

Rapid Improvement in London Probation Court Teams



From Possibility...

Ad Esse worked with London Probation to deliver a series of Rapid Improvement Workshops with a number of the probation service's field teams as part of the successful 'Going for Green' initiative. Whilst these week long events focussed on the specific circumstances for the individual teams, a key outcome of these workshops was to consider general learning points that could be implemented by other field teams. A roll-out plan based on ownership by front-line leaders was developed and many of the field team suggestions have been successfully transferred to other teams, helping London Probation achieve 'Green' status on the Integrated Probation Performance Framework' (IPPF).

In the course of this roll-out activity, London Probation recognised that one group that had not been directly involved (due to the programme's focus on the IPPF) was the probation Court Teams. Court teams work in a different environment to the field teams and therefore are likely to have specific issues and needs not addressed in the original workshop programme. It was therefore proposed that the improvement workshop activity be extended to the Court Teams.

There are two types of court Magistrates and Crown, each of which places very different demands on the Probation Service. The background to the project was what general outcomes could be learned from 2 court teams – 1 Crown Court and 1 Magistrates Court and could this be done in a compressed timeframe to allow a degree of 'catch-up' with the field teams?

OUR APPROACH

Ad Esse's approach to meeting this challenge was to undertake pre-workshop visits to ensure the facilitator had a good understanding of the environment and the scope of potential improvement to allow the most benefit from each workshop. The visits help build some understanding and expectation around problem solving during the delay that is inevitable when trying to get a team together for an extended period.

The rapid improvement workshops were held on-site over a 5 day period using the DMAIC (Define Measure Analyse Improve Control) framework for problem solving. Holding the workshops in this way can be a challenge for front-line services (ensuring cover etc.) but it reaps many rewards in terms of focus within the team, more open communication across the team, better solutions and a reduced lead time to implement these solutions.



OUTCOMES

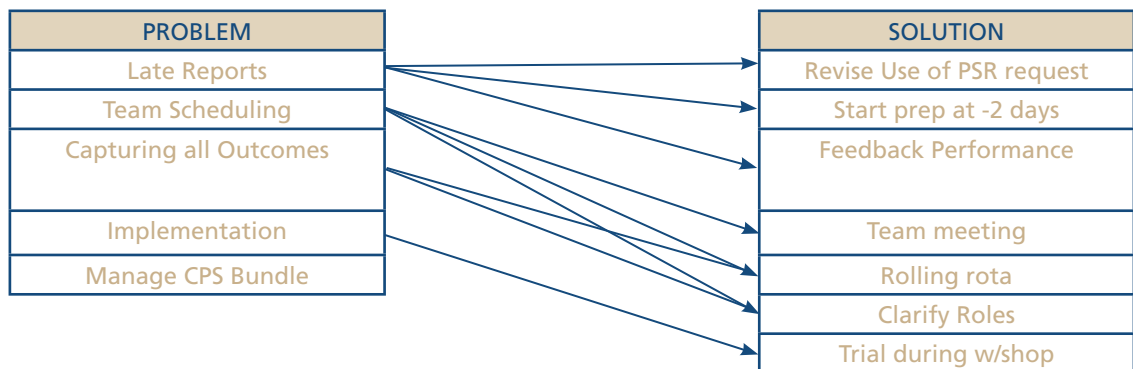
Crown Court Team

The Crown Court team identified issues that related both to the service they provided to the court and to the way they operated within the team. These were:

1. Reports that are not available 2 days before the court hearing add to the administrative workload and can disrupt court activity (re-listing)
2. What is the best way to manage the available resource to meet the 'controlled' demand (reports) and 'uncontrolled' demand (courts & outcomes)?
3. How do we provably capture each day's court outcomes?
4. How do we ensure we implement what we agree?
5. What is the best way to manage CPS documentation?

