

## THOUGHT PIECE

*'Thought Pieces' are papers which draw on the author's personal knowledge and experience to offer stimulating and thought provoking ideas relevant to the aims of the Journal. The ideas are located in an academic, research, and/or practice context and all papers are peer reviewed. Responses to them should be submitted to the Journal in the normal way.*

## A PROBATION OFFICER'S BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON TWENTY YEARS OF REHABILITATIVE TRANSFORMATION

*Mike Guilfoyle, former Probation Officer and Associate Member of Napo*

In the autumn of 1990 I vividly recall my introductory visit to the probation office in North London that was to become the crucible in which my twenty year career as a probation officer was launched. The modern office block that housed the probation team was adjacent to an even newer Magistrates' Court, 'the palace of justice', opined the avuncular Assistant Chief Probation Officer, during my orientation week. I was slowly but methodically inducted into what appeared at the time an almost quasi-masonic occupational rite of passage, the richly grounded foundations of probation practice, the working credos of individual practitioners and Jarvis shaped procedural requirements, unfolded by my probation colleagues. My allocated generic supervision team comprised a disparate but highly skilled and vastly experienced team of practitioners whose congruent value base offered a nuanced balancing of the thorny tension evinced by the thread of supervisory care and control neatly meshed with my emerging probation identity. Having undertaken a post-graduate Certificate of Qualification in Social Work and immersed myself in the lore of social work practice, in mental health and child protection field placements, I had secured to my unexpected delight a placement in a field team in South London which specialised in pre-sentence reports - then known as social enquiry reports. However I still felt professionally ill-equipped to handle the multiple casework challenges that were associated with a community that, in most respects, had all the textbook characteristics of Inner London's social deprivation and indicative levels of crime and disorder.

However the historic organisational arrangements pertaining in London at that time seemed anomalous to me. The borough boundary straddled by one of London's main arterial roads often excited some liminal disputes as to whose responsibility it was to prepare reports and assist discharged prisoners (who, although not on statutory licence, frequently called in to see the duty officer for help and advice). Providing continuity of supervision when addresses between boroughs often shifted on a regular basis due to the rootless lifestyles of many of those on supervision was what probation officers did.

The presence and availability of skilled, highly trained and experienced practitioners was of inestimable value and this was most in evidence when at weekly team meetings the allocation of reports was keenly debated and such deliberations were framed and informed by a well-crafted casework sensitivity of fractured lives whose paths to offending were shaped by the perceived structural and social deficits of poor educational opportunity, joblessness, addictive behaviours and homelessness. One colleague whose resort to assertive advocacy on behalf of prisoners and hearty embrace of the use of benign authority (pro-socially modelling, *avant la lettre!*) in client supervision, worked tirelessly to motivate and ensure some of those most likely to harm others always featured prominently in regular cross-country prison visits. She brought her cogent practice wisdom to the attention of policy makers in parliament and her strengths based and family focussed work with prisoners shaped some of her subsequent evidence-informed and innovative work with sex offenders.

I was thankful that I was able to appear as a working probation officer with organisational sanction, when visible media interest was safely negotiated with the local newspaper that focused on "How probation contributed to safer communities". This was swiftly followed by an appearance with a probationer on BBC Newsnight on the best way of ensuring 'through the gate' support for ex-prisoners! Of course the low public profile of probation, outside of the critical negativity of more recent "supervisory failures" and what some view as a wider benign indifference to its work might be seen as a harbinger of just how susceptible it has been to the implementing of some of the more far reaching organisational reforms of recent times from the introduction of the National Offender Management Service to the current seismic Transforming Rehabilitation agenda.

To this end, report writing and the preeminent need to recommend to the judiciary the most bespoke sentencing options was reinforced by a well-developed and peer led gate keeping process that enabled neophytes as well as experienced colleagues, the opportunity to refine and discursively reflect on the impact of sentencing that might further disadvantage those whose shaping narrative of socially determined delinquency might further embed them in the criminal justice system. I was adjured on one occasion to attend a Crown Court hearing to present my report on a young woman whose offending was of a very serious nature. Her distressing and abusive domestic circumstances merited, after some considered supervisory case discussion with the senior probation officer, a "welfare oriented" intervention (this was prior to probation becoming a sentence in its own right) and although the sentencing judge was unimpressed with the recommendation, he nonetheless was appreciative of the commitment and time expended by my presence as the author of the report in court.

