

Helping offenders into employment: How far is voluntary sector expertise valued in a contracting-out environment?

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Abstract

The Probation Service has, for some years, worked with external service providers in partnership. One strand of this work has involved collaboration with voluntary sector organizations in helping offenders into education training and employment (ETE). Underlying this work is a slim but important evidence base, which shows that offending diminishes when offenders gain employment, and that being in work may trigger longer term desistance.

Drawing on an evaluation of a government-sponsored 'Employment Pathfinder' and on other relevant research, the article argues that recent governmental pressure to contract out services, and to adhere to certain 'what works in reducing re-offending' principles, has given rise to tension within this collaboration attributable to conflicting ideology and practice. Specifically, this has created a context in which there is limited scope to adopt practices which are informed by knowledge about 'what works' in getting people into employment. A less prescriptive approach from the centre about what should be delivered, and how, would restore effective teamwork and might also open up probation practice to empirical and theoretical insights into the desistance process. Wider implications of these findings for the future involvement of organizations with expertise in the provision of services for offenders are discussed.

Key Words: desistance • employment schemes • partnership • what works

Introduction

The Government's Effective Practice Initiative (EPI) in England and Wales sought to pilot a range of interventions for those in prison and under probation supervision, which were designed to reduce re-offending (Furniss and Nutley, 2000). This work became more widespread and gathered speed as it was absorbed into the multi-million pound Crime Reduction Programme (CRP) (Hedderman, 2004). The interventions trialled were said to be based on the 'What Works' literature but, arguably, they prioritized some so-called 'What Works principles'—such as ensuring programmes were delivered exactly as they were designed ('programme integrity')—over other important elements, such as careful targeting and ensuring that delivery matched offenders' learning styles ('responsivity') (Hedderman, 2004, 2007). In a review of this literature conducted before the EPI commenced, it was noted that, important though the principles

were, they did not offer a blue-print to follow about how to manage or deliver services (Vennard and Hedderman, 1998).

The results of a number of the evaluations conducted to assess the EPI/CRP 'Pathfinders' are now available.¹ They show rather mixed results. Few of these studies suggest the underlying approaches are flawed, but most comment on problems with delivery.² In particular, inflated government targets led to unsuitable referrals, high proportions of potential clients failed to attend, there was poor record keeping and high staff turnover led to a stop-start approach. In the case of the first Employment Pathfinder there were problems with inconsistent assessments, overloading offenders with requirements and insufficient tailoring of responses to individual need (see Haslewood-Pocsik et al., 2004). A key recommendation was that 'offending and employment should not be considered as two independent facets of offenders' lives, which can be viewed and dealt with separately' (Haslewood-Pocsik et al., 2004: 65). The authors also recommended that a second phase of the Pathfinder should involve the education, training and employment (ETE) partnership organizations to a greater degree in planning and implementation in order to improve communication and joint working.

This article draws on some of the results of the evaluation of the second phase of the Employment Pathfinder (EP2) (Hedderman and Vennard, 2008). We focus in particular on the advantages of involving those who understand 'what works' in getting people into employment, and explore the difficulties ETE providers experienced in applying this knowledge in a context bound by expectations about 'what works' in reducing re-offending. We argue that, while evidence of 'what works' in reducing offending (and why) has a place in the design and delivery of employment initiatives, an overly prescriptive approach inhibits flexibility in responding to the needs of individual offenders. A centralizing tendency, it will be argued, has eroded what was once perceived by ETE experts as genuine partnership with the Probation Service.

The link between unemployment and offending

Offenders are far more likely than non-offenders to have experienced long-term unemployment (Mair and May, 1997; NACRO, 1999). According to the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 2002), over two-thirds of prisoners are unemployed at the time of imprisonment—around 13 times the national unemployment rate. Three-quarters of prisoners do not have paid employment to go to on release from custody; and over half of offenders subject to community sentences are unemployed at the start of their orders (Home Office, 2004). There are a number of reasons for these high rates of unemployment. A criminal record itself creates a barrier to employment, but also the majority of offenders lack skills and qualifications

and have a poor work history. In one study approximately 40 per cent of a sample of offenders on community orders who were unemployed had basic skills deficits (McMahon et al., 2004). Most offenders will also be handicapped by a number of other social and personal problems including homelessness, debt, poor health and substance abuse (Fletcher et al., 1998; Metcalf et al., 2001).

The association between unemployment and high rates of re-offending is also well established (Crow et al., 1989; Simon and Corbett, 1996; May, 1999; McGuire, 2002). Conversely, the extent and frequency of their offending diminishes when offenders gain employment (Farrington et al., 1986; Sarno et al., 2000). What is less clear is how unemployment and offending are related and, in turn, how they interact with other personal and social problems (e.g. Tarling, 1982).