The solutions that were identified can be summarised as follows:

- Revise the way the PSR booking form is used to identify the report due date. This is now written in the 'Other Description' field at the top of the form.
- Start the list preparation 2 days before the court appearance date. This requires working from the 'Tracker' application rather than the provided 'Court List'.
- Tally the late reports (not available 2 days before appearance) and feedback the performance to core field teams.
- Hold a daily team meeting for court staff to match the resource placement for the following day to the finalised Court List. This may include using report writing staff to cover court at peak times of the day (usually 10am to 12pm).
- Generate a 2 week rolling rota for Court Duty Officers and report writing staff. This is compiled looking at the Tracker, FDR interviews booked and the leave board. It provides clear priorities for court cover and report writing.
- Clarify the responsibilities across the team. Staff tend to help each other out. This had led to a blurring of roles over time meaning certain tasks were not being given sufficient focus. The specific roles were clarified and the impact on workload monitored through team meetings.



Magistrate Court Team

This team was able to identify a number of issues that impacted on their core performance indicators of the proportion of reports delivered on the day of court appearance and the proportion of reports done as Fast Delivery Reports (FDRs). They also identified issues which reduced Court Officer time in court. These were:

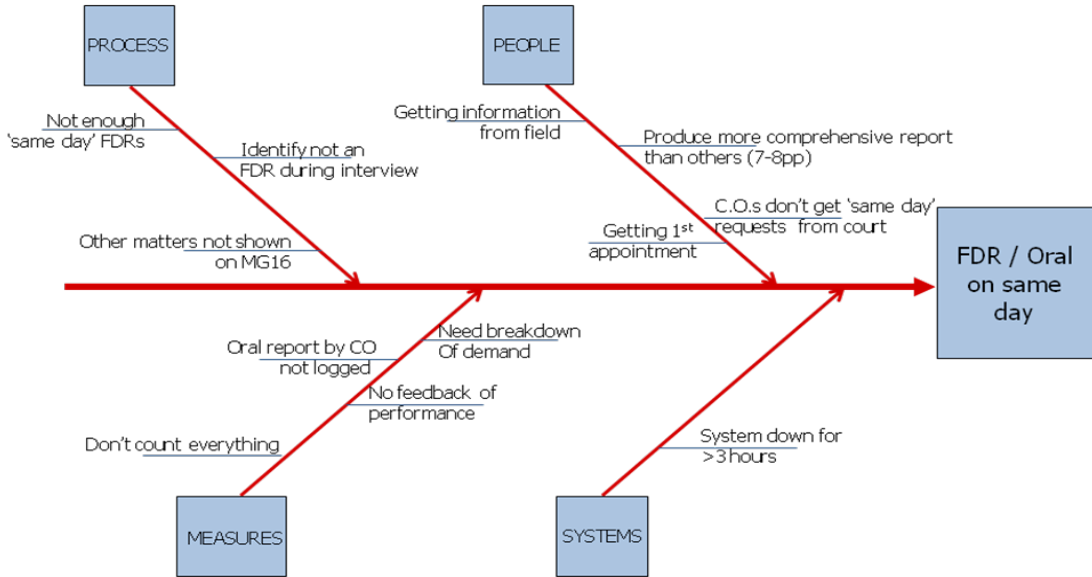
1. The need to promote use of same day reporting to make most of this opportunity.
2. The team often fail to record inputs to sentencing (oral reports) because they are unclear best way to do this.
3. There is a need to error proof the booking system for FDR's as booking too far ahead (more than 5 days) has a double impact – it ensures the booked FDRs do not meet the target and it removes the capacity to do on-time FDRs later.



4. A significant amount of time is spent chasing reports from the field which impacts on time in court, the time court officers have to prepare for the cases being seen and the number of non value-add outcomes at court (non-reports, re-listings etc.)
5. Cover for courts can drop below the level required to meet court requests in a timely manner



