

COMMUNITY JUSTICE FILES 14

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Ministry of Justice

The launch of the Ministry of Justice on 9th May 2007 brings together governmental responsibility for courts, prison, probation, youth justice, criminal law and sentencing. The Ministry has set itself six objectives. These are:

- We will reduce re-offending and protect the public: by ensuring that the punishment fits the crime; through ensuring that violent and dangerous offenders remain in prison for as long as they remain dangerous; by breaking the cycle of re-offending through increased use of effective community penalties and rehabilitation, by bringing more offences to justice and enforcing the orders of the court.
- We will promote justice: by ensuring that there are fair, effective and proportionate ways of resolving disputes, and for fighting crime, reducing re-offending and tackling anti-social behaviour; by ensuring respect for the rule of law underpins our society, our courts and our institutions.
- We will provide access to justice for all: by making help and advice and financial support available at the point of need and at the earliest stage, especially for the most vulnerable; by helping people to find their own solutions wherever possible, but where court intervention is necessary, ensuring that court processes are simpler and more transparent.
- We will increase confidence in the justice system: by improving understanding of justice; by giving communities a greater role in the delivery of justice; by making the justice system more effective, accessible and accountable; by providing greater support for people going through the system and by encouraging diversity.
- We will uphold people's human, information and democratic rights: by improving understanding of rights; by demonstrating that rights are not just for lawyers or minority groups but for everyone; by ensuring government departments and public authorities apply the Human Rights Act with common sense, balancing the rights of individuals with the needs of wider society; by ensuring that government and public authorities adopt a culture of openness through the Freedom of Information Act.
- We will safeguard and modernise our constitution: by ensuring that it is fit for today's society.

On its first day in business, the Ministry of Justice published a background paper on penal policy which outlines policy in the areas of prison, community sentences and commissioning. The policy document argues that more prison places are required to hold those who pose a risk to the public. A further 8000 places are promised by 2012. The document highlights the particular needs of women prisoners. It acknowledges both the recommendations of the Corston Review, including that women should be held in small local secure units rather than larger prisons, but also their cost implications. Such recommendations will be carefully explored.

The policy document argues for a greater use of community sentences on the basis that they have the potential to reduce reoffending and can often be more effective than a short custodial sentence. The role of intensive community supervision for those offenders who commit most crime is also explored. The paper raises the possibility of developing a particularly intensive community sentence, perhaps combining 3 years supervision, 300 hours unpaid work, a programme or treatment requirement and a 6 month curfew, and testing whether this would be used by the courts as an alternative to a short custodial sentence.

The paper ends by outlining the Ministry's vision for the commissioning of services from a range of providers. This includes the plan to turn high performing Probation Boards into Trusts and, in the future, to enable other bodies from the voluntary, private or charitable sectors to take on the work of Boards or to compete with Trusts.

The penal policy background paper can be found on the Ministry of Justice website.
<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/penalpolicy.htm>

The strategy document 'Justice – a new approach' which outlines and explores the Ministry's objectives is also on the website
<http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/justicenewapproach.htm>

Volunteers Can – A Volunteering Strategy to Reduce Reoffending

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has published a consultation paper exploring the role of the volunteer in work with offenders in custody and in the community. The document is positive about the contribution that can be made by volunteers, but identifies some issues that need to be addressed in order for this area of work to develop. These include the rapidly changing organisational environment, barriers to participation for some individuals, inconsistent leadership and scarcity of evidence confirming the effectiveness of volunteering.

The NOMS volunteering strategy has a mission 'to value, build and support the unique role of volunteering in helping to reduce reoffending and building public confidence in the Criminal Justice System'. The aims of the strategy are to:

- Increase the number and diversity of volunteers.
- Become more strategic in volunteer development.
- Improve the quality of support given to volunteers.
- Establish the impact of volunteering.

The document deals with many types of volunteers and gives examples of a variety of projects. For example, offenders work as volunteers in projects such as peer support, mentoring projects and listening schemes. Other members of the community work as volunteers in many capacities in the criminal justice system, including as prison visitors, MAPPA lay advisors, workers at faith based projects and victim/offender mediation. Employees of NOMS also work as volunteers in other settings.

Amongst the examples given in the document are Connect 2 and SOVA's Women into Work Programme.

Connect 2 is a European Social Fund partnership project between four probation boards and the prison service in the West of Midlands. The project provides supported resettlement to short sentence prisoners and has a particular focus on employment. Volunteers work as mentors supporting the offender through their transition from prison into the community. A third of released prisoners take up some form of ongoing contact.

SOVA's Women into Work Programme also has an employment focus and involves women prisoners as peer researchers, training them in techniques such as running focus groups.

The paper suggests how the strategy's aims may be met and calls for responses. The feedback form poses a number of questions about the challenges and barriers that must be overcome in order for volunteering to reach its full potential. It asks how volunteers from traditionally under-represented groups (in this case, men, black and Asian people and young adults) can best be engaged and about the issues involved in work with faith communities. It asks about special considerations that should apply to volunteer work with high risk of harm offenders.