Reducing re-offending through employment initiatives: What works?

A recent review of studies of efforts to reduce re-offending through rehabilitative interventions (Bonta and Andrews, 2007) endorsed the core principles, espoused by the Effective Practice Initiative (Chapman and Hough, 1998), which have influenced probation policy and practice over the last decade. These are: matching interventions to level of risk; targeting needs that are most directly related to offending; drawing on cognitive-behavioural methods; tailoring interventions to motivation, learning style and the abilities and strengths of the offender; addressing multiple problems in a co-ordinated way through multi-agency partnership; and ensuring that programmes are delivered as designed. However, as a number of commentators have observed, the development of structured group programmes has been characterized by a relatively narrow focus on cognitive behavioural models of change, with too little regard to theoretical and empirical insights into what prompts and sustains desistance from offending (e.g. McNeill, 2006; Maguire and Raynor, 2006). The 'what works' focus on formal interventions has also been criticized for paying too little attention to the importance of the traditional 'relational' model of supervision in which practitioners' interpersonal skills were highly valued (e.g. Raynor, 2004; Robinson, 2005).

Certain insights from the growing literature on desistance from offending are of particular relevance to the question of whether, and if so, how employment services can facilitate this process. A key theme of the research is that readiness to stop offending is brought about by the interplay between individual choice and wider social forces (e.g. Farrall and Bowling, 1999: 261). Acquiring new social bonds or strengthening existing ones (most commonly in relation to family and employment) can create a 'stake in conformity', but research has shown that one of the keys to desistance is a person's subjective assessment of the significance of such changes. Farrall (2002), for example, stresses that offenders need to feel that they have acquired something that they value more highly than any benefits derived from a

criminal lifestyle (see also Burnett and Maruna, 2004; McNeill and Maruna, 2008). If securing employment does initiate a re-evaluation of a person's life it is likely to trigger a readiness to adopt a new value system and a pro-social identity which, in turn, may result in long-term desistance (Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2002).

Achieving such a transition can, however, be a protracted process. Desistance studies have shown that it is characterized as a progression from offence-free periods in the course of a criminal career to a point at which a person begins to assume the identity of a law-abiding citizen (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrall, 2004). The research highlights the importance of significant others, such as probation supervisors, in helping to sustain motivation, overcome obstacles and resist pressure to revert to a criminal lifestyle (e.g. Rex, 1999; Dowden and Andrews, 2004; Robinson, 2005).

Continuity within a one-to-one relationship can support an offender's own efforts to overcome 'setbacks and disillusionment' (Maguire and Raynor, 2006: 28-9). Further, desistance studies suggest that a collaborative 'client-centred' approach, in which a practitioner and offender mutually agree goals and tasks, can help build 'human capital' or capacity to change, such as enhanced skills and qualifications (e.g. Farrall, 2002; McNeill, 2006).

While the value of the supervisory relationship and 'individualizing' responses to offenders is acknowledged in more recent policy documents concerning offender management (e.g. NOMS, 2006), this stops well short of advocating a genuinely client-centred approach. It also remains to be seen just how far even the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) model can be realized when so much of the day-to-day work is parcelled out to 'key workers'. Moreover, those key workers who run existing accredited programmes have very little scope to adapt the material or the mode of delivery to the range of learning needs and differing levels of engagement they are likely to encounter (Annison, 2006).

As Farrall (2002) and others have argued, as well as building capacity for change, those who work with offenders must also help to build 'social capital', or opportunities to access mainstream opportunities. Crucially, if offenders are to benefit from work-focused support and training it must be geared to local job opportunities and skills shortages. Recognition of the need to work with employers is evident in at least two recent expressions of government policy and priorities (Home Office et al., 2005, 2006). The second of these documents, *Reducing Re-Offending through Skills and Employment: Next Steps*, stresses the importance of engaging with employers in designing and delivering programmes so that they are more closely aligned to their needs. Additionally, working with employers, it is suggested, may break down real and perceived barriers to employing offenders. The report also argues that raising levels of employment offers a sustainable route out of poverty and

dependence on welfare benefits for offenders and their families (see also Leitch Review, 2005).

