

Home Office case study

Organisation profile

The National Probation Service (NPS) in England and Wales is a law enforcement agency and public authority. The organisation, which has approximately 20 000 staff, comprises a national probation directorate based in London, and 42 area boards, which work in liaison with other local law enforcement agencies.

The NPS is committed to minimising the impact of crime on communities, especially victims who have been touched by serious and violent crime. Its staff works to rehabilitate offenders given community sentences and those released from prison; to enforce the conditions of

court orders; and to protect members of the public. They supervise some 175 000 offenders annually as part of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

Proposals to restructure the NPS: 'Restructuring probation to reduce reoffending,' are currently out for consultation.



The problem

Only two and a half years ago, the majority of the areas comprising the NPS had no effective health and safety policy in place to protect their employees. Following the creation of the National Probation Directorate (NPD) and the 42 area boards in 2001, an independent health and safety audit of the organisation was commissioned for the following year. The audit sought to identify how the 42 area boards were complying with health and safety legislation.

The audit report findings, published toward the end of 2002, raised deep concerns for the Directorate. It found that there were significant disparities across the 42 areas in terms of compliance with health and safety legislation:

- there were few health and safety risk assessments of work tasks;
- only ad hoc inspections of the workplace were carried out;

- health and safety training was minimal;
- few areas had a competent health and safety adviser or adequate staff members trained in first aid;
- few health and safety committees existed;
- there was no health and safety guidance for employees involved in the supervision of offenders.

The report recommended a number of necessary improvements.

The solution

The Directorate's response to the findings of the report was swift and competent, and saw the introduction of a worker involvement scheme on health and safety. Kathryn Ball, a senior health and safety practitioner and a corporate member of the Institute of Safety and Health (IOSH), was appointed corporate health and safety manager in November 2002. A National Health and Safety Forum, based on the same principles as those for Safety Committees, was established involving union safety representatives, representatives of the employers organisation (PBA) and representatives of the probation area safety advisors. The following Spring saw the finalised version of the audit report and the launch of the NPS's health and safety strategy: 'Revitalising Health and Safety in the NPS.' This undertook to implement the findings of the audit and implement a five-point strategy that integrated health and safety into general management systems. It also recognised that agreed partnership on health and safety issues was crucial. An eleven-point action plan was adopted to deliver the strategy in the 18 months, with phases two and three detailing further health and safety proposals to be implemented during the following two years.

Kathryn and her assistants, Brenda Pendlebury and Bill Wood, health and safety managers seconded to the Directorate from the Manchester and Merseyside areas respectively, were responsible for the setting up of the partnership and worker involvement in the delivery of the action plan. They set up a number of short life working groups, each tasked to deliver the eleven objectives in the first 18 months of the plan.

The Directorate was clear that *real improvements would need buy-in from across the organisation. Both at the working group and safety committee level, it was crucial*



From left to right: Eric Leatherman - Health & Safety Manager, Greater Manchester Probation Service; Kathryn Ball - Corporate Health & Safety Manager, National Probation Directorate; Steve Berry - Health & Safety Manager, Humberside Probation Area; Brenda Pendlebury - Health & Safety Manager, National Probation Directorate, in discussion at the National Health & Safety Practitioner's Group Meeting at Oakland House, Trafford, Manchester

to include employees as well as management representatives. Workers were represented both through trade union safety representatives and their area health and safety professionals. It was acknowledged from the start that a critical aspect of ensuring effective worker involvement was the provision of appropriate facility time and workload relief for the union safety representatives. The audit also commented on the need for more trained union safety reps and for local management support for their involvement at all stages. The Directorate established specific funding resources for the national unions' safety reps' facility time and a specific arrangement was subsequently developed giving guidance on union safety rep facility time for all the 42 probation areas. The commitment to this in practice will be an important aspect of subsequent audits.

