

Measuring Attitudinal Change: An Action Research Project

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Summary: Choice and Challenge is a 12-session offending programme based on a motivational cognitive behavioural therapeutic (CBT) approach, designed and implemented by the Probation Service Programme Development Unit (PDU) in 2013. The programme has been delivered in community and custody settings for four years. Pre- and post-programme attitudinal testing has been put in place from the outset in order to have some evidence of effectiveness and to assist in programme revision. Programme impact has been measured using the Crime Pics II questionnaire. Information was also collected on some participants in the six- to 12-month period following completion of the programme. Initial findings suggest that participant attitudes were positively impacted. However, the change has proved difficult to sustain and there are significant variations in terms of which attitudinal indices are best sustained. Victim awareness is the least eroded of the four measured indices. This paper provides a brief introduction to the programme, describes the design process and considers the implications of the findings for service delivery in the Probation Service.

Keywords: Probation supervision, recidivism, reoffending, antisocial attitudes, antisocial behaviour, crime, CBT, group work.

Introduction

The Probation Service has made an increasing commitment in recent years to the delivery of high-quality, evidence-based, structured programme interventions for targeted groups and individuals as part of their supervision. This includes a dedicated Programme Development Unit (PDU) with responsibility for the development and implementation

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of targeted intervention programmes, established in 2012. The PDU is located within the Bridge Project, a funded Probation project based in Dublin which also delivers interventions for male offenders convicted of serious violent offences in a joint agency initiative with An Garda Síochána and the Irish Prison Service.

The Probation Service staff in the PDU have dedicated training in group-work practice and the delivery of Service-approved programmes. Their time is divided between supervision, group-work delivery and their programme development tasks. The Bridge Project and Probation Service personnel had previously implemented a number of cognitive behavioural programmes since 2003, with varied results, and some of the principles that underpinned these approaches were used to inform the Choice and Challenge programme.

Choice and Challenge

A pilot of a new Choice and Challenge group programme with persistent medium-risk¹ offenders commenced in 2012. An internal evaluation of the programme identified challenges and obstacles concerning language, social context, and clarity in aims and focus. The evaluation also prompted development of a one-to-one structured programme, for implementation by Probation Officers as part of case supervision plans.

The core principles underpinning the Choice and Challenge programme are clearly stated in the programme introduction:

In comparing the attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions and behaviours of those who break the law in serious and frequent ways with those who have not, we know that there are key areas in which those who offend differ, in general, from those that do not. These are broadly in relation to –

- Feelings, thoughts and behaviours about criminal settings, persons and activities.
- Feelings, thoughts and behaviours about conventional settings, persons and activities.
- Empathy or sensitivity to the wishes, feelings and expectations of others.

¹ The Level of Service Inventory Revised (LSI-R) is the Probation Service-approved instrument used in risk prediction.

- Self-management and self-control skills.
- Sense of accomplishment and feelings of self-worth based on achievement in conventional pursuits.²

The importance of being able to deliver targeted interventions in relation to offenders is an accepted part of Probation practice. As Lipsey *et al.* (2001) noted in their meta-analysis of programmes:

CBT is indeed an effective intervention – treated offenders recidivated at a rate of about two thirds of the offenders in the treatment-as-usual groups with which they were compared. Moreover the most effective programmes reduced recidivism rates to around one third of the rate for untreated controls.

After major revisions and restructuring by the PDU, a further Choice and Challenge group programme was tested through practice by the designers, before being piloted in a number of teams across the country. Following feedback from participants and facilitators, the Choice and Challenge programme was further revised and was launched as an approved intervention programme in 2013.

The Choice and Challenge Group Programme comprises 12 sessions designed for adult male offenders. Participant selection criteria include a requirement that the participant be ‘group ready’ and stable in relation to addiction and mental health issues. There is emphasis on responsivity and awareness of specific learning needs and learning styles. Groups are co-facilitated by two Probation Officers (sometimes in conjunction with experienced staff from Probation-funded projects) and delivered either once or twice weekly.

