Experiencing modernization: Frontline probation perspectives on the transition to a National Offender Management Service

Gwen Robinson and Ros Burnett

Probation Journal 2007 54: 318
DOI: 10.1177/0264550507083534

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://prb.sagepub.com/content/54/4/318
Experiencing modernization: Frontline probation perspectives on the transition to a National Offender Management Service

Gwen Robinson, University of Sheffield

Ros Burnett, University of Oxford

Abstract The National Offender Management Service (NOMS), intended to integrate the Probation and Prison Services of England and Wales and to provide an operational framework for the end-to-end management of offenders throughout their sentences, was introduced in summer 2004. This major innovation came fast after a period of immense change to probation services which had culminated in the formation of the National Probation Service (NPS) in 2001. The present study, in which 41 probation practitioners from four probation areas were interviewed, sought to gain insight into frontline perspectives on the impact of NOMS. The study indicates that communication to frontline staff about NOMS has not been wholly effective and many practitioners are experiencing ‘initiative confusion’ and ‘change fatigue’ in endeavouring to meet an increasing range of demands from an expanding range of ‘masters’. While many remain open to the possible benefits of NOMS, particularly for offenders, considerable uncertainty remains about the implications of NOMS for themselves and the Probation Service. The ‘ogre of contestability’ is linked with fears about future job security, whilst other aspects of the NOMS agenda are adding to a sense of demoralization and increasing alienation from the values that brought some into the service.

Keywords contestability, NOMS, offender management, practitioners, probation

Introduction

At the end of 2003, just two years after the establishment of the National Probation Service (NPS) in England and Wales, a Correctional Services Review proposed that the Probation Service and the Prison Service should be restructured into a new National Offender Management Service (NOMS) (Carter, 2003). The Home Office
responded with a tandem document, declaring full support for the Carter Review and stating that NOMS would be introduced within months (Home Office, 2004).

The creation of NOMS reified an idea that had been mooted for some time (Nellis, 2004) and which can be traced back at least as far as the 1997 Prison–Probation Review. This review ultimately rejected the notion of a merger as ‘a bridge too far’ (Home Office, 1998: para. 2.38), favouring the option of retaining separate services but encouraging integration. Proposals for closer liaison between the two services were also to be found in the joint prison and probation inspectorates’ report Through the Prison Gate (HM Inspectorates of Prison and Probation, 2001) and in the Social Exclusion Unit’s report on reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners (SEU, 2002). These in turn influenced the Halliday report (2001) and the subsequent White Paper, Justice for All (Home Office, 2002), which continued to push for ‘seamless sentences’ and ‘joined-up services’.

Echoing many of the ideas proposed in these reports, Carter (2003: 33) called for a system which would ‘break down the silos of the services [and] ensure the “end-to-end management” of offenders regardless of whether they were given a custodial or community sentence’. The Home Office response concurred that the restructuring of prison and probation activities was crucial – particularly in the light of the new sentencing framework of the 2003 Criminal Justice Act1 – to stop the situation whereby offenders ‘fall between the gap between the services’ (Home Office, 2004: 10). However, the NOMS vision went much further in respect of its proposals for ‘reform’ – with particularly far-reaching implications for the Probation Service. First, the Carter/Home Office vision included proposals for the creation of a centrally controlled regional basis for the planning and commissioning of services and interventions (with 10 regional offender managers, or ROMs, ultimately taking over the commissioning role from the existing 42 probation boards). Second, it ushered in a ‘contestability’ agenda, officially defined as being ‘about challenging existing suppliers to demonstrate that they continue to offer the best value for money to the taxpayer’ (NOMS, 2005: 4), but widely interpreted as an intention to privatize the delivery of community-based sentences by ‘encouraging the greater use of the private and “not-for-profit” sectors in prisons and in the community’ (Home Office, 2004: 10).

NOMS, championed enthusiastically by the former Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, was duly ‘launched’ in June 2004. A National Offender Manager (NOM) and 10 ROMs were quickly appointed, and a National Offender Management Model (NOMM) was introduced, to provide a shared framework for sentence planning and sequencing of interventions to be used by all organizations involved in managing offenders. The NOMM was initially piloted in the North West (PA Consultancy Group and MORI, 2005) and is now in the process of being implemented nationally (NOMS, 2006a). But, these developments aside, the implementation of the ‘NOMS vision’ was not destined to run smoothly. For example, active and outspoken opposition from the National Association of Probation Officers (Napo) and the Probation Boards Association (PBA) (e.g. McKnight, 2005; Wargent, 2005) as well as several parliamentary debates, have contributed to ongoing delays in enacting the Management of Offenders and Sentencing Bill, intended to legislate the proposed reforms. Napo representatives and others have pressed for
the government to allow more time for consultation and to show its business case to justify not just the introduction of NOMS but also what has been construed as the replacement of probation as a public body by privatization, at a time when the service ‘has never been performing better in relation to any of its targets’ (McKnight, 2005). A subsequent consultation document (NOMS, 2005) seemed to strengthen interpretations that the NPS would soon cease to exist (Napo, 2005) and a leaked letter from the Home Secretary to the Deputy Prime Minister in the same month confirmed that he would after all be abolishing the 42 probation boards and replacing them with smaller, business-focused bodies. Another, so-called ‘consultation’ document was quietly produced in Autumn 2006, Improving Prison and Probation Services: Public Value Partnerships (NOMS, 2006b), including plans to greatly increase the proportion of the total probation budget to be opened up to competition.