While it is clear that employment interventions can help offenders develop work-related skills and find suitable work, there is little evidence about which particular aspects of ETE practice increase the prospects of sustained employment. A recent review of the available evidence revealed an absence of important detail about their duration, intensity and content, while most studies that employed quantitative techniques have lacked a comparison group (Hurry et al., 2006). Moreover, disentangling the impact of ETE initiatives from help received in relation to other needs is problematic. Subject to these caveats, the limited research base does provide support for two of the key 'what works' principles noted above—namely, that in seeking to move offenders into work it is important to match the intervention to individual circumstances and level of motivation, and to address the full range of their needs. An earlier review of the international literature on the employment of offenders (Haslewood -Pocsik et al., 2004) similarly highlighted the benefits of an individualized service that is responsive to diversity in the characteristics of unemployed offenders.

These findings chime with research evidence of 'what works' in helping unemployed, low-qualified adults who are not disadvantaged by a criminal record into work. Here again, improving 'job-readiness' requires an approach that is tailored to individual circumstances and level of motivation, while also combining educational and vocational input with broader-based support, for example help with finances and personal development (Dench et al., 2006).

While it may be appropriate for specialist ETE agencies working in collaboration with the Probation Service to pay attention to levels of motivation, confidence and self-esteem as well as skills deficits, it is clear that they are not equipped (or funded) to address wider personal and social barriers to employment. Studies of employment schemes for offenders underline the central role of the supervisor/offender manager in ensuring that work on skills and employment is well integrated with other interventions (Sarno et al., 2000; Webster et al., 2001). Where there are several areas of need probation staff are likely to prioritize some of these—typically drug treatment and housing—above ETE (McSweeney and Hough, 2006).

Just as desisting from offending can be a protracted process, the research evidence underlines the fact that moving into work is, for many offenders, a long term goal which is unlikely to be achieved in one short programme. Those with entrenched employment problems and a poor work history are likely to need longer and more intensive support from supervisors and ETE specialists (Haslewood-Pocsik et al., 2004). Yet where attendance at an ETE programme is voluntary, motivation to attend can be poor and many offenders drop out at an early stage (Hurry et al., 2006). Consequently, as we shall illustrate with reference to

an evaluation of the second Employment Pathfinder, ETE providers perceive themselves as having to adapt their provision to the individual in order to encourage attendance at future appointments. This ethos, we will argue, is incompatible with NOM's increasingly centralized approach to the design and provision of services by the voluntary sector.

The Probation Service-ETE collaboration: Conflicting philosophy and practice

Although the Probation Service has traditionally worked with both statutory and non-statutory agencies at local level, as Rungay (2007: 543) observed, since the early 1990s such activity has been characterized by central directive rather than local initiative. This may be seen in the Government's adoption of the cross-departmental response to re-offending recommended by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 2002), which stresses the need for all key departments and service agencies to act in partnership. For example, the Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan (Home Office, 2004) identified a number of 'pathways' forward with education, training and employment (ETE) as one of the key sets of needs to be addressed.¹

At the local level probation services have worked in partnership with ETE advisers for some years in seeking to improve offenders' prospects of gaining employment. However, funding for these initiatives has been criticized on the grounds that it is usually short term, output-driven and not subject to detailed monitoring and evaluation (e.g. Roberts et al., 1997; Sarno et al., 2000). In 2001 funding was provided under the auspices of the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme to conduct an employment-focused Pathfinder project in two probation areas, with the explicit aim of reducing re-offending by improving offenders' employability. Within the framework of the Reducing Re-Offending National Action Plan, a second phase of the Employment Pathfinder (EP2) was initiated in April 2004 in the original two probation areas and in five others in order to examine how far problems identified in the first Employment Pathfinder had been resolved. As with the first phase, those targeted by EP2 were either on licence following release from custody or were serving a community sentence. All participants were thus subject to statutory probation supervision.

The evaluation on which this article is based (Hedderman and Vennard, 2008) was conducted in 2006. Data were gathered from a number of sources, including: information contained in a central database; locally held case files; and interviews with those involved in delivering and participating in EP2. Programme managers in all seven areas were interviewed. In four of the areas interviews were also conducted with: 15 offender managers and other probation staff who were involved in delivering EP2; 12 ETE providers, including two senior members of Jobcentre Plus with experience of working in partnership with the Probation Service. In addition, 32 offenders referred to EP2 in the same four areas were interviewed about their experience of EP2. This sample, which included five women, ranged in age from 18 to 49. The interviewees had

been sentenced in respect of a variety of offences, ranging in seriousness from shoplifting to murder. Just over half were serving a community sentence, the rest were on licence having completed a custodial sentence. Despite attempts to include in the interview sample some offenders who had dropped out of the scheme, it proved impossible to contact anyone who was no longer in contact with the Probation Service. This meant that the sample was biased towards those who were still participating in EP2, although we achieved interviews with four participants who had completed the programme, or had left before completion, having taken up employment or work-related training. The Pathfinder comprised two components. The first was a group-work programme—'WorkWise'—designed to enhance motivation to improve work-related skills and to seek employment. The second took the form of nine modules providing employment-related knowledge and skills, including how to disclose previous convictions to potential employers, writing a CV and communication skills. EP2 was designed to provide a substantial element of partnership between the Probation Service and specialist voluntary sector ETE providers of local employment and training services. In most areas the initiative formalized existing, sometimes longstanding, partnerships with charitable organizations.

