

Customer, Consumer or Client?

Putting the Service-User Centre-Stage in Probation Work

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Good afternoon, I am going to talk about focusing on Service Users in the Criminal Justice context and particularly the Probation Service context. I want to talk about some of the issues and challenges involved in our sector as well as the advantages and benefits, as I would see them, for focusing on service-users in a particularly pro-active, and positive, way. My focus will be in parts on strategic issues and elements and more “nitty gritty” elements.

PRESENTATION OUTLINE

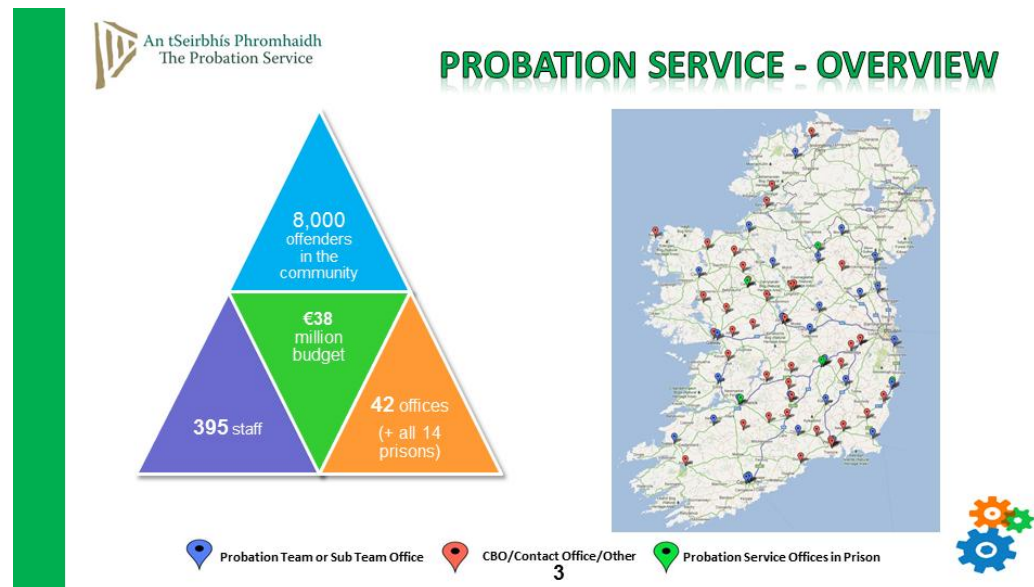
- 1. Probation - context of services in Ireland.**
- 2. Who are our ‘customers’ and ‘clients’?**
- 3. What and who is / are ‘deserving’? And does it matter?**
- 4. Customer focus & practice in probation work.**
- 5. Conclusion.**

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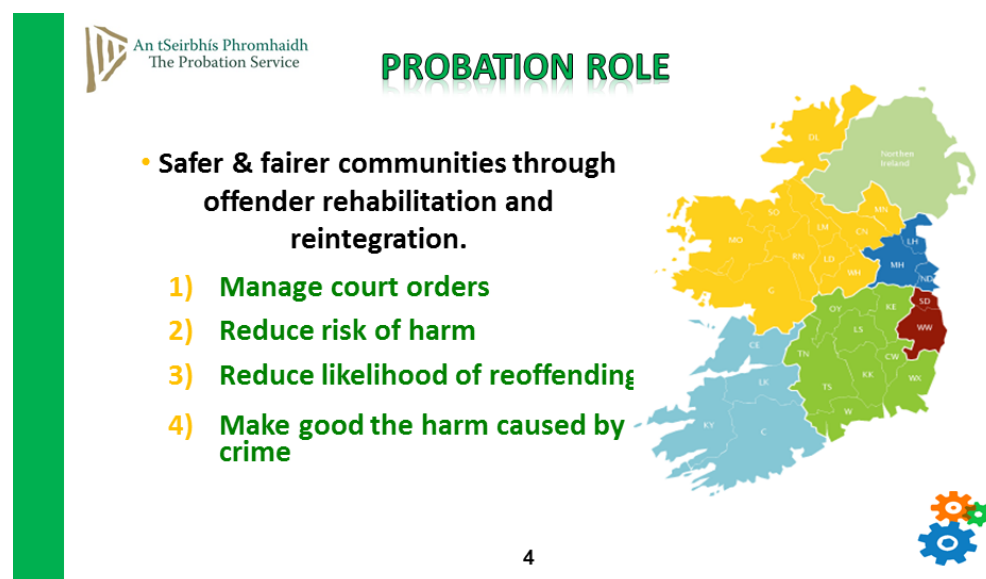