Objectives included:

- the development of a national health and safety policy manual including the provision of a national risk assessment pro forma;
- support for the appointment of in-house health and safety competent persons in each area;
- the provision of a national accident/incident reporting system;
- the development and delivery of briefings to each of the 42 area boards, ensuring board representation at

each of the area health and safety committee meetings; and

- conducting an occupational health audit across all 42 areas to identify the current level of occupational health provisions, and to identify the most effective method of service delivery.

Said Kathryn: 'We liaised closely at policy level with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to ensure our strategy and approach were in accordance with recognised health and safety procedure.

'Members of each working group were drawn from all the key stakeholders including: the probation boards' association; the employers' association; up to four area representatives drawn from volunteers from probation board health and safety professionals; and the unions (UNISON, NAPO and the GMB). Each of the groups was led by a representative from the Directorate.

'Each group held approximately three meetings, with wide consultation between all members on proposals and outcomes. Group findings were also forwarded for consultation to management and staff at area boards and across the Directorate, before their final solutions and policies came to the Directorate's health and safety forum for approval. They were then adopted as part of the official health and safety strategy for the organisation.'



Members of the National Health & Safety Practitioner's Group at their November 2005 meeting in Trafford, Manchester

She added: *'Consultation was very much the key to success in what was achieved. The theme at all the meetings was 'This is by you, for you'... in other words, this is for the care and wellbeing of everyone working within the organisation.* It was important too that outcomes were user friendly.'

Phase two objectives, ten in total, were started in April 2004. They dealt with issues such as generic risk assessments that identified minimum standards for probation work activities including lone working; prison visits; interviewing offenders and home visiting.

In addition to the working groups, there is a national health and safety practitioner group where practitioners from the 42 areas meet quarterly to discuss issues that are of national importance. There are also four health and safety practitioner representatives on the national health and safety forum. They are empowered to bring anything in addition to the working groups' agenda to the attention of the Directorate, should it be of national importance or an otherwise serious issue.

The results

A mid-programme audit carried out during 2004/05 has provided positive proof of the worker involvement scheme's success. Staff in each of the 42 areas completed an audit questionnaire. The results were then corroborated by independent auditor's visits to over 25% of the areas. Figures in the audit report demonstrated that:

- 78% of areas had found the national health and safety policy useful;
- 88% had used the model manual contained in the first audit report to fill in the gaps of their existing systems; and
- 85% of the national practitioners group said they had found it of value.

Brenda Pendlebury said: 'Personally, I feel so proud to see what has been achieved through joint effort. We started with a framework document and turned that into a living, working strategy that delivers health and safety benefits to everyone. Our group members have agreed to disagree along the way

but in the end it is joint working, consultation with the key stakeholders and enthusiasm that has got us where we are today. There is now set guidance for staff to refer to when they risk assess a work task.'

Kathryn Ball said: 'This has been a fantastic challenge. We have been so much in the thick of it that it has been difficult at times to monitor just what progress or achievements we are making. The audit has established the clear facts. The independent evaluation is so important. We know from visits to areas that there is now a clear commitment to health and safety; the framework is established and accepted. The level of outcome represents the level of commitment from our Director and from each of the 42 area boards.' John Hague, one of the union safety reps on the national health and safety forum, said: 'This has been a promising start to the improving of the health and safety working environment for all probation employees. It will now be vital to turn the commitment into a practical reality at the workplace as integrating and enabling the full involvement of union safety representatives from the outset can pay real dividends to everyone.'

The future

Phase three of the strategy is scheduled to finish in March 2006, with implementation by the areas to be completed by December 2006. The next health and safety strategy for the NPS: '2006 and Beyond', intends to build on the improvements in health and safety performance. It will focus on issues that are the most significant causes of lost time at work, to ensure that proactive measures to reduce absence from work are in place.

The Directorate is committed to new action in order to inspire areas to share in the benefits of good health and safety management. It is convinced that *partnership working is at the heart of the success of the Directorate's strategy. Employees and management working together will continue to be the driving force of the initiative.*