

# GUEST EDITORIAL

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For several decades now, public sector agencies have been subjected to major upheavals as the spotlight of government has fallen on them. For criminal justice agencies the picture is further complicated by public and media expectations. New managerialist measurements of performance and targeting of practice are now endemic, if not universally accepted, throughout the police, prison and probation services. New professionals on one hand could expect that their professional training would earn them the right to some autonomy in their future roles: On the other hand, their role is restricted to meeting pre set measures of performance. Discussion of this dissonance has become increasingly central to the training delivered to probation officers in Yorkshire and Humberside.

This special edition of the Journal developed from that interest. The editors, Clare Beckett and Pauline Ashworth, have been involved in the delivery of training to probation officers in the Yorkshire and Humberside Region. They were also involved in organising a day conference held at the University of Bradford, looking specifically at diversity in a performance culture. The event brought together academics from the partner Universities responsible for delivery of training (Sheffield Hallam, Hull and Bradford), practitioners from the three criminal justice agencies (police, probation, prison), trainee probation officers and undergraduate students. Discussion between the disparate groups was focused and heartfelt. It was this that led to the idea of this edition, drawn from the conference and developing conference themes. It seems that a performance culture, its associated impact on ideas of professional behaviour, the resulting service provision for a diverse user group, are 'live' and current issues in practice.

The central focus of the contributions is the question: how far is the emergence and development of performance as the dominant criterion and guiding principle of criminal justice agencies supportive of or antithetical to recognition of diversity? Are these concepts compatible, sympathetic to one another, or are they necessarily distinct and even contradictory in practice? The answer will depend to some extent on a definition of performance and an understanding of diversity – and on how to define the job to be done. In the planning stages we, the editors, came to recognise that we held differing views on the issue. Our struggle to 'square the circle' reflects our different perspectives. Our own discomfort with the context of performance management is reflected by the authors of these papers.

On the one hand, it is argued, the emphasis placed on performance indicators in the past two decades or so has led officers whether in the police, probation or prison services to find their room for manoeuvre restricted and their ability to develop constructive working relationships with offenders curtailed by the requirements to meet targets of performance generated locally or nationally. They may believe that their professional identity and skills

have been undermined. It is fair to say that this opinion was expressed more strongly by probation officers during the conference – particularly former probation officers who witnessed the shift away from social work based values and education to on-the-job training, from there being roughly a balance between the ‘twin peaks’ of care and control to a heavy weighting in favour of the latter. On the other hand, the argument is that, without some clearly identifiable targets or clearly defined goals, it would be impossible to gauge the effectiveness of what is being done or to hold agencies accountable for fulfilling their remit – jointly to protect the public from crime and to work toward ensuring those who did offend were deterred from doing so again. Without a focus on performance, however it is defined or measured, criminal justice agencies would be working in a vacuum with only the vaguest idea of whether they were being successful as the very notion of ‘success’ would have no clear parameters and would, indeed did, remain fluid and uncertain.

The polarities of this argument were brought out very clearly by the two key note speakers at the conference, which are presented here as delivered at the event in June 2008. The speakers were Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work at the University of Bradford, and Sue Hall, Chief Officer of West Yorkshire Probation. The contrast in their perspectives set the scene for the conference and for the articles that follow. Brid Featherstone, outlining the findings from a recent piece of research, spoke about how those on the receiving end of performance-orientated social service provision have felt their opinions to be marginalized, unheard and even discounted by the professionals. At the same time, she notes how those same professionals express resentment and dissatisfaction with a system that requires them to struggle with increased paperwork and complex procedures. Sue Hall argues that the changes introduced by the focus on performance have had a positive effect on probation practice and should be recognised as such. She welcomes the shift away from the highly individualized and potentially ad hoc approach to working with offenders on the grounds that the latter led to piecemeal provision based on personal preferences rather than on a clear and defensible assessment of what was needed. As a result, working with diversity was poorly understood and could lead to disparities and injustices that went unnoticed.

The next article has been collated by one of the editors, Clare Beckett, from material generated in the conference workshops and reflects the views of the various participants on the issues raised during the day. Each workshop focused on a different criminal justice agency – probation, prison and police – and what emerged were some similarities but several radical differences in assumptions and approaches to ‘performance’. It was evident from the discussions that ‘debate and dispute arise over the value of target setting even before the arguments about how it should be done’. The article is structured to present the background and outcomes of each of the workshops separately to allow comparisons to be drawn in the ways in which the different agencies have come to adopt and, more or less, embrace the concept of diversity and its implications for policy, performance and practice. The workshop reports are provided by practitioners, the accompanying discussion by the editor. Both the police and the prison service had the issue brought into sharp relief by a series of high profile cases involving racial assault or murder, which prompted wide-ranging reviews of practice involving clearly defined targets, not all of which were helpful.

The probation workshop considered an initiative aimed at combating racist abuse and attacks by offenders, and the problems encountered not only with the offenders but also with the agency which was slow to recognise the importance of such an initiative and which had no target for performance in this crucial area.

The third paper is also written by a senior practitioner, Simon Mellors of South Yorkshire Police. The issue raised here is how performance targeting can be undermined by organisational and personal practices, to the point that the usefulness or otherwise of the targets becomes undermined. Perhaps the lesson of this paper is that, to some extent, performance targeting is such an inexact science that professional autonomy is still largely untouched.

The remaining three papers have been commissioned specifically for this special edition. The topics addressed reflect themes drawn from the day event. Keith Davies and Pauline Ashworth, both former probation officers now academics, focus on different aspects of the probation service in relation to performance and diversity. The former article highlights the particular problem of time as a key component of probation practice and how it has been re-shaped and re-structured by the imposition of performance targets in a way that 'threatens to displace other practice considerations' including taking proper account of diversity. The latter article considers the effects of the adoption by the probation service of such 'market-driven' concepts as cost-effectiveness, efficiency, measurable outcomes and the like on the nature of the probation service and its work; the author argues that the changes introduced during the 1990s served to lead the service away from offering a 'way back' for offenders into society's mainstream to another arm of government and state control of an already marginalized section of society. Notwithstanding recent initiatives in restorative justice for young offenders, the experience of the vast majority of offenders is of a probation service designed to contain, manage and control their behaviour.

The last article in this collection places the focus again on to offenders. Malcolm Cowburn and Victoria Lavis present the findings of their current research into the effects of the 'performance culture' on prison inmates, in particular those from minority ethnic backgrounds. In the debate entered into by professionals about the implication of performance on their work the poles can perhaps be identified as professional autonomy versus management priorities. This debate fundamentally reflects ways in which officers will meet and offer service to clients, and these effects are easy to ignore.

Perhaps that is where we, as editors, first came in to this debate. We both teach future probation officers, as do the other conference organisers, Maria De Angelis and Cheryl Shackleton. With representatives of the probation service and members of our partner universities, we attempt to ensure that service provision continues to reflect the high standards that have always been present in the probation service. At this time, when the service is facing unprecedented pressure accompanied by swingeing cuts and public and media antipathy, it is more than ever important to be clear about what the job is and why officers continue to do it. Clarity about the purpose of a performance culture could not be timelier.