishment”. The work we do to ensure compliance with the orders of the courts by ensuring offenders attend community work and programmes they are required to do or by preventing escape from prison is essential to ensure that the restrictions that the court have set as a punishment are properly enforced.

Simply punishing is, however, not enough. In nearly every case the courts and public hope that, as a result of our efforts, we will reduce the likelihood of offenders returning to crime. Most of the offenders we deal with in prison or in the community are likely to be either serious or repetitive offenders and often both. For these offenders to give up crime, they genuinely have to reform their lives. Making the change from a criminal lifestyle, to become a law abiding member of the community is often a giant leap and we should recognise the difficulty offenders face in giving up crime and the scale of the change we need to help them to achieve. It is not a change likely to be achieved just because they have achieved compliance with a particular Community Order or have quietly “done time” in prison.

It is our duty to help offenders to secure the significant changes in their lives and reform them so that they can be successful and law abiding members of the community.

Analysis of our data now gives us clear evidence that we are capable of making this difference for many offenders. The improved results since 2000 when we first began measuring the reconviction results of the first quarter’s releases from prisons and commencement of Community Orders shows particularly impressive improvements particularly for longer term imprisonment (29% improvement for the one year and over group measuring actual versus predicted reconvictions and 9% for community sentences). For those sentenced to short-term imprisonment, the results (7%) are much less impressive. The measure of offence rates has also shown significant reductions for prisoners (45% for the one year and over group and 23% for community sentences). These gains are real, but across the board have a relatively small effect on crime rates. If we are to achieve our vision of working as part of the justice system to give the public confidence in our ability to protect them, we will need to continue to improve our performance.

Given the resource situation that faces us, we will not be able to achieve improvements by spending more. That is not to say that we couldn’t achieve more if there was more money to spend, but that luxury is unlikely to be available for the foreseeable future. Therefore, we have to find ways of operating

more cleverly to use our available resources to greater effect. To help us to do that, we have tried to take account of the research evidence and have been discussing the way forward with leading criminologists, as well as trying to learn the lessons from our own successes by mining our own data and using it much more intelligently.

We know that reform is more likely if sentences are properly enforced and offenders are aware that clear limits are set and that transgressions have direct and effective consequences.

But the new thinking suggests that, beyond compliance, one of the key factors in any story of an individual's reform, is the importance of key and persuasive individuals who have convinced the offender that he or she could break clear of crime and be successful. In many cases these key persuasive individuals are members of staff, not just professionally trained treatment staff like Probation Officers or Psychologists, but also community service staff, third sector staff working with us, education staff, Prison Officers and Instructors. What marks these people as ones who can make a difference is their ability to engage on a personal level, to genuinely understand the person they are working with and to show to that person that they do understand and then to use that engagement and understanding to persuade and motivate towards genuine change. This involves balancing care and understanding with the use of authority to set limits and to control. Always a difficult balancing act, but our best staff manage that really well.

Sometimes the change comes, not as a direct result of the interventions of our staff, but because others support the offender in the wider community - partners, relatives, friends or others working with the offenders. There is also some evidence to show that, where offenders genuinely change and then become involved in helping others to do the same, this can be particularly effective. It certainly helps to ensure success for the helper.

We need to structure our work and the interventions we do, so that we maximise the chance of making these relationships either work directly, where they are done by our staff, or by supporting wider relationships so that others in the community can help to create and support the reform we are trying to achieve.

We need to be realistic. The sort of relationship I am describing will not be achieved in a half hour rushed supervision session once a week, particularly if much of that time is spent doing a checklist summary to support our bureaucracy. The sort of genuine care I am describing is not a detached "professional" relationship that is the product of expensive training. There are implications for the selection, training and supervision of our staff in, not only the public sector, but also the private and voluntary sector. What is needed is:

- warmth of engagement;
- the ability to show empathy while being able to take some distance from others' problems;
- confidence in the use of authority.

Staff must be able to set boundaries which can be clearly enforced in a way that is not unnecessarily abrasive and which, therefore, does not damage the long-term relationship that will make a difference. Structuring our interventions, both in the prison and community, to help ensure that these relationships can exist and prosper is very important. On a community payback order, working with the same supervisor on a regular basis, regular detailing of landing staff to the same landing, being prepared to free up the time so that an Offender Manager can regularly visit a long-term offender, are all simple examples of how we can support this process.