In terms of my presentation, I propose to cover the following areas: To begin I will say a little bit about the context of the work of the Probation Service in Ireland. I will then say something about how we consider and define who are our “customers” and / or “clients”. I want to consider the concept of who may be seen as a “deserving” recipient of public services, particularly from a Probation point of view, and what the implications

of that are. I then want to go on and summarise some aspects of the focus and practice for quality customer service in Probation work and draw some conclusions.



The Probation Service is a National service, an agency of the Department of Justice and Equality, with around 395 staff based in over 40 locations around the country. Most of these locations are community based offices. We also have staff based in all 14 of the country's prisons. On any one day we are supervising over 8,000 offenders in the community as well as working with around 1,500 of the 3,800 people in the country's prisons.



The unique purpose and role of the Probation Service is to work to achieve safer and fairer communities through offender rehabilitation and re-integration. Our specific tasks are to manage court orders – particularly community based sanctions – effectively, to reduce the risk of harm and re-offending by those under our supervision, and to make good the harm caused by crime.



WHAT WE DO

The Probation Service deals with almost 15,000 offenders in the community annually (including c.8,000 assessments on offenders which assist judges in making decisions in criminal cases).

Two main work category areas:

Assessment

- Assessment Reports for Court
- Assessment teams in major urban areas
- Risk Assessment tools
- Parole Board Assessment Reports



Supervision and Rehabilitation of offenders:

- **Court-ordered supervision:** Probation (adults and young people), Community Service, Fully suspended sentences.
- **Post-Release Supervision :** Community Return, Part-suspended sentences, Life Sentence Prisoners (Parole), Sex Offenders




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We deal with around 15,000 offenders in the community every year and the two main areas of work that we do with all those individuals is in the general areas of assessment and supervision, which is aimed at rehabilitation, that is, reducing the individual's likelihood of re-offending and helping them to reintegrate into the community. On the question of 'Who are our customers?': I believe first of all that this is a critical question for *all* of us. There are often nuanced answers to this question, depending on who is asking it, who they work for, and in what context. The Probation Service has a number of customers, including our Minister, the Department of Justice and Equality, the Courts, the Prison Service, the Parole Board and so on. I could say a lot about this question, but suffice to say for now that although we have a range of *customers*, the critical person, with whom we are mandated to work, without whom there would be no Probation Service as a service, and for whom and in whom positive change is the clear goal for what we do, in all our actions, every day, is the individual offender who we supervise and help to become an ex-offender. These individual citizens are who we refer to as our *clients*, and a clear focus on them must be at the centre of our work and our daily transactions; transactions aimed at transforming the lives of our clients and those around them.

CUSTOMER SERVICE - WHY BOTHER?

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"The bad news is, our customers hate us. The good news is, we have a lot fewer customers than we used to!"

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So, moving on to the issue of customer service; and the first question for me is – “why bother?” This again is a very basic and fundamental question, but one we should not take for granted. Rather, we need to be sure that we are always clear what our own answer is to this question.

RECENT & CURRENT INFLUENCE ON QUALITY SERVICE

General

1. Government policy – QCS essential part of public service.
2. Citizenship and customer service focus.
3. Action & lobby groups / organisations.
4. Europe.

Probation World

- a) What works – evidence-led practice.
- b) Desistance theory.
- c) Restorative Justice & Practice.
- d) Communications & media.
- e) Council of Europe - European Rules.
- f) Registration, quality standards, inspection .

