
The Offender Engagement Programme – rationale and objectives

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The Offender Engagement Programme (OEP) is a three year programme which started in early 2010 with the core purpose of improving the effectiveness of one-to-one engagement between the probation practitioner and the offender in order to reduce reoffending. The hypothesis on which the OEP is based is that the one-to-one relationship between the offender and the practitioner can be a powerful means of changing behaviour and therefore reducing re-offending.

The role of the programme is to bring about long term sustainable benefits: both the wider cultural change required to promote professional discretion and more effective engagement with offenders to reduce reoffending. As well as reducing reoffending, the aim is to increase public confidence in community sentences and make best use of staff time, especially given current financial constraints.

The decision to establish a programme to develop offender engagement was taken for a number of reasons. One was to improve the evidence base about the effectiveness of supervision, and specifically about offender engagement. Research tells us that the supervisory relationship between

the offender and case manager is important in rehabilitating offenders and reducing reoffending. Interventions have been found to be more effective when delivered by staff deploying *core correctional practices*, including working through warm, open and enthusiastic relationships (Dowden and Andrews 2004). There is also evidence relating skilled engagement to lower rates of reconviction in studies carried out in Australia, North America and Canada¹. However, evidence had not been collected before on the quality of engagement and its potential impact.

NOMS also wanted to use the research that was available to improve the effectiveness of one-to-one community supervision. Given the high volume of offenders receiving supervision, it is important to be able to measure the effectiveness of one-to-one engagement with offenders in the community and to use that to inform the commissioning of community-based services for offenders. Supervision of offenders is a feature across jurisdictions, and we hoped our work would have value internationally.

Another aim of the programme is to reduce unnecessary prescription through performance

targets based on the time taken to complete certain tasks and National Standards for probation practice. The greater freedoms are intended to enable practitioners to use their professional discretion and skills required to reduce re-offending. Following a pilot on Professional Judgement (PJP) in Surrey and Sussex Probation Trust, NOMS issued new National Standards and a practice framework in April 2011, which Trusts are currently implementing. Evidence from the PJP pilot showed that staff had more purposeful and better focussed contact with offenders by being able to exercise their professional judgement in deciding how to work with each individual. The work of the OEP supports that purposeful work by strengthening practitioner skills and management support for effective engagement with offenders.

The Programme builds on more recent research, including that on desistance, which suggests that practitioners can help reduce reoffending and prevent future victims by working with offenders on the wider social factors associated with moving away from crime. The desistance research tells us that the reduced criminal activity which is associated with greater maturity comes about through desisters' personal relationships, social networks, and how they see themselves (Maruna 2001).

Early in the life of the programme, we commissioned a review on the implications for NOMS of the desistance literature (McNeill and Weaver 2010). As a whole, this body of literature is helpful in refocusing on the core correctional practices whose importance was recognised by the architects of What Works as touched on above. It provides key insights for practice: the importance of individual relations, both with offender manager and also with other people who can support non-offending choices; this includes intimate partners and parents but potentially others – an aunt or uncle, a teacher or sports coach, an employer or work supervisor. It points to the benefits of a forward looking approach which builds on a person's strengths and resources and which is based on an individualised assessment of where the offender is and what will support him or her in moving away from offending. The aims summarised above gained immediate recognition from Probation Trusts and the academic community, coinciding with renewed interest

amongst probation practitioners and academic researchers in the effectiveness of community supervision. NOMS moved quickly to build on that initial interest by working with probation practitioners and managers to set up OEP pilots across 22 Trusts from Spring 2011; these are currently underway and conclude in Spring 2012.

The OEP team in NOMS is taking the programme forward through a number of integrated projects. The first, covering the research programme, is discussed in the article by Sue Rex and Elaine Ellis in this issue, and benefits from our liaison with a wide range of academics including our research partners, Sheffield University and the Institute of Criminal Policy Research, Birkbeck College and Leicester University.

