

Practitioner Reflection on the Challenges and Opportunities for Collaborative Working in the Probation Board for Northern Ireland

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Summary: Within the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) the term 'collaborative working' is used so ubiquitously that practitioners risk adopting a nonchalant attitude which belies the complexity of this approach. Following a brief introduction to the role of collaboration in the wider political and criminal justice system, this article explores some of the challenges and opportunities associated with interagency collaboration. It focuses on three salient strands which can either hamper or enhance the efforts of probation staff to fulfil statutory responsibilities, and to empower service-users to recognise that ultimately, they are their own agents for change.

The first strand is that of agency mission and the potential for 'mission distortion', a risk associated with partnership working. The paper then moves on to explore the impact of changing policies and resource management for collaborative working. The third strand focuses on the therapeutic alliance as an essential component in any collaboration that aims to facilitate and enable behavioural change. The paper concludes with some reflections on the need for a balanced, proportionate and person-centred approach to interagency collaboration within probation practice.

Keywords: Collaboration, partnership, agency, interagency, probation, therapeutic alliance.

Introduction

Given the political backdrop, the criminal justice sector within Northern Ireland has historically been a fraught arena. The functioning of this system, particularly in the immediate period post devolvement of justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, is perhaps testament to the sentiment that 'collaboration rests on the team's capacity to harness differences ... such that difference enhances rather than destroys collaboration'

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(Pycroft, 2019, p. 36). The value of partnership working and collaborative practice is a theme that has continued to resonate within Department of Justice policies and strategies in Northern Ireland, as evidenced by policy documents, *Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities: A Community Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012–2017* and *Supporting Change: A Strategic Approach to Desistance* (2015), and the Department of Justice's Corporate Plan for 2021–22, which sets out as its first objective: 'To engage with our partners to help build safe and resilient communities, improve community relations and tackle paramilitary activity.' PBNI's own corporate strategy is aligned to the Department and the Minister's priorities, and therefore partnership working is a key theme of Probation's strategic plan. This is most recently evidenced in PBNI's Corporate Plan for 2020–23, which highlights the importance of collaboration and partnership. Indeed, the *Communications and Engagement Strategy, 2020–2023*, which supports the Corporate Plan, reinforces the need to engage and develop partnerships with stakeholders, internal audiences and service-users, through more dynamic means, e.g. social media, service-user forums, increased community engagement on a local level, and an annual PBNI conference to increase understanding of PBNI's role in the criminal justice system. Justice Minister Naomi Long reflected in 2020 on the challenges posed by COVID-19 at the Criminal Justice Board, and the integral role of partnership working to ensure that the system functioned effectively despite the ongoing global pandemic. She stated:

I have been impressed by the work ethic, collaborative approach and 'can do' attitude of the wider justice family as they have worked together to find practical and agile solutions in the fast-moving and ever-changing landscape created by the COVID-19 crisis.

However, collaborative working, whilst congruent with social work values and ethos, brings both opportunities and challenges in implementation.

Mission distortion

Murphy and Lutze (2009) refer to mission distortion as 'situations where distinctions in the respective missions and roles of Police and Probation Officers become blurred and confused' (p. 67). Whilst this issue may impact on other agencies, in this article it will be considered specifically between

Probation Officers and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In their study, Murphy and Lutze (2009) determined that police officers viewed their role as serving the 'neighbourhood' and protecting residents from crime. However, Probation Officers clearly defined their service-users as active citizens within, rather than separate from, their community. Murphy and Lutze (2009) identified this divergence, and the degree of value to which each agency assigns 'coercive power' as the 'single biggest challenge to successful police-probation partnerships' (p. 66). However, since that time, the PSNI has developed more initiatives to engage directly with communities – for example, through the establishment of the Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland, which became statutory in 2009, and Reducing Offending Units, and participation in Multi-Agency Support Hubs, which were established in 2017. Indicative evidence from Support Hubs shows how a collaborative approach can produce successful outcomes, which cannot necessarily be achieved through one agency. The Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) Joint Committee (consisting of the Department of Justice and NI Policing Board) is working with PCSP managers and Support Hub partners to demonstrate through Outcomes Based Accountability that Support Hubs are addressing the root causes of concern for vulnerable persons and making a positive difference to people's lives, while reducing repeat demand on public services.

When considering collaborative practice and support for adults with complex needs, Smith (2018) highlighted that police are often the first responders during times of mental health crisis, and integral to interagency support of vulnerable individuals. For example, the PSNI recently established a new approach known as the Multi Agency Triage Team (MATT) in response to increased calls from members of the public in mental health crisis. Mental health practitioners and paramedics work alongside police officers as part of a pilot project, aimed at providing on-the-spot help to vulnerable adults with mental health difficulties, while at the same time reducing their reliance on hospital, ambulance and PSNI resources. Furthermore, Kim and Matz (2018) have characterised mission distortion as 'exaggerated'.

