

Nottingham Courts: Delivery Model Review

FROM POSSIBILITY.....

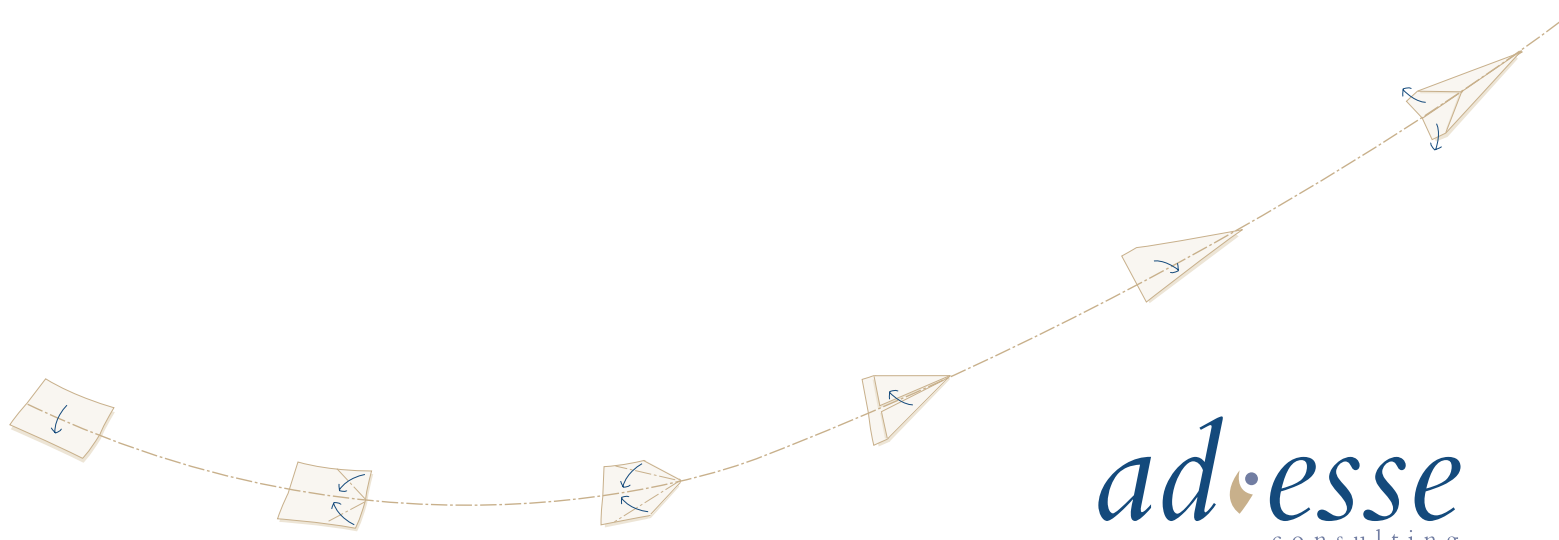
The realities of tighter budgets and increasing work loads have required public sector organisations to be innovative to allow them to meet their targets. Nottinghamshire Probation Area had achieved significant improvements in its performance in the last three years, and had a 'green' status in the Integrated Probation Performance Framework in the proceeding quarter.

However, for any organisation to continually drive performance requires them to constantly evaluate where further improvements can be made and whether their services meet the needs of their customers and stakeholders.

Senior managers recognised that an effective court team is critical to the work of probation because they are a conduit of much of the information that the field teams rely on to carry out their work efficiently and they are the interface to a number of stakeholders whose confidence in Probation is critical if community sentences are to work successfully.

The senior management team therefore wanted to review whether the current delivery model in the courts, including the processes, structure and resources, was 'fit for purpose' and if not, how it could be changed to meet both present and future demands.

The present court team services both the Crown court and city Magistrates court and is know as the combined court team. Therefore the review needed to take account of both of these settings. However, given the considerably larger volume of work dealt with by the city Magistrate's court it was felt that the majority of the work should be focussed here but that any solutions proposed needed to be capable of transference into other Magistrates settings in the County, or indeed to the Crown Court.



OUR APPROACH

The first step was to define the purpose of the combined court team and this required input from senior Probation managers, the court team itself and its customers and stakeholders which include the Probation field teams, Her Majesty's Court Services (HMCS) and other Criminal Justice Organisations (CJO's).

We carried out a series of interviews with people from within these different groups and the results showed a wide ranging role, but with a high degree of consistency among stakeholders and staff about what they saw as the purpose of the team. There was also a strong overlap between both the magistrates and crown courts. Where there was less clarity was who from within the team should fulfil each of the roles and how best to achieve the level of service that the customers of the team either need or would like.

The one area where there was disagreement about purpose or role was to what extent the court team should act as a data gathering function in court. The conclusion that was reached was that the purpose of the court team was to:

1. Deliver a set of services in a professional way which ensures that sentencers have confidence in the information and advice they receive from probation
2. Advise sentencers about the use of different types of community penalty and about the progress of known offenders on current orders
3. Provide written and oral reports to the court
4. Notify the field teams when SDR's are needed including booking offenders in
5. Identify and tracking of serious further offences (SFO)
6. Provide advice, support and initial point of contact for offenders
7. Advise probation field teams of the community order commencements
8. Support other court users such as defence solicitors, CPS, etc
9. Focus on the reduction of the use of custody both remand and sentencing through initiatives such as the 'bail accommodation and support scheme (BASS)', enhanced supervision and ensuring no Suspended Sentence proposals.

