

Offender Engagement: Why is it important to listen to offenders?

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Much of our work on Offender engagement took place prior to us becoming a merged trust on 1st April so much of what I say will relate to West Midlands only.

Background

Our interest in West Midlands was raised by PC 10/2006 on “Offender Engagement: effective consultation and involvement of offenders in developing services”

This was really the first awareness in the West Midlands that we weren't consulting with our offenders as our customers on the services we were offering.

The circular highlighted the importance of engaging offenders when it said “Involving offenders and ex-offenders in shaping the services which affect them is likely to lead to greater responsiveness to offenders' needs and learning styles. This is an important factor in improving retention and completion rates”

The project rationale said that engagement of offenders has five aims

- To improve the quality and outcomes of services working with offenders, as effective consultation shapes the evolution of delivery
- To improve rates of retention of offenders in programmes and court requirements
- Offenders who participate in formal groups will gain skills and confidence from participating in a constructive process
- To motivate some offenders to participate further with the work of the Probation Service, perhaps as mentors to future service users
- To enable the probation service to demonstrate its responsiveness to customer feedback as it prepares for the approaching challenges of commissioning and contestability.

There was an offender engagement questionnaire that Areas had to fill in which asked questions about how we informed, consulted and involved offenders. Unfortunately our assessment was woefully poor. We had some leaflets to inform but the only actual consultation we did was via exit questionnaires completed at the end of a UPW requirement and one off research projects. We did not carry out any true involvement exercises at all.

So it was agreed that I would be involved in the national group which looked at obtaining information to go into the Offender Good Practice Guide, and this was issued with PC 10/2007.

Again the guide stresses the importance of offender engagement:

“There is evidence across both the public and private sectors that engaging service users in shaping services is one factor linked to improvement of services and improved rates of service retention. In the criminal justice

system there is evidence that those who complete treatment or offending related interventions have better outcomes in terms of reducing offending than those who fail to complete”.

It goes on to talk about the impact on both offenders and staff:

“This guide suggests that all practitioners within the Probation Service should see user involvement as an integral part of their working lives. This will enable service users to genuinely influence the planning and development of services and feel properly engaged in how services are allocated. It will also provide a valuable insight into their effectiveness.

“Service users in fields outside of probation frequently mention that being engaged with the planning and delivery of services is a therapeutic experience which increases their self esteem and confidence. It gives them a feeling that they are valued as people who can make a positive contribution to improving services, despite their problems.

“Involving service users can also have positive outcomes for staff. Building better relationships with service users, developing a deeper understanding of their difficulties and working with them to solve problems can make staff feel their work is more effective and enjoyable.”

Following the work on the guide, it was agreed that I should work on developing an approach and strategy to improve this area of our work and that’s what the rest of this paper is about.

Strategy

In December 2007 a report to the Business Development Stakeholder and Partnership Committee of the West Midlands Probation Board introduced the guide and outlined what we currently did to seek offender views. It also outlined issues which we faced in developing more effective offender engagement:

- Our exit questionnaire approach applied only to interventions and not to offender management generally
- There was a lack of a structured approach to ensuring both optimum completion of offender feedback in interventions, and the demonstrable use of that feedback to improve quality of service
- We sought little or no feedback from those who fail to complete interventions, or to comply with orders/licences about their experiences of services
- There was little or no use made of offender consultation in the development of policy or practice guidance.

The report went on to put forward 5 aspirational priorities:

- Developing a feedback questionnaire for offender management
- Developing facilities for offender feedback
- Developing staff awareness of offender engagement via the Intranet – encouraging the capture of ‘softer’ continuous offender feedback
- Expansion of the policy and practice guidance consultation procedures to include offender (or offender group) consultation where appropriate
- Development of procedures and systems to ensure feedback is integral to quality improvement processes.

This was formalised in April 2008 into a Board agreed strategy for offender engagement with 4 priorities to be addressed in order to provide a comprehensive approach to offender engagement:

- Developing a feedback questionnaire for offender management
- Developing facilities for offender feedback
- Building staff awareness of the importance of offender engagement
- Amending policy and practice guidance consultation procedures.

Regular updates on progress against these priorities have been provided to the Board.

And I have to say that much of the work has been concentrated on the development of focus groups, and the area wide survey. We *have* amended the policy consultation procedures to include the requirement to consult with offenders but the practical application of this has not yet really been started, and we *are* feeding back on our findings which has started to raise staff awareness, but we have some way to go on this and on how to make the most effective use of the feedback from offenders.