Prior to EP2, arrangements for assessing needs and deciding the content of employment-related work had been negotiated informally at the local level between probation and ETE providers. This approach was compatible with ETE experts' preferred method of working, which places a premium on establishing rapport, gaining trust and responding to the individual's needs and learning style. Following the implementation of EP2, however, the designers of EP2—the National Probation Directorate (NPD)—required all seven Pathfinder areas to adopt a standardized method of assessing needs and to adhere to a manual detailing what was to be covered in each of the 10 WorkWise sessions and nine modules. Providers had discretion to deliver one or more modules according to an offender's needs, but it was anticipated that actually seeking employment would occur only after the offender had completed other elements designed to improve their 'job readiness'.

The main reasons for such a top-down, prescriptive approach were twofold. First, the NPD wished to ensure that the two components of EP2 were delivered to a consistently high standard in all areas. Second, for evaluation purposes, standardization of programme content and method of delivery was seen as necessary in order to measure the effectiveness of the programme and examine performance in each area against centrally imposed targets. As observed by Raynor (2004: 202) structured programmes have the important advantage that they enable researchers to gather information on 'what is actually being done, with whom, and for how long'. The prescribed nature of EP2 also reflects a wider view within government that poor implementation is one of the main reasons rehabilitative work with offenders appears to have had limited

impact on reconviction rates. As noted earlier, there is some empirical evidence from evaluations of the Government's CRP Pathfinders to support this view. In a recent review of the international literature on offender risk assessment, Bonta and Andrews (2007) note that a gap in effectiveness between the controlled, experimental setting and 'real world' interventions is most likely due to a decline in the quality and integrity of service delivery. Similarly, in a review of 'what works' Harper and Chitty (2005) argue that one reason recent evaluations of interventions with offenders have provided mixed results on effectiveness is that what is implemented locally does not always match the original design.²

However, where programmes are designed in such a way as to allow little or no flexibility in the content of an intervention and in the manner of delivery this inhibits the exercise of discretion on the part of experienced and skilled practitioners. It is important to bear in mind that these were agencies with experience in delivering ETE services to offenders. Staff were highly trained and adhered to accredited national standards for the management and delivery of services.³ From their perspective the EP2 model unduly restricted professional autonomy. As one member of staff observed: 'Our staff are trained advice and guidance workers. This is surely why we're contracted into probation, because we are trained at what we do. So why are probation trying to tell us how to do our jobs?' (ETE co-ordinator).

If they were to improve participants' employment prospects, advisers were strongly of the opinion that they needed to move outside the straightjacket of 'off the peg' modules in order to respond effectively to the needs of individual offenders. Prior to EP2 they had offered a tailored approach, which typically involved working through the learning and skills encompassed by the modules, but in a more informal way and at a brisker pace (each module took approximately half an hour to deliver) in order to sustain interest and motivation. It was also common practice to run the learning and skills element in parallel with efforts to find employment. Advisers argued that it was often preferable to tackle several employment issues simultaneously, for example, conducting a 'job search' while creating a CV or advising on how to disclose convictions to prospective employers. This ensured that offenders saw the relevance of the modules and could immediately practise their new skills. Such an approach accords with evidence of effective practice in the provision of training and education to unemployed, low-qualified adults (Dench et al., 2006). It is also clear from interviews conducted with offenders in the course of the EP2 evaluation that this approach was effective, not least because they tended not to see the value of learning job seeking skills at the initial appointment. From the outset, they expected and wanted ETE advisers to focus on helping them gain employment. Hence the emphasis placed by advisers on the need for incentives—such as demonstrating that they were making efforts to secure work or training—if offenders were to be persuaded of the benefits of attending future appointments.

