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‘What Works’ and the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel: Taking Stock from an Inside Perspective

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1. Introduction and background

This paper provides the first ‘insider’ account of the work of the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel (CSAP) of England and Wales, written from the perspective of a group of academics who were Panel members for, in most cases, nearly a decade. Set up in 1999 as an independent non-departmental public body, CSAP came to occupy an influential position as a central plank of the government’s plan to create and accredit a suite of ‘gold standard’ interventions for adult¹ offenders which would significantly reduce reconviction rates. For a programme to achieve accreditation, its designers had to meet a set of highly demanding criteria, including satisfying the Panel that it was based on sound theoretical principles and providing empirical evidence of its capacity to reduce re-offending. Prisons and probation areas were set annual completion targets for accredited programmes, tied to financial incentives, with the result that many interventions which did not seek or achieve accreditation were discontinued by managers in favour of those that had. The Panel’s decisions therefore played a significant part in shaping a new landscape of rehabilitative work with convicted offenders across England and Wales.

In 2008, CSAP’s status changed to that of an advisory non-statutory body within the Ministry of Justice, and at the same time it experienced a significant turnover in membership. This does not necessarily mean that the Panel’s influence has waned, or that nature of its work will change greatly in practice, but the transition provides an opportune time to reflect broadly on the work of the former independent Panel, and to share views and experiences from which general lessons may be drawn and which may inform the work of other accreditation bodies, both in the UK and elsewhere.

The origins of CSAP lie in two small expert panels set up in the mid-1990s to accredit rehabilitative programmes for prisoners. In 1999, these were replaced by a newly constituted non-departmental public body, initially known as the Joint Prison/Probation Accreditation Panel but later renamed as CSAP, to which members were appointed on the basis of open competition, and whose remit was expanded to include programmes delivered in the community. It had an appointed chair, Sir Duncan Nichol, until 2005, after which Professor Friedrich Lösel was promoted from the membership to the role of acting chairman. Its membership varied over time, but was usually composed of around twelve

¹ Following an evaluation of cognitive behavioural programmes delivered to offenders under 18 (Feilzer *et al.* 2004), the Youth Justice Board decided not to go down the accredited programmes route, partly because they were considered unsuitable for the numerous young offenders with limited literacy skills, and partly out of concern that too high a proportion of available resources might be expended on programmes to the detriment of other interventions (Roberts 2004; Stephenson *et al.* 2007).

appointed members (including several from overseas) most of whom had research-based and/or clinical expertise in the treatment of offenders, together with representatives from policy units in the Home Office (later Ministry of Justice), prisons and probation.

The establishment and growth of such a body can be understood partly in terms of the increasing emphasis placed by governments since the 1980s on the need to demonstrate ‘effectiveness’ and ‘value for money’ in the public sector and, in particular, on the use of robust evidence in decision-making about the allocation of resources, presented in terms such as implementing ‘evidence based policy’ or pursuing ‘what works’. As such, it was strongly in tune with New Labour’s ‘modernisation’ agenda, which built on the New Public Management policies pursued under the previous Conservative governments (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Senior et al 2007), as well as with the aims of the newly launched Crime Reduction Programme (CRP), of which the work of the Panel and related research activities formed a part (Hough 2004; Maguire 2004; Hollin *et al* 2004).² At the same time, the emergence of CSAP signalled a revitalisation of government interest in rehabilitative work with offenders. A core underpinning assumption of the work of the Panel has always been that high quality interventions, delivered to a high standard, should have a significant impact on the reconviction rates of offenders who have received them (in comparison with both their own predicted reconviction rates and the reconviction rates of comparison groups who have not received them). This assumption was not widely espoused during the 1980s and early 1990s, when the rhetoric of ‘nothing works’ and just-deserts punishment remained strong, and politicians shied away from serious investment in rehabilitative services. The rapid change of heart owed much to the skilful dissemination to policy-makers, by academics and practitioners strongly committed new ways of working with offenders, of encouraging research findings from North America which suggested that properly designed programmes – especially those based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) - could reduce reconviction rates by up to 15 per cent (see, for example, Andrews *et al.* 1990; Lipsey 1992; Lösel 1993; Lipsey and Chapman 2001; MacKenzie 2006; Raynor 2007).³

A key message from this and subsequent research has been that the quality of both the *design* and the *delivery* of programmes makes a significant difference to outcomes (McGuire 1995, 2002; Dowden and Andrews 2004). In practice, however, most attention has been paid to design issues, principally through the mechanism of accreditation. Since the mid 1990s, accreditation panels have been established not only in England and Wales, but in several other countries including Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden (by 2008, there were nine such panels in existence).⁴ Their

² The Crime Reduction Programme, with a total budget of £400 million between 1999 and 2004, funded both the implementation and the evaluation of numerous projects to reduce crime or offending, with the overall aim of identifying and implementing ‘what works’ in all the main areas of criminal justice and the penal system.

³ Much of the research literature referred to was based on meta-analyses of the results of a number of separate evaluations.

