

Speech from Alan Woods OBE at the NAPO L&D Conference

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Continuing Professional Development

Good morning. Thank you for your introduction and also for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Skills for Justice is the Sector Skills Council and Standards Setting Body for the Justice and community safety and legal service sectors. That's about a million people across the whole of the UK.

We work with employers across the UK to identify their skills and workforce development needs, and provide high quality solutions for those workforce needs. We are here to help employers and to influence the skills system to take account of justice sector employer needs

We have a long history of working with Probation and the National Offender Management Service, alongside NAPO, and representatives from all of these organisations work with us on specific projects, in employer groups and at our Council and Board level.

In a previous incarnation the CJ NTO worked to develop the Diploma in Probation Studies, and I am really proud to be here today to talk about how we have worked with you again on the development of its successor – the Probation Qualification Framework (PQF).

The PQF is a great example of us working with you to help you unlock the potential of the workforce -and to attract new talent - in order to deliver high quality and effective justice services across the UK.

And what are the issues for the Coalition government?

The major, important issues for Justice services, as recently defined by Ken Clarke as the new Secretary of State, and by implication that means for all of us , is to punish offenders, protect the public and provide access to justice

I believe the skills of individuals and the integration of those skills within the workforce as a whole are at the heart of achieving these aims.

I firmly believe that by developing and widening the skills base of the workforce, we can meet the challenge of delivering a cohesive and effective Justice sector in the 21st century.

The challenge now is to rethink – from first principles – how to tackle the skills and workforce development of the service, creating new opportunities and new career paths for individuals.

All of which supports achieving those goals of punishing offenders, protecting the public and providing access to justice.

There is clearly a long and established working relationship between probation and Skills for Justice – from the Diploma to the PQF – through all the various structural and name changes that we have both undergone. And more change is coming.

I hope that we can continue to work together, building on that solid relationship, and meeting the challenges of the future head on.

It is clear at present that we – as a nation, as a whole service, and as individual organisations – are going through a time of real change.

With a coalition government promising a rehabilitation revolution we can expect greater demands and challenges ahead – and not just ones related to budget cuts.

Ken Clarke spoke recently of wanting to be radical in the approach that we take to justice and rehabilitation in this country; spending less and doing better at the same time; improving how we tackle offenders and protect the public.

All of which is quite a big ask especially given the risk aversion inherent within the systems we grapple with. Change is difficult to deal with but it is inevitable. Change is the only constant.

The coalition government - with new ideas and new approaches – can be seen as an opportunity to break with the past and take a new direction. It is clearly a question of choice which all of us individually or collectively will have to consider.

It is clear that this will not be without its critical challenges. There is no new injection of money. Far from it.

But with a greater use of community punishments promised, with rigorously enforced community sentences, greater use of rehabilitation and treatment programmes, less use of short custodial sentences, and engagement with voluntary and private providers, there is a real challenge for the workforce.

We need to make sure that the workforce – on an individual and service wide basis – is well equipped to meet the challenges ahead.

Focussing justice policy on what is right for today's communities, for sentencing and rehabilitation, means that we have to ensure that tomorrow's workforce has the right skills to do the job. In my mind it is critical that we keep investing in the workforce for those new challenges and take the longer term view.

I've been asked to speak to you today about continuing professional development in the context of the PQF, and the potential that these two things together can bring for developing the skills of those working in probation.

I firmly hope that the use of the PQF to develop the skills of the workforce can help to provide the best possible service to those who need it, in the best possible targeted way.

I don't think I can claim to have the answers – but I do have some insights drawn from the work we have done with our employers. I hope to share those with you.

I won't go into the detail of the PQF as I am well aware that those attending today will have been involved in its development in some way shape or form, are well briefed and many are involved in its ongoing implementation.

So let's take a look at the bigger picture of CPD in general. I believe that CPD at its best and most useful is a combination of approaches, ideas and techniques that help people to manage their own learning over time, allowing them to grow in their roles and think about where they want to be in the future.

CPD is focussed on results and the impact that you can gain from this ongoing development. CPD is most definitely not a one size fits all approach, but something that individuals can tailor to their needs – both now and in the future. CPD is about where you are now and where you want to be in the future – it is most definitely about individual choice and the freedom to develop your own career. CPD is responsive, flexible and adapts to need.

Working in a profession like probation there should always be the desire – from both an individual and an organisation – to review competence and provide opportunities for ongoing development.

The PQF has been designed to support this ambition.