Similarly, those who designed WorkWise underestimated the difficulty in achieving and retaining viable numbers of offenders to run the programme effectively. Even though EP2 had been operational for two years by the time of our evaluation, WorkWise had seldom been delivered—and was even less often completed—within a group setting. Of 257 participants included in the case file sample only 37 (14%) were considered suitable for the programme, 26 of whom came from a rural area in north Wales where tutors sometimes delivered the programme on a one-to-one basis. One area tackled the problem of poor attendance by delivering WorkWise in probation hostels, but since there was little effort to assess suitability among hostel residents completion rates were modest (50%). Given that the programme was to be targeted on offenders who were not well motivated to find employment, in the absence of incentives high attrition rates were perhaps inevitable.⁴ Commenting on what many perceived as a paradox at the heart of WorkWise, one programme manager observed: 'You're asking people to come to a programme that requires a fair amount of motivation and organization whereas it's aimed at people who have no motivation and personal organization.'

The programme was also unsuitable for offenders with low literacy skills or who were unable to cope with the demands of a lengthy group-work programme. Tutors were critical of the highly specified design and constant time pressure, which left minimal scope to tailor the sessions to individual needs, to alter the pace or to respond to questions and concerns. These same criticisms had been expressed by tutors who delivered the 10 session group-work programme in Phase One of the Pathfinder (Haslewood-Pocsik et al., 2004). The assumption underlying the programme—that unemployed offenders are a generic group with similar problems and needs—proved to be unfounded. Some respondents likened the WorkWise material to existing offending behaviour programmes, with its emphasis on improving thinking skills, problem solving and learning appropriate ways of behaving within a work context. While this approach worked well for offenders who were keen to take advantage of what the programme had to offer, for the majority who were referred to EP2 the task of addressing poor motivation fell to the ETE advisers. It was their perception that offenders were sometimes referred before they were 'ready' to engage with efforts to move them into employment. Hence, the advisers emphasized the importance of establishing rapport with an offender at the first appointment through a combination of interpersonal skills, looking for suitable employment from the outset and crucially, ensuring that the service user felt a sense of 'ownership' of the targets and action plan:

To me the success of any work that we do with probation is down to the advisers and their ability to engage the offenders. You can provide any number of modules but the employability skills that they teach anyone can learn. It's the qualities that people bring to the work. (ETE manager)

They [service users] need to feel that they're getting something now; the advisers have to give them a reason to come back. (ETE adviser)

From the moment we assess someone we start thinking about what would suit them let's look at job search, what's on the JobCentre Plus website, let's look in the newspapers. (ETE adviser)

People learn more if they feel they are getting the answers themselves rather than being given them. If they are given everything they tend to glaze over a bit. I think it's important that they take ownership and responsibility for their learning. The parts of the programme that allow this I really enjoy. (WorkWise tutor)

These views underline the limitations of the EP2 modular structure in tackling poor motivation and the key role that the advisers played in encouraging offenders to become actively involved in efforts to improve their employability. This approach is consistent with the understanding that desistance can be triggered if offenders begin to take responsibility for decisions about their future rather than perceiving themselves as passive recipients of interventions (Rex, 1999; Dowden and Andrews, 2004). The importance ETE advisers attached to the inter-personal aspect of their work with offenders accords with the theory that such relationships can promote desistance by helping to build both 'human capital'—capacity to change—and opportunities to lead a crime-free lifestyle (Farrall, 2002, 2004). Moreover, although it was not explicit in the advisers' descriptions of their approach, it could be argued that their ethos was in accordance with a 'strengths-based' (rather than needs-based) model of desistance, in which emphasis is placed upon offenders' skills, resources and assets rather than their level of risk and criminogenic needs (e.g. Maruna et al., 2004; McNeill, 2006). At the same time, ETE advisers stressed the importance of being realistic in their aspirations; their approach was to focus on developing skills which matched their clients' capabilities and that enabled them to take advantage of local labour shortages.

The offenders whom we interviewed responded positively to this style of working. Several interviewees compared ETE advisers favourably with probation officers in terms of their ability to motivate them to tackle the barriers to employment and disengage from crime. These offenders valued the collaborative, non-judgemental manner adopted by the advisers and spoke of having gained in confidence, for example, in approaching prospective employers and responding to questions about their criminal record:

Male, 27, on licence having served a prison sentence for supplying Class A drugs and involved in voluntary work at the time of interview: She's professional but she makes you know that she does care that makes me see

that somebody's actually interested and that gives you a bit of confidence and a bit more belief to keep on pushing.

Male, 47, on licence having served a prison sentence for involvement in supplying Class A drugs. At interview he had just obtained employment: I was so impressed with how he didn't care who I was or what I'd done. He didn't patronize me. He told me how it was. He just wants to see you not go back into prison and do all right.