The brief history of NOMS to date, then, is rife with uncertainty and not inconsiderable controversy. The departures of the original ‘champions’ of NOMS – including the resignation of its first Chief Executive (in July 2005), a change of Home Secretary, and a switch in the parliamentary ministers who had been its main spokespersons – have arguably contributed to implementation delay, and have been interpreted as potentially signalling a change of heart. At the time of writing this article, it is anticipated that the Queen’s Speech in November 2006 will give prominence to a more brutal version of the previously withdrawn ‘NOMS Bill’ to be introduced in the next Parliament, and Napo once again plans to lobby ministers to oppose it (McKnight, 2006). This prolonged period of transition seems set to continue, and it is difficult to disagree with those academic commentators who have argued that the final shape of NOMS will probably not be known for some time (Allen and Hough, 2006; Bhui, 2005; Rumgay, 2005). The future of the Probation Service – and the future shape of probation practice – therefore continues to hang in the balance.

The study: methodology

Clearly NOMS has implications for both the Prison and Probation Services, but from the outset most commentators have agreed that for the latter the implications are both more immediate and particularly dramatic (e.g. Hough et al., 2006). The present research therefore sought to gauge the extent to which NOMS, just over a year after its inauguration, was impacting on, and more generally being understood and perceived by, probation staff ‘on the ground’. To this end we approached Chief Officers in four NPS areas and requested permission to interview 10 staff (up to and including the Senior Probation Officer grade). Having secured access, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted such that, within each probation area, staff in a range of roles and locations were identified by us on the basis of information available in the Napo Probation Directory or, in one area, a list of personnel provided by senior managers. Individuals were then approached by one of us (by email and/or telephone) and invited to take part in a semi-structured interview. It was explained to staff that participation was voluntary, and confidential in
that the names of participants were not disclosed to senior staff or other research participants. The majority of the resulting interviews (total $n = 41$) were conducted at the interviewee’s place of work ($n = 32$), but a small number took place at other locations at the interviewee’s request ($n = 1$) or were conducted by telephone ($n = 8$). All the interviews were carried out in a four month period in autumn 2005.

The areas and the sample
The research sites included two large and two relatively small probation areas (in terms of both geography and number of staff), each falling within a different NOMS region. The four areas were at different stages in the process of implementing changes ‘on the ground’, only one having made real headway with the implementation of the Offender Management Model (see previously). In this area, the majority of staff were working within newly constituted ‘Offender Management Units’ (small teams of staff of different grades); generic rather than specialist caseloads were the norm; and many practitioners had been re-branded ‘offender managers’. In the other three areas, these changes tended to be ‘pending’, although the terminology of offender management was already partially in evidence.

The interviewee sample comprised three main categories of staff: namely, Senior Probation Officers (SPOs) or equivalent ($n = 10$); main grade Probation Officers (POs) ($n = 24$); and Probation Service Officers (PSOs) ($n = 7$). In each probation area all three grades of staff were interviewed. The sample included staff in field teams and more specialist roles (including for example specialists in resettlement, group programmes and community punishment, as well as a small number based in approved premises or prisons). The 23 females and 18 males included both relatively new recruits and a number of very experienced staff, with between 6 months and 35 years’ experience and a mean of 14 years’ service. Samples in all four areas included some Napo members.

Whilst we do not claim a representative sample, we have no reason to suspect that the sample is skewed in any particular direction. Reflecting the experience of Mair et al. (2006), who sought to interview a random sample of probation practitioners in the context of their research on OASys (the risk/needs assessment system used by probation and prison staff), we were not able to contact everyone we initially selected: it was relatively common to find that staff had left the service or moved to another post and in these cases another individual in the same team and/or a similar role was identified. However, the majority of those we approached agreed to take part: the small number who declined tended to cite lack of time or lack of knowledge about NOMS as their reason.

Communication about NOMS
Prior to asking interviewees about the extent of their knowledge of NOMS and their views about its implications, we asked a series of questions about how information about NOMS had been communicated to them, and their views as to the
effectiveness of that communication. The majority of interviewees in all four areas said that most of the information they had received was in electronic format: namely generic emails to all staff often with documents attached. Whilst there was a lack of clarity about how much of this information came directly from the ‘centre’ (NPD or NOMS headquarters) and how much was provided, filtered or ‘cascaded’ by their local Head Office, when prompted the majority recalled receiving regular NOMS newsletters, which are centrally produced. Other sources of written information included Napo newsletters (for those interviewees who were Napo members) and national newspapers.

