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Quality: Lessons from a User Survey

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Summary

A survey of service users carried out on behalf of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) by independent consultants in 2003/04 found high levels of satisfaction and evidence of adherence to practice standards which was consistent with evidence from internally collected key performance data. The survey has also usefully identified areas for improvement and provides the basis for continued monitoring of organisational performance from a user's perspective.

Keywords Service users, user satisfaction, practice standards, business improvement.

Introduction

In 2001 the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) commenced a business improvement project using the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model. The model emphasises collection of information about results which are used to guide business improvement and the User Survey is an important component of that project. It includes the following key concepts:

- Results orientation – improvement in an organisation is demonstrated by results as a consequence of improved processes, policies and management;
- Customer focus – organisations in the public sector and private business survive on their ability to provide a valued service or product to their consumers and any assessment of their performance should reflect their views;
- Leadership and constancy of purpose – feedback from users and customers provides focus for leaders and goals for the organisation;
- Management by processes and facts – user feedback provides factual information about the impact of processes and about how well they are being applied;
- Continuous learning, improvement and innovation – a good survey of user opinions will indicate improvements, corrective action and even unintended consequences of organisational performance;
- Public responsibility – the EFQM model emphasises public responsibility for both public and private organisations. User feedback can provide information about fairness, equity and societal impact of an organisation's performance.

Based on this model the objectives of the survey were to ascertain the satisfaction of users with the service they were receiving, to confirm that standards of practice are being maintained and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions against intended outcomes.

Design of the User Survey

With the help of the NI Statistics and Research Agency PBNI commissioned Price Waterhouse Cooper to carry out the survey. It was agreed that the methodology would be comprised of six consequential steps:

- Desk top research – the aim was to identify comparative data against which PBNI performance could be judged. The most useful study was research commissioned by the Home Office in England and Wales in 1993 1.
- Staff In-depth interviews – as a first step in the design of the survey, staff were interviewed to understand their perception of the job and the objectives of their work.
- Offender focus groups – these were convened in urban and rural locations to test some questions related to the enquiry with service users and to ascertain the aspects of the service they felt were important and should be tested;
- Questionnaire design – using information from the staff in-depth interviews and the offender focus groups, a pilot questionnaire was designed. It covered social characteristics, the nature of contact with their Probation Officer, the impact of supervision, satisfaction with the service provided, the rigour of supervision, their relationship with the supervising officer and the range of interventions used;
- Pilot study – the questionnaire was piloted in Crawford Square office, Derry with 12 offenders;
- Survey implementation – after modifications following the pilot study a full survey was undertaken with a further 130 offenders across Northern Ireland, proportionately representative of the caseloads in PBNI team areas. The survey was restricted to users aged 18 and over subject to current community based supervision excluding Community Service. The sample was approximately 15% of the target group.

Results

Profile of respondents

It was important to ensure that the sample was representative of those supervised by PBNI, so the survey group composition reflected that of the organisation's caseload by gender (80% male; 20% female), age (46% were age 17 – 24; 29% were age 25 – 34), social status (99% were socio

economic group C2DE -unskilled manual/unemployed), marital status (66% single; 23% married/living as married) and type of Order (11% Combination Order; 73% Probation Order; 12% Custody Probation Order).

Contact with Probation Officer

Levels of contact are important basic indicators of the engagement with offenders. Levels of contact reported by the survey group were high (94% reported weekly contact at commencement of Order; 48% currently reporting weekly; 31% fortnightly) which confirms the findings of Key Performance Measures monitoring. Most users (92%) were satisfied with this frequency of contact and with the length of the sessions (90%) which was from 30 minutes to one hour.

Contact with other service deliverers

PBNI is committed to providing a service which is of high quality and meets the needs of offenders and public protection. In order to achieve this level of quality in an appropriate setting, and relevance to the user, emphasis is put upon the use of internal specialists, community groups and voluntary organisations which can provide expertise beyond that of the supervising officer. Users reported a wide range of services received from specialist providers including training, employment, addictions services, local community groups and internal programme providers or specialists. The majority of users (76%) found these services useful.

Change in supervising officer

At a time of higher than usual staff turnover there was concern that many users would have had a change of supervising officer which carries risks of disruption and inconsistency. However, the majority (65%) had no change of supervising officer and of those where there was a change, only one respondent had requested the change. In a small number of cases there was a worryingly high number, up to four, changes of supervising officer.

Home visiting

PBNI practice standards specify the need for home visiting so it is not surprising that 90% of users had received visits at home. The majority of users did not have a preference for home or office visits. Where a preference was expressed, it mainly related to convenience but some said they prefer to keep their home life separate while others believed it important to involve their family or partner.

Location of Probation Office

PBNI are currently undertaking a review of their estate and user views can be helpful in decisions about future office location. Most of the respondents (82%) found the location of their Probation office convenient but some (18%) thought it inconvenient because it was more than five miles from their home.

Contacting their Probation Officer

An indicator of a good quality service is accessibility and nearly all the users (94%) found it

easy to contact their supervising officer. Almost half the respondents had visited their Probation office without an appointment and the majority were able to see their own officer. However, by the nature of a Probation Officer's work, a number were seen by a colleague officer and all reported that they were very satisfied with the service they received.

Contact with family or others in the community

For a range of reasons, including the needs of the user and public protection, family or community contact can be an essential part of a supervision plan and home visiting is a feature of PBNI practice standards. Almost half the respondents reported contact with their family (despite the majority of the sample being single) but only a small number (9%) reported contact with the community. These contacts were recognised by users as being necessary in most cases.