⁴ In 2008, the first international meeting of accreditation panels took place in Den Haag.

main function has been to assess programme manuals and other documentation against a set of formal criteria, and to decide whether the programme in question reaches an overall standard that merits accreditation as an intervention that is likely to ‘work’ in terms of reducing re-offending. Most panels have had less direct involvement in assuring the quality of delivery, although some have responsibility for ‘site accreditation’ – ie certifying particular prisons or probation areas as having reached a stipulated level of competence in delivering programmes. In England and Wales, quality assurance of programme delivery has been undertaken through a variety of ‘audit’ processes managed by departments within the Ministry of Justice (and formerly the Home Office and HM Inspectorate of Probation), the role of CSAP being limited to approving the audit tools and receiving annual reports. Moreover, as will be discussed later, there have been major problems in auditing programme delivery in community settings.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the concept of accreditation, drawing upon literature about similar bodies in other areas of social policy. It then provides a short account of CSAP’s main working practices, commenting particularly on the accreditation criteria and audit procedures. This is followed by a discussion of the changing policy environment in which the Panel has operated and some of the main challenges and tensions this has created around the role and activities of the Panel. In particular, we look at members’ efforts to shift the emphasis of its work in the direction of broader and more strategic contributions to the ‘what works’ agenda, which resulted in some expansion of CSAP’s advisory role and an important (though short-lived) amendment to its remit, which temporarily broadened the forms of interventions which could be accredited. The paper concludes with some thoughts about the future.

2. General Issues of Accreditation

Although the accreditation of correctional programmes is a highly specialised activity, it shares many common issues with accreditation in larger fields such as education, professional training, social welfare, and health care. It is helpful to consider some of these more general issues before addressing specific experiences within CSAP.

In principle, the accreditation of social interventions is analogous to the establishment of norms and quality standards in engineering and technology. Similar to these fields, social interventions are treated as replicable techniques which can be developed, evaluated and certified according to defined quality standards. This does not mean that they should be delivered in a rigidly prescribed and mechanical fashion – far from it, as ‘responsivity’ (ie sensitivity to individual learning styles) is one of the core principles of effective delivery. However, by encouraging the development of logically sequenced programmes which have a clear underlying purpose and use techniques that have been demonstrated to be effective, a policy of accreditation aims to improve the chances of interventions

achieving their prescribed goals. It not only raises standards of design, but provides information, orientation and guidance for practice and is an important instrument for resource allocation.

A number of basic principles are generally agreed in the literature (see for example, American Psychological Association 1996; Rossi *et al.* 2004; Heywood 2007). The criteria for accreditation should be based on evidence rather than opinions and values, although values can play a role with regard to issues such as consent, fairness, or diversity. To reach its aims, accreditation requires a precise definition of 'evidence-based' and a set of clear quality standards. Systematic procedures for the application of the agreed criteria should be developed and implemented. The people who form the accreditation body should not only be experts in the respective field, but also be neutral and independent from other stakeholders. Accreditation should be characterised by openness, transparency and fairness with regard to both processes and decisions. Importantly, too, to ensure the quality of programmes after accreditation, systematic procedures of monitoring, auditing, outcome evaluation and other tools of quality management should be built into the initial design (though, as discussed later, it is not always clear to what extent an accreditation body should – or is in practice able to – oversee the actual implementation of these procedures).

Although there is widespread agreement about the strengths of accreditation, there are also typical problems – all of which have been experienced to some extent during the life of CSAP. First of all, it is unlikely to meet with universal approval among those affected by it. There can sometimes be considerable disagreement about the accreditation criteria adopted, and those who disagree may become resistant or attempt to undermine the process. There is a risk of resentment being generated by the significantly increased workload that accreditation can create for programme developers and practitioners: for example, manuals have to be produced, implementation has to be monitored and outcomes have to be evaluated. And although investment in the process may be highly rewarding for those whose programmes are accredited, it may cause further opposition and loss of morale among those whose applications fail.

Secondly, although accreditation should be based on empirical evidence, that available is often far from perfect. As is clear from the systematic reviews of evidence produced by the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations⁵, there are often very few high-quality evaluation studies on a specific issue. This leaves accreditation with relatively weak knowledge and blind spots. The less well-replicated the evidence base is, the more doubts will be cast on an accreditation process that is based on it. Moreover, as in other areas of programme implementation, accredited correctional programmes may be confronted with discrepancies between the outcomes of well-designed and researcher-monitored

⁵ The Cochrane Library stores a database of reviews of evidence on the effectiveness of healthcare interventions (<http://www.cochrane.org/reviews/clibintro.htm>), and the Campbell Collaboration performs a similar function in relation to education, crime and justice, and social welfare (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/library.php>).

demonstration projects and those of programmes implemented in routine practice: in many cases, the former are more successful than the latter (Lipsey 1999; Lipsey & Landenberger 2006; Lösel & Schmucker 2007). Similarly, as accreditation focuses on the most reproducible parts of interventions it may not sufficiently recognise important factors beyond the content of psychosocial programmes. For example, evidence on psychotherapy in general shows that relationship and interactional factors are at least as relevant for the outcome as the type and design of the programme (Orlinsky *et al.* 1994). However, such individual factors are much less standardised and reproducible than the programme content.

Even when an accreditation policy is relatively successful in its early days, problems can arise later. For example, stakeholders may misuse accreditation as a substitute for further empirical evaluation of the respective programme. A lack of sound evaluation and monitoring may lead to a reduction in quality over time (Weiss and Petrosino, 2007). Importantly, too, if accredited programmes remain in place without updated evidence, accreditation may become an obstacle to innovation and creativity in problem solving. Therefore, accreditation should not become too static but should be open to new situations, knowledge and ideas. And finally, even a highly successful accreditation system can lose its impact and standing over time due to changes in political or policy fashion or, for example, to the arrival of new key decision makers who are less in favour of such approaches than their predecessors. Consequently, from a more general perspective, any implementation of an accreditation process should be accompanied by realistic expectations from the beginning. It is not the one and only solution for improving social interventions, but, we would argue, it can make an important contribution to more rational and effective policy-making.