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There have been a number of recent and current influences on the drive towards quality customer service in public sector organisations generally. While the private sector may often be characterised as having an interest in maximising quality customer service because of the profit motive, the underlying motive of public services, in general, is surely to deliver public value in whatever sector the relevant service operates. The various drivers of quality customer service in the public sector have been highlighted by

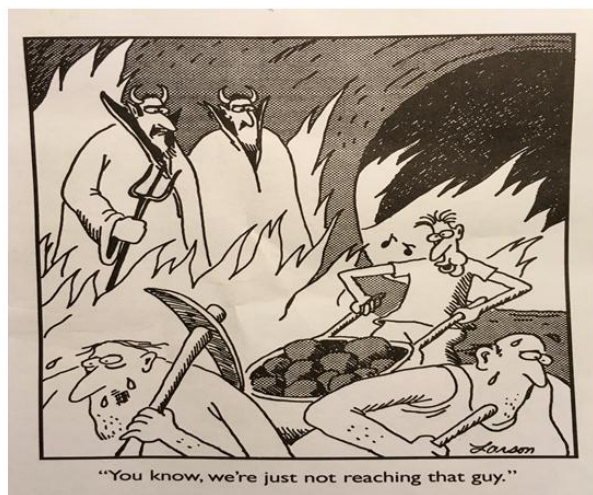
a number of speakers earlier, so I do not propose to go over those in detail. What I would like to focus on more is the influences on the development of quality customer service in the Criminal Justice and Probation world. These are not separate to, but rather additional to, the general points listed. For example, research over the last couple of decades into what works in reducing re-offending, has shown us that the journey towards desistance – or stopping offending – is not a simple or straightforward path. Rather, it is influenced by a range of factors including the relationship that professionals have with service users and the extent to which service users can be helped to swap negative for positive identities, and improve their own sense of agency or control over what they do; as well as increasing their individual human, and social capital among other things.

Recent developments in the area of restorative justice have shown us that it is impossible to have restorative justice without involving the offender in a pro-active and positive way. Communications and the media in general have opened up what we do to greater scrutiny. In addition, external rules and standards – such as the Council of Europe's standards on probation work, have put in place clearly established principles behind how we should run our services and part of these includes a greater voice for service users. Finally, I want to mention the increased level of registration of professionals, for example Social Workers, the expectation of quality standards being implemented consistently by those professionals, and the work of external inspection bodies such as the Inspector of Prisons – in the prison field - and HIQA in the health and social services field.



**Probation /
Criminal
Justice
Social Work:**

**Involuntary
v Voluntary
Clients**



“So what?” you may well ask. Even though Probation is effectively the social work wing of the Criminal Justice system, is there not an expectation that whatever we do in responding to offenders and implementing sanctions has to have a punitive “bite” or tough element to it? It is undoubtedly true that in probation we constantly have to juggle these often competing elements of care and control when we supervise offenders and try to help them turn their lives around for the better. But a big part of our work is helping people who are referred to us (for example by Courts), as involuntary clients in the first instance, into becoming voluntary (or *co-operative*) ones, over time.



WHO / WHAT IS ‘DESERVING’?

- **The Poor Laws – the ‘deserving poor.’**
- **Theory of ‘less eligibility.’**
- **‘Deserving’: A redundant or enduring concept?**

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I want to say a little bit about the concept of “deserving” service users. This concept goes back to the poor laws and the idea of the “deserving poor.” Allied to this was the theory of “less eligibility,” which set out that public services – for example workhouse institutions – had to be less attractive than the alternative facing the service user in the community. We may believe that we have moved on considerably from the concept of the deserving poor, but I sometimes wonder whether it is not still hard-wired into our cultural DNA. I suggest we need to avoid the “deserving client” outlook, if we want to avoid discriminating and ineffective practice.

CURRENT CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'DESERVING' IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

1. First time offenders.
2. Young people.
3. Women.
4. Addictions.
5. Mental illness.
6. Victims(?).

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I would suggest that some offenders always have been, and perhaps always will be, seen as more or less “deserving” than others. For example, first time offenders, young people, women, people with addictions or mental illness, are frequently seen – when they offend – as more “deserving” of help than other, more “serious” offenders. You may wonder at my inclusion of victims on this list. I also believe however that concepts of the “perfect victim” or the “imperfect victim” can influence who and how we believe deserve more or less “friendly” services. In terms of different categories of person under probation supervision, we seek to treat the young person who has offended for the first time – perhaps committing a property-related offence, or a relatively minor assault, *and* the drug-dealer, *and* the person who has sexually offended against children, as all clients with the same right to fair treatment; even though they will each require different assessments and individualised case management and supervision plans.

