

A responsible national voice

David Scott introduces the new Probation Chiefs Association



The need for a strong independent and professional voice that represents probation leadership in England and Wales has become apparent and ever more urgent since we became a national service in 2001 – hence the formation of the Probation Chiefs Association (PCA).

An independent body representing the views of probation chief officers and chief executives has been conspicuously absent until now. This is in contrast to our colleagues in other criminal justice services who have well-established forums: for example, the police through the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).

PCA aims to comment, challenge and contribute to the development of not just probation but criminal justice policy and practice more widely. We also seek to be an organisation that is consulted, is responsive and focused on finding solutions. We will be working to enable probation chiefs to contribute to the development and implementation of policy and to provide different platforms and environments for them to speak out and promote the work of probation.

Equally important, we will assist in the development of the wider probation leadership by providing assistant chief officers and all senior managers, as members of the association, with opportunities to contribute their thinking, knowledge and expertise to the development of the Association and its role in this more public arena.

AN APPROPRIATE VOICE

While we intend to be the responsible national voice for probation chiefs we do not want to be on some kind of theoretical soapbox about criminal justice. Nor do we see the PCA as having a political voice – we are a public service working within the framework of government.

Our immediate challenge is to establish our credibility. There are immense criminal justice challenges facing us nationally, many of them highly complex and inter-related, and unless we can demonstrate some connection to improved delivery we will have failed. Ultimately, there is no substitute for getting the quality of what we do right at a

local level and where we can really make a difference is to enable chief officers to work confidently with sentencers to ensure:

- high quality advice to sentencers, in relation to sentencing individual offenders, delivered on time but making it clear what probation can and can't deliver;
- improved quality and consistency of service to courts and the administration of justice;
- sentences are properly implemented and effective.

Critical to our success will be the way in which we communicate what we do to sentencers and to local people and communities. We have already had initial meetings with the chair and chief executive of the Magistrates' Association, which were constructive. I have a strongly held view that you cannot expect to influence public confidence without first positively impacting on sentencer confidence. At a national level we are looking at ways we can assist in the production of better practice guidance and how we can contribute to joint training.

The reality is that we have evidence that the work of the probation service is barely understood by the public. Consequently, it is often misrepresented; consider the stereotypes that persist about our work in TV soap operas alone! We have to take a substantial amount of responsibility for this. It's too easy to blame the media. We have to understand much more what interests and concerns

the public and address these by responding and putting across our messages clearly. There is a growing amount of evidence that when we do this the public is much more constructive in its attitude towards crime and punishment than we would otherwise think.

For this reason we believe it is essential that probation – nationally now part of a new delivery agency and more integrated with the prison service – evidences the effectiveness of what it does. We are, therefore, very interested in encouraging research that enables us to demonstrate the impact of what we do. Right now we are particularly interested to show the value of probation in providing sufficient and appropriate community sentencing, especially in relation to those offenders who would otherwise have gone into prison for short-term prison sentences of 12 months and under. I have a particular concern about offenders who go to prison for four months



or less where there is no impact in terms of constructive intervention. Yes, some of this is linked to cost but every bit as important is our ability to reduce reoffending and give offenders the tools and skills to lead more law-abiding lives.

EARLY STEPS

We have looked at the crucial challenges facing the PCA and set up a number of portfolio leads that will be supported by assistant chief officers and other senior managers in the policy development process. One of the most important, to promote our work and links with sentencers, will be led by John Crawforth, chief officer in Greater Manchester and a member of the Sentencing Advisory Panel, who is already well known to the Magistrates' Association through the National Sentencer/NOMS Consultation Group. Others reflect changes in the way we work, for example, offender management and the obvious areas such as public protection and diversity.

Diversity is built into the objects of the PCA and Karen Page, probation chief officer for Surrey will lead this brief, which is vitally important in two main ways:

- from a staffing perspective – put simply does probation reflect the communities it seeks to serve? For instance, we are significantly under-represented in terms of black and minority ethnic chief officers;
- in the area of service delivery – recognising and responding to the rapidly changing composition of our local communities. My own area, London, is an obvious example but it is by no means confined to our capital.

On both counts it is essential that we encourage recruitment into probation from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds.

PCA is being incorporated as a company with the 42 chief officers and chief executives in England and Wales comprising the Council. The day-to-day business of the Association will be led by a small executive, elected by the Council, which will be seeking to develop strong external links at the same time as creating internal networks that make us a true membership organisation.

The membership involves chief officers with command responsibility for areas, chief executives, directors, assistant chief officers, board secretaries, treasurers and some 500 senior managers, including those on national or international secondment. We are also establishing a corporate membership, as we believe strongly that there will be mutual benefits in linking those organisations which have a shared interest in promoting public confidence in probation and the criminal justice service as a whole.

The PCA values, in particular, the opportunity for regular dialogue with the Magistrates' Association at national level and looks forward to forging new links locally.

David Scott chairs the Probation Chiefs Association and is chief officer, London Probation.

For further information please contact PCA@london.probation.gsi.gov.uk

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