3. Core working practices

We now move to a more concrete discussion of the working practices of the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel as they developed after 1999. The Panel's functions were originally defined as, in brief:

- Recommending programme design and delivery criteria
- Accrediting individual programme designs
- Authorising procedures for audit of programme delivery
- Authorising an annual assessment of quality of actual programme delivery
- Advising on curriculum development
- Advising on related matters, especially in relation to the assessment of risk and need
- Assisting cultural change to effective practice in prisons and probation
- Accounting for its work to the Home Secretary.

In practice, the core function has always remained the accreditation of individual programme designs, and this will be the main focus of this section. We also comment briefly on the auditing of programme delivery, which the Panel has overseen on a routine basis since 1999, as well as issues around ‘change control’ and re-accreditation.

Accreditation criteria and scoring

The accreditation criteria used by the Panel have changed relatively little over time. They are based substantially on the criteria developed by the original Prison Service panels in the late 1990s, which reflected the main principles of effective interventions suggested by the results of meta-analyses and articulated by writers such as Andrews et al (1990) and McGuire (1995, 2002). These strongly favoured cognitive behavioural methods, which had emerged as the most effective in most of the North American studies, but the Panel’s experience was that the criteria could fairly easily be adapted to the assessment of interventions based on quite different principles (such as therapeutic communities or twelve step drug programmes) and members generally agreed that major changes were unnecessary. Indeed, several of the accreditation panels set up in other European countries have based their own criteria on the CSAP list, adapting them only in minor ways. The version in use by CSAP at the time of writing contains ten accreditation criteria, as follows:

1. **Clear model of change:** There should be an explicit model to explain how the programme is intended to bring about relevant change in offenders;
2. **Selection of offenders:** The types of offender for whom the programme is intended and the methods to select them should be specified.
3. **Targeting a range of dynamic risk factors:** It should be described how the programme addresses the dynamic risk factors associated with re-offending.
4. **Effective methods:** Evidence should be provided to show that the treatment methods used are likely to have an impact on the targeted risk factors.
5. **Skills oriented:** It should be shown how the programme will facilitate the learning of skills that will assist participants to avoid criminal activity;
6. **Intensity, sequencing and duration:** The frequency and number of treatment sessions should be matched to the degree of treatment needs typical for most participants in the programme;
7. **Engagement and Motivation:** The programme should be structured to maximise the engagement of participants and sustain their motivation;
8. **Continuity of programmes and services:** There should be clear links between the programme and the overall management of the offender both during a prison sentence and in the context of community supervision;
9. **Maintaining integrity:** There should be in-built mechanisms which monitor operations and enable service delivery to be adjusted where necessary.

10. Ongoing evaluation: There should be an outline of how a programme will be evaluated so that its effectiveness can be analysed. In the long-term this means a reconviction study with the relevant comparison data.

When programme developers submit a programme for accreditation (as opposed to a preliminary submission for advice only), they normally include a Theory Manual, Programme Manual, Assessment and Evaluation Manual, Training Manual and Management Manual. The developers are invited to attend a subpanel meeting to answer questions and discuss their submission (site visits, though quite common in some other countries with accreditation panels, have been rare where CSAP is concerned). The Panel then considers the submission in private. Each criterion is scored as fully met, partially met or not met (2, 1 and 0 points, respectively). A number of criteria (most importantly, the model of change) are identified as mandatory: that is, the programme cannot be accredited if they do not score a full two points. In order to be fully accredited, the programme must achieve a total of at least 18 points. If scoring 16-17, it may be ‘recognised’ or provisionally accredited for a limited period (usually 12 months), with a view to full accreditation after specified changes have been made.

As at April 2008, when CSAP ceased to be an independent non-departmental public body, a total of 39 programmes had been accredited, provisionally accredited or recognised by the Panel (CSAP 2008).⁶ They fell into the following categories:

- 6 general offending behaviour programmes
- 7 violence programmes
- 6 sex offender programmes
- 17 substance misuse programmes (including 4 specifically for alcohol misuse and 3 – one of them for women only - based on therapeutic communities)
- 1 democratic therapeutic community core module
- 2 motivational programmes (one exclusively for women)

Most of these programmes have as yet been accredited for use either only in custody or only in the community – a legacy of the separate prison and probation ‘What Works’ units in the Home Office, which in most cases developed or sponsored programmes separately. However, as the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has become established, such units have merged and more joint working has developed, leading to a policy of, wherever possible, designing programmes with a view to accreditation for delivery in either context.

⁶ Much of the accreditation activity in the following year concerned adaptations of prison programmes for use in the community and *vice-versa*, as well as re-accreditation of older programmes, but a small number of new programmes were provisionally or fully accredited, notably the Thinking Skills Programme developed by NOMS for use on a large scale in both custody and community, and a new kind of residential community programme developed by a third sector provider (see Ministry of Justice, 2009).

