

The Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation System (ACE) in Northern Ireland

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Summary: This article charts the introduction and development of the ACE (Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation) risk assessment system in the Probation Board for Northern Ireland during the mid-1990s.

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Introduction

In the early 1990s a major sentencing review heralded the introduction of the 1996 Criminal Justice Act (NI). This legislation fundamentally changed the nature of the work of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), from a service mandated to ‘advise, assist and befriend’ clients to one tasked to ‘protect the public’ as well as to ‘rehabilitate the offender’.

In anticipation of this development, an organisational change management process began in the PBNI. This process was based on the TQM (total quality management) approach and involved the establishment of task-focused, cross-sectional teams to work on identified areas of practice. I was involved alongside seven or eight other managers, probation officers and administrative grades in the working party tasked to address the needs of the PBNI in relation to assessment as well as what were known in those days as SERs (social enquiry reports).

The Task Group spent a number of months researching and evaluating different assessment tools used nationally and internationally. The three main tools considered were LSI-R (Level of Service Inventory-Revised),

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OGRS (Offender Group Reconviction Score) and ACE (Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation) System.¹ The pros and cons of each tool were considered and the decision was made to adopt the ACE System, largely due to the fact that it was a more comprehensive and dynamic tool which could be used at various stages of contact to inform assessment and case management. It is interesting to note that at this stage most of the discussion was around assessment and supervision; the terms 'risk assessment' and 'risk management' were not part of the vernacular!

The rationale for the introduction of ACE was that the PBNI needed to adopt a more systematic, consistent and evidence-based approach to the assessment of offenders. Until then, assessments had been based solely on practitioner judgements and, whilst these were in some cases extremely good, they were inconsistent and dependent on the knowledge and skill of the individual probation officer. It was recognised in the new era that the PBNI needed to make assessments which were accurate as well as defensible and which would stand up to increased scrutiny.

The PBNI, as with the Irish Probation Service, came relatively late to structured assessment systems. In the early 1990s some services in England and Wales had started to use ACE; these included the Greater Manchester Probation Service and the West Midlands Probation Service. Being able to learn from the experiences of others proved invaluable to the Task Group. We also consulted with Colin Roberts, Professor of Criminology at the Probation Studies Unit at Oxford University, who had designed the original ACE system. We were impressed by the depth of his knowledge about risk assessment and case management and his practical approach. In addition, his probation background was useful in relation to the PBNI's implementation of ACE in Northern Ireland.

Initial development

The initial stage of the change process involved the establishment of an implementation plan. As part of this process, a further ACE Development Group, comprising a cross-section of staff, was set up and provided a useful access point for Roberts and his team.

¹ At that stage, work in the UK on the Offender Assessment System (OASys) had not yet begun. See www.probation.homeoffice.gov.uk for further details on OASys.

One of the first tasks of the Development Group was to customise ACE to the specific needs of Northern Ireland, both in terms of the tool itself and the guidance notes which accompanied the tool. It was clear from the outset that a tool which was researched and developed in another cultural context and based on patterns and profiles of offending in England and Wales would not automatically transfer. The Development Group made a number of key changes to the English model, including the development of a Young Persons' ACE, a risk of harm filter, a revised scoring mechanism and the insertion of protective factors i.e. strengths to provide a more balanced outcome rather than focusing solely on risk factors. As well as this, the Development Group was keen, as a result of consultation with the practitioners and teams, that the tool would include a section on victims, the community and a case history perspective.

Although the work of the Development Group delayed the initial implementation of ACE it was felt that these changes to the format and content of the tool were essential to improve the validity of the tool and for staff to feel ownership of the final outcome. In fact, Roberts transferred many of the ideas from and much of the work carried out in Northern Ireland back to England and Wales in terms of the development of the OASys tool. It is interesting to see that many of the inclusions that Northern Ireland had conceived (for example the risk of harm assessment) were subsequently incorporated in OASys.

Training

Once the Development Group felt comfortable with the final draft – there were in fact numerous drafts of ACE (NI) – attention turned to the model for training/implementation. The Development Group considered that training was key to the successful implementation of ACE. It also felt that the follow-up to initial training was equally as important in order to embed the process and make further adjustments to the tool. In England and Wales the model of pilot sites had been adopted but the Development Group opted instead for widespread implementation, with the use of 'champions', one from each operational team, to assist with the process.

Training was conducted on a team-by-team basis with the assistance of the champions, who were initially trained alongside middle and senior

management. The basic training courses were two-day events, commencing with an overview of assessment processes and some skills training in eliciting information and forming judgements, and followed by an introduction to ACE itself.

Until this training very little had been done in terms of knowledge and skill development within the PBNI in relation to risk assessment training. The process therefore proved to be quite a culture shock for some staff who until then had worked from their own structures and who felt that their practice was being interfered with in some way. It is fair to say that there was a good deal of initial resistance to be overcome. However with the help of a consistent focus from senior management, the use of the cross-sectional Development Group and the adoption of the change management model using a representative from each team, the process of implementing ACE began to work. Within a few months all members of the service were trained and the date for full-scale implementation had arrived.