Indeed, interviewees agreed that there was no shortage of information coming through about NOMS, and that it was appearing on a regular basis. However, views about this were mixed. On the one hand, the majority appreciated attempts to keep them informed of developments; but on the other hand there were significant problems of ‘information overload’, exacerbated by a lack of time to read and/or absorb the information. Not surprisingly, the quantity of information had little to do with the perceived effectiveness of communication. Almost all interviewees made some comment along these lines:

I’m always chasing my tail and I really don’t have the time, you know. . . . The stuff is in the tray with good intentions but that’s as far as it gets. (PO)

Criticisms were also voiced about the quality of some of the information received. For example, one prison-based SPO said that in the early stages of NOMS he had been able to access more and better quality information from the prison ‘intranet’, which he had then passed on to probation colleagues. Others felt that too much information had been ‘cascaded’ to staff by senior managers in an unthinking manner, with little or no attempt to summarize or draw out key points to aid digestion or comprehension. Many staff said they would have appreciated more ‘face-to-face’ communication from managers, with time to think about the issues and ask questions. In one of the smaller areas senior managers had organized a ‘roadshow’, personally visiting local teams to discuss the implications of NOMS with staff; but in other areas where staff had attended local NOMS briefings, these were generally felt to be rather ‘one way’ affairs with little or no time for dialogue:

[Managers] should be, I think, almost in a constant conversation with their teams and individuals within teams; talking about, encouraging, selling, if you like, the National Offender Model, the NOMS concept, progress updates, etc. We don’t even have team meetings. (PO)

For some interviewees, the effectiveness of communication was judged not in terms of the amount of information or even its quality, but in terms of the persuasiveness of its content:

I suppose it depends on what you mean by effective [. . .]. I suppose effectiveness in the sense of information dissemination, yes. Effective in terms of persuading, convincing me that NOMS is the right direction, well I guess that’s a different question. (PO)
Knowledge about NOMS

Among our interviewees, knowledge about NOMS and its national implementation was extremely varied: our sample included some individuals able to communicate a detailed account of up-to-the-minute developments, and some others who could tell us virtually nothing:

I know stuff is happening, I just don’t know what. (Trainee PO)

Something has happened because it’s on the bottom of letterheads, I believe. (PO)

Most, however, could tell us something about national NOMS developments. A number of interviewees referred to aspects of the ‘creation of the organization’, such as new senior appointments (Regional Offender Managers were mentioned more commonly than the National Offender Manager), though few (SPOs being the exception) referred to more fundamental developments such as ‘amalgamation with prisons’ or the new regional structure. Of the 41 interviewees, only two were able to name both the NOM and their region’s ROM. There was a tendency to confuse the former with the NPS directorship, but some said they were not aware of the post at all. Familiarity with the identity of ROMs varied across areas, with those able to name the relevant postholder ranging from one to five per area.

In order to gauge how knowledgeable individuals perceived themselves to be, we asked interviewees to rate both their own knowledge and that of colleagues on a scale of 0–10. Overall we found a tendency among staff of all grades to rate their own knowledge as relatively poor. In all areas the highest ‘self’ rating was 7 and the lowest 0, with means of between 3.5 and 5 in the four areas. Interestingly, individuals tended to rate colleagues’ knowledge as slightly poorer than their own (some adding the proviso that senior managers or active union members would be likely to know more than average), with mean colleagues’ ratings on average lower than ‘self’ ratings in all four areas.

This tendency to rate knowledge about NOMS as relatively low was linked with a number of factors. First, as already mentioned, many interviewees said they had limited time to devote to reading and absorbing information about NOMS. But a more fundamental barrier to understanding, for many of those we interviewed, was a perception of NOMS as a ‘moving target’; an ever-changing entity or ‘vision’ about which successive communications could appear contradictory, and which made it difficult for people to keep on top of developments.

I feel] unclear; uninformed; or not informed in a way that is accessible for me. (PO)

This meant that even the best informed interviewees felt unclear and to some extent doubted what they knew:

I would [rate my knowledge as] probably about 6½ [out of 10]. I know the information they’ve put out but I’m still not sure what it’s going to look like because it’s got to get through parliament. (Community Punishment Manager)

And there was a general sense of confusion about the contemporary status of NOMS:
It’s happening but it’s happening slowly it’s . . . . I’m confused about when this is supposed to be happening – has it been delayed, you know, I’m not sure in my mind the answers to those questions. I suspect it should have been in place by now, I might be wrong. (PO)

However, this sense of confusion was not solely attributable to the perception of NOMS as a ‘moving target’: another very significant issue, mentioned by the majority of interviewees, was one which we might characterize as ‘initiative confusion’. The fact of NOMS being just one of a large number of contemporary developments meant that staff admitted to a lot of uncertainty about exactly which changes were and which were not NOMS-related. Thus, for example, interviewees commonly referred to pre-NOMS or relatively independent developments, such as the ongoing implementation of the Offender Assessment System (OASys) or the 2003 Criminal Justice Act:

We had to go to something or other for a half day some while back, I’m not really sure what that was about. That could have been about NOMS but it could equally have been about the new Criminal Justice Act ‘cos . . . I think those two sort of issues have blurred to some extent in people’s minds. (PO)

We’ve had a lot thrown at us in the last year, not just about NOMS but you know stuff about the way we assess risk, IT changes, electronic case records [. . .] electronic pre-sentence reports and it’s all a lot for anyone to take in [. . .] the water gets very muddied [. . .] there’s too much change in too short a space of time. (PO)

**Perceived implications of NOMS**

Interviewees were invited to talk about the perceived implications of NOMS for a variety of stakeholders. This part of the interview included both fixed-response and open questions. For example, interviewees were asked to evaluate the implications of NOMS for the prison and probation services, offenders and themselves with reference to a fixed range of responses (summarized in Table 1, to follow), but also to explain their choice of responses.