Subpanel working and the collective voice

Throughout the life of the Panel, individual programmes have been assessed by subpanels of four or five members. As with many other decision-making bodies which use subpanel systems and meet relatively rarely as a full group (for example, the Parole Board), this carries risks in relation to consistency of policy and practice. In the first years of its life, when the whole Panel met over several days in one residential location, subpanel chairs reported back to plenary meetings, providing all members with a window on the working of different groups and encouraging shared standards and ‘corporate ownership’ of decisions. However, from around 2003, largely for financial reasons, the Panel virtually ceased meeting as a whole group and subpanels began to meet (usually for one day) in isolation to deal with a specific programme. These separate meetings of subpanels had the advantages of providing more time for reading the manuals and intensive discussions with programme developers, but such a fragmented working practice also contained the potential for ‘drift’ – although it is not clear to what extent this actually occurred.⁷

As well as increasing the risk of inconsistency in decision-making, this shift in practice reduced the ability of CSAP to speak with a ‘collective voice’. In the early years, plenary meetings were often attended by senior policy-makers, and the Panel was able to convey opinions about how best to take forward the ‘what works’ agenda, what kinds of programmes should be developed, what kinds of research were needed, and so on. This not only gave CSAP the opportunity to influence policy, but kept it on the ‘radar’ of senior civil servants and ministers as a key player in the correctional field. While it never lost this role entirely, the reduction of plenary meetings made it more difficult to have any impact beyond individual decisions on programme accreditation. However, recent experience suggests that the Panel’s new advisory role – combined with a limited revival of plenary meetings – may lead to wider use being made of the Panel’s knowledge and expertise.

Audit

As mentioned earlier, the Panel has always been concerned that accreditation of programme design alone is no guarantee of effectiveness: unless interventions are delivered as designed and in a mindful and responsive style, much of the value of even the best designed programme is likely to be lost. Furthermore, it is widely recognised in the literature that the effectiveness of individual programmes – however well run by the facilitators in the ‘classroom’ - can be greatly enhanced or reduced by the quality of the environment in which they are delivered, the support accorded to programmes teams by

⁷ There was relatively little movement of personnel between some of the subpanels because, for example, sex offender or substance misuse experts tended to sit on all those dealing with programmes in their own specialist area and hence to create their own distinctive approaches and standards. Where general offending programmes were concerned, by contrast, developers sometimes complained that advice given by one subpanel was later contradicted by another consisting of different individuals.

senior management, the quality of offender selection, and the degree of preparation, support and follow up provided to participants. The critical mechanism in England and Wales for monitoring all the above factors is that of *audit*. However, the auditing systems around programmes have experienced a number of difficulties which have reduced their impact.

The official remit of the independent Panel in relation to audit entailed:

- Authorising procedures for audit of programme delivery; and
- Authorising an annual assessment of quality of actual programme delivery.

The main underlying aims were to ensure that senior managers were supplying the necessary resources to run programmes properly; that programme and treatment managers were adequately supervising delivery and supporting staff; and that facilitators were maintaining programme ‘integrity’ and avoiding ‘drift’. Early on in the life of the Panel, prison audits were managed by the Home Office Offending Behaviour Programmes Unit, using a combination of psychologists (who assessed quality of delivery, principally through video monitoring of facilitators running sessions) and seconded prison governors (who focused on management issues), while audits of programmes delivered in the community were carried out by members of HM Inspectorate of Probation. In both cases, audit instruments were designed in consultation with Panel members, and marks were awarded to sites under headings such as ‘institutional support’, ‘committed leadership’, ‘programme management’ and ‘quality of programme delivery’. In addition, the prison audits included a section headed ‘continuity and resettlement’ and the probation audits a section headed ‘case management responsibilities’, thereby showing recognition of the importance of assessment, selection, preparation, support and follow-up to the overall impact of programmes. The results of the audits were reported to CSAP subpanels on an annual basis, where they were scrutinised and approved. In some cases (principally sex offender programmes), members with particular expertise became more directly involved in the assessment of raw material such as facilitators’ reports and ‘homework’ produced by offenders.

There is little doubt that, especially in the early days, the programme audits made some important contributions to the whole ‘what works’ enterprise, in particular by regularly pressing senior managers to resource programmes adequately and by firmly repeating messages to practitioners at all levels about the importance of high quality delivery. However, in the probation context, these benefits disappeared in 2003, when HM Inspectorate of Probation suddenly withdrew from the process, taking the view that programme auditing was a key managerial function which was the proper responsibility of the newly established National Probation Directorate. Although it undertook some exercises in self-audit, the probation service subsequently lacked any systematic external auditing of programmes except as part of general inspections. This was a serious blow, not least because the Inspectorate’s audits had been widely praised as practitioner-friendly, constructive and imaginative, and had been based on a clear set of standards developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. It also

brought to a halt work which was underway at the time to bring probation and prison audits closer together, each learning from the best elements of the other system (although the prison system did later develop its own set of standards for programme delivery, based substantially on the original probation standards).

By contrast, annual prison programme audits continued to be funded generously. Good audit scores translated into resources and support to run programmes the following year, so most prison managers were strongly focused on meeting as many as possible of the formal criteria set out in the (very transparent) audit documents. While this had obvious advantages, at the same time it led to concerns among Panel members that a 'tick box' culture was developing in which the central focus was on 'process' compliance, rather than on quality or on considerations such as how programmes were experienced by offenders. It was often argued that the audit document included too many items on which it was relatively easy to score maximum points, resulting in a high average score even if some points were dropped on more important items. Indeed, around two-thirds of sites regularly achieved a rounded-up score of 100%. While pleasing for those involved, this did little to distinguish between sites, and could lead to complacency when in fact there were some significant hidden shortcomings. An obvious example of this was in the area of 'continuity and resettlement': in reality, the learning and other benefits offenders had gained from programmes were often not consolidated and followed up as they should be, but there were sufficient readily achievable marks in the relevant section for this not to affect the total score.

