

Think First: The Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Implementation Strategy of a New General Offending Behaviour Programme

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Summary: This paper outlines the planning, identification and subsequent implementation of Think First, a general offender behaviour programme, into the repertoire of programmes developed by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland in 2009. It considers the implications and challenges in delivering this programme and how it is part of a broader vision within PBNI to deliver accredited, well-designed programmes in preparation for the needs of the new sentencing framework.

Keywords: Offending behaviour programmes, cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing, effective practice principles.

Introduction

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) Corporate Plan 2008–2011 includes the strategic theme that PBNI will ensure the provision of appropriate offender behaviour programmes and interventions for custody and community sentences. To take the Corporate Plan forward, the annual Business Plan 2007–2008 included a Public Protection Objective 'To develop a general offending programme'. This paper outlines PBNI's response to this objective.

PBNI is planning for the introduction of all the provisions contained in the new Criminal Justice Order Sentencing Framework legislation, and sees itself as having a key place in the assessment and management of risk posed by offenders in the community. Community sentences are not a soft option. They are aimed at reducing reoffending and effecting change in the offenders' behaviour; research indicates that one of the

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most effective ways to bring about change can be through the offender undertaking a structured programme. These programmes, run with a tight management structure, by skilled staff and with a programme manual, have been shown to be effective (Maguire, 1995).

In order to ensure that the most effective programme was identified, a working party was set up and spent some considerable time researching general offending behaviour programmes. This scoping exercise looked at various general offending behaviour programmes in the United Kingdom, including Reasoning and Rehabilitation, One to One and Enhanced Thinking Skills.

Following analysis of national and international research, PBNI decided to implement the Think First programme. This is a Home Office accredited programme delivered in most probation areas in England and Wales. Evaluation studies conducted in 2006/07 showed a very promising improvement in positive changes in behaviour among offenders undertaking the programme (Hollis, 2007).

One of these studies looked at a significant number of offenders who attended General Offending Behaviour Programmes, and the study indicated that the reconviction rate for those who completed programmes fell by 26%. However, in relation to those who started but failed to complete, this number reduced dramatically, indicating the need for appropriate targeting and selection of participants.

To reflect back to the Corporate Plan, it included the need for the development of a Northern Ireland Offender Management Strategy which in a nutshell dealt with the need for a seamless offender management process from court sentence through prison, into the community until the end of the court disposal; this has become known within PBNI as 'End to End offender management'. This allows for an alignment of processes and systems to ensure the risk management of offenders. One of the main attractions of Think First is that it can be run in the prison and in the community: this was seen to be an important part of the decision-making as to its suitability to meet the needs of PBNI.

Theoretical base

Thinking areas targeted by offending behaviour programmes include self-control, cognitive style, interpersonal problem-solving, social perspective-taking, values and critical reasoning.

In deciding on Think First, a major factor was that it was based on effective practice principles, which incorporate the following:

- appropriate selection and allocation
- community-based
- focused on criminogenic needs
- structured approach
- responsiveness
- programme integrity
- clear theoretical framework
- cognitive behavioural methods.

It is important to understand the theory of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) on which the programme is based. Professor James McGuire was responsible for developing Think First, and it is his view that cognitive behaviourism represents a combination of different psychological approaches, behaviourism and cognition: the former focuses on observable behaviour and the latter focuses on subjectivity. CBT focuses on thoughts, feelings and behaviour and how they interact with each other. Cognitive abilities are viewed as learned rather than inherent, and so the ability to change and develop new learning is possible.

Groupwork facilitation within PBNI is based on the principle of pro-social modelling. An important factor in group facilitation is the belief in the importance and effectiveness of programmes. This enables clearer communication of the programme contents to participants.

A complex dynamic exists between facilitators and group participants, and it is essential that an empathetic relationship be established between the two. The facilitator is a role model who is clear about roles and boundaries; within this the participant feels respected and valued and by copying the facilitator can learn appropriate ways of behaving.

Think First programme overview

The Think First programme is an intensive offence-focused groupwork programme delivered to groups of up to 10 offenders. Its aims are:

- to help group members develop their skills for thinking about problems and for solving them in real-life situations
- to apply these skills to the problem of offence behaviour and help group members reduce the risk of future offending.

The main objective of the programme is to help offenders learn new skills related to social problem-solving that will enable them to manage areas of concern in their lives and to avoid further offending. It tackles the way offenders think and behave and aims to change behaviour by teaching problem-solving skills.

The programme runs for 30–32 two-hour sessions, comprising four pre-group, 22 group and seven post-group sessions with a number of sessions delivered immediately after the groupwork element by the Case Manager. The final sessions can be delivered over some three to four months after completion of the group element, acting as a ‘booster’ or used as a relapse prevention module.

The pre-group sessions establish a point of contact and set the scene for the remainder of the Probation Order. They begin the working alliance and also check out any obstacles to successful completion. The use of motivational interviewing skills is essential at this early stage.

There are five principles of motivational interviewing: express empathy; avoid argumentation; develop discrepancy; support self-efficacy; and roll with resistance. Motivational interviewing is based on the principles of CBT and is a client-centred approach, which aims to help the participant see the possibilities that can be gained by change.

