



PLACEMENT REPORT

DEALING WITH BUDGET CUTS: THE IMPACT, THE REPORT CENTRE AND THE FUTURE

Rowena Pearce

During my final year studying Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies at Plymouth University, I undertook work based learning as one of my modules. This involved an 80 hour placement with the Devon and Cornwall Probation Trust. The Probation Service works with offenders in the community to tackle the causes of their offending behaviour; help them turn their lives around and where possible rehabilitate them back into the community (LPT, 2013). Whilst on placement my initial role was to carry out research on the Report Centre and the Community Engagement Plan for the Trust. However, after negotiation I was given the opportunity to shadow various probation officers. I spent time with magistrates and the crown court team, high risk of harm team, drugs rehabilitation requirement team, approved premises team and the offender management team. As a result I gained an in depth understanding of how Devon and Cornwall Probation Trust functions. Throughout each team it was clear to see from the very beginning that there were many issues surrounding the organisational structure and budget cuts.

The Coalition Government announced plans for budget cuts in 2010, such that the Probation Service will see cuts of up to 25%. One of the only ways NAPO believes the cuts could be achieved is through reducing staff levels drastically (NAPO, 2010). Throughout my placement this was visible within every team. The workloads Probation Officers faced had increased significantly as the numbers of probation officers had decreased. Unmanageable workloads have been a fundamental issue for many years. Probation officers often face a lot of frustration and difficulties when trying to supervise offenders as only 24% of their time is actually spent face-to-face working with offenders, the rest of their time consists of keeping records, attending

meetings and undertaking computer based work (Ramsbotham, 2010). Unmanageable workloads have also led to an increase in sickness levels due to stress and anxiety.

The Probation Service recognises that ever increasing workload is a problem that needs to be addressed. That said, the Service has had a history of adaptation and innovation which enables it to respond to change positively and imaginatively (Ledger, 2010). Whilst on placement I discovered that the Devon and Cornwall Probation Trust had designed a pilot project called the Report Centre. The aim behind this is to overcome some of the issues that have arisen from budget cuts. As workloads are already extremely high, when staff go on leave or are off due to sickness, it is important that offenders are still supervised. It is not feasible for other probation officers to cover such case work nor for the officer to do so on their return. For this reason the report centre allows the offender to still receive supervision. The Report Centre is also used for a variety of other reasons such as offenders who have not yet been allocated to a particular officer on release from prison, offenders that have been released on temporary licence, inductions, transfers and workloads. The Report Centre enables staff to use their time more effectively to balance the demands they face within their job. For example, many probation officers believe that the best way to deal with offenders is on a one-to-one basis. Numerous Probation Officers struggle with their workloads so on many occasions will not have the time to see an offender for very long. Therefore, they could appoint the offender to the Report Centre for one week, resulting in time being freed up for future sessions to be longer and therefore more productive. This is important as offender management requires a dynamic approach towards risk. Constant reassessment of risk, allocation of resources and adjustments to sentence plans should occur (Dominey, 2012).

The future of the Probation Service is uncertain as recent proposals by the Coalition Government could see the Probation Service privatised by 2015. Therefore, private companies and the voluntary sector will take over the rehabilitation of the majority of offenders, as Chris Grayling the Justice Secretary aims to reduce the costs and to also reduce the re-offending rates (Travis, 2013a). If this happens 70% of the Probation Service's core work will go out to tender on Payment by Results principles (NAPO, 2013). Therefore, the probation service will only focus on the high-risk offenders and the provision of information to the courts (Travis, 2013b). Chris Grayling proposes these plans mainly because the re-offending rates are so high for short-term prisoners. It was suggested that this was evidence of Probation's failure;

however, the Probation Service has no statutory responsibility to supervise offenders serving a custody sentence of 12 months or less (Travis, 2013b).

This decision has therefore been surprising as the Probation Service met all of its targets in the financial year 2011/12, and even last year the Probation Service won the British Quality Foundation Gold Award for Excellence, in which the organisation were told that they were probably one of the best organisations to provide these services (NAPO, 2013). Over the years the Probation Service has established an infrastructure with trained and highly skilled staff that have a considerable amount of experience of working successfully with offenders (Ledger, 2010). Consequently, there has been much debate about what implications this change may cause. Many critics oppose privatisation in principle (Teague, 2012), and others believe that the plans are based on a poorly informed understanding of the dynamic nature of risk and believe that it could result in confused and unsafe practice (Dobson, 2012). There could also be many problems with information exchange and inter-agency communications. There are also worries that new plans will lack stability and neglect the interests of those that are most difficult to help (Dominey, 2012). Harry Fletcher, an Assistant General Secretary at NAPO believes that the plan could be chaotic and could in effect compromise public protection. The Probation service is a success story that the government should be building on, not destroying (NAPO, 2013). As a result, the uncertainty of the Probation Service in the future has left staff morale low with much anxiety surrounding what will happen to their jobs and pensions. What I found interesting about undertaking this placement was that it gave me a unique insight into the Probation Service. This enabled me to link the practical experiences with the criminological literature I studied throughout my course, giving me greater understanding and invaluable experience. This has made me realise how much support offenders need to get their lives back on track.

References

LPT. (2013) *London probation Trust*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.london-probation.org.uk/> [Accessed on: 18th October 2013].

NAPO. (2013) *MoJ Statement on the future of Probation*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.napo.org.uk/about/news/news.cfm/newsid/233>. [Accessed on: 18st October 2013].

Ramsbotham, Lord (2010) *House of Lords Debate*, Hansard, 21 December 2010, Cm.1143.

Ledger, J. (2010) 'Rehabilitation Revolution: Will Probation Pay the Price?', *Probation Journal*, 57 (4): 416-422.

Dobson, G. (2012) The problem with privatising probation services, *The Guardian*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/may/22/problem-with-privatising-probation-services> [Accessed on: 1st April 2013]

Dominey, J. (2012) 'A mixed market for probation services: Can lessons from the recent past help shape the near future?', *Probation Journal*, 59(4): 339-354

Teague, M. (2012) 'Privatising criminal justice: A step too far?' In: Helyar-Cardwell V (ed.) *Delivering Justice: The Role of the Public, Private and Voluntary Sectors in Prisons and Probation*. London: Criminal Justice Alliance.

Travis, A. (2013a) Probation service 'revolution' means wholesale privatisation, *The Guardian*, [Online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/jan/09/probation-service-private-firms-grayling> [Accessed on: 1st April 2013]

Travis, A. (2013b) *Grayling admits probation privatisation will not cut reoffending dramatically*, *The Guardian*, [Online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/jan/09/chris-grayling-probation-privatisation-reoffending> [Accessed 11th March 2013].