In 2007, an internal review of audit was set up, and some new approaches were recommended, including the design of common audit documents for previously separate types of programme (eg drugs and cognitive skills) and for both prison and community sites, as well as a greater focus on quality-related issues. The latter, now clearly distinguished from compliance issues and evaluated in a broader, more judgement-based and outcome-focused fashion, include assessment, staff training and development, adherence to programme aims (style and content), the measurement of impact (responsivity and evidence of change in offenders), and effective communication of outcomes. The recommendation is for quality to be assessed not in terms of average marks, but as 'exceeded', 'achieved', 'almost achieved' or 'failed', with incentives such as exemption from the next year's compliance audit for those achieving the 'exceeded' rating. While these changes are very welcome, at the time of writing it is still unclear who will in the future be responsible for programme audits in prisons, probation, or both - or, indeed, whether programme audits will be conducted separately from broader audits or inspections of interventions and/or management processes. Settling these issues in a manner which produces an authoritative, respected and constructive audit process across all prison and probation programmes, is highly important to the future effectiveness of structured interventions within the correctional system.

Change control and re-accreditation

Closely linked with audit issues are those of 'change control'. This has two rather different aspects. On the one hand, it involves halting excessive 'drift' as delivery strays from what was originally intended. This may be the result of conscious or unconscious modifications brought about by those delivering the programmes. The aim is for undesirable programme drift to be picked up by audit and, where necessary, corrected. On the other hand, change may be positive and planned, arising from the lessons of new evidence, or from feedback from auditors or treatment managers about what does and does not work well in practice. Various change control mechanisms were put in place, the general intention being that small changes would be implemented by the Services without recourse to CSAP, while more substantial modifications to programmes would come back to the Panel for approval, with reasons and evidence for the change provided.

In practice, very few proposals for modifications to programmes were brought to the independent Panel over the years. More importantly, no programmes came back to the Panel for 're-accreditation', despite a general understanding that this should happen with all programmes after about five years in order to ensure that they are refreshed in the light of new knowledge or evaluation evidence. However, a recent Ministry of Justice policy decision that all programmes should be capable of being delivered in both prison and the community has brought these issues into focus and led to closer scrutiny of older programmes. All programmes currently accredited for use by either the prison or probation service have had to be reviewed to determine whether they could simply be handed over to the other without alteration, or whether modifications are required. Obvious considerations are whether additional measures to manage risk are needed when treatment moves from prison to the community, and whether aspects of programmes requiring 'practice' or exposure to specific experiences can be achieved in prison. Although initially uncomfortable with the notion of 'one size fits all', the Panel has recognised the potential benefits of the policy in terms of joint training, and of allowing movement of programme staff between prison and the community, and in practice has not encountered major problems in agreeing to modifications to allow delivery in either context. Perhaps more important, the exercise has led to the introduction of a policy whereby the Panel will review formally all programmes after a period of five years, with the possibility of de-accreditation if their methods have become outdated, they have not been delivered to an adequate standard, or they have failed to demonstrate any impact.

When this review occurs, however, the Panel is likely to come up against one of the key problems which will be discussed in the following section – a continuing lack of robust evaluation of many of the programmes that have been accredited.

4. The Panel in a changing policy environment: challenges, tensions and dilemmas

We now move from the internal working practices of the Panel to a discussion of broader issues and developments which have had challenging implications for the work of the Panel, and/or indeed for the ‘What Works’ movement as a whole. Some have affected the quality of implementation of programmes, others have caused dilemmas for the Panel in terms of compromising its high standards, and some have created scepticism about the possibility of delivering significant reductions in re-offending. They are discussed under six subheadings: targets and the pressure to ‘roll out’; disappointing research results and a dip in political enthusiasm; accreditation and ‘integrated systems’; disruption in the probation service and the creation of NOMS; the growth in the prison population; and the decline in evaluation.

Targets and the imperative to ‘roll out’

A ubiquitous feature of New Labour’s modernisation programme was the creation of ‘targets’, in most cases tied to financial incentives. To accelerate the implementation of programmes in the community, the Probation Service was set the extremely challenging target of 30,000 completions of accredited programmes by 2004. This implied an extraordinarily rapid development and roll-out process in a Service which, by comparison with the Prison Service, had little experience of programmes and very few psychologists or other staff with relevant experience. (Substantial expansion and roll-out was also under way in the prisons, but against a background of more experience and more established expertise.) The pressure on Probation staff to meet these targets inevitably led to inappropriate referrals and poor standards of delivery in some areas. It also encountered strong resistance from staff, to the extent that the probation officers’ union was for a time officially opposed to accredited programmes (NAPO 2001), as well as generating academic criticisms of ‘programme fetishism’ and concerns that the Probation Service was adopting a highly risky strategy by putting all its eggs into the programmes basket (see, for example, Mair 2000, 2004).

Such targets also produced dilemmas for CSAP, in particular balancing their commitment to high standards of evidence with recognition of the Probation Service’s urgent need for sufficient numbers of accredited programmes to put offenders through. Although some panel members were uncomfortable with the speed of the process, a range of credible programmes was accredited in time to assist probation chiefs in their quest. In many cases, however, programmes were accredited on the basis of general principles of ‘what works’ and without strong evidence that they were effective in the daily practice of the prison and probation services in England and Wales. Typically, there had not yet been an opportunity for evaluation with large enough numbers of people passing through, or evidence was available only from demonstration projects in other contexts or jurisdictions. In such cases accreditation was often provisional, or granted with a proviso or strong advice that a proper evaluation should be carried out.