Respondents appreciated the encouragement they received to keep applying for posts and not become disheartened or de-motivated if they were not offered an interview. Regular appointments with the EP2 adviser could also provide focus and help overcome inertia:

Male, 27, serving a community sentence for possession of a bladed article, unemployed but training to become a bus driver: If I wasn't coming down here and seeing [the EP2 tutor] and he wasn't putting me through and forward to contacts, I'd be a lot more lazier □ because I've got the appointments to go to it forces me and pushes me to get into the employment, which is good, 'cause I do want to work and I know I'd be lazy.

ETE managers and staff considered that regular appointments with the same adviser were essential in building trust and achieving continuity in working with an offender. Here again there is evidence to support such an approach. Recent research on different models of case management on the part of probation supervisors concluded that offenders are more inclined to trust their case manager and ask for help if they see the same person over a period of time (Partridge, 2004). Partridge (2004: 9) reports that offenders with experience of different models of supervision 'were unanimous about the importance of contact with the same case manager, particularly during the initial stages of supervision'. Interestingly, while Partridge's research may have informed the NOMS concept of offender managers, in the current study it was ETE advisers rather than offender managers whom offenders described in this way.

In fulfilling this role, it was clear that ETE advisers were accustomed to providing advice and guidance falling outside the topics covered by modular design of EP2. Examples were given of offenders who looked to them for help with problems that were not strictly employment-related, but needed to be prioritized. If an offender mentioned more immediate concerns—for example in relation to accommodation, debt or benefits—respondents said that they would attempt to address these. Such a broad-based service was not envisaged by those who commissioned EP2. The wider support sought by offenders and provided within the ambit of EP2 is exemplified in the following extract from an interview with an in-house tutor:

I spent an hour with him and we got his benefits changed and everything and I'm still working with him and it's made it a lot easier and I can move him on to other programmes now that will eventually make him work ready but I was not delivering anything that was actually in EP2 so I can't actually say that I've done any work on EP2.

While these findings reflect well on the ETE advisers, they suggest that a minority of probation officers may not be as effective as ETE experts in building on and developing offenders' strengths and helping them acquire new skills and personal attributes. This may reflect the fact that, unlike ETE providers, the Probation Service must look to public protection and cannot focus exclusively on the offender's interests. However, the findings raise the question of why, in the case of offenders with multiple needs, some probation case managers appeared not to be addressing these directly, or through partnerships with other agencies. One explanation, mentioned by members of the probation teams involved in delivering EP2, is that a policy of automatic referral of unemployed offenders—imposed from the centre in order to achieve target numbers—gave rise to inappropriate or premature referrals in some of the Pathfinder areas. Pressure to achieve the targets was such that some case managers conceded that they referred offenders at an early stage in the supervision order, with insufficient regard to other more pressing needs. Others resisted such a mechanistic approach, referring offenders to EP2 relatively infrequently and screening out those who appeared unmotivated, or where priority needed to be given to other problems.

Meeting referral and employment targets proved to be one of the main points of tension between the architects of EP2 and the external providers of ETE services (and between probation staff and ETE advisers on the ground). Those offender managers who referred indiscriminately created difficulties further down the line for their ETE partners, whose employment-focused performance targets were unlikely to be achieved if offenders were some way from being 'job-ready'. As McSweeney and Hough (2006) observed, from the perspective of voluntary sector providers, performance targets are a source of anxiety since any shortfall could jeopardize future funding. Low rates of employment among offenders reflect the fact that the majority have poor educational attainment and skills and are ill-equipped to compete with non-offenders for a limited pool of suitable jobs. Thus, while ETE advisers engaged in EP2 initiated job searches with some offenders as a way of motivating them, they regarded the targets under which they operated as unattainable by many of the offenders referred to them. In such cases, advisers saw the achievement of sustainable employment as a very long term goal and perceived their role principally in terms of moving the offenders towards job-readiness rather than directly into jobs (see also McSweeney and Hough, 2006). However, the employment targets did not give credit for steps taken on the way towards employment, such as improvement in skills, self-

confidence and motivation to find work. Such 'soft outcomes' are not readily encompassed in quantitative measures of performance (inputs and outputs), or in centrally imposed employment targets.

Linking funding to achieving targets can be an effective way of managing performance, but unless targets are realistic and reflect progression towards employment they can have unintended consequences. ETE advisers engaged in the EP2 Pathfinder tended to concentrate their resources on offenders who were most likely to find work rather than the least 'job-ready'. By the same token, they were discouraged from putting effort into improving the qualifications, vocational and 'soft' skills that for many offenders are essential bridges to sustainable employment. The exclusion from the EP2 targets of training outcomes also placed providers under pressure to secure jobs for offenders regardless of their motivation, skills and job-readiness. In the longer term this was likely to be counter-productive.

