

Practitioner Group. Desistance and Compliance Dec 09

Chairs: Gill Kelly, Tina Eadie. Notes: Sarah Hilder, Brian Stout

The group were asked to consider a number of questions arising from the morning sessions, this included:

1. Do limited opportunities for professional discretion impact upon the offender/officer relationship at various stages of engagement?
2. High Risk offenders value: Fairness, Justice, accuracy in risk assessment; “legitimate” risk management plans (Wood and Kemshall 2007). Can we extend the approach towards compliance with high risk offenders to others?
3. Desistance is a highly relevant concept across the age range (from adolescence to adulthood). How might services across Youth and Adult services work together?
4. How does Probation relearn its “old ways” of working whilst keeping the elements of best practice from new developments?
5. How does the offender management model assist/inhibit desistance?

Organisational Constraints

There was an initial strength of feeling that the emphasis on processes and administration had become overwhelming within the service and often detracted from establishing strong foundations for engagement with offenders. In particular some practitioners described a laborious induction process requiring the completion of a lengthy booklet outlining various rules and expectations. This was seen to serve a purpose of advising the offender of the requirements of the order but it was felt that in reality very little information was absorbed from such a strategy. It was also argued that this approach was not conducive to establishing a good working rapport; process driven tasks limited the opportunities for self narrative.

Other contributors highlighted that such processes could be adapted and that often it was a question of practitioner confidence as to whether individuals were able to divert from the “script” and deliver requirements in a way which would be more likely to motivate and engage. However it was felt that practitioners then had the added pressure of defending and justifying approaches which were seen to deviate from centralised administrative requirements. There was some disparity amongst the workshop participants as to how much discretion they felt they had as practitioners.

There were also concerns raised that the concept of an offender manager as a commissioner of resources was one of the key interpretations of the offender management model (at the expense of other elements). Key performance indicator targets were seen to take priority. Some contributors felt that enforcement action stemmed on occasion from the offender being out of sync with the organisational process, rather than as a result of wilful non compliance. If further time was available to engage, assess and address the offender’s criminogenic needs, it was thought that outcomes may be more positive. The group strongly advocated the need for clear boundaries and acknowledged that constraints were necessary in work with offenders. However it was also felt that a fundamental shift in organisational thinking which recognised the value of engagement as a vehicle for supporting desistance needed to occur. Practitioners were unsure as to whether there was an understanding of this at more senior NOMs/DOMs levels?

Joint, collaborative working with offenders

It was generally accepted that risk assessments which incorporated the active engagement of an offender were likely to be more accurate and that similarly the supervision plans which led on from this were likely to be more effective. It was observed that public protection work, engagement and compliance were not mutually exclusive concepts, although it was considered that where there is simply an emphasis on procedure rather than content there was a danger that these connections might be lost. Members of the group provided examples of where the language of desistance could be introduced into the supervision process with offenders at an early stage of engagement. There were also good examples provided of how home visits and family work might be used to build a more holistic picture of an offender's narrative. It was recognised that relationship building takes time, yet many of the practitioners stated that they often felt under pressure to commence offending behaviour work, or seek to render an offender as "programme ready" within a very short space of time from their initial sentence/release. Members of the group stated that the principles of the Offender Management Model could support desistance but the realities of workload allocation, programme resourcing and administrative pressures resulted in practitioners feeling that this was often not achievable.

From reports from the group different styles of engagement and practice appeared to exist in different areas and offices, often driven by the ethos and values of key senior practitioners and/or managers. It was generally felt that where practitioners felt empowered and confident to make key decisions in relation to their supervision choices and approaches to engagement with offenders, that experiences of supervision felt more positive. Within these types of supportive work environment it was felt that engagement and motivational work was equated with effective risk management, but that this was not yet a universally held belief within the service.

The group concluded with an observation regarding the adoption of further time efficiency measures which are being introduced in some regions to ascertain where services may be streamlined. Members were again anxious that bureaucratic methods such as this would yet again impact on the value given to offender/officer contact time, its nature and impact.