The following is an overview of the sessions delivered to the participants on whose data the research was based: (i) Programme aims, overview and expectations, (ii) How people learn – learning and offending, (iii) Pro-social and anti-social thinking, (iv) Problem solving, (v) Thinking errors and self talk, (vi) Excuses and individual behaviour, (vii) Morality and hierarchy of offences, (viii) Use of time – high-risk situations, (ix) Victim awareness and victim empathy, (x) Crime responses, (xi) Goal setting and life choices, (xii) Review and action plans.

² *Choice and Challenge* – internal Probation Service document, 2013, p. 5.

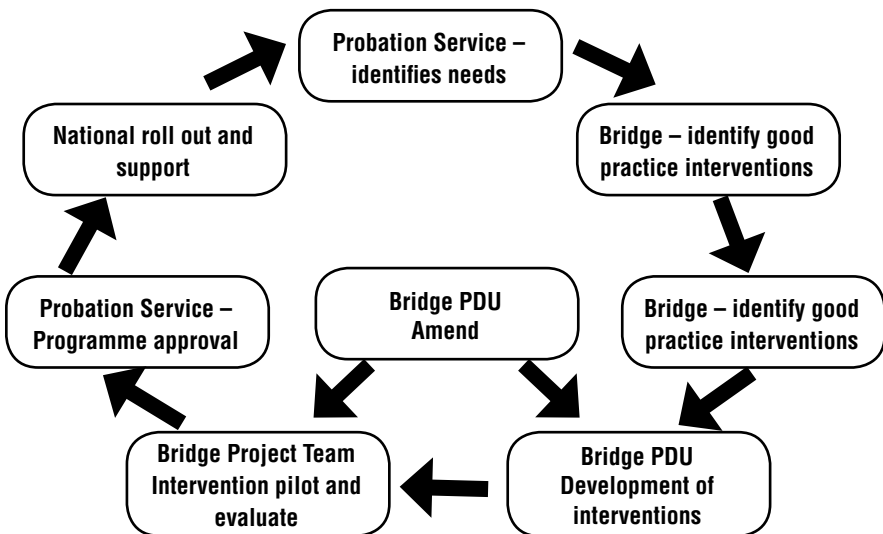
Programme design process

The PDU from the outset focused on issues of programme content, ensuring the appropriate integration of elements of effective programmes. In designing the Choice and Challenge groupwork programme, the PDU focused not only on programme content but also on consistent implementation and effective delivery. At the same time, the team was conscious of the broader challenges of the remit to implement a programme strategy, supporting the delivery of groups on a national basis across Probation Service practice.

As Leschied *et al.* (2001: 5) have noted, ‘Numerous researchers and practitioners now speak about the need for examining “technology transfer”; the application of what research has suggested can be effective and translation of the knowledge into routine correctional practice’.

In the design of Choice and Challenge the PDU team realised it would be essential that the programme have a strong sense of integrity and coherence. It would also be important to be able to assure staff charged with delivery of Choice and Challenge of its quality, benefit to practice and overall efficacy. To achieve this in the design and testing, the PDU used the process described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PDU programme design process



A crucial element in the design process, following initial programme research, is to run a pilot Choice and Challenge programme in the PDU. Following the learning from that in-house pilot, the programme is further trialled in Probation teams with links to community-based projects. All learning, including user and facilitator feedback, is consolidated into the approved programme. A second incremental strand of design and implementation within the PDU formally identifies the duration of each programme so that there is an in-built redesign and evaluation timeframe. The Choice and Challenge programme was delivered for nationwide roll-out in 2013, with an agreed review and revision scheduled for 2018.

Research rationale

A key purpose in establishing the PDU was the option of undertaking action research in new practice initiatives and developments in order to measure and review effectiveness and impact. Action research is generally linked to organisational development. Sagor (2000) outlines a seven-step process for such research in educational settings which proved useful in formulating an effective action research model for the Choice and Challenge programme. As Maguire and Priestley (2000: 22) note, ‘the single most commonly reported finding of research is that many programmes are never evaluated at all and that numerous opportunities for providing information that would be valued by practitioners, managers and researchers alike are simply lost’.

