

Probation Chiefs Association – Sonnex case media coverage

4 June 2009

Steve Collett, Vice Chair of the Probation Chiefs Association was invited to comment on:

BBC Radio 4 World at One with Home affairs correspondent Rory McLean, who looked at the events leading to the murders' coverage. After the BBC statement that probation's failure to recall Sonnex to prison was because probation officers were overworked and under pressure to reduce prison numbers, Steve was quoted: "When we get it wrong with public protection matters, it can go spectacularly wrong. You cannot eliminate risk. You can minimise it and you can manage it but you cannot eliminate it and there will always be people who go on to commit further offences of the most serious nature what ever we and however we manage them."

Radio 5 Live Drive programme, 5 p.m with Peter Allen who prefaced the interview: One of your PCA members had paid an immediate price for the fact that one of these guys was out of prison, didn't he Steve?

Steve: That's right, Peter.

Peter: We heard Jack Straw come on and say, yeah my responsibility I take the blame although he is apologising rather than losing his job. He went on to say that it wasn't really the way you organise things or the lack of money or too much bureaucracy, he just kept on saying, no, it was failings on the part of people doing the job. What's your view on that?

Steve: I am not going to comment directly on the Sonnex case but I will say is that the probation service manages some 50,000 offenders within the multi-agency public protection arrangements each and every day. The number of serious further offences that those people we supervise commit is very small. The year before last it was 79. The problem is when we get it wrong and when the system gets it wrong the outcome can be absolutely catastrophic as it was in this particular case.

Peter: Why can't you comment on this particular case, everyone else is?

Steve: Because the Probation Chiefs Association, the purpose of it is to promote probation and promote its role in public protection and I don't have all the facts about the Sonnex case and it's for the Ministry of Justice to respond on that but I'm very happy to talk about anything to do with the probation service's role in public protection.

Peter: We heard from officials that you have failed IT system, consultants, lots of bureaucracy, that's where all the money has gone. There aren't enough probation officers and that the system fails as a result of that. How do you react to those claims?

Steve: When something as catastrophic as this happens, there's never one simple easy answer. If there was it wouldn't happen in the first place but probation chiefs and probation staff have to live within their resources and we have to manage those resources so that the riskiest offenders get the most attention from our staff. I think that's what the public would expect and demand from us.

Peter: I have listened to what you have said very careful Steve but in this case whose failure was it? Why did it go wrong?

Steve: Well, I've said before I'm not prepared to be drawn on the specifics of this case but when cases go wrong it's not normally one simple explanation, it's a culmination of things all coming together: failures from individual members of staff, failures of the system, breakdown in communication, the failure to pass on pieces of information – you put that in the churn with difficulties perhaps around local staffing issues and you get the kind of situation that has just been described today.

Peter: Steve Collett, thank you.