Those who read the Prison Service Journal will have seen in the November edition a summary of Dr Sarah Tait's research into "Care and the prison officer". It is a fascinating piece of work which provides a typology of prison staff but has read across to probation work:

- True carers are confident, secure and highly engaged staff who see prisoners as "people just like me" with a high degree of empathy for prisoners and a realistic approach to helping them.
- Limited carers try their best to provide a consistent and supportive approach and do their duties in a way which was consistent with decency but who are not able to engage and provide the emotional support that the true carers did.
- 'Old school' officers have spent a long time in the Prison Service are confident in dealing with

prisoners, provide a reliable and trustworthy presence so that prisoners can count on their responsiveness and straight forward approach. They are often openly anti-management and deny being caring, but are actually seen by prisoners as caring and are very good at understanding the difficulties that prisoners face in doing imprisonment.

- Conflicted officers, the final category in Sarah's typology, experience insecurity and conflict in working with prisoners. They see care as "teaching prisoners to be better people". They are sometimes prepared to help those they describe as "deserving" but, if prisoners do not give them the respect they expect for this, they could turn from helpful to hostile very quickly. Many of the staff in this group had, as a result of some event, or accumulation of events, been damaged and found it difficult coping with their job.

I'm sure this is not a complete typology but, if we are to make a real difference, we need to:

- maximise the number of staff who are true carers;
- support the good staff, both old stagers and limited carers;
- prevent damage to staff and minimise the number in the conflicted category; and,
- where staff are behaving in a way which makes it impossible to work successfully with prisoners and makes it more difficult for other staff to be successful, we need to deal with this problem.

We are lucky to have Sarah's work done as a result of detailed research at Leeds and Eastwood Park. I know of no matching research in probation - though I hope to encourage similar research work in probation - but it strikes me that a similar sort of typology could well be applied to probation work and the challenge is very much the same for probation managers trying to secure relationships that do change lives and reduce reoffending.

We also need to recognise that prison and probation work is not just about the relationships that our staff have with offenders. Realistically, it may be sensible in many cases to work with the wider community to support this process of change. Probation Officers

who help the immediate family to understand what will work best and support them in helping secure the reform of the offender are making a real difference. Prison staff who see families on visits and encourage family contact can also help to mobilise this wider social support. There is also more we can do to integrate our work with other agencies whose staff are in regular contact with offenders.

None of this is to downgrade the value of other work which we either do directly with offenders or the support we provide to offenders once they have achieved the motivation to break clear of crime. This includes:

- provision of education and training, particularly where it raises skill levels and increases the employment prospects;
- the development of thinking skills which help offenders to rationally analyse, take better decisions, control compulsions and to be fully aware of the effects that their behaviour has on victims;
- specialist help to break free of drug and alcohol addiction including cognitive behavioural programmes, therapeutic communities and self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.

All are likely to have a positive effective, but only if they build on, or help create, that motivation and self-belief that enables offenders to see themselves as changed people able to reform and start afresh.

As an Agency, we want to take and develop this new thinking, testing out the assumptions and by analysing our detailed data on offenders, their needs, their sentence plans and their reconvictions, we should be able to continuously improve our understanding so that we can make more targeted use of resources.

Under-pinning all that I have said is the notion of targeting resources. Spreading what we do thinly and widely is highly unlikely to achieve the change we want and the public expect of us. Up tariffing low risk offenders from fines or cautions into community sentences and overwhelming probation resources is folly. The clear lesson from the analysis we have done of the probation budget allocation

and the differential use of community sentences by probation areas suggests that probation services have a much greater impact on the courts' choice of a community sentences versus some other noncustodial disposal than we have ever publicly acknowledged.

In other words, if as a Chief Probation Officer, you have a fair allocation of the budget and you are spreading your resources in the probation services thinly and widely, it is probably a direct consequence of the advice your staff are giving the courts. You must make sure that reports to courts are monitored carefully, that staff have clear advice on what is appropriate and that we do not allow an over-use of community sentences that fatally weakens our ability to make a difference. We know from the excellent work that probation services have done this year which has reduced the short-term prison population by over 1,000 from its peak, that probation services can have a real impact on the short-term prison population which is the prison sentence where it is least likely that we can create the relationships or supportive interventions that produce reform.

