

THE MAGISTRATES' ASSOCIATION
JUDICIAL POLICY & PRACTICE COMMITTEE
SENTENCING POLICY & PRACTICE COMMITTEE

RESPONSE

A new training qualification framework for Probation Officers and Probation Support Officers

Qualification Framework

We welcome unreservedly the proposals under the new guidance to maintain the qualification for Probation Officers (POs) at Honours Degree level and to introduce a minimum level of qualification for Probation Support Officers (PSOs).

Currently it is a concern that there is no minimum requirement for PSO qualification once they have completed their training and this manifests itself in inconsistency in the use of PSOs and the work they do. It is noted that in some areas as much as 50% of the practitioner workforce are PSOs and throughout England and Wales there are inconsistencies in the level of work undertaken by such staff, especially in the complexity of cases they supervise and the level of risk they assess. There is more and more emphasis on magistrates maintaining a consistent sentencing approach, and we welcome the proposal to introduce a minimum standard of qualification for PSOs in the expectation that there will, in the future, be a greater consistency in a) the work they do, b) the levels of responsibility they are responsible for and c) the numbers of such staff in each probation area.

The majority of trainee POs have already completed a degree course before undertaking the diploma and we welcome the proposal to introduce a career path for PSOs to progress to POs without the need to resign their job and take the further training externally. This will have the advantage of attracting a more diverse workforce from differing backgrounds but it is also important that there is no lowering of the standard required to become a PO as a result of the two-year diploma being condensed into one year. A benefit to courts, and the magistracy in particular, is to work with staff who are familiar with a particular bench, who give a consistent level of performance and have local knowledge. This comes from continuity of staffing.

Funding

It is noted that the funding for the training of probation practitioners will move from being provided centrally to being funded by local employers and probation trusts. We hope that such funding will be ring-fenced and that locally held funds will not be diverted away from core services and activities such as those required by, and imposed by courts.

The section entitled 'impact on existing staff' is vague. It states that 'it is not proposed that there should be a requirement for all existing staff to achieve this minimum standard', but goes on to say that 'it is anticipated that employers will wish to provide opportunities to

extend this qualification to existing staff over time.’ However, there is clearly no dedicated funding available to areas which wish to do this – the framework merely states ‘employers would need to consider the practicalities and the costs’ and we would be concerned if the lack of dedicated resources led to further pressure on the workloads of individual probation officers, for example, because the employer could not afford sufficient staff.

Other comments

It is noted in the document that PSOs are sometimes referred to as Probation Support Officers as, for example, in the title of the document and in the last paragraph on page 2 of the Introduction and Background. At all other times this grade is referred to as Probation Service Officers. It would be beneficial to other court users to have a consistent title.

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