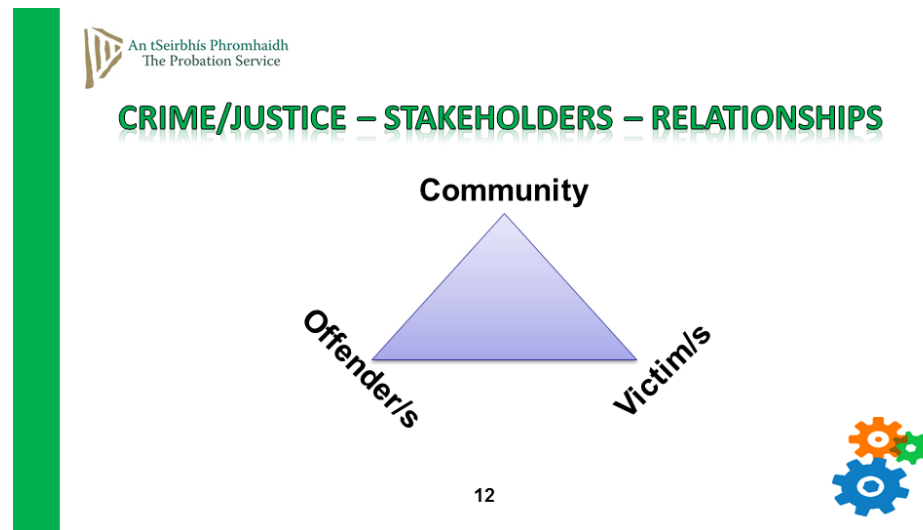
OFFENDERS: FROM OBJECTS, TO SUBJECTS, TO CO-PRODUCTION

1. *Objects*, to have something done *to* them.
2. *Subjects* to be empowered, to change.
3. *Co-creators* of a better future.

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We need to move – and I hope we have – moved on from the concept of offenders under our supervision being objects to have something done to them, to people who are not only subjects to be empowered, to be enabled or helped to change, but, where appropriate and where possible as potential co-creators of a better future both for themselves and for their community. This approach is founded on social work values and human rights principles.



This approach also sees crime and justice as involving stakeholders who, because of offending, have ended up in a broken relationship. And the three main parties to this relationship include the community, the offender, and the victim. Our work in Probation is about repairing those broken relationships so that the offender, while being sanctioned or punished appropriately, has an opportunity to make good the harm they have done and also has an opportunity to be re-integrated in their community. I want to emphasise here that this is in no way about giving the offender, preference or priority over any other party to the relationship. We must take into account all parts of the triangle if we are to be most effective. Probation officers do that from a solid, well tested and proven, evidence-informed, professional practice base.

TO BEGIN – LISTEN!!!



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To do this, we have to begin by *listening* to all parties and tuning in to their respective needs. This includes offenders – and *all* categories of offending, - as well as victims and the wider community.

PROBATION – ENGAGING POSITIVELY

1. Social Work Values, Principles: Individual's value. Ability to change.
2. Language: Offenders, clients, service users, citizens.
3. Social work methods: Motivational Interviewing > Pro-Social Modelling > Engagement > Co-Production.
4. Balance different / competing roles & responsibilities.
5. Heightened expectations for 'successful' outcomes and appropriate / respectful / inclusive processes.
6. From respect & listening, through consultation, and engagement, to real stakeholding (e.g. employment).

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These are some of the ways we have worked to achieve that in Probation, starting with our value base, which includes seeing each individual's value and recognising their ability to change. The language we use is important; the language of "offenders" versus "clients" and "service users" and "citizens". We use particular social work methods – including motivational interviewing and pro-social modelling, among others, to promote

positive engagement with individuals under our supervision. Our ultimate aim is to engage them to the extent that they work collaboratively with us, on addressing the changes they need to make in their lives. There is, through all of this, a heightened expectation for successful outcomes achieved in appropriate respectful and inclusive processes. We have then, moved from respect and listening, through consultation and engagement, to offenders having a real stake in how we respond to crime. One practical example of this is situations where we have managed to employ ex-offenders in running offender-related programmes.