Responses to the consultation are required by Friday 10th August and the documents are available on the NOMS website http://www.noms.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-publications-vents/publications/consultations/Consultation_Volunteers_Can/?view=Standard&pubID=465822

The National Prolific and Other Priority Offender (PPO) Evaluation

The Prolific and other Priority Offender (PPO) programme was implemented in September 2004 with a focus on that small group of offenders identified as responsible for a significant proportion of all crime. Home Office Online Report 09/07, published in

February 2007, discusses findings from an evaluation of the PPO programme and makes a number of practical recommendations intended to promulgate best practice.

The findings from the research, which comprised interviews with PPO workers and offenders in ten areas of England and Wales, include:

- some good partnership work and information sharing between the agencies involved in the PPO programme.
- the opportunity for staff working with this group of offenders to gain a good knowledge of each individual offender and hence manage cases effectively.
- evidence that PPOs have specific needs in the areas of accommodation, drug misuse and education and employment. A multi-agency approach, involving all the appropriate services, is beneficial.

The report makes a number of recommendations for practitioners. Amongst these are

- reviewing the process for the selection and de-selection of PPOs. All relevant agencies should be involved and the systems should be clear and open.
- locating key staff in the same place aids multi-agency working and improves the management of PPOs.
- PPO schemes should seek out opportunities for additional funding.
- offenders on the PPO programme should be given good levels of information about the scheme, the criteria for selection and de-selection and the support and opportunities available to them.

A copy of the report can be found at

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs07/rdsolr0907.pdf>

Groups, Gangs and Weapons

The Youth Justice Board has recently published research investigating gang related offending and the use of weapons by young people. The research comprised a literature review, a survey of youth offending team managers, interviews with about 50 young people (male and female) involved in group offending, interviews with practitioners working with young people, and an ethnographic study based on eight young men known to be involved in gangs.

The report concludes that, whilst much offending by young people occurs in groups, organised juvenile gangs using violence and threats are relatively rare. The position is complicated because young people may claim to be gang members to boost their status and because a group of delinquent young people may be labelled as a gang by others. The research also identifies that knives are much more likely to be carried as weapons than firearms by young people and carrying any weapon increases the risk of serious injury or death when young people are involved in fights.

The report concludes that work must be done to reduce the chances of young offenders graduating from group delinquency to involvement with gangs and serious organised crime in adulthood. The report suggests that any strategy needs to be based in the local community and have a multi-agency approach. Better assessment of young people already in the criminal justice system is needed to identify those involved in group offending and at most risk of moving to gang related violence in the future.

The report argues that information about knife crime should be collected in the same way as data is kept about gun crime. This would enable local trends to be observed and mean that the success of interventions could be measured. Police searches play an important part in finding knives but can lead to tension between the police and groups of young people. The report argues for improvements in the conduct of searches, including the use of search wands.

A summary of the report can be downloaded at

<http://www.yjb.gov.uk/publications/Scripts/prodView.asp?idproduct=341&eP=>

Forthcoming Events

Delivering Mental Health Services for Offenders

Nacro's 7th annual mental health and crime conference will be held on 5th and 6th September 2007 at the University of Nottingham. The conference will consider how an improved mental health strategy for all offenders can tackle health inequality and reduce reoffending and social exclusion. Invited speakers include Richard Bradshaw, Director of Prison Health, Terry Eastham, Chief Officer, National Probation Service, Merseyside, and Barbara Herts, Director, YoungMinds.

For further details, contact events@nacro.org.uk or telephone 020 7840 6466.

Restorative Justice: When, Where and How It Works

The 4th Winchester International Restorative Justice Conference will be held from 9th – 11th October 2007. The venue is the Winchester Guildhall, Hampshire. The conference aims to look at many different aspects of restorative justice, highlighting best practice and developments in new areas. Confirmed speakers include Howard Zehr, author of 'Changing Lenses', Professor Lawrence Sherman, author of 'Restorative Justice: The Evidence', Her Honour Judge Bria Huculak, Saskatchewan Provincial Court, and Graham Robb, Interim Chair Youth Justice Board for England and Wales.

For further details, contact sarah.spencer@neilstewartassociates.co.uk or telephone 020 7324 4359

Century of Probation International Conference – 10th-13th September

The Hallam Centre for Community Justice at Sheffield Hallam University are holding an International Conference to mark the Centenary of the 1907 Probation of Offenders Act.

The conference seeks to achieve three interrelated aims:

- Celebrating the rich and diverse history of community measures for offenders in the context of the growth of probation and other key agencies
- Championing the many good practices which have developed both in the UK and across the world and sharing such practices
- Confronting the reality of changing demands on services for offenders in the community and during periods of custody and looking forward to the future in community engagement with offenders

For further details, including a downloadable conference programme and online booking facility visit www.centuryofprobation.com