Our main contribution to the PQF has been to make sure that the standards it is based on are up to date and are reflective of the jobs that you all do. This is very much our role as an SSC and the standards are the building blocks of everything we do with employers.

We used the standards to make the units within the framework and made sure they worked for you, and for the varying demands of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

I do not propose to go into the dark art of getting units on the QCF as other colleagues within Skills for Justice are better placed than I to tell you how it all works.

Simply put, it means that by working with a wide range of representatives from all parts of probation we have developed bespoke vocational qualifications that meet your needs.

These qualifications and units provide the pathways to qualify in your chosen roles – as a Probation Services Officer or as a Probation Officer. In terms of CPD and the PQF this is perhaps its greatest achievement – that existing staff with real work experience can more easily qualify as a probation officer, without having to leave and come back in, costing time and money all round. It also means that individuals can step on and off the PQF due to its modular approach. Qualifications can be built over time. This creates real opportunities and choice which is central to continuing professional development.

So effectively that's the tool that you as individuals are now provided with to take control of your own careers within probation – it is very clear to me that the PQF is a key way for the service to meet the CPD needs of its workforce, in a logical, structured and efficient way.

But what are the challenges that CPD is expected to meet?

I said earlier that one size doesn't fit all and I am sure that the needs of you as individuals, or collectively as a workforce, will differ.

There are some things we know already though.

Offender management will always experience scrutiny, review and subsequent development – the pace of change is always a challenge – in justice, in safer communities, in skills and across all essential services. And probably no more so than now.

We can see this in policy announcements from the Secretary of State, where he says that justice cannot simply be a numbers game of more staff, more prisoners, more money spent on the problem.

If he were here today I would tell him what I believe.

Excellent justice services are delivered by the people who work in organisations across the UK, and the support they need to do their jobs even better than they do now, is the critical challenge. I would also be able to tell him that with the PQF we have made an excellent start in developing a highly skilled workforce, fit for the new vision of justice, and providing excellent services to all.

There is clarity in the new government plans – they have placed strong emphasis on skills development as essential to lift this country out of recession.

To forge the path of economic recovery and growth we need a highly skilled workforce, delivering on our ambitions of safe, strong and fair justice in this case.

It is clear to me that CPD interventions like the PQF are the best way to develop current workforce to meet these demands. And to attract a future workforce of highly skilled and highly motivated individuals.

The coalition government is also strongly supportive of the justice system, and believes that more needs to be done to ensure fairness in the system. They are heralding a ‘rehabilitation revolution’, overhauling the system of rehabilitation to reduce reoffending and provide greater support and protection for the victims of crime.

This will clearly have an affect on the way in which probation services are delivered and the links between independent and voluntary organisations who deliver services.

That’s the good news.

The bad news is that the age of austerity is upon us and politicians and officials are thinking very hard about where to spend what little money there is. We all know that there will be less money to spend delivering public services but the demand for these services and the scrutiny of these services will be greater.

And we know the mantra – we are all going to have to deliver “more for less”. There are challenges for us all in this new government and its approach to justice.

We need to ensure that professionalism is embedded across services – the PQF is a huge step forward on that road.

We need to make sure that everyone delivering services to offenders, through community sentences, has the right skills to do the job properly – again the PQF is a step towards that for current and future probation staff.

We need to make sure that people and resources are deployed effectively and efficiently - the PQF is a key way of assuring skills and capabilities in a range of roles.

In the future it can be built on to ensure high standards of delivery for those delivering services to probation, for those in specialist roles, and in different organisations.

The huge potential of the PQF as a key part of the ongoing professional development for the community justice workforce is clear.

Consistency of practice and high professional standards are the way in which the workforce can meet the challenges ahead for justice.

You can be rightly proud of being ahead of the curve for your service in the development of the PQF.

I am sure that I don't need to tell you how much public and media scrutiny is on this particular area, and of the pressure on staff to deliver excellent services.

Ken Clarke's recent speech heralded a real change to sentencing policy, bringing with it challenges around capacity to deliver, the role of voluntary and independent services, payment by results and commissioning skills.

Reviews and inspections bring about changes to the way in which services are delivered, with specialisation a key focus at the minute. Developments like this place a different requirement on staff – requiring them to update and extend their professional practice.

In recent weeks HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary published a joint review on ensuring the right mix of skills and approaches needed to tackle the management of sex offenders in the community.

This brings to mind a debate about the specialisation of skills for those working in distinct areas – standards like those that currently support the PQF can help to maintain standards of professionalism in specific areas as well as generalist.

