Service User Engagement – What's the big deal?

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The following provides a brief summary of a piece of practice based research undertaken in 2010, which explored the relationship between 'sentence planning' and 'offender engagement'. A fuller account of the research and its methodology can be read in the Probation Journal (Hughes 2012).

The aim of the research was to establish some preliminary data regarding effective practice in sentence planning, and the extent to which a good sentence plan was relevant in terms of increasing compliance and engagement (and ultimately a reduction in re offending). The initial focus of the research was on the role of sentence planning. However, broader considerations regarding the content of supervision sessions, a dynamic approach by practitioners, and the relationship between staff members and service users, appeared to be the most significant factors for service users. It is not feasible to make broad generalizations on the basis of a small sample. Nevertheless the responses illustrate that specific processes or formalised tasks can be experienced as counterproductive by service users, with regard to fostering a sense of engagement with their supervision.

There has been a growing emphasis on service user engagement in both practice guidance and academic literature, within Probation in England and Wales. This attention is reflected in the 2012 special issue of EuroVista. Arguably, the term 'offender engagement', has become a new buzz phrase. However, critical reflection regarding its meaning and application has sometimes been lacking.

The attention given to service user engagement contrasts with the themes which have, until recently, dominated probation practice in England and Wales. While the aims of motivating and encouraging often reluctant service users has, inevitably, always been a key feature of the work of probation practitioners (Raynor 2007), arguably, explicit attention to this has been marginalised. The greater focus has been on delivering approved or accredited methods of intervention, based on cognitive behavioural approaches, usually delivered in a standardised format, and often in group settings (Chapman and Hough 1998, Underdown 1998, McGuire 1995). The pre determined content and style of interventions, rather than the perceptions and perspectives of individual service users, was accorded most significance. Furthermore, there has been an organisational separation in England and Wales, between what has been rather uncomfortably termed; 'offender management' on the one hand (involving the assessment, enforcement and coordination of work for service users) and 'interventions' on the other (involving actual face to face work with service users, which attempts to address needs). A consequence of this has been that the emphasis, for many probation staff, has been on the management and assessment of service users, rather than the delivery of therapeutic work. Another key theme which cannot be overlooked is the on-going priority given to issues of public protection and risk management.

More recent commentary has criticised many of the approved and accredited methods of intervention, pointing to their limited capacity to be responsive to the individual needs and perspectives of service users (and perhaps it is also worth reflecting on their limitations in accommodating the individual styles and preferences of the worker). This has been combined with a growing reduction in the optimism which initially surrounded accredited cognitive behavioural approaches, in relation to their capacity to have an impact on re offending (Porporino 2010).

It should be noted, however, that the extent to which cognitive behavioural approaches and accredited programmes are unresponsive, is contested (McGuire 2005). It is hard to dismiss the fairly consistent evidence of the effectiveness of cognitive behavioural programmes, and recent revisions have endeavoured to explicitly re orientate such interventions towards the preferences and goals of the service users (Travers 2012).

The move away from relatively standardised or practitioner led interventions is consistent with a range of research and academic developments related to desistance. This has placed substantial emphasis on relationships; service user involvement; and responsiveness to the individual motivations, perspectives and narratives of service users (Maruna 2001, McNeill 2006). Some commentators have gone beyond stressing the importance of relationships, and argued that the content of any intervention is of fairly limited significance compared to the establishment of a positive relationship (McNeill et al 2005).

Reflecting this change of emphasis, and as documented in the special edition of EuroVista, the National Offender Management Service in England and Wales has been driving an 'offender engagement programme'. This includes a number of pilots, which aim to identify effective methods of securing the engagement of offenders in their sentences and supervision (Rex 2012).

SENTENCE PLANNING AND SERVICE USER ENGAGEMENT

In the context described above, the processes and practices of sentence planning have been attributed significance, as these are potential areas where engagement can be fostered. Sentence plans are completed at the commencement of any period of community supervision, detailing clear objectives, the activities which are to be undertaken, who is expected to contribute to them, and how progress will be measured. The completion of a clear sentence plan at the start of a period of community supervision is a key activity for practice staff in England and Wales. Practitioners are given specific guidance regarding the wording of objectives, and sentence plans are expected to be underpinned by OASys (Figure 1). There is an expectation that objectives are SMART/A (usually Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Relevant, Timely/Anti Discriminatory). However, the practices and assumptions underpinning sentence planning in Probation have not been subject to rigorous evaluation, and therefore its impact on compliance, engagement, and ultimately re offending, remains unclear. As with other aspects of Probation practice, attention needs to be given to the way in which sentence planning and supervision are experienced and given meaning by service users and staff. Particular consideration needs to be given to the practice skills and training of staff. Arguably, these have not been sufficiently orientated around issues of responsivity, developing individualized supervision, or relationships. Where responsivity has been considered, it has usually been in relation to fitting service users into existing service interventions, rather than vice versa. Without this critical reflection, the investment in particular processes, such as sentence planning, may be misplaced. Additionally, much of the guidance which is provided in relation to planning (such as SMART/A) may not be helpful when dealing with complex lives (Canton 2011).