Preparation for Local Survey

Right from the start we recognised how important it was to ask offenders about their experiences *before* reaching the end of their order when it was really too late to do much about the issues raised and we started to work on the development of a questionnaire which could reach offenders at all points of their order, rather than relying on haphazard exit questionnaires for our feedback.

In order to decide what exactly we wanted to ask for feedback on, some early work was undertaken with staff in Coventry and also the Diversity Unit to see what issues they thought offenders had, and we also looked at questionnaires used in other Probation Areas. However, we soon realised that in order to deal with real issues, we needed to ask offenders themselves.

So the Research Officer and I interviewed individual offenders reporting to offices, those attending Unpaid Work projects, and we also attended several of the women's programme sessions to see what real issues there were.

Finally we drafted a questionnaire and took it to our first focus group for comments. I have to say there were some things we hadn't thought of in relation to meaning of questions so this was a really important test for our questionnaire.

We piloted the survey in March 2009 in Coventry.

- We asked what office they reported to
- Whether childcare had been a problem for them whilst on the order
- If this was a problem, had the Offender Manager helped them to make arrangement to address these problems, and if so, how
- Whether they had difficulty in travelling to their appointment and why
- How welcome they felt when visiting the reception area, and why
- Whether they had any difficulty contacting their offender manager

- And whether they felt their needs had been met in terms of diversity and specific needs.

The main findings were:

- Whilst only 3% felt not very welcome when visiting office reception areas, the majority (60%) felt 'OK' rather than very welcome
- Whilst only 7% reported that childcare was a problem, only 87% of these felt that their offender manager had helped them to make arrangements to address these problems
- 8% had difficulty in travelling to appointments and of these 64% said it was because of cost, but another 18% said this was because of distance and a further 18% reported disability as a problem
- Probably most significant is the response that 18%, nearly a fifth, of offenders reported having difficulty contacting their offender manager.

These findings were fed back to the senior managers but I think there was a feeling that in most cases it didn't relate to their own LDU or District as it was then.

Whilst we were working on this, we learned that there was a national offender Management Feedback Questionnaire being planned and we were a bit concerned that we may be duplicating work but when we looked at the national questionnaire we felt that it did not address actual offender needs and also we didn't know exactly when it would be implemented so we agreed to go ahead with our own local survey and start to make arrangements for rolling it out across the area.

However we did agree to pilot the national survey in Walsall and were able to give some feedback to the researchers about the length of the questionnaire, and its complicated language etc.

Focus Groups

I've already mentioned our use of the focus group to test out our local questionnaire. We wanted to set up focus groups of offenders to get more in depth feedback on a range of issues.

Practicalities – there were a number of issues relating to risk that we had to take into account – we were only able to run the groups on probation premises which we didn't feel was ideal as we wanted to make the atmosphere more relaxed and different from the statutory supervision experience. Also we had to have an Offender manager with us (which fortunately worked well but could have restricted feedback).

We provided lunch, bus fares and an excellent goody bag!

We relied on the Offender manager to provide attendees so this was not a scientific representative sample of our offenders, and we were let down with non attendance somewhat, but we still were able to glean some useful information - and the offenders were really keen to contribute and did come back for more (obviously the goody bag was a draw!)

We were very clear about what would happen and that we really wanted their honest views. We also made it clear that we would feed everything back to

the organisations managers, but couldn't promise that everything or anything would be acted on.

We also got the group to produce their own ground rules.

It was really clear that everyone wanted to be there and felt very comfortable expressing their views. They were surprisingly open and really really helpful in making suggestions.

We captured their comments on table cloths and they seemed to respond well to this to develop ideas.

Apart from feeding back on the proposed questionnaire they also gave feedback on probation supervision, courts, reception, information, and programmes.

After the first focus group which was mainly about what they thought of their experiences, the second session they were encouraged to address the issues and think about what would have improved their experiences. Having their original comments on a table cloth for them to see was really helpful for this.