Disappointing research results and a dip in political enthusiasm

The early work of the Panel was favourably regarded by policy-makers and politicians, particularly when preliminary evidence was published indicating that the programmes it had accredited were helping to reduce reconviction rates. The first attempt to evaluate the impact of general offending behaviour programmes in the prisons produced encouraging results (Friendship *et al.* 2002), while an evaluation of the Panel itself carried out for the Home Office by the Cambridge Institute of Criminology produced broadly positive conclusions about the Panel's processes, reputation and impact (Rex *et al.* 2003).

However, in 2003, two further evaluations of prison-based cognitive-behavioural general offending programmes (Falshaw *et al.* 2003; Cann *et al.* 2003) appeared to contradict the conclusions of the first. One of these found no significant differences between programme participants and a comparison group (though, more positively, both groups had been reconvicted at a lower level than predicted), while the other found some differences in favour of programme completers only. Soon afterwards, early evaluations of community-based programmes also produced results that were, at best, mixed (see Hollin *et al.*, 2004; Harper & Chitty, 2005).⁸ The Panel, as a central plank of the government's strategy to reducing re-offending, could not entirely escape the consequences of official suspicions that 'What Works' was not working as expected. Although international research continued to be broadly supportive of the principles which informed the Panel's work (for example, Allen *et al.* 2001; Aos *et al.* 2001; Lipton *et al.* 2002; McGuire 2002; Wilson *et al.* 2005; Davis *et al.* 2008), officials were not in a position to report the levels of success that politicians had been led to expect. Consequently, even while the generally positive Cambridge evaluation of CSAP was being prepared for publication, an internal Home Office review raised serious questions about the future of the Panel.

Accreditation and 'integrated systems'

Partly in response to the disappointing research results, but also on both theoretical and evidential grounds, several Panel members began to argue more forcibly that the application of accreditation processes to individual programmes alone was insufficient to bring about a significant reduction in reconviction rates. One of the messages from the original 'What Works' research, it was pointed out, had been that cognitive behavioural programmes are not a single 'magic bullet': they are one element (albeit an extremely important one) of what can be a complex bundle of interventions experienced by offenders sent to prison or placed on probation. However well a programme is delivered, if it is not combined with effective offender management, or is not complemented with appropriate referrals to other services, much of its impact can be lost. This led to a proposal, briefly accepted by the Home

⁸ As discussed later, it should however be noted that more recent results of the impact of community-based programmes have been much more encouraging (see Hollis, 2007).

Office in 2003-4, that the Panel should be able to accredit 'integrated systems' (or 'sub-systems', as some preferred to envisage them) as well as programmes. The Panel's terms of reference and the accreditation criteria were altered accordingly. A number of multi-pronged interventions were considered as candidates for development into accreditable packages, including new approaches to resettlement and new ways of running Approved Premises. In each case, it was argued, the 'system' could be assessed in similar fashion to programmes, including whether it was built around a credible and evidence-based model of change, particular attention being paid to the need for its components to blend together to form a coherent and managed whole. This was reflected in criterion 7 of the integrated systems criteria, headed *Planning and Integration*: 'Systems should ensure that the different elements of intervention are integrated within a case management, supervision, or sentence plan'.

In the end, only one 'integrated system', Enhanced Community Punishment (ECP), which entailed the addition of explicitly rehabilitative elements such as skills learning and pro-social modelling to standard community punishment, went through the whole process and was accredited before the Home Office decided to abandon the idea of accredited systems. This seems to have been partly on the grounds that it was both too difficult and too expensive to ensure that every element of a complex system was implemented to a standard commensurate with those applied to individual programmes. There may also have been concerns that the Panel was straying too far into policy and practice areas which were regarded as beyond its boundaries. Importantly, too, most integrated systems would cross the new divide between 'offender management' and 'interventions', which (as described later) accompanied the introduction of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), raising major questions about who would control and monitor their delivery. ECP, which was more self-contained and 'programme-like' than the other examples given, was implemented fairly successfully in a number of areas, but later fell victim to other forces in the criminal justice system, including both a tightening of resources and a shift in policy aimed at making community punishment more overtly punitive, including renaming it 'unpaid work' (and later, 'community payback').

The 'integrated systems' interlude can be seen as part of a wider and ongoing debate within the Panel about the effectiveness of interventions, and in particular the need to pay serious attention to the context in which programmes are implemented and the skills of those working with offenders outside formal group sessions (see, for example, Gendreau et al. 1999; Bernfeld et al. 2001; Dowden and Andrews 2004; Maguire and Raynor 2006). This includes the need for skilful preparatory work (particularly around motivation) before they attend the programme, support while they are attending, and work afterwards to reinforce what they have learned, as well as to help them find opportunities to make productive use of newly acquired skills and pro-social attitudes. The key role here is played by offender managers, who should supply the essential elements of personal support, continuity, planning, and referral to other services and interventions to complement attendance at a programme.

It should be emphasised that this was already recognised to some extent in the accreditation criteria: 'continuity of programmes and services' had been included as a criterion since the beginning. However, it remained a recurrent concern among Panel members that neither of these criteria was paid as much attention in practice as is merited by their importance to outcomes.

It remains to be seen whether the reformulation of the Panel in 2008 as an internal advisory body will lead to a renewed expansion of its sphere of influence, moving beyond accreditation of the content of programme sessions into the provision of advice based on a more holistic view of rehabilitative interventions, including attention to the quality and effectiveness of offender management and other 'wrap around' practices and services.