Three general points about this part of the interviews can be made at the outset. First, there was a great deal of uncertainty about the implications of NOMS, as is evident in the far right-hand column of Table 1 which indicates that ‘don’t know yet’ was a very popular response. To a large extent this uncertainty seemed to reflect the perception of NOMS as a ‘moving target’, discussed previously. A second general observation is that responses tended to reveal ambivalence on the part of interviewees, rather than wholesale negative (or indeed positive) views. This is evident in that ‘mixed implications’ was the most common choice both overall and in respect of three out of four groups of stakeholders (see Table 1). Third, when positive implications were identified, these tended to be qualified by doubts about whether what was being described would be achievable in practice; or to be counterbalanced by less positive predictions about other aspects of NOMS.
These 'less positive' predictions tended to centre on what one interviewee described as the 'ogre of contestability' (see further later).

We focus here on what interviewees said in respect of implications for three main groups of stakeholders – offenders, the Probation Service, and probation practitioners themselves.

**NOMS and offenders**

When initially invited to talk, unprompted, about the perceived implications of NOMS, interviewees tended to focus on the implications for offenders first, before going on to refer to other stakeholders. Interviewees typically began by talking in positive terms about plans to develop ‘end-to-end offender management’ and continuity of supervision for individual offenders, the following comment being fairly typical:

... people who go into prison and come out again should potentially get a better service, a more integrated kind of service. (PO)

However, comments endorsing the promise of integrated services tended to be counterbalanced by a number of concerns and doubts. For example, interviewees commonly pointed out that in the absence of a significant injection or redistribution of resources, the achievement of these laudable goals would be extremely difficult. Several mentioned the importance of being able to visit offenders during their prison sentence and expressed the hope that previous barriers against this would be removed:

For most of my colleagues, a prison visit is an absolute luxury. That clearly is going to have to change, because there’s got to be continuity. (PO)

In a similar vein, doubts were raised about the extent to which continuity of supervision would make much real difference to offenders unless offender managers were enabled to spend more time with individuals:

---

**Table 1** Perceived implications of NOMS for different stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mainly positive</th>
<th>Mainly negative</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Don’t know yet*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offenders</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation Service</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison Service</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A small minority of these were ‘other responses’ rather than straightforward responses of ‘Don’t know yet’, including ‘no change yet’ and a few who felt unable to choose between the available response categories
Scepticism was also expressed about the necessity of a NOMS structure to deliver continuity in supervision, with some longer-serving staff explaining that a ‘one offender, one supervisor’ model was hardly new. As one SPO put it: ‘there are other ways of achieving what they’re trying to achieve’. Comments such as these tended to be linked with an understanding of NOMS, expressed by some as a ‘political project’ rather than an initiative with offenders’ needs and/or effectiveness at its heart. Linked to this perception was another set of concerns about the potential for cost- and/or corner-cutting, particularly with reference to the ‘contestability’ agenda. This, some argued, would be likely to reduce the quality and effectiveness of the service received by offenders, rather than improving it. As one interviewee explained:

... you know as a public sector organization, you are fairly neutral in value [. . .] well, I see us as a guardian for the citizen as it were [. . .]. We’re asked by the court to supervise this person on behalf of society – and that value’s understood. But I don’t think it will be in the new system – you know, they’re going to see the profit and that’s going to . . . you know, these are already messed-up people.

(CP Manager)

A final concern voiced by a small number of interviewees was the potentially confusing effect for offenders of another set of changes in terminology and expectations:

[NOMS has] mixed implications [for offenders] in that they’ve got to get used to changes as well, in terms of just jargon and terminology [and changed] expectations [. . .]. I think a lot of them just feel as if they haven’t got a clue what’s going on, and they just resign themselves to the fact that somebody else is in charge of their case really. (PO)

**NOMS and the Probation Service**

Views about the implications of NOMS for the Probation Service were very mixed (see Table 1). In all four probation areas, positive comments focused on the potential for more ‘joined up’ working with prisons, and the ‘end-to-end management’ of offenders (see previously). Some interviewees also saw the potential of NOMS to raise probation’s profile and/or enhance the credibility of the service in the eyes of the public. However, as Table 1 shows, interviewees were much more likely to see the implications of NOMS for the Probation Service in negative rather than positive terms, or as ‘mixed’. By far the most common source of concern was the contestability agenda, with comments such as this being very common:

Well, we’re about to be sold off . . . [laughter] . . . so that’s . . . you know, that’s . . . it would appear that from the top there is no, you know, there isn’t any faith in
the probation service or what we do and it seems to be something that can be hived off to the private sector. (PO)

In this context, the responses of interviewees to a more specific question is illustrative. Interviewees were shown or read a short series of statements about NOMS which we garnered from a variety of sources. The sources of each statement were not revealed to interviewees prior to responding. One of these statements, which derived from a Napo briefing in 2005, read as follows: ‘The Government is contemplating dismantling the Probation Service through the bureaucratic vehicle of NOMS’. Thirty-two of our 41 respondents indicated that they either agreed (n = 20) or partly agreed (n = 12) with this statement. Those who partly agreed or disagreed often did so on the basis that whilst they did not believe this to be an overt objective of the NOMS agenda, they nonetheless felt that it was a likely outcome:

I think the plan is to implement what is politically popular and cost effective. Now if the end result of that happens to be the dismantling of probation, then they’ll dismantle probation but I don’t think that’s the official target. (PO)

Interviewed just days after the publication of a leaked memo from the Home Secretary in the national press (see previously), one interviewee made the following comment:

I partly agree with [the statement], that’s my fear and I know it’s a fear of a lot of people but I know we had a thing this week on the email saying that that’s not the case. I’d like to believe them but I feel probably probation will keep its name . . . but in terms of the values and the reasons why a lot of the people came into the job, they will disappear. (PO)

One size fits all?

A further, significant way in which some interviewees felt that NOMS might be negative for the Probation Service was via the imposition of a standardized, ‘one size fits all’ approach across all probation areas. A number of interviewees expressed the view that aspects of the NOMS model were being applied across the board in a rather dogmatic fashion without due regard to how well they might work in different contexts. In one of our four areas, which interviewees there regarded as a ‘high performing’ area, some made comments along the lines of ‘why change what works?’ (PSO), this sentiment being applied to a number of aspects of NOMS, including the introduction of contestability (seen as making sense in poorly performing areas but not in high performing areas) and the implementation of the Offender Management Model (OMM). The latter created particular concern about the prospect of ‘splitting’ the functions of offender management and interventions. In the area in question, this division of responsibilities had been tried, rather unsuccessfully, in the context of Community Punishment (not least because senior managers felt it would soon become necessary to be able to cost the different elements of CP in the context of contestability):

... much of the work we do is really intervention and not much in the way of case management in the traditional probation sense and maybe, you know, to split my...
team into two was going to make it very inflexible, much more fragmented, a lot less cost effective actually. And really was this a good thing to happen? So all that’s on hold now. (CP Manager)

In all four areas, many of the answers about risks for the Probation Service concerned regionalization, another process affecting probation areas across the board. Regionalization was perceived as a risk because it was expected to impact on the development of relevant services and make it more difficult to highlight local needs, as well as creating what some saw as more unhelpful layers of bureaucracy:

While some things work on a regional basis, I think with regions you lose local knowledge which is absolutely critical in terms of serving the local community and meeting the needs of the offenders in that community. . . . (SPO)

I think that each area is different. For example, in [X-shire], we’ve got one area where there is a lot of crime to do with alcohol and that sort of abuse, and I think the more specific you can make it for that area, and assessing what’s going on there, the better service you’re going to give for the needs of the area. Rather than just saying, it has to be like this over the whole region. (PSO)

**NOMS and Probation Practitioners**

Returning to Table 1, we see once again quite a lot of uncertainty, as well as predictions of ‘mixed implications’, in respect of NOMS in relation to interviewees themselves (and, by implication, colleagues). Only two interviewees, both long-serving officers, thought NOMS was likely to have ‘mainly positive’ implications for them. More typically, NOMS was perceived as presenting significant risks to both job security and job satisfaction.

**The ‘ogre of contestability’**

At the top of interviewees’ lists of concerns was the contestability agenda which, not surprisingly, was linked with significant worries about job security:

. . . with all this concern about competitive tendering and all the rest of it [. . .] I suppose the biggest fear is that there are going to be fewer and fewer probation officers. (PO)

In this context some were clearly feeling more vulnerable than others. For example, some staff in approved premises were expecting to be re-interviewed in order to retain their jobs, and both community punishment and programme delivery staff were often referred to as being ‘high risk’ in this respect:

. . . so the potential is that it’s going to remove things like community service, or the accredited programmes aren’t going to be part of the probation service any more, hostels will be privatized, you know you can see the potential for just hiving off those bits of the probation service. (PO)
We see ourselves very much in the frontline of being shoved out to Group Four, and nobody’s held back to say that that isn’t so to staff either. I think that’s been honestly put by management as well. (CP Manager)

But whilst many of our interviewees suspected that the jobs of certain colleagues were probably most vulnerable, this did not imply complacency about other roles, including their own. As one interviewee put it, ‘everything is up for grabs’. Indeed, it was pointed out by more than one interviewee that with the advancement of an increasingly prescriptive or standardized (Robinson, 2003) approach in most areas of probation practice (assessment, supervision planning and report writing being commonly quoted as exemplars of this trend), the potential for contracting out had been vastly enhanced:

So I think most of the work could be under threat really [. . .] [if] it’s a very prescriptive approach to dealing with people then that makes it tangible to private companies, what they’d be bidding for or getting themselves involved in [. . .] If we’re saying that in every instance we do x, y and z with each offender then that makes it more appealing [to them]. (PO)

**Roles and identity**

Closely linked to worries about job security was a broader set of concerns about changes to the nature of the job itself. As we have already noted, the four areas were at different stages in the process of implementing changes ‘on the ground’, only one having made real headway with the implementation of the Offender Management Model. Not surprisingly, interviewees had yet to get to grips with the implications of many of these (actual or pending) changes. Thus, for example, interviewees were not always sure to what extent a move toward ‘offender management’ amounted to a new way of working, or simply a new label to describe existing practices:

My understanding of the concept of offender management [is] that I hold cases and I become . . . I used to be classed, I believe, a ‘case manager’ – I’m not sure whether I am any more . . . I’m just a probation officer really. (PO)

[It means] that actually I am the person that manages the offender and the resources that the offender accesses, or I access on behalf of the offender [. . .]. But that’s always been my perception of what my job is, I guess. (PO)

Nonetheless, for many of those we interviewed, the move toward ‘offender management’ was associated with a number of actual or potential risks, or, perhaps more accurately, was understood as exacerbating trends already in train. Among ‘main-grade’ staff, there were two principal, closely related sets of concerns, both stemming from the creation of the ‘offender manager’ role. The first concern was the prospect of much less direct, ‘face-to-face’ work with offenders, which tended to be associated with reduced levels of job satisfaction. Whilst the prospect of continuity in supervision (‘end-to-end’ management) was seen as a positive development, this was for many counterbalanced by fears about the amount of direct input they would realistically be able to have with offenders:
They’ve got to leave space for the offender manager to be the person who also spends time with the offender; they’ve got to leave space for that relationship to exist, and to be nurtured. (PO)

And as one group programmes specialist commented:

. . . there’s lots of things about being [an Offender Manager] that don’t appeal to me. I mean it’s a far more bureaucratic and paper-based role than I left six years ago [. . .] the other thing that impresses me at the moment is the amount of time that people are sat in front of screens and not face-to-face with clients . . . and you go out into the area offices and you just see people sat at their computers, you know, and that’s the other thing that worries me a little bit . . . but there we are. (PO)

The second, related, concern was the loss of ‘professional territory’ to non-qualified staff. A number of interviewees referred to the appointment of more PSO than PO grades in recent months and voiced concerns about the former encroaching on ‘their’ territory (see Drakeford, 1993). Indeed, one area was in the process of appointing a number of PSO Offender Managers. As one maingrade/qualified OM in this area commented:

I’m ever so slightly suspicious that, as an OM grade, that’s too high in terms of maintaining my contact with offenders, so I can see myself going towards the situation where I’m going to be sitting at my desk more and more, banging out risk assessments and writing letters and taking the flak for things, and it will be the PSO grades [. . .] that will be doing the more . . . having the good stuff to deal with. So I can see that with [high risk] cases, I would still have those and be having fewer cases that are high risk but the kind of enjoyable part of rapport building and helping people with their situational needs and just the sort of welfare stuff is becoming less and less and less, and then moved to a different grade officer. So I’m not particularly keen on that. (PO)

This probation officer was not alone in expressing a more generalized worry about the potential of NOMS to undermine some of the values to which many staff subscribed and which had motivated them to join the service. This concern tended to be revealed when we asked interviewees how they felt about the new terminology of ‘offender management’. Whilst we must acknowledge that the majority said they had no problem with this discursive turn, others were clearly alienated by it:

I don’t like it at all. I think it’s a nonsense . . . it’s the language of an organization that’s got no real interest in people or their lives. (PO – nearing retirement)

Rather than dealing with people in terms of taking an interest in [their] lives and so on, we’re talking about managing them. So I think that worries me a little bit, we’re not helping people, we’re managing them. I think that’s just a subtle thing [in] which I notice the change. (PO – qualified 1 year)

I don’t like the word offenders, I don’t like to categorize people . . . especially people who might have made just one mistake to then to be called an offender when it’s just unnecessary. (Trainee PO)
Coping with change

In the final part of the interview, we asked individuals to summarize how they felt about the establishment of NOMS and ‘NOMS-related changes’. What became clear to us was that people’s personal reactions were very variable indeed, ranging from quite optimistic, through neutral, to ‘concerned’, ‘cynical’, ‘stressed’ and ‘depressed’. It also became apparent that the degree to which our interviewees had engaged with NOMS, intellectually and/or emotionally, was also very variable: whilst a number were apparently deeply affected, others remained virtually untouched by, and in some cases almost completely ignorant of, the same developments.

