The Level of Service Inventory in the Republic of Ireland

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Summary: By 2004 it was widely accepted that structured risk instruments such as the Level of Service Inventory-Revised could help improve the accuracy of predictions of the likelihood of reconviction and other outcomes. The Probation Service in Ireland came later to it than UK services but learned from their experiences, for example, of the importance of training and of acknowledging and planning for the consequential changes to service culture. After the system was rolled out, periodic valuations were made of samples of test scores which yielded valuable information on the risk and need levels of offender populations and of the quality of the tests themselves. The emphasis now is on refresher training, exploration of newer versions and other instruments and computerisation of the test process.

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Introduction

During the mid to late 1990s, criminal justice services in the UK and some other European countries began to explore the possibilities offered by structured risk instruments in the assessment and management of offenders. In Ireland a limited number of Dublin staff working in the Bridge Project and the Circuit Court were trained to use the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R) in the late 1990s. Then in spring 2004, it was decided to introduce structured risk assessment instruments into mainstream practice across the country.

In selecting the appropriate instrument, the experiences of the Bridge Project and Circuit Court were important sources of information about the LSI-R, as well as the research and evaluations of the experiences of other probation and criminal justice services in using the LSI-R and

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similar instruments. In the end the decision came down to a choice between the LSI-R and the Offender Assessment System (OASys) that had been developed by the Home Office for use in the English and Welsh probation and prison services. Major factors influencing the decision were the body of evidence supporting the LSI-R and the fact that its lengthy development process had ensured that the test is relatively short and therefore useable on a day-to-day basis by practitioners. Having made the decision to introduce the LSI-R, the service also decided to adopt the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI) as its core assessment instrument for assessing younger clients.

The rationale for the introduction of the LSI-R and YLS/CMI was recognition that the service needed a consistent and evidence-based approach to the assessment of clients. By 2004 it had been accepted by criminal justice organisations throughout the world that assessments of clients based solely on practitioner judgements were likely to be both inconsistent and unreliable. A host of studies had also demonstrated that structured risk assessments such as the LSI-R could help improve the accuracy of predictions of the likelihood of reconviction and other outcomes.

The Irish service came late to structured assessment compared to services in many parts of the UK. This gave it a huge advantage, as it was able to learn from the experiences of others, both good and bad. It also tapped into the knowledge and experience of staff at The Cognitive Centre Foundation who had been instrumental in introducing the LSI-R and YLS/CMI into practice throughout the UK. The key lesson learned from these sources was that simply training staff to use the test without providing ongoing support at many levels would very quickly reduce the impact of the LSI-R on the development of practice in the service.

**Partnership**

The Cognitive Centre Foundation, despite its grand title, is a limited company called SSD Limited. For some in the UK public sector, working with private business is akin to a pact with the devil as its sole focus is considered to be on making a profit. As a result, some preferred to try to develop their own (extremely poor) intervention programmes rather than purchase expertly designed and proven programmes from the
outside. When confronted by someone who expressed this view, one of the founders of the company David Sutton, a former chief probation officer, asked whether that meant that they also made their own desks, chairs and filing cabinets.

The upshot is that real partnerships between probation services and the Cognitive Centre are rare, however where they do exist the outcomes are invariably positive for all those involved. From the outset the Irish Probation Service was clear that it wanted to work in partnership with the Cognitive Centre and in particular to benefit from the Cognitive Centre’s knowledge and experience of what needed to be in place to make full use of the tests. The service was very clear about what it wanted to achieve and where it wanted to go, but also knew that it had to be responsive to the concerns of staff and to implementation issues as they arose.

Training

The management style and culture in the Irish Probation Service is very different from the centrally driven and directive-based model exercised by the British Home Office through the National Offender Management Service and recognises that staff must be firmly ‘on board’ if a project is to succeed. Before the training proper started, therefore, management emphasised that the introduction of the LSI-R into practice would be a gradual process designed to ensure that staff fully understood the professional rationale behind the move to structured risk assessment and the impact that it was likely to have on their work practices.