This definition of purpose clearly identified that it was not the role of the court team to have staff in courts to:

- Record results or outcomes of cases in general
- Identify committals to crown court
- Hear about the need for PSR's.

Once a clearly defined purpose had been agreed we worked with the court team manager and his staff to identify what processes would support their defined purpose.

HOW TO DELIVER THE PROCESSES IN THE MOST EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE WAY?

The next stage was to work with the team to investigate and understand their current situation of processes, structures and resources and to identify where the issues were that would stop them delivering in an efficient and effective way against the new purpose. It became clear that although there was scope to improve the processes by which the court team conducted their work, as there is in most processes, there were some more fundamental issues that needed to be resolved to allow the team to deliver against the agreed purpose.

The areas of concern included:

- The need for a co-ordination role in magistrates court to manage resources on a day to day basis, to mentor and support staff and to provide greater levels of contact with stakeholders in the court setting
- The different skill set required by staff in court compared to in the field setting and the need for greater continuity of staff in court
- Under-resourcing in the magistrates court particularly in terms of certain grades of staff that are needed to support certain areas of work
- That present facilities and access to systems were hampering the team and having a significant impact on their efficiency and effectiveness
- The need to build stronger relationships between the field and court teams especially in the area of enforcement of community penalty breaches
- The need to make better use of the existing IT system (Xhibit) within the Crown court and to focus on how the upcoming implementation of a new IT system in the Magistrates court (Libra) to ensure it provides the best possible solution to all stakeholders.

Given these clearly identified issues further work was undertaken to gather data on the present situation which included:

- volumes of work especially numbers of FDR's (Fast Delivery Reports) presently delivered and any targeted increases (e.g. Nottingham wish to increase the number of FDR's they provide to court)
- present staffing levels and importantly the rosters for part time staff
- diary of court sittings to allow the identification of demand on probation staff from certain types of courts such as overnight/remand and sentencing courts.

The team also looked at how other Probation areas have set up their court teams to identify whether there was any scope for learning about best practice.

TO ACTUALITY.....

It was clear that to bring about the necessary changes the senior management team within Probation would need to be involved and there would also be a requirement to carry out some negotiations with other stakeholders especially HMCS. Therefore a proposed set of next steps was developed with the courts team manager and then presented to the senior management team. These were:

1. Finalise an SLA with HMCS covering the roles of the two organisations and what they will provide to each other in terms of information and in what timescales. One of the key aims being to reduce the need for Probation staff to act as information gatherers in court
2. Look at solutions to provide the required facilities necessary for the Probation court team to operate effectively in the magistrates court
3. Recruit a Probation Officer to fulfil the co-ordinator role in the magistrates court
4. Re-align the enforcement team staff to site them with the field teams, so as to promote closer working links and better flow of quality information
5. Recruit and change the staffing of the court team to meet the required FTE head count and minimise the number of part time staff to ensure better continuity
6. Develop a training programme that provides new staff with an understanding of how the courts operate and what is expected of them in the court setting. Also further training for existing staff where required to ensure that they are comfortable presenting information to court and carrying out an advocacy role in the court setting

7. Initiate a working group made up of staff from the probation court team and HMCS staff to define how their joint processes could be better aligned and also whether Xhibit could provide more information to Probation
8. Initiate a joint working group to consider the processes once Libra is rolled out to the Magistrates courts, so as to ensure that it best supports the business processes and reduces the information gathering burden for Probation.

THE BENEFITS

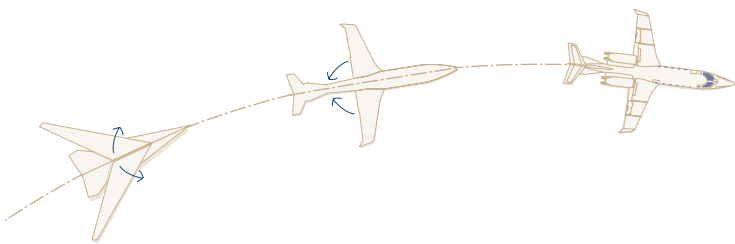
It is clear that given the nature of the changes required it is going to take a little time for the service to be in a position to implement the necessary changes and therefore obtain the benefits from the work. However, we left Nottinghamshire with the following:

- A clearly defined and agreed purpose for the court team
- A newly defined model in terms of structure and resources which will deliver the new purpose but also provide them with the flexibility to meet new demands which arise in the future
- A clear roadmap of what steps they need to take to increase the effectiveness of the court team especially in the magistrates court setting
- A team manager and team who have been empowered by being able to input and help develop the new model

The senior management team have already started the processes required to implement the steps outlined above and are clear that they want to ensure that the refreshed model is implemented as soon as possible.

Sheila Wright, Director of Offender Management for Nottingham Probation explained that this work has been:

“central to the Area aligning its structure to those of the Courts. In doing so it is ensuring an effective and efficient service for sentencers, offenders, field teams and other court users.”



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