The initial step in an action research process is the selection of a *focus*, which in this case was the improved impact of programme delivery. The second step is *clarifying theories*. The PDU designed the Choice and Challenge programme on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) principles delivered within a motivational framework. As Barnes *et al.* (2017: 613) note, ‘CBT programs that target criminal activity ... are also not simple analogues to traditional CBT programming, and may have several unique features. When dealing with an offender population, CBT treatment can integrate training focused on both interpersonal and social skills, two distinct skill-sets thought to influence the propensity to commit crime.’ Completing Choice and Challenge is not an alternative to supervision but an adjunct and support to supervision. This is an important cornerstone for all programmes designed in the unit.

The third phase is *identifying research questions*. The PDU wished to examine:

1. if the Choice and Challenge CBT programme delivered within a motivational framework impacted on attitudes in relation to offending
2. what attitudes, if any, were most positively impacted on
3. whether any potential changes were then sustained.

Following Sagor's (2000) model, the next steps were to *collect data* and to *analyse the data*, before *reporting results* and, crucially, *taking informed action*.

For the purpose of the action research model utilised in the Choice and Challenge programme, it was agreed that structured testing of outcomes should be incorporated in the programme delivery. The guidance for facilitators says that:

Participants should be subject to a testing process before and after the programme to measure differences in thinking and behaviour. This testing should be specifically related to attitudes and beliefs in terms of offending and will allow for longer term testing to examine if any positive changes can be sustained.

The standard general offending instrument for the assessment of risk of reoffending and need used in the Probation Service is the LSI-R. While the LSI-R has been extensively validated, its mix of static and dynamic factors and the recommended interval length between tests limited (in the PDU's view) its usefulness as an outcome measurement for the Choice and Challenge programme. LSI-R was used as a supporting measure and also in 'identifying treatment targets and monitoring offender risk while under supervision and/or treatment services'.

The PDU's hypothesis is that over time, programme completion, aligned with other supervision interventions, should lead to risk reduction. To measure the impact and effectiveness of Choice and Challenge's CBT based approach, the PDU sought an instrument that would reflect attitudinal change and a related change in thinking. On that basis the PDU elected to use Crime Pics II, devised by M & A Research (2008), as the primary measure for the action research on the Choice and Challenge programme.

As the Crime Pics II developers state, 'Traditionally, assessment of the impact of probation work has been made on the basis of simple

activity measures such as compliance levels or crude outcome measures such as reconviction rates' (M & A Research, 2008: 3). Crime Pics II was selected for its demonstrated validity and ease of administration. It addresses attitudinal change, providing the opportunity to assess the success of the probation intervention, including the Choice and Challenge programme. The introduction in the manual for the Choice and Challenge programme describes the use of Crime Pics II:

In the individual Choice and Challenge programme the selected tool is Crime Pics II, which is a validated tool measuring attitudes in relation to victim awareness, evaluation of crime as worthwhile, anticipation of further offending and general attitude to crime.

Research methodology

Between October 2015 and December 2017, 101 adult male participants who completed the Choice and Challenge programme responded to Crime Pics questionnaires. All participants were in either community or custody settings in Dublin.

The main purpose of the action research – to improve programme effectiveness – was explained to the participants. They were advised that the individual data from the questionnaires and the related scoring were not disclosed to supervising staff and had no direct impact on the course of probation supervision or operational decisions in custody settings. Any participant who did not wish to complete a questionnaire was not obliged to do so, and feedback to participants on their scores was encouraged.

The Crime Pics II questionnaire is in two parts. Four indices are measured in Part 1 (questionnaire items); the manner in which an offender scales a range of life problems is measured in Part 2 (problem inventory). The four indices measured in the questionnaire are: general attitude to offending (G), anticipation of reoffending (A), victim hurt denial (V) and evaluation of crime as worthwhile (E).

The questionnaire section contains 20 statements and the offender rates his response to each statement on a five-point scale: strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. Examples of statements include 'In the end, crime does pay; my crimes have never harmed anyone; I always seem to give in to temptation; once a criminal, always a criminal'.

