

The national voice of probation leadership

The **Probation Chiefs Association (PCA)** was launched last month in response to the need for a strong independent professional voice that represents Probation leadership in England and Wales



Signing up for the association

Seated: centre David Scott, chair, Probation Chiefs Association (PCA), and chief officer, London Probation; left Steve Collett, PCA vice-chair and chief officer, Cheshire Probation; right Sue Hall, PCA vice-chair, and chief officer, West Yorkshire Probation. Standing: left Karen Page, PCA executive member and chief officer, Surrey Probation; right John Budd, PCA executive member and chief officer, Suffolk Probation.

The formation of an independent body representing the views of probation chief officers and chief executives has become ever more urgent since probation became a national service in 2001, yet it has been conspicuously absent until now. This has been in contrast to other criminal justice services that have well-established leadership forums, like the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).

The PCA aims to comment, challenge and contribute to the development of not only 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.

We are equally committed to assisting in the development of the wider probation leadership. The PCA will provide assistant chief officers and all senior managers, as members, with opportunities to contribute their thinking, knowledge and expertise to the development of the association and its

role in the public arena.

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 — probation is a public service working within the framework of government.

Our immediate challenge is to establish the association's credibility. Critical to our success will be the way in which we communicate what we do to local people and communities. The reality is that we have evidence that the public in general has only a vague idea of what probation is or

“the best hope of rehabilitating offenders lies in real commitment to offenders as individuals, imaginative offender management with properly focused interventions and supportive wider social provision”

does. However, people’s expectations that offences should not be committed on bail, that defendants do turn up in court and that sentences are correctly implemented and enforced all fall within our remit.

While there is no substitute for getting the quality of what we do right we have to understand much more what interests and concerns the public and address them by responding and putting our messages across clearly. There is growing evidence that when we do this people are much more constructive in their attitude towards crime and punishment than would otherwise be the case. It is also 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; therefore, we will be encouraging research that enables us to demonstrate the impact of the work we do.

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 sentences of 12 months and under. By promoting alternatives to custodial sentences, we have the ability to reduce reoffending and give offenders the tools and skills to lead more law-abiding lives.

The increased focus politically and strategically on reducing re-offending and protecting the public places probation in a pivotal position within the criminal justice service (CJS). However, although our service is a much more effective organisation than it has ever been, the correctional path the service has taken has come with a cost. There has been a shift away from offenders’ families and their communities, and from its traditional partners in the voluntary sector. Ironically, wider community engagement has shrunk at precisely the time it is so urgently needed.

The PCA, in line with all the evidence, maintains that the best hope of rehabilitating offenders lies in real commitment to offenders as individuals, imaginative offender management with properly focused interventions, and supportive wider social provision.

Where the PCA can make a real difference is to articulate a coherent vision, rooted in our collective operational experience. The right balance has to be struck between influencing and contributing to a centrally shaped and determined criminal justice policy in the areas of, say, offender management and broader sentencing policy, while taking account of local responses to local crime. To inform this we have set up a number of portfolio leads that will be supported by assistant chief officers and other senior managers in the policy development process.

We will be promoting and encouraging the following:

Imagination to innovate:

Probation’s active participation in the ‘Virtual Court’ model is a concrete example. This concept seeks to transform the way we do business in court — it can result in some cases being dealt with in hours — by applying modern technology to reduce delays and bureaucracy

Professionalism to perform:

We will be working to achieve the highest professional standards. This will include developing practical tools for practitioners, managers and leaders, and facilitating top quality training jointly with police, prison staff and sentencers where appropriate.

Openness to collaborate:

we will be making new connections with partners and further strengthening existing relationships with a view to extending

influence and exchanging knowledge and good practice. Experience tells us that coalitions of this kind can help ease the process of reform, and change and create channels that allow criminal justice practitioners to be on the front foot, able to identify opportunities and anticipate early signs of disquiet.

The PCA has been incorporated as a company with the 42 chief officers and chief executives in England and Wales comprising the Council. A small Executive, elected by the Council, leads the day-to-day business of the association.

The membership involves chief officers with command responsibility for areas, chief executives, directors, assistant chief officers, board secretaries, treasurers and some 500 senior managers. We are also establishing a corporate membership, owing to mutual benefits in linking those organisations with a shared interest in promoting public confidence in probation and the criminal justice service as a whole.

The PCA will work positively across, and with other organisations in the CJS to develop strong external and internal networks that make us a true membership organisation and provide a distinctive probation leadership voice to the development of effective criminal justice policy and practice. **CJM**

David Scott, chair of the Probation Chiefs Association and chief officer, London Probation.

For further information about PCA and membership enquiries, email PCA@london.probation.gsi.gov.uk

