

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 RETURNING PROBATION OFFICER'S THOUGHTS ON THE EROSION OF PROFESSIONALISM IN OFFENDER MANAGEMENT AND THE TRANSFORMING REHABILITATION AGENDA

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Professionals are often defined as those who have their knowledge certified by way of examination and that practice is grounded in theory. Traditionally Probation Officers have shared a set of core values which are underpinned by the notion of working for the greater good whilst recognising the intrinsic worth of the individual. My own view is that the Probation Officer qualification now serves as a 'badge of competency', is government driven and should be viewed in the context of a capitalist state. To this end it is important to consider if officers are being taught competency in specific tasks rather than intellectual development. The bookshelves in probation offices used to contain published academic works from practitioners, sadly these authors are not being replaced by their younger counterparts. One considers if this was part of the plan all along to place officers in an increasingly restrained environment where 'doing the job' becomes the only priority. The pre-sentence report, arguably one of the most important analytical documents, has now in the main been reduced to a series of tick boxes in an electronic format which prohibits any creative alteration of text: 'computer says no'. Surely investment in the promotion of autonomy and the intellectual potential of staff ensures continued professional development, and this is not necessarily satisfied by the generic 'one size fits all' training. Ideally one would prefer employers to consider sponsoring staff to complete higher qualifications and foster an environment where their own research informs practice.

Arguably practitioners now perceive that their role is being devalued and that rather than the MOJ raising standards, there is a determined effort being made to undermine

Probation Officers. Society looks to professionals to provide solutions to problems, Probation Trusts view reoffending as a problem and all efforts are focussed on reducing this problem. Should the TR proposals become realised then companies may view themselves firstly as 'financial institutions' secondly as 'offender managers' and arguably not at all as 'servants of the public'. Most commentators on TR emphasise the speed at which these reforms are taking place with a focus on overarching strategic objectives and little or no mention of the tactical or operational feasibility of many of the proposals. Probation Trusts are guilty of allowing themselves to become secretive organisations; were the public to be surveyed, one would predict there would be a preference for qualified non-profit making professionals to manage offenders. That said qualified officers will form part of the CRCs, for now, what of the future training of new 'offender managers', will individuals be motivated to undertake a period of study when their employment is precarious? Employees whose values do not sit well with the organisation may experience a conflict in this 'dual identity'.

Without doubt the greatest fear concerns the management of risk, the protection of victims, and potential victims. Draft documents propose that those posing the greatest threat of harm will remain under the supervision of the new NPS, an acknowledgment then that professionals are required. Latest proposals suggest that the penny is finally dropping in terms of risk being dynamic and the necessity to identify offending pathways, triggers to further offending, and accurate identification of potential victims. Politicians have showcased proposals by way of photo opportunities with community groups who no doubt have completed some meaningful interventions with offenders. Whilst there are a number of agencies who are best placed to treat addiction, address mental health issues, and support housing and educational needs, the only individuals with the professional capacity to assess and manage risk are Probation Officers. It is of course acknowledged that working alongside partnership agencies is vital and research suggests that an integrated approach to offender management could be further developed to cover a wider range of offenders. However one fears that this pooling of resources may be jeopardised by TR proposals; moreover can the Police be expected to share intelligence with untested organisations?

Having not practiced for the last four years, when returning to the Probation Trust at a most tumultuous time I was unsure what to expect. If the latest 'TR Bulletin' is to become a reality then I will move to the CRC as for the last few years I have worked for the Police and in Education, so not deemed eligible to work in the new NPS. The battle is not yet lost of course.

I have observed a constant, that Probation staff are a body of dedicated professionals who are committed to protecting the public and working with individuals to change their lives. Probation Officers are not resistant to change and are experts at responding to crisis situations; most days are a rollercoaster ride. We are used to doing 'more for less', regularly work unpaid overtime and go over and above our role in supporting and protecting people. That is who we are, that is what we do. One wishes that this message was more widely disseminated by those in influential circles.