

Work via Probation service (updated 2005)

National research has clearly established:

- the link between securing full-time employment and reducing criminal behaviour
- that the majority of offenders do not have the basic skills levels required for securing such employment
- that offenders, additionally, need to be able to understand the information presented to them by the probation service and others. (If there is a misunderstanding of letters about the conditions of the enforcement order, there are missed appointments, lack of progress by the offender – with the possibility of being sent back to court - and missed targets for the Probation service).

The West Midlands Probation Service has, for a number of years, progressively established education, training and employment activities as part of the mainstream activity for the service. This has included:

- building greater awareness in voluntary and statutory agencies of the needs of offenders
- recruiting and using people in support mentoring roles
- nominated staff with responsibility to link to colleges and link to employers

In 2001 the key national decision was made that, for those found guilty, all pre-sentence reports should contain a basic assessment of the offender's literacy and numeracy needs. A fast-track screening tool that takes only a few minutes can easily be built into the wider assessment of the offender's needs. This led to a large increase in the numbers of probation service clients whose basic skills needed to be met.

The service now has staff capable of identifying, and responding to, offenders' basic skills needs; basic skills provision in probation hostels and bail hostels; bridging activity to move offenders on from 1:1 support to small group learning, to participation in adult basic skills courses in community settings. The service now also has targets to be met for the numbers of offenders who achieve, in their basic skills, by securing national accreditation.

There are also closer links between this work within the probation service and parallel basic skills work via the prison service. The intention is that prisoners released back in to the community in Birmingham have, through these prison/probation links, a good opportunity to seamlessly continue improving their levels of basic skills.

Probation Service work with offenders

Of the estimated 2000+ people on probation orders in the area more than 50% have strong basic skills needs. Whilst some of these can move into mainstream provision after a short amount of preparatory work, others are very transient (reoffending before being securely linked to provision) or erratic (because of the linkages across to complex lifestyles).

The West Midlands Probation Service has responded well in developing an effective infrastructure in order to deliver more basic skills programmes. They have appointed a basic skills development officer and have a development agenda that includes:

- Using basic skills tutors with recognised national qualifications
- Using approved screening, assessment and individual learning plans.
- Direct provision of, and/or access to, nationally approved programmes of learning, using materials approved by Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit and appropriate to the level of offender
- Providing advice and guidance on progression to other learning opportunities at higher levels within the community
- Ensuring that there is access to ESOL where this is needed
- Learning programmes flexibly constructed including group provision, intensive courses, individual programmes, as well as methods that exploit new technologies.
- Learning mentor support for those who would benefit, with mentors appropriately qualified, supervised and developed
- Access to nationally recognised qualification and accreditation
- Systems for effective monitoring

Given the high potential for attrition between screening at Probation Service Report stage and participation in learning programmes, appropriate assessment needs to take place as soon after referral as possible. Appropriateness of, and familiarity with, screening and diagnostic assessment tools is a continuing issue.

The Probation Service is keen to find ways in which basic skills teaching can be provided whilst an offender is attending other interventions, for example whilst undertaking a general offending behaviour programme, a drug programme or in a hostel.

The Probation Service has clusters of staff (Employment Liaison officers; hostel staff; Probation Service officers; volunteers etc) all of which can have specific contributions to make in terms of supporting offenders to access basic skills provision. Delivery is a mix of in-house and contracted-in (from a variety of providers). Good use has been made, since 1998, of paraprofessionals in hostels (including specialist hostels such as one for men with mental health problems); use of ICT with basic skills software, including flexible use of laptops; customised basic skills provision; 1:1 and drop in work (with visiting teachers) in hostels/day centres. These activities were initially externally funded as development activities but have increasingly been funded by the Probation Service itself.

A substantial proportion of those currently worked with have been successful in the new national tests. This, combined with increased use of assessment tools, and an approach based on topping up spiky profiles etc, has led to more focus on the achievement of outcomes. In Birmingham and Solihull

there are now a set of very challenging targets for the number of probation clients starting community-based basic skills activity and the proportion of these achieving recognised progress or achievement.

Development work is also underway to create a more 'lined-up' set of supports for those offenders (16+, but predominantly 25+) released into Birmingham from Birmingham Prison. Given the basic skills support infrastructure development within the Prison Service it is becoming more feasible for such adults to bring Individual Learning Plans with them on release and to more seamlessly continue their progress towards basic skills accreditations. This has required a set of information-sharing agreements between prison, probation and Jobcentre Plus employment services.

More remains to be done:

- to turn agreements and plans into realities for substantial numbers of people
- to move the funding of basic skills provision, for offenders in the community, onto a longer-term mainstream basis
- to find ways of using such mainstream funds to meet the real needs of people on supervision orders (and to separate these from assumptions being made by provider staff and by probation staff)
- to address the attrition points – i.e. those transitions from referral, to assessment, to teaching, to success, all of which are currently associated with high levels of drop-off and lost opportunities
- to expand the volume of provision able to meet the needs of probation clients – and to link this to 'booster' activity, increased use of ICT, better access to national accreditations etc
- to meet basic skills needs within vocationally-focused training courses.