Disruption in the probation service and the creation of NOMS

As mentioned above, early in the life of the Panel, the Probation Service was set extremely challenging targets for programme completions. This came at a time when it was still in the throes of a major reorganisation following the creation of a unified National Probation Service in 2001, which continued to cause significant disruption at area and local level. It rapidly became clear that many probation areas were falling far short of their targets and furthermore that the majority of offenders originally recommended or selected to attend programmes either did not start or did not complete them. To make matters worse, the implementation of the 'Pathfinder' programmes which were intended to pioneer the 'What Works' developments in the community was badly flawed, and the very high drop-out rates made it difficult for evaluators to determine whether the programmes had had any effect on reconviction (Hollin et al. 2004). Implementation problems included unrealistic targets; the absence of comprehensive data on offenders' needs; selection of offenders which did not conform to programme guidelines; unreliable collection of monitoring and evaluation data; variations in staff commitment; and insufficient or inconsistent provision of resources and support resulting from a process of centrally-driven, top-down change (Raynor 2004; Goggin and Gendreau 2006). Probation managers were anxious to press ahead with rapid change in a Service which was perceived as being at risk unless it achieved a step-change in effectiveness, but hindsight suggests that some of this pressure and sense of urgency was self-defeating.

At the end of 2003, partly (but by no means entirely) driven by concerns about the perceived failings of the National Probation Service, another set of potentially disruptive changes suddenly loomed over the horizon. Patrick (later Lord) Carter had been commissioned by the government to carry out a review of the effectiveness of correctional services in reducing re-offending, and produced a radical report which was very quickly accepted by Government (Carter 2003; Home Office 2004). This led within a few months to the creation of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and a further series of organisational changes which have continued at frequent intervals ever since, most of

them aimed at 'joining up' prison and probation structures and processes (Hough *et al.* 2005; Maguire and Raynor, in press).

A key message from Carter was the need for a coordinated system of 'end to end' offender management, especially for offenders sent to prison. This was broadly welcomed by CSAP members, who were well aware of evidence on the importance of continuity of relationships and services 'through the gate' and of skilled and responsive case management and supervision, as essential support for programmes (see, for example, Dowden and Andrews 2004; Raynor and Maguire 2005). In addition, the closer alignment of prison and probation offered the potential for new opportunities to 'join up' aspects of programme delivery (through, for example, joint training and exchanges of staff), to devise a joint audit process, and to undertake research around 'through the gate' services linked to programmes. However, Carter's report also contained some controversial proposals that had far-reaching implications for the implementation of What Works initiatives, especially in the community. In particular, it reflected a belief, intrinsic to the government's general policy of 'modernisation' (Senior *et al.*, 2007), that one of the most effective ways to improve public services was to open them up to competition and market forces: a principle referred to by Carter and in subsequent debates as 'contestability'. Partly (though again not entirely) in order to produce clearer 'packages' of services that could eventually be put out to tender, the work of the Probation Service was divided into two distinct categories – 'offender management' and 'interventions' – and staff and offices across the country were radically reorganised to reflect the new policy. This led to a further period of organisational disruption, at a time when budgets were beginning to tighten and caseloads were rising. It also ran the risk that work with offenders would in practice become more fragmented, negating some of the gains achieved through 'end-to-end' offender management (Raynor and Maguire, 2005).

The growth in the prison population

While most of the difficulties above have afflicted programmes delivered in the community, it is also important to draw attention to what has increasingly become a major obstacle to maintaining the quality of programme delivery in prisons at the high standard that it has generally achieved. This is the continuously rising prison population, which now stands at well over 80,000, around double the population in 1990. This not only causes practical difficulties within individual prisons, but eats up resources that might otherwise have been spent on rehabilitative interventions (resources, of course, which are likely to shrink further due to the economic recession). It is significant that Lord Carter's latest report (Carter 2007) is no longer about reducing re-offending, but about how to accommodate projected future rises in the prison population. Of course, advocates of continued strong investment in programmes would argue that the two issues are closely linked, because effective correctional interventions can contribute to a decrease in the prison population.

Limitations in the research base

Finally, a problem that has increasingly raised concern among Panel members is a fall in the amount of research undertaken to evaluate the effectiveness of accredited programmes in reducing re-offending. This appears to be part of a wider decrease in resources allocated to research since the high point of the enthusiasm for ‘evidence based policy’ which gave rise to the Crime Reduction Programme at the turn of the century (Maguire 2004). In the early days of the CRP, it was stipulated that evaluation should be built into all new projects. Similarly, it was expected that every programme brought to CSAP would produce evidence of its effectiveness or, at least, that an evaluation plan would be approved at the point of accreditation and implemented later. In practice, this has often not happened: many accredited programmes have not been evaluated, and as their resources have shrunk and other demands arisen, government research teams have afforded lower priority to meeting the Panel’s immediate needs.⁹

In addition to the squeeze on research resources, the reductions in programme evaluation stemmed partly from a view that held sway for a period among government research managers that results could not be relied upon unless they were based on studies using the so-called ‘gold standard’ of randomised controlled trials (see Harper and Chitty, 2005). An emphasis on the highest methodological standards is of course positive in principle, but can be counterproductive if it is applied too rigidly. Although randomised trials have clear strengths and should also be used in the criminal justice context when possible (e.g. Lösel, 2007), they can be expensive to carry out, difficult to implement and confronted with various threats to validity (Hollin, 2008). Such obstacles, combined with reluctance to consider other designs such as quasi-experiments (in themselves less conclusive, but in numbers providing indicative ‘weight of evidence’) influenced decisions not to embark upon evaluations of individual programmes. In addition, over-reliance was placed on those delivering programmes to collect large amounts of accurate data for use by evaluators; programme deliverers, however, had other priorities, and the result in many cases was missing and poor quality data. Alternative approaches, such as using dedicated research assistants to collect smaller data sets, were rarely used. Whatever the reasons, the upshot has been that the evidence base for the effectiveness of programmes in England and Wales remains quite limited.