The problem inventory comprises 15 items relating to life issues: money, relationships, mental health, housing, etc. The respondent is asked to rate from four domains whether these issues are a big problem, problem, small problem, no problem at all. The raw data results are scaled using a conversion table in the Crime Pics II manual to produce a set of scores between 0 and 9. The higher the scaled score, the greater is the positive identification of the offender with the attitudinal index being measured.

At the end of the programme, Crime Pics II was completed a second time with each participant. The scores of those who did not complete the programme were not included. The question of non-completion of programme interventions and higher reconviction rates has been explored extensively (Palmer *et al.*, 2007; Wilson *et al.*, 2005; Lipsey *et al.*, 2001). One of the central questions it raised for the Choice and Challenge action research in reflecting on the findings was the level of motivation for completers v. non-completers, as much as programme design. As Palmer *et al.* (2007: 260) note in relation to improved outcomes for programme completers, 'The first explanation is that the treatment effect could be a selection effect, with programmes simply sorting out those offenders who would have done well, regardless of the treatment'.

For a small cohort ($n = 20$) who were still engaged with or available to the PDU team, a third Crime Pics II questionnaire was completed six months after the programme finished.

Each scale in Crime Pics II measures a different factor. The G scale is described as looking at a general feeling about offending. According to the Crime Pics II manual (p. 27), 'A person with a low G score believes that offending is not an acceptable way of life. In essence, they are saying "Crime is not for me".'

The A scale indicates the expectation by the person as to whether they will offend again. The lower the score, the greater is the expectation that offending will be avoided. The V scale indicates the level of acceptance that there has been an adverse effect on victims by the person's offending. The Crime Pics II authors accept that the nature of offending is likely to have an impact on scoring in this scale. Scale E explores the person's consideration of crime as worthwhile and is, in effect, a form of cost-benefit analysis. The P scale is a self-reporting scale that gives a sense of the problems that the person feels they are facing in life.

In practice, Crime Pics II can be applied to identify attitudes that require attention and the areas that present problems for the person. If

one sees improvements in terms of attitude resulting from programme intervention, improvements in self-reported problems can be anticipated.

Findings from data

The average age of those who undertook and completed the programme and were measured by Crime Pics II was 32.8 years. Accurate criminal records were gathered in relation to 88 of the 101 completers and showed a range from 1 to 379 convictions and an average of 47.6. Removing the highest and lowest scores, the average for the remaining 86 participants was 44.5 offences. This indicated that many but not all of those engaged in the Choice and Challenge programmes had well-established pro-criminal attitudes and had been involved with the criminal justice system for a number of years.

There were, however, instances of regression within scores as well as scores that remained constant. The regressed scores were broadly clustered within some individuals but, given the relatively small percentages and size of the group for whom we had complete data, it was not possible to draw any conclusions as to what factors may have influenced the regressions.

A review of LSI-R scores for those completing the programme and included in the review showed that the majority of those for whom assessments were completed (95/101) were in the moderate risk of reoffending category in the year following assessment (47/95), with 33 placed in the high-risk category and 15 in the very high category.

The findings for participants for whom Crime Pics II was completed pre- and post-programme showed an overall positive improvement across the four attitudinal indices and also in the ranking related to perceived problems within their lives (Table 1, Figure 2). Participants among whom regression was noted started at lower levels than the general completers of the programme, as noted in Table 2 and Figure 3. There were also instances with no change in scores across the group. There were 8 instances of static scores for scale G, 9 for scale A, 15 for scale V, 4 for Scale E and 11 instances on the problem inventory scale.

For the static instances on scale G the average score was 1.1, while it was 5.8 for scale A, 1.4 for scale V, and 2.7 for scale E. For 13 out of 101 completers on scale G there was no improvement: attitudes either remained static or regressed. 19 out of 101 scale A (Anticipation of further offending), 21 out of 101 scale V (Victim hurt denial), 15 out of

101 scale E (evaluation of crime as worthwhile) and 22 out of 101 scale P (Problem inventory) indicated no improvement.