An tSeirbhís Phrómhaidh
The Probation Service

ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

1. **Every transaction a positive opportunity.**
2. **Professional/international standards.**
3. **Communicate and consult – e.g. strategy generation, research.**
4. **Agree assessments, CMPs etc. Prisoner councils, offenders as conference speakers & peer mentors.**
5. **Written policy and procedures .**
6. **Culture change. Take complaints seriously. Train staff.**
7. **Purposeful, ‘intrusive’ supervision.**
8. **External monitoring / inspection.**
9. **Time, effort, resources. Be real and realistic!**

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My goal, as head of the Probation Service, is that we see every worker's every transaction with a client as a positive opportunity. For the organisation, it takes a conscious effort to check the standards I have referred to, and to communicate with staff and with service users and others about what needs to be put in place. We consult service users in preparing our strategic plan and in research projects. We consult service users in the preparation of our individual assessments (e.g. for Court), and in drafting and agreeing supervision and case-management plans. Further extensions of this approach include prisoner councils, ex-offenders as conference speakers and peer mentors. We need to write down clearly our policy and our procedures, to take complaints seriously, to focus on a culture of change within the organisation; to train staff, to include purposeful intrusive supervision of staff to ensure that they are supported in their job, to have external monitoring and inspection where appropriate, and finally to be real and to be realistic about what we do.



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There is no point in paying lip-service to customer service without really doing what we say we will do, and being conscious of times when what we do may contradict what we said we would do.

PROBATION – CUSTOMER SERVICE

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1. Culture. | Positive Engagement
Throughout Practice – |
| 2. Environment. | |
| 3. Communication. | |
| 4. Training. | |
| 5. Procedures. | |
| 6. Follow-through. | |
| 7. Review. | |
| | a) Customer Charter. |
| | b) Customer Service Policy. |
| | c) Complaints Procedure. |

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So the focus on quality customer service for the Probation Service has evolved from that focus on culture, environment, communication, training, procedures, follow through, and review and specifically through positive engagement throughout our practice, on to the setting down and implementation of three key documents: our customer charter, our customer service policy and our complaints procedure. And even though the members of our client group – by definition – have all done something wrong; they have committed a criminal offence or offences, we do by and large manage to engage them in

a positive and mutually respectful way. That is notwithstanding the fact that we have to work closely with our prisons and Garda colleagues for example, and put appropriate and sometimes strict boundaries around our supervision of our clients – particularly those who may present the highest level of risk of causing further harm. We also have to return some clients to Court or to prison, where they have been in significant breach of the terms of their supervision. Despite all that, we apply the same quality customer ethos and approach to everyone, and by and large, we do not experience significant incidences of threat to our staff. In fact, I would say that a big part of the reason for that is the firm but fair way we aim to treat everyone.



THE FUTURE

- 1. No going back – constant improvement.**
- 2. The citizen/service user expects - and is entitled to – quality service.**
- 3. Achieve (Probation/Justice) goals in a better & fairer way.**
- 4. Unlock potential of staff and service-users.**
- 5. Limitless opportunities. Not a panacea, but great possibilities.**
- 6. Ultimately, only offenders can become ex-offenders.**

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In terms of the future, there is no going back and that is a good thing. On the contrary, we need to constantly focus on further improvement. Our citizens and service users – all service users - expect and are entitled to quality service. If we maximise that customer service, I believe we can and we do achieve our Justice and Probation goals- a safer and fairer Ireland - in a better *and* a fairer *and* a more effective way. The reason for that is that our approach helps us to unlock the potential both of staff and of service users as complementary resources in the work we do. While there are no limits to what we can achieve, quality customer service is neither an easy option, nor a panacea. But there are great possibilities, some of which we are well on the way to realising. Ultimately however, we have to remember that only offenders can become ex-offenders. Our role, in Probation Services, is to help our clients on that journey – sometimes by using control and boundaries; other times by engaging, motivating, and helping – but always in the

context of quality customer services, recognising the client's potential for change and where possible, facilitating rather than forcing it.

Thank you for your attention.

END



QUESTIONS & ANSWERS.

THANK YOU

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