The formative supervisory experience afforded by the time honoured practice of graduated caseload increases, supportive managerial oversight and added casework complexity over the "probationary" year for newly appointed probation officers, enabled the acquisition of new found skills in dynamic casework and the "smell of practice" on joint prison visits, shared case conference participation and doubling up on home visits. The vestigial Divorce Court Welfare role was also finding another institutional direction as I was entering probation. The time allotted to assimilating the practitioner's knowledge bank around the diverse range of partnership organisations locally commissioned who worked with probation was invaluable as one needed time to gain such a ready familiarity with providers best suited to individual needs. Who to refer to and who to consult with, began to play an integral part in the compass of supervisory oversight. The local "spike" for homeless men, which had a much derided reputation from service users, began to work in lockstep with the courts and referring probation officers, once some of the vexed issues around institutional caretaking were flagged up in joint meetings and court liaison seminars.

This inveterate sense of the professionally compelling need to work together with others in the wider community to provide a skilled, purposeful, engaged and meaningful supervisory experience was brought home to me most poignantly when I was allocated supervisory responsibility for a woman who had a long standing and problematic drug and alcohol dependency. This was compounded by very enmeshed and abusive relationships which resulted in the build up of a persistent pattern of acquisitive offending, in which periods in custody interspersed periods of short-lived abstinence on release and recurrent relapses that meant reporting requirements under the incipient national standards framework (which had in the interim been tightened up but still offered some discretionary space) were often breached. Working together with drug and alcohol agencies and attending numerous Crown Court hearings as a referral to residential treatment was arranged, consumed considerable amounts of professional time and attention. The Crown Court judge, well versed in the therapeutic nomenclature of drug and probation reports, acceded to the final adjournment pending admittance. However the debilitating strain of remaining drug and alcohol-free proved too great and tragically she absconded and shortly thereafter died from an overdose in very disturbing circumstances. When I collected her personal belongings from HMP Holloway to pass onto family members, she had written on a scrap of paper. "Tell Mike that I will not let him down this time"!

The shifting political and managerial environment manifested most clearly in the introduction of tightened national standards, diminution of professional autonomy and greater national accountability to government began to impact. For many this was detrimental to the service's core professionalism and foundational ethos, more particularly with the undue emphasis on the management of supervision rather than the content, with a shriller emphasis on the macho-correctional language of offender management and the removal of the word 'probation' from court orders, foreshadowed with the inauguration of the National Probation Service in 2001. The "triune dicta" of enforcement, rehabilitation and public protection, enshrined in the NPS objectives strap line, reframed from "advise, assist and befriend", was augmented by a programme of

wholesale computerisation, standardised offending behaviour programmes and ever more desk bound, office-centric laborious assessment tools.

I worked as a probation officer through some turbulent political times and will readily admit to a considerable degree of occupational dissonance with the introduction of some of the target fixated coercive managerial imperatives that disfigured the workplace, demoralised probation workers, as well as the insidious attenuation of the probation identity meshed within the dominant prison-centric penal command and control world view of NOMS. The amount of time spent in front of computer screens compiling routine risk assessments remains perversely disproportionate. The demographic profile of probation staff has changed and the contemporary probation culture is certainly more diverse. The role of trade unions in probation and in particular Napo has been for me a powerful and tenacious influence in helping me to understand, respond and cope with many of the changes alluded to above.

It seems that the present Transforming Rehabilitation proposals if enacted will fast become a legislative bludgeoning engine intent on dismantling probation and offering in its place a largely fissiparous mix comprising a skein of lowest bidders and corporate raiders. This will almost inevitably undermine and fragment a service that already works best in cooperation and in multi-agency partnerships, that has at its heart a commitment to working holistically, with a resilient belief in the possibility of motivated change and reparative action. At a time of reduced resources the service helps to reduce the harms of offending at the local level in communities blighted by crime. Probation has made a unique contribution to criminal justice and although many would argue that it has lost much by way of its traditional roots, professionalism and identity, it still merits its place at the centre of any rehabilitative revolution. Arguably it has long been transforming rehabilitation. Let us hope that it can find its voice again?