

scottish justice matters

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON DESISTANCE

Edited by
Fergus McNeill

ALSO

Mike Nellis on
Electronic Monitoring

Andrew Coyle on
early prison reform in Scotland

Bernadette Monaghan on
Children's Hearings

Interview with
HMIP David Strang



DESISTANCE

MOVING ON: DESISTANCE AND REHABILITATION

Scottish Justice Matters is a publication of the Scottish Consortium of Crime and Criminal Justice (SCCCJ). The Consortium is an alliance of organisations and individuals committed to better criminal justice policies. It works to stimulate well informed debate and to promote discussion and analysis of new ideas: it seeks a rational, humane, constructive and rights-based approach to questions of justice and crime in Scotland.

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WIRRAL DESISTANCE PROJECT:

Seeing beyond the risk agenda in probation practice

Rosie Goodwin, with a comment from **Jan Tuncer** and **Jason Nickeas**. This article is adapted from a blog post on the Discovering Desistance web site (Discovering Desistance 2013)

THE WIRRAL is one of five local delivery units (LDUs) of the Merseyside Probation Trust. It has been of some concern over the last few years that proven re-offending rates appear to be higher than the other LDUs: it has been very difficult to pinpoint exactly why that might be the case.

Rather than do nothing and blame changes on police activity, offending profiles within the geographical area and so on, Wirral LDU decided to focus attention on probation practice and so took part in the Desistance Knowledge Exchange in late 2012. Two workshops were held comprising of a mix of staff, service users and partner agency representatives. This was the first time that staff and service users had sat around a table together in a workshop to explore the journey of the service user and the helpful or unhelpful responses of the Probation Service. As the probation lead officer, it was a humbling and very exciting experience.

The film 'The Road From Crime', acted as a wonderful conduit to understanding and debate between service users and workers (The Road from Crime 2012). Partner agencies also contributed their observations. Whilst partners remained supportive of probation work, some comments challenged our thinking regarding service delivery particularly in relation to our use of the term 'offender'. What came out of the workshops was a renewed commitment to work differently within desistance principles and to involve the service user more effectively in the journey Wirral LDU was about to make.

In order to ensure a sound knowledge base across the LDU, a further two desistance theory and research lectures were delivered by Rachael Steele, Senior Research and Performance Information Manager, to all staff, explaining desistance as a process and highlighting key principles which should underpin and define a different way of working with service users.

Following the workshops, a desistance planning team of Wirral staff and service users was convened. This is where the ideas and creativity were generated and the energy to progress the project was fuelled. The first step was to change

our language replacing 'offender' with 'service user'. This was remarkably easy and was a first sign that we could make changes to common practice and still retain our focus on rehabilitation and public protection.

An early lesson was that too much emphasis on the offending behaviour and current risk issues masked important clues to why a person does not and cannot desist. For so many years, probation staff have sat in front of their computers and have rarely ventured out of their offices. Supervision has been behind closed doors and the content of engagement has been confined to those behaviours associated with risk, rather than promoting behaviour associated with hope and change. Our mission statement "Wirral Doing Things Differently: 'Seeing beyond the risk...'" captures the new agenda.

How can something that is all about 'doing things differently' feel so natural and easy?

The project will be evaluated using a variety of data collection measures. A cohort of cases has been identified comprising of four cases per offender manager. This cohort will be asked to complete a pre and post desistance questionnaire over a nine month period. In addition, data will be collected which compares levels of unacceptable absences, compliance figures, staff and service user satisfaction.

It was agreed that for the project to be successful, it had to involve everyone in Wirral Probation Centre including administrative staff. For this to be achieved, staff members have to bid for particular projects. Each project is linked to one or more desistance principles. For example, the creation of a women's netball team can be linked to improvements in social capital, health and wellbeing; our welfare reform workshops are based in a realism that acknowledges a service user's experience of obstacles to change; our film club hopes



to develop moral aptitude via discussion and debate; the redesign of the reception area encourages better engagement and a more hopeful environment.

One-to-one work with service users is based on the premise that everyone should try a different approach based on desistance principles. Practice workshops aim to encourage and liberate workers from old styles of offence-focused engagement. By the end of the workshops, each participating probation worker will have formulated three actions to try with their desistance cohort and which will be different to conventional ways of working. These might include leaving the office and carrying out supervision on the move, known on the Wirral as 'walks and talks'. It might include visiting places which are important to the service user and exploring times when they were not offending. Follow on workshops will include exploring how to demonstrate desistance principles in risk assessments and risk management. We will also be looking at induction procedures, pre-group work for accredited programmes and exit interviews.

In the face of considerable uncertainty surrounding probation's future in England and Wales, it would be reasonable to expect workers to approach any new initiatives with a degree of cynicism as threats to their futures appear on the horizon. On the

Wirral this has not been the case and workers appear invigorated and enthused by the project. I have encouraged staff and service users to write narratives about their experiences and these are beginning to trickle in. One worker decided on a sunny day to go for a walk with his service user. Interestingly, the first 10 minutes of the conversation were taken up with a bombardment of questions: 'Where are you taking me? Are we going to the police station? Are you taking me to the court to make me pay my fine?' The message was not lost on the probation worker and it demonstrated just how much trust we had lost in our relationships with service users by an over-emphasis on enforcement, targets and risk.