Enforcement - induction

Effective enforcement depends upon prompt action by the supervising officer and the offenders' clear understanding of their responsibilities. Nearly all users recalled being informed of the requirement to keep appointments, received a copy of their Order to sign and confirmed consent. More than half recalled the requirements to behave appropriately, to inform of a change of address and the procedures for changing an appointment. However, it was noted that 21% did not recall being told of confidentiality limitations which is a potential area for improvement.

Risk assessment and supervision plan

Nearly all users (84%) reported that a risk assessment process was undertaken but there was a large variation in the risk score reported by offenders and the actual score recorded. This understanding should be improved since it is crucial to motivation in the supervision process. However, nearly all users reported that a supervision plan had been drawn up and nearly all of those (98%) agreed with its contents.

Enforcement – appointments

When asking about experience of enforcement procedures, most users reported that they had been informed of the consequences of failing to keep appointments. There were 32% who had missed an appointment and they reported a verbal or written consequence in the vast majority of cases. Most of them thought it was a fair response although less than a fifth of their explanations for failing to keep an appointment were deemed acceptable.

Satisfaction levels

There were generally very positive views of supervising officers and satisfaction with supervision. Probation Officers were described as friendly (82%), a good listener (75%) and reliable (65%). Some negative views were expressed ('strict' – 18%; 'intrusive' – 16%) but it could be argued that it is likely that a non collusive supervising officer might be perceived this way. An overall satisfaction rate of 98% was reported. This is extremely high in such surveys, especially where the user is receiving a service they have not chosen but have had imposed.

Influence on offending

In spite of the high levels of satisfaction and indicators of effective practice from the survey, few users identified Probation interventions as the main influences on their likelihood to reoffend. The two main influences identified are family (rated top by 54%) and fear of prison (36%)

Expectations of Probation

However, users did expect Probation to help prevent offending as well as provide assistance with employment and accommodation. Significantly, nearly all (96%) reported that Probation met or exceeded their expectations.

Content of supervision

Service users reported that the content of supervision emphasised offending related issues. A majority were referred to specialist resources but a significant number (32%) failed to engage with them. Where users did engage with specialists there was a high satisfaction level.

Overall satisfaction levels

Satisfaction rates of 59% very satisfied with the overall experience of being supervised and 36% quite satisfied give an overall satisfied rating of 95% which compares extremely favourably with public and private sector studies across the UK and Ireland.

Comparison with England and Wales

The results obtained from the survey were compared with those from the 1993 Home Office study in England and Wales 1. While some results were similar, there were others which demonstrated a comparatively high level of performance as perceived by service users.

Question	Home Office Report	PBNI
Copy of order to sign	85%	97%
Confirmed consent	Over 90%	97%
Supervision plan	65%	82%
Frequency of first appointments	83% weekly	94% weekly

The way forward

As explained earlier, the EFQM model emphasises results and the use of results information to improve performance.

The results of this survey are very impressive. Overall satisfaction levels of 95% (59% very satisfied and 36% quite satisfied) are remarkable, especially since research indicates that when forced to use a service, as offenders are in this case, respondents generally will score the service lower. PBNI also compares favourably with the only other significant survey of offender attitudes that was discovered.

In order to make best use of these findings it is important to build upon the knowledge gained to further develop and monitor service provision. There is now a baseline against which to compare future findings and to identify improvements that can be made.

In general the strategy will be to move the proportion indicating "quite good" into "very good" since a "quite good" rating indicates room for improvement. More specifically certain areas which are of concern will be addressed including the explanation of confidentiality so that it has a more lasting impact upon offenders under supervision and communication of supervision plans. A plan should be central to supervision and underpin the rationale for every interaction with an offender so one would expect it to be more to the fore than was indicated in the survey.

A plan is being developed to monitor user views through internally administered surveys and periodic engagement of independent consultants to provide a picture of improvements and progress in relation to the actions taken.

However, notwithstanding these potential improvements, it is clear from the survey that most of the credit for the positive results is attributable to supervising officers and their workplace colleagues who are the public face of the service by which it is judged. Comments about their performance are overwhelmingly positive and highly valued by offenders who respect their supervising officers and the job they do.

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Inaugural PROTECT N&S National Conference Summary

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Summary

PROTECT N&S is a joint initiative between the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) and the Probation & Welfare Service (PWS). The project was developed as a response to the Belfast Agreement and the subsequent Criminal Justice Review that highlighted the need for development of co-operation between public bodies in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This paper is a summary of the proceedings of the inaugural project conference, held in May 2005.

Keywords Best Practice; Innovation; Vision; Collaboration; Partnership; Community

Introduction

Funded by the Special European Union Programmes Body under the Cross-Border Co-operation Measure, PROTECT N&S aims to contribute to community safety throughout Ireland by enhancing co-operation between the two Probation Services with particular emphasis on developing best practice, joint training and exchange opportunities. The project brings together an Ireland-wide network of probation management, staff and Criminal Justice experts who have practical experience of effective practice in securing the protection and safety of communities through the social inclusion of offenders.

PROTECT N&S has been in operation for fifteen months and has sought to focus on the significant challenges of building a safer society, through partnerships with other agencies and communities. This is at the heart of the mission statements of both PWS and PBNI.

The inaugural PROTECT N&S National Conference was held in Dublin on 24/25 May 2005. The Conference aims were to:

- Promote the role of the community in working in partnership with criminal justice agencies towards enhanced community safety,
- Demonstrate current effective practice within criminal justice services, and
- Identify developing trends and issues in criminal justice across Ireland.

Over 120 people attended and participated in a varied, interesting and challenging programme building on the work undertaken in the four seminars with PWS and PBNI border teams during the last year. Domestic Violence, Alcohol- Related Offending and Drug-Dependent Offending were particular issues under consideration in these seminars. A very full Conference