This variation appeared to have little to do with roles, grades, length of time in the service, or probation areas: rather, what we saw was a range of strategies for coping with change. Many of the responses throughout the interviews threw into relief the different ways in which people cope with a seemingly unending stream of fresh directives and impending transformations that may be perceived as challenging or threatening. Some react quite passively, with a degree of resignation, coupled with a determination not to get ‘bogged down’ or waste energy worrying about the future: ‘whatever will happen will happen’. Others make a conscious decision to ‘grasp the nettle’ and focus on the positives, refusing to get ‘dragged down by all the negativity’. Still others react with passive anger or cynical resignation. In the words of one interviewee:

I’m far from convinced that the majority of the people who work in the service really have great faith that the changes are going to make great impact, or indeed that it’s the best way to be working with clients/offenders, but that’s really the [only] acceptable option now and there’s a feeling that there’s no way in which one can have any kind of practitioners’ formal discussion, or dare I say it, revolt against it. It’s going to happen and so . . . . (PO)

Others use strategies to resist or deny impending change. For example, one SPO admitted:

I need to be honest, I’ve been in denial about NOMS, so I’ve been operating on a rather-not-know basis, rather than know basis, as it might go away. . . . I’ve been asked to join groups and things in my role and I’ve said that I really don’t want to be involved. So, that’s very, very personal rather than an area view [laughs]. So that’s kind of where I was coming from in terms of resistance to change and that’s how I’ve chosen to manage it myself. (SPO)

The possibility of a degree of denial on their own part was recognized and explicitly referred to by a small number of other interviewees, and was perhaps best summed up by one probation officer’s comment that: ‘NOMS is the elephant in the room – we all know it’s there. . . .’. Indeed, in respect of NOMS, strategies of minimization or (partial) denial have arguably been unintentionally fostered by continuing uncertainty about the implications of NOMS, coupled with relatively ineffective communication to staff. These factors, it seems, have lent NOMS an air of ‘unreality’ which has rendered it for
many a prospect that has been relatively easy to ignore, at least in the short term. In the course of our interviews it was not uncommon to hear NOMS characterized as something rather remote: a ‘brewing thunderstorm’ or an entity ‘looming on the horizon’:

On a day-to-day level, it is difficult to really identify with what NOMS is. It does feel as if it’s something ‘out there’, a bit. For me, it does feel quite virtual. (SPO)

We’ve not got to NOMS yet, because NOMS is next year. (PSO)

Discussion: Change fatigue in the Probation Service

Probation staff – and certainly those who have been in the service for several years – are accustomed to working within an organization that is undergoing reform. Indeterminate change is the norm: it is a defining characteristic of their professional existence. Indeed, it is probably fair to claim that practitioners have been under pressure to reform their way of operating at least since the mid-1980s (Home Office, 1984) and perhaps since ‘the arrival of the Thatcher government in 1979 which led to the cold winds of business ideology and practices entering the debate about community penalties’ (Mair, 1997: 1216). In this they are hardly different from professionals in other public services, all of which have been affected in their operation by the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) strategies (Raine and Willson, 1996; Clarke et al., 2000). When the events since the start of the new millennium are taken into account though, the Probation Service is arguably an exceptional case.

The National Probation Service was formed as recently as 2001. This is not the place to recount the factors which led to this, nor to describe the specifics of policy and practice (for a recent history see Raynor and Vanstone, 2007). Suffice to say though that the reorganization of 54 relatively independent services into a national service with 42 centrally managed areas was a radical overhaul involving massive expense and readjustment. This transformation involved the setting up of a National Probation Directorate with armies of managers to orchestrate the change and implement a national strategy (Wallis, 2001). Good progress was made in overcoming difficulties encountered in the development of evidence-based policy and practice (Knott, 2004). Following all this, any suggestion that the probation service was in need of another radical transformation was bound to strike participants as inappropriate if not absurd.

In a recent paper addressing the implications of NOMS for probation staff, Raynor and Maguire (2006) argue that a significant challenge for NOMS will be maintaining the morale and motivation of staff at a time of major organizational change and, in particular, under the shadow of contestability. This small study lends empirical support to that observation, in a number of respects. First, it has demonstrated that the ‘ogre of contestability’ is a particular concern among practitioners, albeit that this particular ogre is more of a ‘looming threat’ than a reality for the majority. Second, it has revealed a significant degree of ‘change fatigue’ among staff. Rather than being especially negative or positive about future
prospects, many were simply ‘weary of changes’ or overwhelmed by a sense that ‘it’s happening too quickly’ and ‘there’s too much to take on board’. Corresponding with the ‘initiative confusion’ mentioned earlier, they spoke of the tension created by relentless change, as well as the daily stress experienced in endeavouring to meet an increasing range of demands from an expanding range of ‘masters’.

Third, the study indicates that whilst practitioners are utilizing a range of coping strategies, and many clearly remain motivated in the context of their work with offenders, some staff (most notably longer serving staff) are experiencing a degree of alienation within their role, in the sense that NOMS – not least with its terminology of ‘offender management’ – is distancing them from some of the values which underpin their continuing commitment to the work. Finally, whilst staff were positive about the prospects for continuity of supervision and integration between prison and probation services, our study does seem to indicate that morale may be suffering under the shadow of NOMS. In the final part of our interviews, we asked people to rate (on a subjective scale of 0–10) both their own morale and that of colleagues. Whilst the results are clearly subjective, and are offered in the absence of any ‘baseline’ against which to compare them, they do seem to confirm Raynor and Maguire’s prediction, with interviewees’ ‘self-ratings’ averaging at 5.6, and ‘colleague’ ratings even lower, at 4.5. Of course, these ratings – however evaluated – are not solely attributable to the coming of NOMS, but rather reflect the impact of a succession of changes, of which NOMS is just the latest.