The process of introducing and assimilating the LSI-R into practice started in the early summer of 2004, initially with a presentation to managers followed by a series of half-day introductory sessions throughout the country. These sessions were primarily concerned with providing staff with information about the LSI-R, giving them a chance to ask questions and generally preparing them for what was to be a major change in the way they worked. These events were important for a number of reasons, not least of which was to gauge people’s reactions to the prospect of the LSI-R tests being introduced. Whilst there were many questions asked, my impression is that people did not generally feel threatened or challenged by being asked to use the tests and the vast majority welcomed it as a way to improve practice.
The LSI-R basic training course lasts for two days, the second day taking place approximately six weeks after the first. This gives participants an opportunity to practice using the instrument and to share experiences and questions on the second training day. The first part-one training day took place in Limerick on 14 September and the fifteenth and last of these events was held on 21 October. When all fifteen courses were completed (by the end of January), the vast majority of probation officers were trained and qualified to use the LSI-R. The first YLS/CMI courses were run in Dublin at the end of January.

The changes that the LSI-R represented for the service were also likely to impact on the organisations and individuals that interact with probation officers on a daily basis. Briefing sessions, led by Anna Connolly, were therefore undertaken with judges and lawyers to ensure that they had an understanding of the tests, how they were to be used and in particular how they were likely to impact on the preparation of pre-sanction reports.

### Staff performance, support and development

It was realised from the outset that the introduction of the LSI-R tests would prove a major cultural change for the service. Previously, as with other probation and criminal justice services throughout the world, services provided for clients had been largely based on unstructured assessment and interventions that relied heavily on the officer’s training and professional and life experience. The interactions between officer and client were essentially guided by the officer’s judgement of what was right in that particular situation. Certainly there were no ‘correct’ ways of doing things.

The LSI-R tests changed this, as there is certainly a correct way of using the tests based on an understanding of social learning theory and the testing procedures outlined in the manuals. There are scoring ‘rules’ that can be broken and therefore an officer’s use of the tests can be deemed faulty and mistakes can be fairly easily identified. Thus systems needed to be developed that not only supported staff but also actively encouraged the development of the instruments as part of service delivery in the Irish Probation Service. It was also acknowledged that management needed to be aware of situations where the tests were not being accurately scored, and more contentiously which members of staff were making mistakes.
The importance of developing consistent and accurate use of the tests is twofold. Firstly it ensures that the service provided to any particular client is not solely dependent on the skills and expertise of the officer preparing their report or supervising them. Secondly when used well the tests give reliable information about changes in a client’s risk levels, and eventually information on the effectiveness of interventions.

That there would be initial ‘inter-rater reliability’ problems was predictable and anticipated. The LSI training is called ‘basic’ training, in other words there is an expectation that further training and/or support will follow. As with any training programme it could be predicted that there would be variations in levels of understanding and subsequent performance. What is different about the LSI tests is that these variations can be identified.

At the outset it was agreed that the mechanism for offering staff support and guidance in the use of the instruments would be the LSI Superuser Group. The ‘superuser’ approach had been used before in the service as a means of supporting specific areas of practice. Officers volunteered or were recruited in the spring of 2004 and advanced training courses were run in June and November. The LSI Superuser Group comprises ‘champions’ in the use of the test and is seen as offering a pool of expertise and experience that staff can utilise when necessary.

Integration

A considerable amount of work has been undertaken on the integration of the tests into the practices of the service. The training raised many practical issues from how to explain the use of the tests to clients to how to use it in formulating parole reports. During the basic training programme, management became clearer about how the tests should be used and developed practice guidelines that have since become part of the training. The tests are now central to overall risk and case management practices in the service.

The training also offered a model for interpreting the results of LSI-R tests and using them to develop case management approaches. In other jurisdictions it had been observed that the link between the LSI-R assessments and case planning had not been made and that the LSI-R test was not always being used to guide plans for intervention. From the outset the training aimed to emphasise this link.
The next or fourth generation of assessment instruments makes the links more overt and is designed to be compatible with organisational case management and tracking systems. These tools work on the principle that criminal and youth justice probation and social work organisations should be aiming to reduce recidivism through addressing criminogenic need rather than providing a general welfare service. Crucially these instruments address responsivity issues and take practitioners through a process of assessment, analysis and interpretation, intervention planning and review. The YLS/CMI is an example of a fourth generation instrument.

