Summary: Probation Institute Trainees’ conference

Anne Burrell provides a summary of a recent Probation Institute conference for probation trainees.
Around 50 PQiP learners attended the Probation Institute Trainees’ Conference, held online on November 24, 2021. Helen Schofield, Acting Chief Executive of the Institute, welcomed attendees, and pointed out that the PI Trainees’ events aim to cover topics which are current, and need attention; and issues which are not covered in the PQiP curriculum. The topics for this event covered both areas of interest.

Berenice Ellis, currently working in the Tackling Unacceptable Behaviours Unit, opened the event with a discussion regarding the recent HMIP report into the experiences of BAME staff, and people on probation (HMIP 2021). She noted that the report made for uncomfortable reading, especially in its critique of current probation practice around race and ethnicity.

Berenice outlined the statutory duties on all probation workers to address the different needs of people in order to achieve equality of outcomes. She noted that the Lammy report of 2017 had identified disparities across the criminal justice system in the experiences of BAME service users, and that trust is a central theme - illustrated by the fact that all ethnic minority women involved in the HMIP inspection said that their preference would be to have a supervising officer who is not white. She outlined the factors which mean that engagement with BAME people on probation is highly variable, and the significant impact this has on outcomes.

Berenice is the Allyship lead for the Ministry of Justice PROUD network, and she emphasised that her presentation was aimed at supporting and developing effective practice. She discussed the Ministry of Justice action plan, in light of the HMIP report; and encouraged attendees to address our own practice, specifically around developing cultural competency; considering intersectionality; acknowledging and addressing unconscious bias; being an ally; and being an upstander, not a bystander. The theme for all these actions was to develop personal knowledge and awareness, by undertaking relevant learning; by being interested and curious in the experiences of others; and by challenging our own attitudes which stereotype people, as well as challenging inappropriate comments and behaviours from others.

We then heard from Philippa Southwell, of Southwell and Partners, an expert on Modern Slavery cases, discussing her work with people who have been subjected to trafficking, and enslaved. She described the steps which probation practitioners can take to identify and address this issue. Philippa acknowledged the complexities of the situation, and that it can be difficult for victims to disclose their circumstances, commonly fearful of the possible consequences. However, she also highlighted that it is possible that people in coercive relationships, for instance, may not recognise that they are being exploited. This can have serious implications if vulnerable people are then coerced into criminal activity.
Philippa debunked the notion that people who are trafficked are invariably foreign nationals, pointing out that British children and young adults are highly vulnerable to grooming or coercion in regard to drug dealing, acquisitive crime, and sexual exploitation. She advised of the National Referral Monitoring system, which places a legal duty on probation practitioners to report cases of suspected slavery and trafficking. She also outlined the steps which are then taken to safeguard and support victims. She supported Berenice’s emphasis on the importance of asking questions about the circumstances of someone’s life, particularly at the pre-sentence report stage, in order to more accurately identify if a person on probation is being compelled to commit crime.

The final speaker was Hannah Pittaway from the Criminal Justice Alliance, an umbrella organisation for 170 agencies and groups working in Criminal Justice, with the aim of creating a fair and effective criminal justice system; and of which the Probation Institute is a member. She focused on the notion of community scrutiny, noting that Probation Services are less accountable to their local communities currently than has ever been the case previously. The principles of community scrutiny enable organisations to demonstrate that they are safe; smart; personalised; restorative; and that they command the trust of people locally. Hannah noted the hidden nature of probation work, which can make its processes opaque. She advised that the CJA is currently working with partners to establish a community scrutiny process for probation. This would include a presence on the ground which is permanent; enable real time intelligence gathering; improve engagement with people on probation; build public confidence in what probation does; address equality issues and differential outcomes for people with protected characteristics; and support the unification process. It is likely that the Probation Institute will be an active participant in this work.

This was a stimulating and challenging conference, which presented participants with much food for thought in our current practice as well as practical, creative suggestions that can be applied immediately. Most of all we left understanding the importance of being curious about the hidden aspects of the lives of the people with whom we work; avoiding assumptions and judgements; and being constantly mindful of the factors which can contribute to people’s involvement with the criminal justice system and the probation service.

References


Race equality in probation: the experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic probation service users and staff (justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)