Core components of the Think First programme include social problem-solving skills, which are the focus of sessions 1–13 (session 14 is a review session). These early sessions start with problem awareness, gathering information, problem definition and assessment, offending behaviour as a problem, through to alternative thinking and decision-making. A number of criminogenic factors are targeted by these skills, i.e.:

- not recognising or avoiding problems
- impulsivity
- lack of empathy
- inability to think of consequences
- rigid thinking.

After session 14 the sessions are all about applying the skills learnt. Skills in self-management and self-control are addressed in sessions 15 and 16; examples of the criminogenic factors targeted include addictive behaviours and impulse control.

Social behaviour and interaction skills are looked at in sessions 17 and 18; examples of the criminogenic factors targeted include communication styles, assertiveness skills and cognition patterns, e.g. stereotyping. Sessions 19–21 focus on perspective-taking, attitudes, negotiation and conflict resolution. Session 22 is a review session.

Pre- and post-groupwork sessions are conducted by the case managers and these include preparation for engaging in the programme and relapse prevention strategies.

Target group

The Think First programme can only be undertaken by way of additional requirement to a Probation Order. A full assessment of the offender's suitability and motivation to comply with the demands of the programme should be conducted at the Pre Sentence Report stage and consent obtained. The following criteria are the basic indicators of suitability for the programme and can be evidenced through the PBNI assessment tool ACE, which is a dynamic offender management assessment tool:

1. 3+ previous convictions
2. aged 18+
3. medium-/high-risk offenders, i.e. 16+ on final ACE score
4. those who have a score of 2 or 3 out of sections 8:3 and 9:4 ACE – Personal Section.

The programme may not be appropriate for certain categories of offenders as outlined below, and additional suitability assessments may be required.

Research shows that for an offender to benefit from the programme it is important that they are motivated to attend and complete. Offenders who start the programme and don't complete are more likely to reoffend than offenders who don't start the programme at all, therefore selection and targeting of appropriate offenders for this programme is key.

Most suitable

- those aged roughly 18–40 years
- medium to medium-high risk of reoffending and high scoring in the 'individual characteristics/ personal skills' section of ACE, i.e. 16+
- repetitive offenders

- burglary, theft, criminal damage, driving-related behaviours
- some offenders convicted of assault
- evidence of difficulty in problem-solving linked to offending behaviour.

Least suitable

- sex offenders, schedule one offenders
- mentally disordered offenders
- those with learning difficulties
- domestic violence, substance misuse
- those at low risk of re-offending.

Treatment management

Treatment management is an essential component of accredited programmes. One of the Treatment Manager's primary responsibilities is providing support and guidance to programme facilitators in achieving best practice for ongoing programme sessions. The Treatment Manager also needs to ensure that programme integrity is maintained throughout all aspects of delivery, to act as a drift check and ensure that there is no reversal of the aims of the programme.

Finally, the Treatment Manager will assist and support facilitators to make decisions, in consultation with the programme manager, with regard to the day-to-day running of the programme, particularly where difficult practice issues arise.

Evaluation

As part of the need to ensure consistency, accredited programmes must evidence that they are being evaluated. In case of Think First this is done by the application of psychometric tests pre- and post-programme, as follows.

- Impulsivity Scale (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1978)
- Locus of Control (Craig *et al.*, 1984)
- Gough Socialisation Scale (Gough, 1960)
- Crime PICS II (Frude *et al.*, 1994)
- PICTS (Psychological Inventory of Criminal Thinking Styles) (Walters, 2001)
- Social Problem-Solving Questionnaire (Clark, 1988)

The psychometric tests can provide information on the impact of programmes in terms of changes in the offender's attitudes and self-reported behaviour both throughout and immediately after attending a programme. The information from pre- and post-testing will also contribute to long-term studies into reconviction and reoffending rates.

Accreditation

To achieve accredited status, programmes go through a rigorous process in terms of how they are designed and developed, and are scrutinised to ensure that they can evidence an impact on offenders. In addition, the programme has to evidence programme integrity, i.e. that it is being delivered to a standard that ensures it targets criminogenic need and leads to a reduction in reoffending.

Implementation plan

Having decided on the appropriate programme it was necessary to establish an implementation plan, and consultation with the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) led us to opt for a widespread implementation across the service and judiciary within a six-month timescale. The strategy had to include senior management agreement and so a presentation was made to and agreed by senior management within PBNI.

The strategy outlined the following.

- It was recommended that Think First should replace two of the current range of programmes: Disqualified Drivers Programme (DDP) and Don't Risk It Programme (DRIP).
- In line with the suggested model of programme delivery that had been agreed with the NI Prison Service, it was recommended that PBNI should deliver the Think First accredited programme according to the relevant level of assessed risk of harm.
- A timeline was drawn up that included training needs for staff across the whole service, and this was seen as a key factor in embedding the programme into staff thinking.
- Awareness training was seen as being required for external agencies including courts, magistrates and judiciary. Consultation with judiciary entailed a briefing note being drawn up to be sent out to

judges/magistrates, followed up by meetings between individual Area Managers and the courts sitting within their area; a meeting was also held with the President of the presiding magistrates and there was ongoing attendance at Judicial Studies Boards.