Table 1. Overall Crime Pics scores

<i>Category</i>	<i>Pre</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>% of group</i>
G	0.2	2.4	5.05
A	1.6	4.7	10.1
V	1.7	3.5	6.06
E	2.6	5.3	11.1
P	3	4.5	7.9

Figure 2. Attitudes to crime before and after Choice and Challenge programme

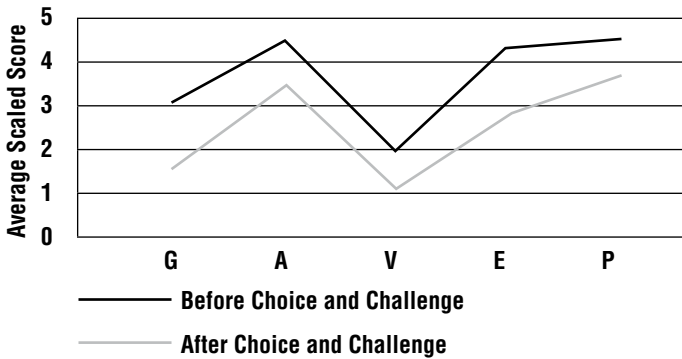
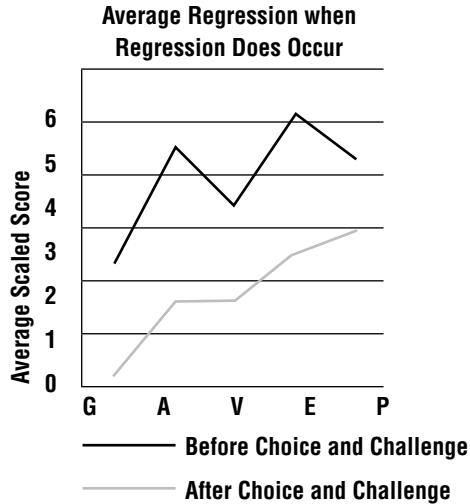


Table 2. Overall changes in indices

<i>Category</i>	<i>Pre</i>	<i>Post</i>	<i>% of group</i>
G	0.2	2.4	5.05
A	1.6	4.7	10.1
V	1.7	3.5	6.06
E	2.6	5.3	11.1
P	3	4.5	7.9

Figure 3. Regression changes

The most significant negative scores in the Crime Pics II attitudinal scales were in relation to scales A (Anticipation of reoffending) and E (Evaluation of crime as worthwhile). Interestingly, victim hurt denial was the lowest scoring index, both pre- and post-testing.

For a small number of those who completed the programme and were available, a third Crime Pics II assessment was completed six months post-programme (Table 3). Given that this sample represented only 20 of the 101 programme completers, and that by and large those available for a third test had remained either engaged with or available to the PDU team, findings must be interpreted cautiously.

Table 3. Third test averages

Scale	Pre-programme	Post-programme	6–12 months	% change 1–3
G	3.4	1.4	2	–41
A	4.6	3.5	3.6	–20
V	1.3	0.4	0.5	–61
E	4	1.6	2	–50
P	4.2	3.2	3.5	–16

Discussion

The goal of undertaking this action research was to look more closely at whether and how the Choice and Challenge programme was able to deliver on the goals of changed behaviour and reduced recidivism. We also wished to consider how we could use and incorporate the findings in programme revisions and fulfil the Probation Service goal that interventions should be evidence-based.

The initial action research findings show that the Choice and Challenge programme has the capacity to deliver behavioural change centred on challenging pro-criminal attitudes. For the 101 people who completed the Choice and Challenge programme over the course of the study, there were significant improvements in measurable attitude scores as well as a reduction in their self-perceived difficulties.

These improvements ranged from a 54% improvement in general attitude to offending scores to a 16.2% improvement in the level of life difficulties reported. The programme interventions do not target the structural challenges that most offenders face in making change and, especially, in the development of secondary desistance and new identities. However, provision of a well-researched, CBT-based targeted programme, delivered within a motivational framework, could provide what King (2013: 147) identified as a Probation supervision task in 'helping to develop particular skills and capacities that are likely to be of assistance during the desistance process'.