However, in my experience of supervision, this concept can pose an issue, particularly with reference to supervision of service-users who are subject to release from custody on licence. In the past, when I have been contacted by police regarding the arrest of a service-user subject to release under licence supervision, there has been an immediate proposal that I should consider applying to recall the service-user to custody. Whilst the swift sharing of

information is essential to re-evaluating the risks and protective measures which may need to be put in place, and is always welcomed by supervising officers, it can sometimes be perceived as suggestive of information being shared in the anticipation of expediting a potential return to custody, rather than evidencing commitment to the collaborative process. McNeill (2009, cited by Beckett Wilson, 2014) highlights that probation is an 'agency of justice' and Probation Officers must remain mindful to what is 'just'. Whilst I recognise that the arrest of service-users following alleged further offending is 'just', this must be balanced with the concern as to whether initiating recall and their return to incarceration is commensurate with the risk to community safety. It is clear that both agencies strive to work on the basis of service to the community, both in terms of protection of the public and reduction of offending, but feedback from one police officer in research undertaken by Leon and Shadaimah (2019) succinctly highlighted the divergence, advising that whilst there was an interest in a team approach to problem-solving, they (the police officers) still ultimately relied on the threat of arrest. In this regard, Leon and Shadaimah (2019) indicated that whilst the police officers demonstrated empathy in both demeanour and willingness to participate in diversionary policing, there was 'little of the "hugs" aspect to diversion in the views espoused by these police officers' (p. 574).

The issue of authority and the ability of Probation Officers to be proactive, rather than being confined to reactive responses, is discussed by Murphy and Lutze (2009). They caution against using the 'convenience' of sanction and revocation; rather, they encourage police/probation partnerships to focus on the 'conscience' approach necessary for long-term complex problem-solving and reintegration, advocating for an 'agency-level philosophical shift in order to prevent serious problems' (p. 75). Murphy and Worrall (2007) concluded that it was imperative for both agencies to provide appropriate training to equip officers to broaden the roles whilst 'simultaneously preserving the integrity of their respective missions' (p. 147). This conclusion is reiterated by both Kim *et al.* (2017) and McGregor *et al.* (2018), who determined that training should not only be 'workforce driven' but should also address 'workplace development'.

Joint working and sharing of information with PSNI as a close partner agency is a fundamental component of effective intervention in the risk-management mandate of the criminal justice system. In cases it is sometimes only through information garnered from the PSNI that Probation Officers can become aware of child-protection issues, which has a 'ripple effect' of

triggering a Probation Officer to make a referral to social services. In their study on interagency adult support and protection practice, Joseph *et al.* (2019) use the term 'boundary spanners' in describing those who work to break down the barriers encountered within interagency practice. According to Burney Nissen (2010), as cited by Hean *et al.* (2018), in order to be effective, boundary spanners must have the endorsement of all organisations involved, and a thorough knowledge of the work that takes place within each institution. Krayer *et al.* (2018) indicate that understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each agency involved in joint working within the criminal justice and social care services is essential to core working, and the absence of such can lead to significant interagency conflict. Probation Officers, as qualified social workers working in a criminal justice context, are ideally positioned to act as integral 'boundary spanners' in multi-agency collaborative practice.

Changing policies and resource management

Fluctuating policies and resource management can impact significantly on collaborative engagement, sometimes creating difficulties, but also providing opportunities. Naughton (2005) is scathing about policies that are 'agenda' driven rather than evidence-based, indicating that unless strategies are 'politically acceptable and implementable', they are cast aside, irrespective of the research evidence. More recently, Kim *et al.* (2017) comment that partnership working may not have 'much' influence on crime, and criminal justice agencies are more driven by stakeholder concerns, a consideration which they characterise as 'counterintuitive'.

Welsh *et al.* (2016) report that criminal justice agencies are driven by a 'fundamentally different mission and mandate than public health-orientated counterparts' (p. 107), and that the mandate of each strategic partner is distinct. Despite the benefits of shared systems such as IT and co-located services (Bligaard Madsen and Burau, 2020, Logan and Ramsden, 2015 and Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2020) being highlighted as effective in enhancing collaboration within the criminal justice arena, this integrated model is not available to Probation Officers in generic teams in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, Kaehne *et al.* (2017) identify that the reconfiguration of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, and the adoption of an integrated model of care, has ensured that 'trusts operate as single bodies, not through partnership or collaboration, have single budgets

and all staff are employed by one organisation' (p. 92). This research suggested that this development has led to more cohesive care and a system that is simpler to navigate. However, criminal justice agencies do not have that level of integration, common purpose or operating model.