> **OASys (Offender Assessment System)**
> OASys has become the most commonly used assessment tool within probation practice in England and Wales. It is a structured assessment which directs the practitioner to 'score' static factors and dynamic factors (including attitudes, accommodation and emotional well-being) which have been identified as having a relationship with offending. Sections relating to risk of harm, risk management and sentence planning are integrated. For a fuller account see Canton (2011)
> *Figure 1*

THE RESEARCH

Twelve probation staff were interviewed. Six of these were qualified Probation Officers, and the other six were Probation Service Officers. The latter receive on the job training with no higher education input, and account for a growing proportion of front line probation staff.

Twelve service users were interviewed, all of whom had commenced statutory supervision within the preceding three months. Those subject to supervision are allocated to one of four tiers, broadly reflecting the level of risk and need. Those interviewed were all within tiers two and three.

As previously mentioned, in view of the relatively small sample size, it is not possible to make claims for broader groups of service users and practitioners. They nevertheless illustrate a range of understanding and perspectives.

THE PRACTITIONERS

Sentence planning was identified as being central by the practitioners for engaging offenders. As one Officer stated:

> *It's all about engagement; they (offenders) need to know why they are here and what the overall purpose is.*

In this sense, the sentence plan was a key opportunity to discuss the parameters of supervision, identify goals and agree expectations.

Sentence planning was identified as something which aims to provide coordination and structure to supervision, by documenting the work required and enabling other staff to pick up tasks easily, in a similar way that a lesson plan might in an educational context. In this understanding, the sentence plan was more to meet the needs of staff and the organisation, than to meet the needs of the service user. Within this understanding, a sentence plan may nevertheless remain relevant for engagement in terms of ensuring that a reasonable quality of work is undertaken.

Practitioners identified the formal sentence planning process as an organisational requirement, which was an end in itself, rather than being linked to any clear purpose or outcome. The key reason for sentence plans being completed within this understanding was one of defensibility or anxiety regarding potential repercussions of not doing so, as captured in the following:

> *So that the inspectors can see what you are doing*

Despite the above, planning was identified as important for engagement, in terms of broadly establishing goals and expectations. However, building relationships, establishing dialogue and using interpersonal skills were seen as having greater significance. Additionally, the establishment of goals and expectations was seen as needing to be responsive to emerging needs and circumstances, rather than being fixed at a particular point in time, or reducible to specific or clearly measurable objectives and outcomes.

Central in discussions regarding approaches to sentence planning was the use of OASys, and the associated OASys sentence plan. For those who had only worked for the probation service within recent years, it was hard to envisage what the job would entail without OASys. One respondent said in response to the question: Is OASys helpful for your job?

> *'Helpful at what; OASys is the job'*

Frustrations were expressed with regard to what practitioners perceived as an approach to planning which was largely orientated around the use of prescribed tools. These tools were experienced as impeding the pursuit of the more meaningful task of slowly developing relationships, considering broad aims with service users, and discussing day to day problems. These concerns reflect academic developments related to the use of standardized

or prescribed assessment tools and their limitations in terms of being responsive to the individual narratives and understandings of service users (Aas 2004).

Practitioners expressed difficulties between ensuring that their practice was engaging to service users on the one hand, and meeting other organisational requirements on the other. For example practitioners expressed the view that it was difficult to make objectives consistent with the acronym SMART/A. Supervision was perceived as needing to be much more dynamic and not reducible to a set of specific objectives drawn up at a particular time. Practitioners additionally expressed a tension between exploring issues identified by the service users on the one hand, and setting objectives which the probation service had identified as priorities. The latter included victim work, offence focussed work, factors identified by OASys, and risk management. Practitioners also expressed the view that it was appropriate in many instances for the practitioner to take the lead in setting objectives and driving supervision. Sometimes because many service users were perceived as lacking insight into their own difficulties, but also because staff were anxious that not giving attention to offence focused work would lead to criticism:

> *'We are here to do what we are here to do. I think if we just let them set their own objectives, supervision would be about getting a colour TV and not about offending behaviour.'*

Practitioners responded to these tensions in a range of ways. They often demonstrated knowledge and skill in relation to the need to encourage service users to recognise mutually agreed long term goals.