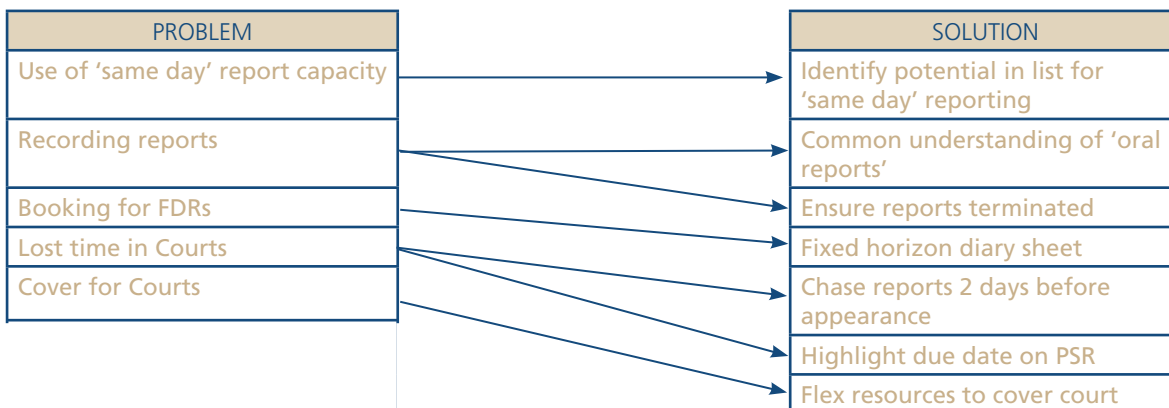
We worked with the team to review underlying causes of the problems identified. The example below shows a cause and effect diagram looking at one of the identified issues.



This led to the identification of a number of specific improvement tasks which are summarised below:

1. Implement a review of the court list to identify potential same day reports early. The Court Officer is then pre-warned and can liaise with court personnel to make best use of the available 'same day' reporting capacity.
2. Error Proofing of the diary booking system to remove the possibility of booking interviews beyond the FDR time limit and emphasise the fixed capacity available to do FDRs.
3. Start checking due FDRs 2 days before court appearance. This necessitates working from the Tracker application rather than the Court List.
4. On the electronic PSR request form, the 'Other Description' field is to include the report due date to avoid confusion with the court appearance date.
5. Discuss and agree within the team what constitutes an 'Oral Report' to ensure that Court Officers identify and log all 'Oral Reports' provided to the court.

The connection between the stated problems and the identified improvement activities can be shown as follows:



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BENEFITS

Crown Court

Within the workshop period the Crown court's team had implemented changes to the 'list preparation' process and had been able to resolve issues in 20% of the incoming case load that would otherwise not have been addressed. This work reduced the number 'non-reports' and 're-list' requests to the court.

The proportion of late reports will take time to reduce, however the immediate impact of clarifying the due date has been better communication into the team of when reports will arrive which in itself has reduced administrative workload (no chasing required). This reduced fire-fighting has led to 'reading in' of reports being possible – ensuring that the Court Duty Officers have a better understanding of the proposals before court and are more able to help with any clarification required. In the week this had been running 2 reports that required revision had been picked up (approximately 5% of reports).

The introduction of a daily team meeting to discuss the workload for the next day had helped ensure appropriate resource was available and used as flexibly as possible. This 5 minute conversation was considered to be saving significant amounts of time compared to re-organising cover during the court day when people were distributed around the building and not necessarily contactable. The team also feel that a better service is being provided to courts.

The Court Duty Officers were able to pass all sentence notifications back to administration staff for logging onto the computer system. This has freed up CDO time to review the court outcomes for those courts they were covering (but not necessarily present in). This has helped ensure that any sentences without reports are logged.

Magistrate Court

Having POs review the Court List for potential 'same day' reports has identified approximately twice as many opportunities for 'same day' reports as have been reported historically (about 4 per day compared to 1.8 same day reports). Further work is required to make best use of these opportunities.

The changes to the FDR booking diary successfully removed the possibility of over-booking (something that had been a recurring problem for the team). This required some 'bedding down' as existing over-booked appointments were worked through.

The practice of checking the report availability 2 days prior to appearance date has significantly reduced the time spent chasing reports, allowing Court Officer staff more time physically present in court. This has also reduced the stress level for Court Officers.

As well as the tangible benefits to the organisation, the participants also gained from the experience. Some quotes from the workshop participants illustrate this:

- o 'It's great to get the chance to fix the problems for once' – Participant
- o 'Colin (AE's Consultant) must have done something right, the work was all embedded when I got back' – SPO

FURTHER INFORMATION

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