The difference in the approaches adopted by the health and social care system has led to a consumer and provider supply chain emerging, which impacts on interagency collaboration between PBNi and the Health and Social Care trusts. Upon implementation of the General Data Protection Regulations in May 2018, the 'supply chain' was fractured by the need to agree retention policies between PBNi and the Health and Social Care trusts, which led to protracted negotiations. Clients were in limbo regarding professional intervention, which had previously been delivered by healthcare trust services. PBNi commenced a pilot programme, working with a drug and alcohol intervention community group, 'ASCERT', whereby addiction intervention for 'high level' dependence and poor emotional wellbeing was facilitated within days of making the referral. This provided the opportunity for engagement with the service-user at the point of readiness, rather than stagnating in a lengthy referral and waiting list hierarchy. It also created a new and purposeful partnership outside the criminal justice system, based on need and targeted service provision

Hollis (2016) indicates that the fear of the loss of funding is a significant aspect of conflict in the collaborative partnerships within the criminal justice system. She characterises the entire system as adversarial by design, and reports that, on an organisational level, being fettered by the need to 'sell' the agency to funders leads to limitations in critical evaluation and fear of the 'competition'. Despite financial difficulties, Clinks (2018) advises that probation services have a 'responsibility to the wider ecosystem of the voluntary sector organisations in their areas' (p. 18) and must evidence a commitment to commissioning services. The collaboration between PBNi and ASCERT demonstrates the efficacy of utilising social enterprise agencies within the community to promote positive change.

Therapeutic alliance

Abeling-Judge (2016) highlights that 'the perspective of the offender directly relates to changes in behaviour' (p. 1238), recognising that it is service-users, and not the service-providers, who are the agents for change. Research undertaken by Tambuyzer and Van Audenhove (2013) indicates that this

encouragement of collaboration and active involvement enhanced service-users' sense of satisfaction and feelings of empowerment. They conclude that making active involvement a reality was both an opportunity and an ethical imperative. The themes of trust, therapeutic alliance, and the development of professional working relationships with service-users as a foundation for intervention and empowerment are consistently raised as essential components in collaboration (Hawdon, 2008; Lewis, 2014; Tompkins and Neale, 2018).

However, Getha-Taylor *et al.* (2019) dispute the importance of trust as integral to successful collaboration with the service-user, identifying that lack of trust is not the same as 'distrust'; rather, efficacy of engagement with service-users is dependent on their perception of the legitimacy of power/sanction. This can be particularly challenging when supervision is imposed through new sentencing options as implemented by the Criminal Justice Northern Ireland Order, 2008, whereby licence requirements are imposed on the basis of risk rather than consent.

In their study on professional helping relations, Brekke *et al.* (2018) caution that service-users did not want to be 'pampered'; rather, a sense of empowerment came from recognition that they were an active participant in their own lives. Furthermore, Manjunath *et al.* (2018) contend that the recognition of potential sanctions for non-compliance is a positive aspect of supervision, as it illustrates that the service-user fully understands their position. This contention – that it is not trust, but obligation, that motivates effective collaboration – suggests that case plans could be instrumental in the development of a therapeutic relationship between the supervising Probation Officer and those subject to supervision

Contracts should be explicit in the expectations of both the service-user and the Probation Officer, regarding engagement with both PBNI and associated service-providers. A significant benefit of this approach is less repetition and more co-ordinated engagement, clearly conveying that Probation Officers will collaborate with other agencies on an ongoing basis, rather than limited to the referral submission. Dominey (2019) indicates that this multi-agency service provision and active client participation are central to 'thick supervision', and necessary to move beyond 'short-term requirement compliance' to 'longer-term legal compliance' (Bottoms, 2001, cited in Robinson and McNeill, 2008).

Conclusion

Despite the myriad networks involved, probation must remain true to the social work values upon which engagement is based. Krayer *et al.* (2018) consider that when the motivating factors in collaborative practice are legal requirements and statutory obligation, the policies and processes in place ensure that staff are less likely to neglect these responsibilities. However, whilst policy and process are fluid and evolving, the central tenet of collaboration with the service-user remains constant. Paparozzi and Guy (2018) succinctly outline that regardless of political and cascading managerial directives, 'street level' changes are 'always filtered through the values and professional orientation of the line staff' (p. 8). It is my belief that it is within the realm of therapeutic alliance and relationships that most opportunity exists to effect positive change. The practitioner–service-user dynamic can be hampered by poor collaboration with other agencies and service-providers, through lack of communication. The therapeutic alliance can be enhanced by joint working when there are shared goals, clear expectations, good communication, mutual understanding and respect, and co-ordinated intervention. Collaboration with any professional service-provider is not a panacea or substitute for person-centred practice and recognition of the service-user as the ultimate agent of change.

It is evident that collaborative working is best effected when operating within a coherent structure, rather than a haphazard, scattershot approach. The assumption that practitioners have a 'natural flair' for interagency liaison without a clear framework for joined-up working cannot be relied upon to circumvent the challenges which are inherent in this format. Within the research literature, training – particularly interagency training – was a recurrent theme identified as a critical aspect of effective collaboration in helping to dispel some of the anxiety for practitioners, such as limits of confidentiality and accountability, whilst reinforcing the importance of maintaining the integrity of the agency mandate. The healthcare system has moved to embrace the integrated care model of practice. Within PBNI and the criminal justice field, this has been limited to specialised teams, such as the public protection arrangements model for sexual and domestic abuse. Commitment to collaborative working should extend beyond any one category of offending behaviour. Valuable lessons from existing initiatives provide a solid platform for the development of an organisational strategy that promotes and supports effective collaboration across all areas of practice.

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