On a positive note, the longer term prospects for increasing the knowledge base are more encouraging. In particular, the Ministry of Justice has embarked upon three new cohort studies (of adult prisoners, adults on community sentences, and young offenders), which hold out considerable promise in terms of evidence as to which combinations of interventions, including programmes, are most effective in

⁹ Evaluations were initially carried out by the Research and Statistics Directorate, based in the Home Office, but with the formation of the Ministry of Justice, responsibility for research on criminal justice interventions passed to RDS NOMS, later renamed OMSAS (Offender Management Support and Analytical Services). As discussed below, OMSAS has now implemented a longer term, cohort based programme of effectiveness research.

reducing reconviction.¹⁰ However, while this is clearly a welcome development, it leaves the Panel with the problem that, while there is often some evidence, at a general level, of the effectiveness of methods used in the programmes it accredits, there is rarely any reliable evidence that specific programmes have actually reduced re-offending. Indeed, members have commented that in some cases accreditation has come to function almost as an *alternative* to evaluation: in other words, accreditation itself has been treated as evidence of effectiveness, so that further evaluation is thought unnecessary. This risks undermining the commitment to evidence based policy that has underpinned the work of the Panel (and indeed the whole What Works initiative). If accreditation is to be effective, it must ultimately be based on solid and ongoing research evidence about both the implementation and the outcomes of the specific interventions that are recommended.¹¹

5. The future: emerging roles for the new Panel

While the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel has experienced problems on a variety of fronts, this should not distract attention from its achievements. By setting the accreditation ‘bar’ at a very high level, it has overseen the development of a suite of high quality interventions, ranging from cognitive behavioural programmes to therapeutic communities, one or more of which are delivered in virtually all prisons and probation areas across the country. It has encouraged a culture of excellence among staff delivering the programmes, insisting on training which helps them understand the theories behind the interventions, and on audit processes which underline the importance of responsivity in their interactions with offenders. Equally important in a period when attitudes towards offenders have become increasingly punitive, it has helped to keep in front of policy-makers evidence from international research that well designed rehabilitative interventions delivered by skilled staff can change offenders’ behaviour, and hence to persuade them that they should continue to invest in both.

The decision to replace the former independent status of CSAP with a purely advisory role, will almost certainly not end the original vision of creating and maintaining a portfolio of high quality interventions, demonstrated by research to reduce re-offending if implemented properly. However, the current Panel works in a very different penal landscape to that of 1999 when CSAP (under its former name) was established. The prison population has since increased by over a third; resources are severely constrained; the penological ‘climate’ is more punitive, and politicians, policy-makers, the media and the general public are all more sceptical about the value of rehabilitative interventions.

¹⁰ For a brief summary, see www.statistics.gov.uk/events/gss2005/downloads/D2.ppt).

¹¹ Some recent progress in addressing this problem has been made by members of the programmes units in the Ministry of Justice undertaking to conduct their own evaluations of individual programmes, based on routine data returns (which appear to be improving in terms of accuracy and completeness) and in some cases help from interested staff in particular prisons or probation areas. A randomised controlled trial of the Enhanced Thinking Skills programme, analysing changes in prisoners’ psychometric scores, was produced in this way (McDougall *et al.*, 2009). However, the resources for such work are quite limited.

For those longer serving CSAP members who felt that they had too little influence over important aspects of the implementation of programmes (hasty roll out, over-ambitious targets, poor assessment and selection practices, lack of follow-up, lack of evaluative evidence, and so on – all of which may well have contributed to the somewhat disappointing outcomes of programmes to date), the prospects of gaining a greater say in such matters remain remote. Yet at the same time, the Panel has new opportunities to influence policy at a broader level. The concept of evidence-based policy is by no means dead, and senior policymakers remain open to suggested improvements to interventions with offenders, provided there is evidence that they should ‘work’ and (increasingly) that they are likely to be cost-effective. This is illustrated by an increase in requests to the Panel for advice on setting priorities in programme portfolios, and by recent consideration of the possibility of a new correctional ‘Centre of Excellence’ with similarities to NICE in the health service,¹² whereby expert advice and evidence would be sought on a wide range of interventions (although the idea was in the end not pursued).

A key dilemma for CSAP was and is how to balance its members’ aspirations for excellence with the reality of a political and policy context in which available resources are shrinking. Much of the current research literature suggests that desistance from crime is a difficult and lengthy process for offenders and that, if they are to be effective, practitioners need both high skills and a great deal of time to support them through it (Dowden and Andrews 2004; Farrall and Calverley 2005; McNeill 2005). If this is taken seriously, the Panel should be advocating more investment in training, more time spent by offender managers in developing relationships with offenders, more follow-up work to reinforce lessons learnt on programmes, and so on. Yet this is a message that policy-makers will not wish to hear unless, for example, a case can be made for targeting resources more intensively at smaller numbers of offenders where the impact of reduced offending will be greatest. In other words, if it is to be effective, the Panel will have to be keenly attuned to current policy priorities and constraints, without at the same time allowing these to divert them from the long-term goal of promoting excellence in interventions.

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¹² <http://www.nice.org.uk/aboutnice>

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