Much of what I have said is a direct result of applying our values, which we set out in our Statement of Purpose, Vision and Values and which must underpin all the work we do. Values are not just for the here and now, they are for life. We constantly need to check out whether what we are doing or proposing is consistent with our values and, if it isn't, we should not be doing it.

We have said clearly that in our work we will be objective and take full account of public protection when assessing risk. Having hope is not enough. Carefully assessing the evidence and being realistic about risks is. This involves balancing risks. The public may not always be best protected by the refusal of a period of temporary release or by the breach of an offender for some technical transgression, decisions which might offer a short-term guarantee of protection but produce a longer-term increase in risk. Defensible decision-making in which risks have been carefully assessed and a balanced judgement taken to secure the best way of protecting the public will be supported and defended, even when the outcomes are not good.

We have committed to being open, honest and transparent and that is not only with each other - managers with their staff, staff with each other - but also with the offenders we work with and the public who we serve. Partial accounts of the truth, spun data and information, and HQ failure to acknowledge the real remaining risks that offenders present by over-stating our ability to make a difference, are all examples of not being open, honest and transparent. We need to ensure we never fall into any of these practices no matter how tempting in the short-run to manage a situation.

We want to incorporate equality and diversity in all we do. For the health of what sometimes seems a divided society where our work is often on the fault lines of that society, it is essential that we do all we can in our work to promote equality and diversity. In particular, I continue to worry about the gross over-representation of black and minority ethnic people, not only in the prison population. Societies that fracture on racial lines are very ugly indeed and we need to make sure we have done our best in our area of work to mitigate any chance of this happening here.

As I have just pointed out, our staff and the others we work with are how we achieve success. We can only succeed if we value and empower those staff. This is rather more than 'apple pie and motherhood' and it isn't just a value for managers. When I hear Prison Officers being begrudging about the work of "civvies" or Probation Officers, devaluing the contribution of community payback supervisors or approved premises staff, I know that we are failing to live up to this value.

The relationships that I think lie at the heart of reform and change are only possible if offenders have been treated with decency and respect. Relationships which are not founded on decency and respect will create resentment, at best mere compliance and often resistance and rejection.

We know some of the things that work. We think we know how to make things work better. As I have explained, we are working with our data to find new and better ways of operating and working with the wider academic community to improve what we do. We need to continue to embrace change

and innovation if we are to make a difference. Hanging on to the old ways of doing things or constantly being nostalgic about the rose coloured past are highly unlikely to help us to make a real difference in the challenging times we are facing.

And because one of the major challenges is the shortage of resources, we must ensure that, not only we as managers, but also our staff, understand the need to use resources in the most cost-effective way. Devising over-elaborate processes, which chew up staff time, imposing unnecessary bureaucracy or allowing demarcation disputes to force the use of more expensive staff than we need to achieve our outputs, are all entirely inconsistent with the value of using resources in the most cost-effective way. In my view, we have a moral duty to use the country's money, money we receive from hard-pressed tax payers, in a way which maximises its effect. It should not be an add-on to our work which we rather resent, it lies at the heart of our work as managers.

I think that, in spite of all the difficulties:

- we face an exciting future. We are much better placed to make a real difference as a combined offender management service than we ever were as a splintered organisation with divides between prison and probation and between public and private sector;
- we know much more clearly what we need to do and we are much better at doing the basics of our job ensuring compliance with community sentences and maintaining security, order and control in prison than we ever were before;
- at HQ, I commit to doing all that I can to support development and improvement in what we do.

I genuinely believe that we can continue to improve, in spite of the constraints placed on us by our tight financial circumstances. I will not allow us to throw away the hard-earned gains in our work which enable us to protect the public by agreeing to do more than is possible with too little. By targeting our resources, continuing to work to improve our efficiency and being careful not to produce self-induced overload in the work facing us, we can succeed. As a result, we will win increased public confidence in our role of protecting the public and reducing reoffending.

NOTES

- ¹ In this his Forum contribution we reproduce, with the kind permission of the author, the address by Phil Wheatley, UK NOMS Director General, to the NOMS Agency Conference 2009.