Early signs are that service users are benefiting from the change in practices, and we look forward to hearing their stories as the project develops.

Jan Tuncer comments

As one of the staff members working on the Wirral and engaged in this project, I am finding it surprisingly hard to reconcile how I feel about it. How can something that is all about 'doing things differently' feel so natural and easy, to the point where you start to question how something apparently so simple can make a genuine difference? And can it really be considered a 'revolution'?

Perhaps the apparent simplicity is just that this is a framework for treating people with a humanity that comes naturally to people who've chosen this line of work, but who are sometimes tied up in knots by the necessity of recording, measurement and enforcement.

I first heard of desistance about three years ago now, when Fergus McNeill attended our staff conference. I felt that same conflict at the time. How is this new? Is this not what we already do? Is it The Emperor's New Clothes? But now that we are really living desistance as an LDU, you do start to see that there are more opportunities for creativity than we realised, and often so simple to implement.

Jason Nickeas adds

A couple of months ago Joe was really struggling; feeling low and drinking excessively. Joe mentioned in supervision about the 'Miles for Men' event at Aintree, explaining it was a charity 5km for men's cancer research. He said he would love to complete it, as it was a particularly personal issue for him, but did not feel physically or mentally able to. I challenged this assumption and self-doubt, asking Joe 'why not?' At the end of the session his attitude had changed to 'I can do it!'. I agreed to also run the event by way of supporting him and the charity.

In September, I met an enthusiastic Joe at Aintree: he was raring to go. He disclosed as we warmed up that he hadn't run properly for a number of years. I was amazed at his commitment to the cause and how driven he was to complete the full 5km. He completed the run in a great time, an amazing achievement considering the issues he had faced less than two months prior. He continues to play football every week and is attending the gym on a regular basis.

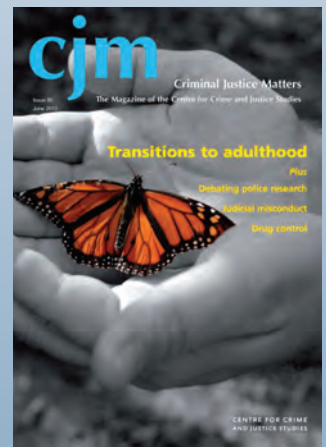
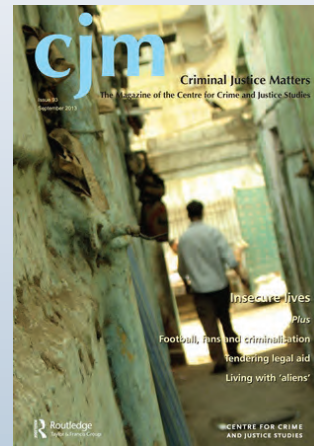
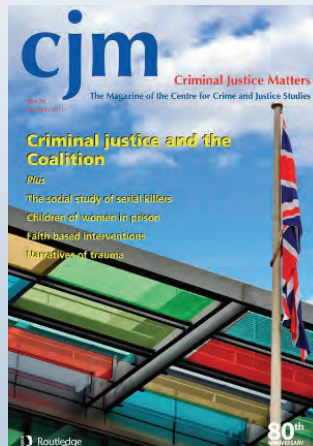
Joe achieved this himself: it was his own goal. All I did was challenge his 'I can't' attitude with a 'why not?', and I think sometimes we need to just ask that simple question to encourage ownership to make a change.

[Discovering Desistance web site. McNeill and Goodwin *The impacts of criminological research* \[Posted on 4.7.13\]\[accessed on 18.10.13\]](#)

<http://blogs.iriss.org.uk/discoveringdesistance/2013/07/04/the-impacts-of-criminological-research/>
The Road from Crime (2012) film free download available from <http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/the-road-from-crime>

Rosie Goodwin is Assistant Chief Officer of the Merseyside Probation Trust Local Delivery Unit based in Birkenhead, the Wirral. Jan Tuncer is operational support manager and Jason Nickeas is a probation officer.

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 Professor Tim Newburn, London School of Economics.



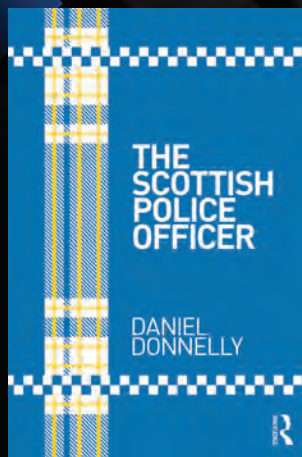
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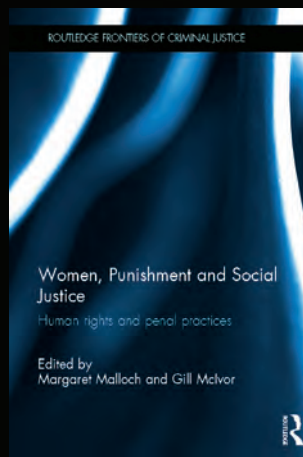
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