There were many comments from the first 2 focus groups but I'll just pick out a few:

There were a lot of comments about the importance of their relationship with their offender manager:

Some Positive:

- Probation officer lovely – got to know me as a person
- Shared experiences as a friend
- Didn't look down on me – treated me as a person

Then of course there were the negative experiences

- Don't talk to offender on a level – too posh, not from the streets
- Want PO to open up more about what to do in life
- OM should be 'real world' – need to relate to them
- Don't like being spoken down to or told what to do – two way respect needed

There were interesting comments about readiness to change:

- Need to be at that point of your life where you want to change
- OM needs to be able to see who wants to change – waste of time for those who don't want to change

Then there was feedback on appointments and what they got out of them:

- very short appointments – more in depth may have been more helpful – needed time to talk to me as a person
- Very good officers – they need to be bothered. If see an offender is a good one who is not going to re-offend, just can't be bothered – "she's OK, see you later"

We asked about what they thought about the possibility of having group supervision sessions:

- One to one is important as the offender manager gets to know you. Need to build up rapport and confidence. Need to be comfortable about your own officer
- Don't want to speak in groups – feel shy and worry if you say something wrong
- Wouldn't want to talk about my business in a group
- In group/programme tends to be a closed group where you get to know each other and build up the confidence to talk, in group supervision would be changing people, coming and going, so don't get a stable group which you feel confidence in.

In relation to courts they wanted more information about the sort of thing that would be happening during the order, and they didn't like not knowing at that stage who their offender manager was going to be.

They also commented on the reputation of probation in court stressing the long delays and waiting times, and also that there seemed to be a lot of probation paperwork which was not ready on time

Reception areas – here they gave some really practical advice:

- Offenders need to be asked whether there are any issues about having to wait in particular offices due to gangs etc
- Posters and the PowerPoint display were good but people felt uncomfortable being seen reading leaflets – they didn't want people to know they may have a particular problem like domestic violence
- They also felt that they had to wait a long time for their offender manager in some cases. They said that they were expected to be on time and so the offender manager should be on time too.

There were big issues about the lack of information about what to expect on probation and also about programmes.

They felt strongly that more should be done to fill the gap between getting the order and getting on the programme:

- Should be introductory work done with offender manager to address lack of motivation
- Big change from 5 minute OM interview to 2 ½ hours twice a week

Generally the feeling was that programmes were really beneficial but again the relationship with the tutor was important.

All the feedback was passed back to LDU heads although to date there has been little take up of our offer to facilitate local focus groups. I think one of the issues is that LDU heads again did not think that the issues necessarily related to their own offenders.

We did display the tablecloths at head office and this did at least highlight to staff and board members attending for meetings, what was happening and there was some interest shown in these.

Area wide survey

We rolled out the offender survey piloted earlier in Coventry, across the West Midlands Probation Area in February 2010. We used office based

coordinators to manage the distribution and collection of the questionnaires in each office. I went to the Heads of Services meeting to publicise what would happen and sent out a sheet of instructions for LDU heads and office coordinators.

It all went extremely well with 2389 responses.

The main points were:

- 19% of respondents reported having a disability
- 36% had no say in sentence planning
- 23% often or sometimes had a problem contacting their offender manager (this varied between offices – those often or sometimes having a problem ranged from 14% to 44%)
- Situations making supervision hard to attend:
 - 18% employment
 - 14% cost
 - 13% childcare
- Of those who had difficulties 71% said these were taken into account when planning their appointments (29% not) – varied between offices (range saying they were taken into account 17%-82%)
- Welcomed by reception staff
 - 72% always (range 74% - 63%)
 - 19% sometimes
 - 5% rarely
 - 4% never
- Satisfaction with supervision – 94% satisfied/very satisfied
- New opportunities for future 61% agree/strongly agree
- Learned new skills – 56% agree/strongly agree
- More positive about the future – 58% agree/strongly agree

Comments – only 6 negative comments out of hundreds which were neutral or positive.

Comments in relation to “Do you think that being on probation is being helpful to you in making changes in your life?”

Lot to do with ‘thinking’, having someone to listen to them, skills learned and one to one relationship with offender manager

I’ve picked out a few to give a flavour of the responses:

- Its allowed me to look at myself and my actions, helped me to make a more informed decision
- Helping me gain qualifications and skills
- Giving me a wider and better look on things and also I hope to learn better and more helpful skills in life and general living for myself and my son
- The techniques learned have allowed me to utilise a much more positive outlook on life generally and will definitely aid me in leading a better non offensive life
- Sorted and positive!
- I stop and think of my actions as before I didn’t!!
- It has made me think about my life and what is important to me

- Helped with self esteem and confidence
- I have learnt what matters in life and have learned to control myself
- I think about things more
- I have the respect of my offender manager, and he is always there if I need any help
- Making me question my impulsive actions and think about the effect on the victim
- Helps me think before I act and lets me know of the severity of the consequences if I was to re-offend
- I seem to have got my head together a lot more, my head is more focused on the future and not re-offending
- Access to talk to someone who does not judge you
- Has made me aware of the seriousness of my offence and I will no longer be burying my head in the sand about issues
- I think of all options before acting
- Probation has helped me so much because I can now talk to someone about my problems and really get help with them
- Get back on track and never come back here
- Don't want to get in trouble and don't want to let my probation officer down

This is all useful feedback and also we were able to identify which LDU the comments and responses related to. I think some managers were a bit shocked by some of the feedback. Its all well and good to have 94% satisfaction virtually across the board, but there were some really noticeable differences in the way offenders were treated (or how they felt they were treated) in different offices.