There is no simple relationship between life problems and offending. While positive changes in thinking patterns and attitudes may improve coping capacity and increase positive life chances, factors beyond the impact of the individual's thought and action will be in play. What a person feels to be a significant or non-significant problem in their lives is likely to be impacted by how they manage a problem and their personal resources just as much as it is related to the actual dynamics and objective scale of the problem.

In examining the Crime Pics II G scale and how it measures the extent to which an individual feels that they want to move away from crime or that crime 'is not for them', the findings appear impressive. When static and regressed scores are excluded there is an improvement from 51.83% to 61%. The Choice and Challenge programme appears to have significantly impacted the completers' attitudes and thinking scores. When regressed and static scores are excluded, the improvement grows from 16% to 32% on the Crime Pics II P scale.

These results must be qualified because they only include data for those who completed the Choice and Challenge programme. They do not include full statistical returns for individuals who failed to complete the programme. Those additional data would have provided a greater understanding of the range of any impact.

One group for whom attendance was compulsory and with an added incentive to comply were participants released from custody under the Community Return scheme, an early release from custody initiative, serving between one and eight years.

Those participating in the Community Return Programme are granted reviewable temporary release having served at least 50 per cent of their sentence and following an individual assessment process. Factors considered at the assessment process include progress during custodial sentence (behaviour while in prison and engagement with services), risk to the community (the nature of the offence and previous offending), and resettlement stability (accommodation status upon release, addiction issues and medical suitability). (McNally and Brennan, 2015: 141)

Community Return participants have to complete community service obligations as well as having reporting conditions for 50% of the balance between the date they commence on Community Return and the completion of their sentence. Research has shown that ‘Almost 89 per cent of prisoners released on the Community Return Programme since its commencement have completed or are completing their supervision successfully’ (McNally and Brennan, 2015: 156).

It is also important to note that, as engagement in the Choice and Challenge programme was voluntary in most cases, participants were more likely to have had potentially greater levels of motivation. Reviewing the starting Crime Pics II scores shows that completers averaged 3.1 on scaled scores for the G scale, with the highest possible score being 9. This would suggest that the completers were, potentially, already in the process of positive change. Healy and O’Donnell (2008: 25) say, ‘[that] the majority of offenders eventually terminate their criminal careers is a criminological truism. The “age–crime curve” shows that by the age of 28 most have ceased to be involved in crime.’

Findings provided an opportunity to explore the correlation between being ready for and wanting change and actually making those changes.

The scores for the completers on scales A (anticipation of reoffending) and E (evaluation of crime as worthwhile) are higher than those for the G scale, at 4.3 and 4.2 respectively. While the E scale score shows an improvement of 33.3% to 2.8, the A score shows only an improvement of 20% to 3.4 for all completers. When static and regressed scores are removed, the results are considerably more positive, with a 54% improvement on the A scale and 52% improvement on the E scale. Looking at the small sample of regressed completers' scores, these results are reversed. The 10.1% (A) and 11.1% (E) for regressed completers reflect negative scores increased by 193% and 103% respectively.

These findings fit with other studies that indicate significant differences between an offender's stated desire for change, which we would broadly associate with the G scale, and their belief in their own capacity to change or their agency, associated with the A scale (Burnett, 1992; Farrall, 2002; Healy and O'Donnell, 2008). In our view the E scale reflects at least ambivalence in relation to the value of offending.

These two scales would appear to be key measures of the likely progress in desistance for a programme completer, given that simply wanting a change in direction, in the absence of any level of personal agency, limits the likelihood of success. Ambivalence about the benefits of offending and motivation to change makes positive change more difficult to sustain. Programme design should promote delivery using a motivational perspective and facilitators need to be competent and confident in how they deliver the programme with that perspective.

In the Crime Pics II V (victim hurt denial) scale, the average pre-programme score for all completers was 2, with a post-programme average score of 1.2, showing a 40% improvement. This pre-test score was the lowest across the five scales, supporting the possibility that the relative success of the programme in attitudinal impact could be a selection feature. Even if this proved to be true, the role of the programme in supporting the process of initial desistance and building support for secondary desistance is still very important and significant.