**Data collection and interpretation: Lessons for practice**

One of the beneficial aspects of the use of the LSI-R tests is that collecting and analysing the data from the tests can generate valuable information on the risk and need levels of offender populations throughout Ireland. Thus part of the agreement between the Probation Service and the Cognitive Centre was that the Cognitive Centre would produce periodic evaluations of samples of LSI-R and YLS/CMI tests. These evaluations provide information on risk and need levels of offender populations in Ireland and on the quality of the tests themselves.

The first sample was evaluated at the Cognitive Centre in the summer of 2005. The trawl undertaken to find LSI-R tests for the sample indicated that the use of the test was somewhat patchy and that it had been more readily integrated into practice in some areas than in others. Nevertheless enough tests were available to provide representative samples for all the teams/regions in Ireland and overall the initial results proved encouraging in that the comparative risk levels were broadly as expected, for example the Dublin samples scored higher on average than the ‘country’ areas. Within Dublin, the Circuit Court and the Bridge Project teams scored significantly higher than the other Dublin teams, again as expected. It was also evident that basic mistakes in administration were being made which, whilst probably not affecting the overall results in the study, might have significant implications for the assessments of individual clients.

The results from the second, larger sample in 2006 were even more encouraging. Overall the scores had increased which, in the view of the tests’ publishers and Professor Peter Raynor at Swansea University,
indicates that users in Ireland are becoming more confident in the use of the tests. There was also an ‘evening out’ of the scores to the extent that risk levels in the regions in country areas had become quite similar, as had the Dublin scores with the expected exception of the Circuit Court and Bridge Project teams. However mistakes in administration were still evident and that was a concern.

The collection and interpretation of data is a valuable spin-off from the use of the LSI-R as information can be obtained about offender characteristics based on a range of factors such as gender, geography, offence type, age etc. This in turn can provide hard information to assist decisions about the level and nature of resources needed.

**2007 and beyond**

In less than three years the Irish Probation Service has transformed its risk assessment processes, but it still has many challenges to face. As the tests become more widely used the task of improving and sustaining inter-rater reliability becomes more important. In 2004 Bonta wrote, ‘A training programme may successfully train staff to a high skill level but the skills often deteriorate with time. In one study, hundreds of videotapes of offender risk assessments conducted by correctional officers found an average error rate of 13%. After booster training sessions, the percentage of errors decreased to one percent’. Basic training is thus only the start and refresher training led by the LSI Superuser Group has to be a priority.

One associated issue is that overall responsibility for the supervision of staff, which includes the monitoring of performance, lies with the line manager or senior probation officer. The LSI Superuser Group’s remit can only cover overall trends and issues, not the individual performance of probation offers who are, after all, their peers. What has emerged is the need to equip the supervisors of LSI-R users with the ability to identify where staff are making errors in the use of the tests and to help correct them. The Cognitive Centre has developed new training materials that will hopefully help superusers and supervisors in their tasks.

The new version of the LSI-R, the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI) is now available. This fourth-generation instrument offers a similar model to the YLS/CMI and may, in the long term, be a way forward for the service. The use of other risk assessment
instruments to support assessment processes should also be a consideration, particularly in relation to the assessment of risk of serious harm and of ‘specialist’ offenders such as domestic violence and sex offenders.

Validation studies are necessary in order that the tests can formally be said to be validated in the Irish jurisdiction. The reality is that the LSI tests are reliable predictors in Ireland but the formal step of a validation study remains an important stage.

Finally, computerisation is central to the overall success of the project. Eventually the pen and paper ‘QuikScore™’ will largely be a thing of the past. Officers will input the test results, which will be integrated into offenders’ electronic records. Not only will this allow for more effective risk and case management but also over time a huge database on Irish offender populations and trends will be available to the service. This will begin to become a reality during the next year.

References