

Seminar Series 3 Notes from Discussion Group 2

Group Led by Sarah Hilder Notes Bernadette Wilkinson

This group focused on two questions

1. What the case work relationship should or could be and how to develop it.
2. Challenges to Services in changing direction and allowing staff the flexibility and discretion to respond more individually to offender need.

The discussion ranged across both topics throughout.

The Case Work Relationship and developing practice

- The group were interested by Jenny's challenge to the centrality of the casework relationship and wondered if end to end supervision is more about our needs, than about the offenders. If the service as a whole was refocused on a more positive and engaging approach to supervision that might matter just as much.
- There was an interesting discussion about voluntarism; one of the group members is working on a voluntary basis with released short term prisoners most of whom were imprisoned because of breach proceedings. She has experienced this as very positive and much more led by the needs of the offenders, she is also liberated from some of the demands of OASys (although still uses it and still has to evidence what has been done). Is there a place for increasing voluntary contact even with statutory orders?
- There was also discussion about emotional intelligence and supervision and agreement that some showing of emotion to offenders is appropriate and can break down barriers if we aim for controlled disclosure of feelings. A good working relationship has to draw on authentic elements of self.
- We should be moving away from confrontation treating everything offenders say as an excuse instead working towards helping them experience success. On the other hand there are tensions with other targets and time scales and a continuing focus on 'ticking boxes'. Practitioners can also feel safer working in this known and contained way so there is a need to build the skill and confidence of staff.
- The ideas of human and social capital were taken up and discussed and the consensus was that we need to look at the whole picture human and social capital together one without the other less likely to be effective. There was a very encouraging anecdote about the Good Lives Model which was explained to their employer by a sex offender and taken up and used with the workforce.

Challenges for the Service

- The good lives model and other practice ideas shouldn't rest with sex offender treatment but should be considered for all offenders.

- A new approach to practice is not currently supported organisationally however which seems only to be concerned with outputs and outcomes. Showing emotion seems to be seen as unprofessional managers are more likely to encourage you to keep emotions hidden. This is not universal however some members of the group had managers who were able to discuss feelings and this was seen as helpful to practice. Managers are of course themselves subject to a culture that may see emotions as weakness. Workload pressures for both practitioners and managers can mean that a serious attempt to develop greater emotional literacy could be scary if it increases the likelihood of more complex demands and issues coming to the surface that then need to be dealt with. This applies to work with offenders but also to the supervision of staff.
- If you want practitioners to exercise good judgement they need to have supervision of a high standard that really focuses on the quality of what they do otherwise there is a danger that they will become too individualised in their decision making, working with offenders they like, not with those who need the attention. More needs to be invested in supervision skills for middle managers
- There was also a perception that there are opportunities about at the present for doing things differently. Finding your own way to achieving outcomes for example setting up practitioner groups to discuss practice with individuals taking a lead on particular subjects. Developing provision for women was also a possibility being pursued. There was a perception that the language around criminal justice is beginning to change. For example some practitioners are involved in stepping stones training helping offenders buy into sentence planning taking smaller steps towards change and getting much more engagement as a result. There are dangers here as well however if as happened with OASys stepping stones just becomes another end in itself
- We still need to maintain an appropriate balance, we may over breach but workers have rights too; situations have to be judged on their merit, again suggesting confident well supported practitioners able to exercise their skills. We also need well trained and supported reception staff as a good reception can make a real difference.