The reality of partnership

A consistent message from evaluations of programmes such as EP2 is that where voluntary sector providers of services for offenders are dependent on statutory funding, genuine partnership—characterized by teamwork, recognition of the respective strengths of partner organisations and effort towards achieving shared goals—is very hard to achieve (Jacobson, 2004; Minkes et al., 2005; McSweeney and Hough, 2006). Such funding arrangements, particularly those set up through competitive tendering, set out the funder's objectives as the ones which must be achieved. While those tendering may be invited to suggest alternative delivery plans, there is rarely scope to renegotiate goals and priorities. In this context objectives are shared only in the sense that the voluntary sector partner is contractually required to meet them. Even in the absence of a contractual relationship, differences in ideology and approach can give rise to tension, as was well illustrated in a study of partnership between voluntary drug agencies and Youth Offender Teams (YOTs). Minkes et al. (2005) observed that drug agencies tended to prioritize client need, confidentiality, rapport and trust. In contrast, YOTs, operating within a framework of criminal justice, were expected to focus on enforcement and prevention of re-offending. In the same vein, ETE personnel who participated in EP2 perceived themselves to be more 'client-centred' and less concerned with crime reduction goals than their Probation Service counterparts.

Historically, the voluntary sector has been less constrained by bureaucracy and performance targets than the public sector and has therefore been better able to provide a flexible, client-centred service and to be innovative (Gill and Mawby, 1990). However, experienced ETE advisers involved in the EP2 employment initiative spoke of an erosion of the partnership ethos that had once characterized their relationship with the Probation Service. The contractual arrangements

surrounding the content and delivery of EP2 were perceived by these experts as well beyond appropriate parameter-setting by the centre. As has occurred in other areas in which the voluntary/not-for-profit sector has traditionally had a significant role, ETE providers are subject to increasing regulation and a more centralized style of management. Benson (2008: 5), founder of the new voluntary sector network the National Coalition for Independent Action, argues that a culture of commissioning and procurement has undermined the independence of the voluntary sector while pushing them into delivering more public services, effectively as an 'arm's-length agency of the state'. Adherence to a national structure and style of work ensures that an initiative is implemented consistently as designed, but it fails to respond at the local and individual level to diversity, undervalues local expertise and runs the risk of demoralizing front line staff.

The voluntary sector is likely to continue to play a major part in the provision of services to ex-offenders. Indeed, in creating NOMS the Government envisages an expansion in partnerships between the statutory and voluntary sector across a range of services, including housing, health care, drug treatment and ETE provision (NOMS, 2005). In principle, such arrangements enable those with multiple needs to benefit from the diversity of skills and experience within the voluntary sector (Gill and Mawby, 1990; Hucklesby and Worrall, 2007). In practice, the potential for friction between statutory funding bodies and the voluntary/community sector is likely to increase with the advance of the NOMS 'contestability' programme. If they are to secure contracts from the statutory sector under the new 'contestability' rules, the voluntary sector will have to adapt to a competitive, contract-driven culture with few incentives for partnership effort that is not subject to rigorous performance measurement (McSweeney and Hough, 2006; Hucklesby and Worrall, 2007). While the sector can expect a degree of central co-ordination and must account for its expenditure, such a climate is likely to undermine the benefits associated with voluntary provision of public services. As highlighted in the EP2 evaluation, these include flexibility, a capacity to be innovative, responsiveness to individual and local circumstances and the freedom to devise methods of delivery that those who are expert in their field deem appropriate.

Conclusions

Although the precise nature of the relationship between unemployment and crime is unclear, there is some evidence that helping offenders gain employment reduces their re-offending. As we have illustrated, the scheme we evaluated—EP2—was designed to accord with certain 'what works' principles that underpin Probation Service policy and practice, whereas the providers of ETE services are guided by another body of knowledge about 'what works' in helping low skilled, poorly qualified adults into employment. The dominance of the 'what works' with offenders model is such that much of the reason for involving ETE experts in work with offenders is in danger of being lost. Yet the personalized approach favoured by

ETE professionals is compatible with studies of desistance from crime, which confirm that there is an important 'human element' in work with offenders. It can also be said that the principles underpinning the work of ETE providers—which inform the Government's national Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) service for adult learners (DfES, 2003)—are consistent with a model of desistance that focuses on what offenders can achieve given help and encouragement to access mainstream opportunities. These principles underline the importance of raising aspirations, extending opportunities, examining needs jointly with the client and providing evidence of progress and achievement (Quinton, 2006).