Another project, developing evidence based practice in offender engagement, is the focus of two pilots. The Skills for Effective Engagement and Development (SEED) pilot is testing out a model of offender engagement and practitioner skills development, bringing together insights from the desistance research with lessons from 'what works'. The Sentence Planning Approaches (SPA) pilot is testing out different tools aimed at making it easier for offenders to get involved with planning what happens on supervision and what will be achieved.

The Reflective Supervision Model pilot is a core part of the project on Enabling Culture Change and is being piloted in eight Trusts, developing middle managers' and senior managers' roles in supporting practitioners' professional development and enabling cultural change. We are building on this work in developing proposals to maintain engagement and continuity of supervision when released prisoners are recalled to prison.

The success of the programme rests on the active participation of probation staff and other stakeholders, and a strong collaborative model has been its key strength. As well as working with Probation Trusts through steering groups to co-ordinate the pilots, we have benefitted enormously from the contribution of reference groups of middle managers and practitioners supported by all but one Trust. We recently established a senior managers' reference group to assist Trusts to incorporate

learning from the OEP into their strategic planning, and this too has proved popular. The wider stakeholder reference group is enthusiastically supported by representatives from the judiciary and magistracy, ex-offenders groups, and staff associations as well as the associations of probation chiefs and chairs of probation boards.

We are making good progress. To note our **key achievements** so far:

- The development of National Standards 2011 provides a framework for offender engagement, promoting a shift away from too great an emphasis on achieving timeliness targets. The new National Standards enable practitioners to use their professional judgement more flexibly to improve outcomes.
- Products from the research programme so far include literature reviews, research bulletins and reports from our research partners. The evaluation of the pilots is well underway and will be reporting during the second half of 2012.
- In SEED (Skills for Effective Engagement and Development) a total of 149 managers and offender managers have been trained, and 74 days of training have been delivered by the OEP team to the eight participating Trusts.
- For SPA (Sentence Planning Approaches) over 500 offenders across seven Trusts are involved in the pilots. The training was delivered independently by Probation Trusts.
- We estimate that by the time these two pilots end, around 4,000 offenders will have been involved.
- For RSM 104 probation managers have been trained in eight Trusts through 26 training days delivered by the OEP team.
- In initial feedback, practitioners and managers have seen the pilots as having a major impact: 80% of practitioners said that the core training for SEED had improved their supervision sessions; around 90% of middle and senior managers said they would be able to use RSM in their practice.
- The OEP and Probation Chiefs Association held a successful Event in November, where Trusts had the opportunity to share their experiences of the OEP approach. Following extremely positive feedback the OEP plans to hold a second event in Spring 2012.

The response to the OEP has been overwhelmingly positive, and we will be working hard over the next year of the programme to respond to, harness and build on the innovation and creativity shown by probation practitioners. Our **key priorities** will be:

- Continuing to support the pilots to successful completion, and refining the material in the light of delivery experience and our lessons learned exercises.
- Embarking on two major initiatives building on pilot work: an integrated OE model for practice, SEEDS (Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision); pilots to improve the engagement of recalled prisoners to secure their safe re-release.
- Taking delivery of and considering the implications of the evaluations – both internal and external.
- Continuing our communications and engagement with stakeholders to demonstrate NOMS' long term commitment to strengthening offender engagement and promoting professional discretion, to improve the quality of practice and reduce reoffending.

NOTES

- ¹ In Australia, pro-social modelling (acting as a positive role model and encouraging and rewarding pro-social statements and actions) was associated with lower rates of breach and reconviction over four years (49% compared with 73% where there was no evidence of pro-social modelling) (Trotter 1996). In Maryland, USA, offenders supervised by officers trained in Proactive Community Supervision supported by a pro-social organisational environment achieved lower re-arrest rates than comparable offenders (30% versus 42% for the comparison group) (Taxman 2008). In Canada, officers trained in STICS (Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision) used relationship building, cognitive techniques and a structured approach to achieve lower reconviction rates (25% compared with just over 40% for other officers) (Bonta et al 2010).

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