As with all processes, ACE impacted on other systems as well as other organisations and individuals, both internal and external. Briefing sessions were undertaken with judges and magistrates as well as solicitors, and further down the line work began with staff from the Prison Service and Training Schools (as the Youth Justice Centres were known at that time), to enable them to understand the ACE process and its implications for their work. In fact a major training and development plan was initiated and developed with the Prison Service, which has seen the introduction of ACE into the prison setting in Northern Ireland. It was recognised that it was important if not essential to have a seamless criminal justice system employing aligned processes and systems in order to have effective risk assessment and risk management of offenders.

Implementation and further development

The Development Group, having successfully overseen the initial introductory training, soon realised that this was only the beginning of its work. Knowing on the one hand how to use ACE at an individual level and on the other achieving consistency on an organisational level were the two ends of a continuum. It was recognised that the PBNI had a long way to go before it would achieve the latter.

The trusted model of the Development Group came into play once again to oversee and audit the ongoing implementation of ACE. Thus the team representatives were asked to monitor and provide feedback on issues, difficulties and strengths in practice as well as to carry out, from time to time, formal audits of practice.

Although extremely ambitious, it was very useful that the PBNI, at the same time as embarking on a process of change in terms of assessment, was also introducing new formats and processes in relation to presentence report (PSR) writing and subsequently in terms of supervision and case management standards. Some would say that it was foolhardy to implement so much change at one time but on the other hand it meant that all the changes developed together and contributed to an integrated system for the assessment and case management of offenders in Northern Ireland.

As a consequence, audits of PSRs were able to incorporate an element of the connection between the ACE risk assessment and the PSR. Furthermore, audits of case management and supervision planning were able to ascertain how far work plans were established from the use of ACE. Initially it was apparent that some probation officers were completing the ACE documentation subsequent to the completion of the PSR or work plans, thus relegating ACE to the level of a paperwork exercise. However, as time went on and new staff were trained and inducted on the basis of ACE, this practice diminished.

Further developments and adaptations did occur arising out of the feedback to the Development Group. Perhaps the most important of these was the development of RAI (Risk Assessment Inventory), the risk of harm assessment tool for use with those who were identified via the ACE screen as having the potential to cause serious harm to others. The initial tool for this was developed in-house and then further adaptations were made in consultation with the Psychology Department at Queen's University Belfast.

The development and implementation of RAI, alongside the introduction of a policy concerning the assessment and management of risk concern cases, meant that the PBNI was well placed to meet the demands of the new criminal justice and sex offender legislation of the late 1990s in Northern Ireland as well as the introduction of MASRAM, the multi-agency process for the risk assessment and management of sex offenders.

Data collection/PIMS

One of the features of ACE which appealed to managers as well as researchers was its evaluation aspect. ACE provides a wealth of information not only for individual practitioners in terms of reviewing the effectiveness of practice and progress on supervision but also on a macro level for analysis in terms of the profile of offender populations in Northern Ireland. This in turn is invaluable information for the planning and resourcing of projects to meet offender needs.

Unfortunately, until relatively recently, the fact that ACE was a paper-based process made data collation a laborious task, carried out mostly by university researchers or social work students on a small scale. However, the introduction of PIMS (PBNI Information Management System) has meant a major change in the PBNI's capacity to collect and analyse data. Whilst some concerns exist at this early stage in relation to the reliability of data, this is a developmental issue which will be resolved and the introduction of PIMS means that the PBNI is now in a position to appreciate fully the opportunities provided by the 'E' (evaluation) element of ACE.

Future development

The transformation of the PBNI's systems of risk assessment has been a ten-year project, which, since risk assessment is such a dynamic process, is still subject to change. However, I believe the service has substantially improved its capacity to risk assess and risk manage increasingly more high-risk offenders. It is also well placed to meet the demands of new legislation which will bring more offenders of a high-risk profile under the statutory supervision of the PBNI as a consequence of the recent review of criminal justice legislation in Northern Ireland.

Two issues still remain for consideration in my opinion. First is the issue of the North/South integration and alignment of risk assessment systems. It is regrettable that both services have developed apart on this issue, although it is true that both have made major strides in implementing more systematic, rigorous and evidence-based approaches. It should be possible to establish more integration and to plan together on proposed developments in this important area of practice. The second is the issue of OASys, particularly now that E-OASys exists. Much expertise, time and energy have gone into the development and

continuing refinement of this well-researched and comprehensive tool. It represents, in terms of performance/management reporting in particular, a considerable improvement on both ACE and LSI-R. The situation regarding OASys is subject to continuing review within the PBNI and a final decision on its applicability will need to be taken by all the criminal justice agencies both North and South.

Due to the mobility of offenders, it is important to ensure that processes and systems between the three jurisdictions – England/Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland – are aligned to ensure effective risk assessment and risk management of offenders, particularly those who have the potential to cause serious harm to others.