Working with offenders in this way is not incompatible with the cognitive-behavioural approach that has been a key feature of probation practice since the 1990s, with its focus on changing attitudes to criminal behaviour and enhancing thinking skills and motivation. However, while both ETE and cognitive-behavioural programmes adopt what Maguire and Raynor (2006) have termed a 'responsibility model' (characterized by choice, empowerment, self-determination, etc.), in practice cognitive-behavioural programmes for offenders have tended to emphasize risk, needs and perceived 'deficits' (Farrall, 2002). As exemplified by the IAG ethos, ETE programmes encourage responsibility, choice and ownership of plans to improve skills and job prospects.

The drive to ensure that programmes provided by the voluntary sector are delivered as designed and to the prescribed 'dosage' has wider implications for their future involvement in providing services for offenders. As we have observed, an overly prescriptive approach can inhibit the exercise of expertise and legitimate professional judgement. It can also demoralize and undermine effective partnership (Nellis, 2002). Moreover, where national oversight goes beyond parameter-setting by the centre, this can disregard local diversity and override the need to adapt the service to local circumstances. As argued by Nellis (2002: 70) 'Everything must be done, every target achieved—everywhere—in a pre-specified period of time.'

There are signs that the architects of the Government's strategy for improving skills and employment among offenders have begun to respond to these concerns. Recent policy pronouncements signal a more flexible approach, which recognizes the need to tailor employment-related support to an offender's needs. This is particularly notable in the Next Steps strategy document, which, significantly, was jointly authored by the Departments for Education and Skills and for Work and Pensions as well as the Home Office (Home Office et al., 2006). It is also evident in the context of proposed new employability contracts, which are envisaged as providing 'personalized learning' and 'customized packages'. Learning is still conceived as highly work-focused, but the strategy conveys recognition that learning extends beyond vocational training to wider skills—disclosure of convictions, literacy/numeracy, life-skills—and opportunities to practise new skills through work experience. There are also signs that the need to

address poor motivation and lack of incentives among unemployed offenders is now recognized. For example, the PS Plus prison-probation employment initiative includes a structured motivational approach to support offenders during the transition from custody to the community (Cole et al., 2007). Moreover, the evaluation of PS Plus provides a more meaningful measurement of the impact of the programme than with EP2, since it incorporates recognition of the achievements of probation and ETE personnel in helping offenders overcome poor motivation and develop marketable skills, even if they are not 'job-ready' (Cole et al., 2007). An assessment of improvement in employability can go further and include progression in learning (e.g. from basic skills to a vocational course), movement from complete inactivity to voluntary work and participation in unpaid employment (Dench et al., 2006). If future employment work with the voluntary sector adopts such a broad understanding of the role and impact of ETE providers, it may be that some of the criticisms expressed by ETE experts in the course of EP2 will be addressed.

Our findings suggest, however, that wider concerns about the erosion of genuine partnership between the funding body and the voluntary sector provider will be more difficult to resolve. The architects of the National Offender Management Model (NOMS, 2006: 45) have acknowledged the importance of this issue, calling for an 'environment in which teamwork at the level of the individual offender can flourish'. Further, 'partners from outside of the main correctional services need to feel that they are more than simple contractors' (NOMS, 2006: 45). Such an aspiration is surely incompatible with the centralizing tendencies of Government, exemplified in the NOMS (2008) purchaser-provider, target-driven model of partnership.

Notes

We would like to thank all who facilitated our evaluation of the EP2 Pathfinder in the seven pilot areas, including probation staff, ETE providers and participants. We are also very grateful to Jessica Prendergrast, Mega Arumugam and Melody Askari for their assistance with the fieldwork and transcription of interviews.

1 Strategy Unit (2003: 10) advice on piloting recommends against using terms like 'Pathfinder' because they imply that success is certain and that such projects are 'innovative exemplars rather than rigorous policy trials'. See Hedderman (2004) on this and other problems that had to be faced in evaluating the Effective Practice Initiative.

2 See, for example, the evaluation reports on basic skills (McMahon et al., 2004), resettlement (Lewis et al., 2003) and offending behaviour programmes (Hollin et al., 2002).

3 Other 'pathways' include accommodation, finance, mental and physical health and substance abuse. Their delivery is to take place within the context of the NOMS concept of a co-ordinated, holistic approach to inter-related needs.

4 In fact, the explanation for the complex and mixed messages from the CRP evaluations favoured by the Home Office Research, Development and Statistics division was not implementation failure, but failure on the part of the researchers to use randomized control trials. This interpretation and the Home Office response—imposition of strict control over the delivery of an intervention and a simplistic belief that using randomized control trials will yield simple and certain research results—has been widely criticized (see, for example, Hollin, 2008; Raynor, 2008).

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