Conclusions: Whither Probation Officers in NOMS?

There has been remarkably little commentary on NOMS and its implications by criminal justice academics: perhaps they share the ‘initiative confusion’ and ‘change fatigue’ that seems now to be experienced within the probation practice. Yet this development is surely of significance not only for the criminal justice process in England and Wales but for those countries that may be seeking to reform their own justice services. The NPS aimed to establish itself as a ‘world leader’ in providing programmes that reduce re-offending and improve public safety, and as ‘a top performing public service’ benchmarked by the European Excellence Model; and it has indeed been seen as a model for other countries to follow (e.g. see CEP and NPS, 2004). If NOMS, which presently incorporates the NPS, is to share similar aspirations, then it is worth reflecting on the manner of its introduction and its implications for core practice, and how these have been experienced by frontline staff.

This snapshot study to gain insights into frontline staff perceptions of sustained central planning and revision of their service, indicates the extent of uncertainty and confusion that busy practitioners are likely to experience, even when there is an abundance of information to access, at least online. In particular, it seems important to appreciate that indeterminate change at the top level can adversely affect the motivation and morale of practitioners on the ground. Our findings suggest that the remote and impersonal nature of communication about developments has been unsettling; minimal discussion in local services together with uncertainty
about what is going on nationally has left staff with little scope for expressing concerns and asking questions.7

There are clear implications for the morale and retention of existing staff. National figures show that while there has been a recent growth in NPS staff, this has been driven by substantial increases in administrative staff and PSOs, whereas the attrition rate for main PO grades continues to show a loss.8 Even if staff do not leave, their ability to carry out the work may be impaired. A recent National Audit Office (2006) study of staff sickness absence in the Probation service, carried out around the same time as our own study, found that one-third of all sick leave in the National Probation Service is attributed to stress, anxiety and depression. Similarly to our own findings, these problems were, to a large extent, attributed to lack of communication and confusion about what was happening to the probation service and the future impact of NOMS.

The latest developments, as this article ‘goes to press’, bring the service to a new low point of morale, with six probation areas undergoing ‘capability reviews’ for poor performance, and John Reid announcing, in a speech to Wormwood Scrubs prisoners on 7 November 2006, that ‘the probation system is not working as well as it should’ and will be opened up to competition from the voluntary and private sector. These come on the back of a BBC Panorama programme unfairly criticizing the probation service for not providing round-the-clock surveillance of ex-prisoners released to approved premises, and announcements that the October 2007 cohort of trainee probation officers will be the last. Those public sector probation staff who decide to stay in the organization, despite all this and the latest round of strategic planning, must wonder what, when the dust finally settles, will be left for them of the role they chose when they entered the service. Finally, it is worth considering how NOMS will impact on ‘relational’ probation practice (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Robinson, 2005). At a time when there is renewed attention to the pivotal role of interpersonal skills and relationships in effective practice (McGuire, 2002; McNeill et al., 2005), the question of ‘who’ is going to do the face-to-face work with offenders is paramount.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the Probation Research Education Trust for a grant towards the costs of this study, and to Martin Wargent, Probation Boards Association, and the four Probation Areas involved, for their support.

Notes

1 The need for ‘seamless’ delivery of services is reflected in new sentences which include both community and custodial elements, such as Custody Plus and Intermediate Custody.

2 This was shortly after the Home Secretary’s speech to the Prison Reform Trust (Clarke, 2005) which had briefly inspired a more positive construal of the intended reforms.

3 Following the descriptions of ‘families of areas’ used by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2005: Appendix E), the areas included: one metropolitan area; one
large size, lower density area; one medium size, higher density area; and one small size, higher density area.

4 Community punishment has subsequently been re-branded as ‘unpaid work’ and more recently ‘community payback’.

5 Explaining that lack of knowledge was not a barrier to participation did on occasion change the person’s mind.

6 Latest figures indicate that, nationally, PSOs now outnumber Probation Officers by 1.22:1 (full time employment) (NPS, 2006).

7 A number of our interviewees commented on the cathartic effect of being invited to talk (to us) about their views and feelings.

8 The full attrition rate for main Probation Officer grades during the 2005/2006 financial year was 11.59 per cent, which is significantly up on 9.40 per cent for the 04/05 financial year (NOMS, 2006b).

References


Gwen Robinson is a Lecturer in Criminal Justice, University of Sheffield, Department of Law, Crookesmoor Building, Conduit Road, Sheffield S10 1FL. Email: G.J.Robinson@sheffield.ac.uk

Ros Burnett is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford, Manor Road Building, Manor Road, Oxford OX1 3UQ. Email: ros.burnett@crim.ox.ac.uk