Removal of regressed and static scores produced a pre-test average score of 3.3 with a post-test score of 1.1, indicating a 67% improvement. For those who regressed, 6 of the 101 completers, their scores went from 1.7 to 3.5. There were 15 static completers in this scale, with a score of 1.4. Overall, there was a score improvement for 80% of those completing the programme.

The victim awareness input to the Choice and Challenge programme, where completed, contributes to improved attitude scores. The victim hurt denial score level begins from a generally positive base. There also appears to be a weak correlation between levels of victim awareness in those completing Choice and Challenge programmes and the changes in anticipation of further offending and evaluation of crime as worthwhile.

For particular offence types involving individual targets, there may be a strong rationale for greater victim awareness input. As Burrows (2013: 384) puts it when reflecting on the historically weak voice of victims in the criminal justice system, ‘this position has been increasingly challenged by a variety of voices which have sometimes been collectively termed “the victims movement”’; Burrows adds that there has been a culture shift in which victims are ‘increasingly seen as consumers of the criminal justice system’.

In revising the Choice and Challenge programme it will be important to take account of not just these findings but also the Probation Service commitments to victims, as reflected in the Service’s Victims Charter. The Victims Charter says the Probation Service will ‘make sure that any community-based programmes are sensitive to your concerns and aim to prevent reoffending’.

Rather than increasing the direct programme input in relation to victims, best results may be achieved by ensuring that programme elements address issues highlighted on the Crime Pics II E, A and G scales. As Burrows (2013: 386) argues, ‘victim awareness work targets knowledge (for example the consequences of offending for both specific and potential victims, attitudes/cognitions (including denial and minimisation), and emotions (for example encouraging offenders to care or develop empathy)’.

The results from the small cohort available to complete Crime Pics II 6–12 months after completing the Choice and Challenge programme comprise only 20 of the total completers. It is difficult to draw strong findings since the sample is small in number and contains some for whom supervision was intensive as well as others subject to ‘ordinary’ supervision. Two participants had been returned to custody within the period, while others had progressed to low-intensity supervision. Overall, the results show that the Crime Pics II A, E and V scales remain the lowest, indicating that even with slippage from early gains the awareness of victim hurt remained high.

Conclusion

The inclusion of pre- and post-programme testing is an indicator of good practice in programme delivery. Scores reviewed on an individual level provide a focus for both one-to-one and group supervision. It is also important to look at trends and patterns within pre- and post-programme scores, and to use findings to inform programme content and issues of responsivity together with feedback from focus groups and programme reviews. The PDU has used these research findings for this purpose.

Because of the short time frame for the action research project and limited access to confirmed data on new charges and reoffending, it was not possible as part of this project to report fully on participant behavioural change and recidivism. This gap is worthy of attention in a future research study.

When the action research commenced, the PDU team had not fully anticipated the wide range and review that followed. The process reinforced the importance of the integration of evaluative tools into the design of effective programmes. It also highlighted the challenges of managing and coordinating operational resources and systems in order to meet that objective.

The final step for the action research project, using Sagor's (2000) framework, is the taking of informed action. Some actions, such as the revising of the Choice and Challenge programme and improving data gathering, lie within the scope of the team. The findings of this study will inform the overall review of the programme this year. Steps have been taken to enhance the sessional content in relation to supporting and building offender agency, a key learning point from the findings. The findings in relation to victims were encouraging, particularly at a time when the Probation Service and the wider criminal justice system are working to respond more effectively to the needs of victims. The possibility of an increase in the victim focus is a current subject under discussion and raises interesting questions. As Burrows (2013) notes, 'Although the imperative to undertake victim awareness work is apparent, the actual concept of "victim awareness" is not always as clear'.

In designing and delivering the Choice and Challenge programme, the PDU has taken a very concrete step to embed action research into the overall programme process. The findings have demonstrated positive and measurable attitudinal changes across a range of indices. In addition to informing the current review of the Choice and Challenge

programme, this action research project has provided a blueprint for further research within the Programme Development Unit. It will also contribute to informing wider decisions in the organisation regarding the development, design and delivery of best-practice interventions throughout the Service.

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