The strategy also looked at the area of offenders who posed risk of harm. PBNI has a range of programmes for perpetrators of sexual offences and domestic violence, which are delivered by a specialist team in Belfast and from a number of locations in the rural areas. The Cognitive Self Change Programme is delivered from a central point in Belfast using a generic team approach with trained facilitators based in outer offices. Offenders whose offending behaviour is of a sexual and/or domestic violence nature require services that are delivered and managed tightly and that staff be trained and supported to ensure a very high level of performance. The development and implementation of new accredited programmes including the Internet Programme for Sex Offenders and the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) as well as the Safer Lives Programme (programme for young men who commit sex offences) will increase the need for high-intensity programmes for high-risk offenders to be delivered using a specialist model of delivery and management.

The strategy recommended that programmes for medium/high-risk concern offenders should also be delivered using a specialised team approach similar to that employed at the Intensive Supervision Unit (ISU). The ISU was set up to be staffed by experienced Probation Officers who have received specialist training in working with this targeted group of offenders. A cohort of staff provides group work programmes and case management for offenders who have been deemed at risk of harm. The programmes offered there include the Community Sex Offenders Groupwork programme (CSOGP) and the Men Overcoming Domestic Violence programme (MODV). Therefore, to replicate this necessitated the training of a cohort of staff who could deliver the Think First programme aimed at medium- to high-risk offenders.

Workforce planning

A statistical analysis of PBNI caseload revealed that between 250 and 300 offenders fell into the target group of:

- adult 18+
- male/female
- not a sex offender/domestic violence offender
- medium/high risk, i.e. 16+ in the Assessment Case management and Evaluation (ACE) score
- personal/thinking skill deficits – Section 9:4 (ACE).

It was estimated that PBNI should aim for approximately 200 completions per year on a basis of 10–12 participants per group.

This meant that PBNI needed to commence two groups per month, one Belfast-based and one rural-based. Each group would continue for three months at a rate of two sessions per week. In terms of dosage the ideal was two half-day sessions interspaced by one to two days. However, it was agreed that in the rural areas these sessions could be combined into a one-day format.

It was suggested that the grade of staff used to deliver low- to medium-intensity programmes be employed to deliver the Think First programme, i.e. Probation Service Officer (PSO) grades with sessional back-up to cover other programmes. This grade of staff were recruited to provide direct service delivery to offenders and were expected to carry a mixed workload for example programme delivery, community projects and duties in court or as required. Experience of working in social care, youth and community work with a qualification in one of these was one of the essential criteria.

Staff ratios were outlined to meet the requirements to deliver the Think First Programme: seven PSO staff in the rural areas and 5.5 in the Belfast Area.

It was estimated that approximately 50% of clients were employed, requiring the delivery of evening programmes on a 50% pro-rata basis with day programmes. As a result it was suggested that some staff might need to be employed on a part-time, evening basis.

Training

Training was competence-based, requiring the use of an assessment centre approach. The assessment centre is structured around a competency framework that is the basis of assessing the suitability of a staff member to attend core skills and programme-specific training; the purpose is to ensure staff members' ability to deliver an accredited programme.

The process involved a 10–15 minute presentation and a structured interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. This approach had already been employed successfully for other accredited programmes that PBNI delivers.

Once selected, facilitators were required to attend five days' Groupwork Skills Training and a further five days' programme-specific training. PBNI identified and employed two experienced trainers from the North West Training Consortium in February and March 2008 to train an initial cohort of 16 staff, i.e. Facilitators and Programme/Treatment Managers.

Training for pre-sentence report (PSR) writers and Case Managers as well as Field Managers was highlighted. North West Training Consortium Trainers provided two-day 'Train the Trainer' training for three to four Learning and Development staff and the Programme Managers so that they can provide this training in-house on a cascade basis.

As noted in the overview, evaluation will be a key part of the development of this programme and a database has been set up; within this Northern Ireland has been designated as a separate region by NOMS. The information from the psychometric tests will be fed into the national database, which is set up in such a way that PBNI can use the data collected. It is equally important to gather the views of participants in terms of its responsivity in terms of delivery but also in terms of relevance to their needs. This information is being gathered through verbal feedback, interviews and group discussions. A total of 180 Probation Orders have been made with the additional requirement of Think First across Northern Ireland. Ten programmes have been run to date, with an average of nine people completing each programme. Evaluation feedback will be available within the next six to 12 months and it will be important to use this information to feed into the development of this programme.

Future development

The main aim of Think First and the development of programmes is to ensure effective risk management of offenders, to challenge, change and protect.

The Think First programme was implemented in Northern Ireland in 2008 and is thus relatively new to the PBNI; however, it has been

running in England and Wales since 2004. Like all programmes it is not static, and while research has shown the efficacy of the programme there has been ongoing updating to reflect developing practice. Within PBNI we are watching with interest the development of a new second-generation programme, 'Thinking Skills', which incorporates advances in cognitive behavioural techniques.

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