Therefore it was agreed that all LDU heads would ensure that their action plans would contain action in relation to the findings of the survey and the progress on these to be monitored by me and reported back to senior managers. An example of some of the actions received so far is at one LDU where the action is to progress reception development plans to deal with 'welcome at reception' and delays in seeing offender managers.

It is too early yet to measure differences made by actions resulting from the feedback but it will be monitored and not just be a one off exercise that ticks certain performance boxes.

It's also important to show the offenders that we are taking note and acting on their feedback. Examples of this include some slides in the reception PowerPoint and a poster produced by one LDU.

It's also important to show staff the issues but also celebrate what is good. 94% satisfied or very satisfied with supervision is certainly something to be proud of.

We have publicised this widely via the Team Briefing which is cascaded to all staff, and also issued a press release – all helps to raise morale of staff, recognise good work, but also to show how important it is to hear the views of offenders and act upon them.

Next Steps

So where are we going from here?

National survey:

The national survey has been refined and reduced and does actually now repeat some of our questions, but we need to implement this in September and ensure a good response as the results will feed into the Probation Trust Rating Score. Hopefully the findings will confirm what we already know to a great extent.

National Offender Engagement Programme: - introduced 2010

This is subtitled 'changing lives and reducing re-offending through the power of one to one relationships'

This programme has been initiated for four main reasons:

- Probation practitioners are working one-to-one with over 178,000 offenders in the community
- There is a shared conviction that the one-to-one relationship between the probation practitioner and the offender can be a powerful means of changing behaviour and reducing re-offending (*the comments from our survey and focus groups support this*)
- If offenders are to feel that probation supervisors can assist them in dealing with such issues [as finance, employment and drug taking], they need to be confident that supervisors really do understand the social worlds they inhabit (*again comments in relation to being "too posh, not from the streets" and the OM being from the "real world" support this*)
- The current culture seems to be target and process driven and the offender's needs are not the key focus.

They aim to produce a tool kit to shape one to one work. The programme aims to enable practitioners and managers to concentrate on purposeful work with offenders by making proposals to remove the barriers to one-to-one engagement.

The practitioner reference group has a rep from each trust – as we are the second largest Trust now we have successfully argued to have a practitioner on the group but also me so I can continue to feed in our findings.

Whole Trust:

Now we've merged with Staffordshire there needs to be some work on sharing effective engagement ideas and implementing the strategy across the trust. The national survey will be the first major cross trust engagement activity in September.

Focus Groups:

We hope to run further focus groups and encourage LDU heads to run their own, perhaps relating to specific issues and develop this into a panel to be able to consult more fully on policies and other practice developments. For example, I do know that the former Staffordshire Area ran some focus groups with offenders on Diversity.

Experience Based Design:

The final engagement activity we are going to experiment with is based on the NHS experience based design idea. This is where staff and service users are brought together to improve processes. Rather than practitioners undertaking improvement work in isolation and then just asking offenders what they think, this involves offenders at every stage feeding back on how it feels for them. This would truly address the level of involvement – going back to PC 10/2006 where we measured our levels of offender engagement in terms of inform, consult and involve.

After all, we can design efficient processes but if offenders are unable to understand the process or are really unhappy with parts of it, they may opt out leading ultimately to breach – therefore it may not be the best most effective process.

Conclusion

So in conclusion, I guess we've learned a lot over the past 12 months or so about what offenders think about different aspects of the probation experience. Particularly how important it is to build up the relationship with their offender manager based on trust, respect and openness. There is also a reminder that they are our customers – our biggest group of stakeholders – and if we want to strive to offer excellent services then we can't ignore what they have to say.

Finally, its not enough just to listen – we have to close the loop by feeding their experiences into the local processes we use and the services we offer, otherwise it is a pretty pointless exercise and we will lose the valuable knowledge that our offenders have on what will make us an excellent and effective organisation.

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