Practitioners identified that the range of service users under supervision was one of the key challenges in their work. Individuals subject to statutory supervision are diverse in terms of commitment to change, insight, learning style and the nature of their problems. Many service users will hold hostile attitudes towards authority and their supervision. Applying a single or restricted model of practice, and expecting the same level of engagement from all service users is clearly not viable. This is even more pertinent when it is considered that an individual service user is likely to change his or her perspectives, motivation and attitude over a period of supervision.

THE SERVICE USERS

Generally, service users were unaware of a sentence plan having been created.

> *I think she wrote something down on paper, which I must have signed*

Despite the above, service users consistently had a clear sense of the purpose of their supervision, and spoke about it positively. By far the most significant factors in encouraging this were relational, with virtually all of those interviewed referring to the positive non judgemental and empathic approach of their officers. As with most of the staff, relationships, motivation, and the direction of supervision were seen as needing to be developed slowly. The sentence plan or initial meetings were not of particular significance.

Related to the above, personal respect for supervising officers and a perception that authority was used legitimately were identified as being significant. Service users expressed confidence that advice or activities, which their supervising officer provided, were likely to be in their interests. Directive approaches were often welcomed and service users identified that they would have been pleased to have had a clearer structure and purpose to supervision. For example, one participant expressed frustration that she had to balance work commitments to be told that she was doing well and sent away. Others expressed the view that short appointments, or being simply 'signed in' made probation seem rather meaningless. These accounts seem to be consistent with well established considerations with regard to the importance given to the legitimate use of authority and 'normative compliance' (Bottoms 2001). These concepts, which perhaps could be overlooked in the current debate regarding service user led approaches, would benefit from further reflection.

Interestingly, those who could recall discussing a specific sentence plan had very negative experiences associated with it:

> *'...something was talked about but she said I needed to talk about my offence and I said if you want me talk about that you are taking the piss. It should be about me.'*

It seems plausible that where too much emphasis was placed on a formal written sentence plan, the scope for being flexible, dynamic and responsive is diminished. Related to this theme, one of the key factors which undermined a sense of engagement was where service users had a perception that they were not being treated as an individual and were required to fit into service requirements:

> *'She said what do you need help with, and I said well if you can't get me a house I could do with some anger management. She said well you can't have that because your scores don't add up.'*

Inflexible guidelines or processes seemed clearly visible to the service users and these gave a powerful message regarding the extent to which the supervision was orientated around their needs.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The current emphasis and reflection on service user engagement is welcome in a number of respects. It recognises the services user's ultimate responsibility for change, and the practitioner's role in supporting this, rather than providing an injection of an approved intervention designed to 'cure' the problem behaviour (McNeill 2006).

Many of the initiatives within the National Offender Management Service's Offender Engagement programme are to be welcomed in that they urge consideration of a more service user orientated approach. However, taking into consideration the complexity of issues and obstacles in terms of service user engagement, it is likely that many of the strategies currently being developed and implemented within the Offender Engagement Programme, and elsewhere, may impede the professional judgement and confidence required to develop genuinely individualised practice. There has been greater flexibility provided to practitioners through the introduction of a new practice framework, which replaces the previous National Standards, which previously governed practice within England and Wales. National Standards provided strict guidance on timescales such as frequency of contact, while the new framework allows and possibly encourages a reduction in contact. This change is often cited as evidence of the extent to which practitioners now have greater scope to undertake individualised practice in which professional judgement can be exercised. However, it appears to be a paradox to claim that encouraging a reduction in contact with service users is relevant in terms of promoting engagement. One of the key roles of National Standards was to ensure a degree of engagement with the service users who were most challenging. Staff are likely to benefit from guidance and support. Sentence planning is inevitably an important element in ensuring that practice is sufficiently considered and focussed. Nevertheless building relationships remains a key skill for staff, and one which needs to be intuitive and responsive, rather than one that can be built on the basis of rigid guidelines. At the present time privatisation has become a central theme in the delivery of Probation services. The impact of this on the nature of probation practice is at the present time unknown. However, some commentators have speculated that it will result in a decrease in the skills and training of practitioners seeking to engage with reluctant service users (Fitzgibbon 2012).

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