This could be a key future development in terms of CPD for the PQF, allowing individuals and the workforce as a whole to meet the changing demands of the service.

Ensuring that staff receive the appropriate training, support and oversight to equip them to work with a range of offenders will give them confidence and drive up performance across the sector, delivering better results for individuals and for society at large.

There is a risk of over engineering in any professional development framework but I heartily believe that the PQF is benefiting from one of the major changes to the skills world – the Qualifications and Credit Framework.

The welcome introduction of the QCF has enabled individuals to gain recognised unit based awards – building up qualifications over time – without needing to complete a full NVQ for example, unless their occupation demands it.

This approach could ideally suit the specialisation agenda, in a CPD context for probation.

I urge you to take the line from government and think radically – from first principles – about what the workforce needs in this area.

Dealing fairly and effectively with offenders is a key part of supporting them to change and it is crucial that we continuously build on the skills of the workforce to deal with individuals and ensure good results for all.

To achieve this we all need to work together.

The growing importance of multi-agency working reinforces the need for particular skill sets.

These include contract management, and skills in persuasion and influencing, as well as understanding the key relationships between agencies all working towards one common goal.

Enhanced multi-agency working will again require flexibility among frontline staff, as well as the skills provided within this framework on working together and understanding the needs and roles of other agencies.

Through the coalition government's proposal for the 'Big Society' we also know that voluntary sector organisations are going to have a significant role in delivering social change.

We need to make sure that all those working across probation know and understand how to get the most out of these relationships.

We also hope that the use and implementation of the PQF will attract new staff, as well as retain the current staff, as it provides new opportunities for career progression. This may also have a knock on effect on those groups of people who are underrepresented in the current workforce, allowing the service to better reflect society as a whole.

I know from working with a range of employers across all parts of the UK, and across the whole sector, that the use of minimum standards is critical to ensuring a consistency of practice and therefore consistency of service no matter where you work.

This can surely be of benefit to those coming into contact with the service, and ensure better outcomes for all. I can see opportunities for building on the work of the PQF in a range of ways, for example, at PSO level in line with another key government priority with higher level apprenticeships.

This could be an ideal opportunity to get the ball rolling on a new approach to developing people over time, whilst they are gaining real experience, with the ideal mix of classroom based and on the job learning.

I know that apprenticeships would be a new venture for the service. We are here to support and advise you on what you want to do in terms of development of the future workforce, and apprenticeships are just one way of tackling skills development.

So far I have talked about the priorities and business challenges that you have told us that you face, and it's pretty clear that the PQF is a key way in which you can – as individuals and as a whole service – work to achieve those priorities, and overcome those challenges.

The PQF can easily support ongoing CPD and workforce development for probation. But only if people are committed to ongoing development.

The point about CPD is that it's supposed to be continuous. A unit or qualification is a snapshot in time, measuring your competence at that moment and ensuring that you have the skills to perform well in the future.

You need to think continually about your own professional development, and the opportunities presented to your workforce. The PQF presents a real opportunity to baseline skills and set an established standard of practice from the outset.

So my challenge back to you is how all individuals will be supported to take up opportunities within the PQF. For example, will directors of offender management look at the increase in PSOs holding vocational qualifications under the PQF when they commission Probation Trusts to do work?

Is it about using the standards in all parts of your work, about continual and ongoing assessment, about the whole workforce and about the individual, about your service delivery and the services that others deliver to you?

You are already working hard to address the challenges facing you today – from constant service change and the pressure to deliver more for less. At Skills for Justice we aim to add value to this by providing the skills system infrastructure to allow you to offer staff recognised qualifications in the most effective way possible.

The challenges we face will almost always be best met through partnership working.

Partnership with each other, partnership with other justice sector organisations and partnership with Skills for Justice and other stakeholders in the skills system.

I hope that we can continue to work together to make your workforce ambitions a reality despite the difficult times we face.

Over this coming year, we will again be working with colleagues in NOMS to support the implementation of the new qualifications, ensuring that the units continue to be clear in their interpretation, and that the assessment is working.

We also want to explore the possibility of additional units to meet the demands of specialisation if needed and how these can be worked in to the current models.

We will also be exploring the development of a specific case administration qualification for those working across NOMS.

All of this work is undertaken – like the PQF development – in close consultation with employers, employees and stakeholders.

Clearly we are all facing difficult and uncertain times. With restricted investment organisations will need to deliver 'more for less' - and delivery of services must be based on a foundation of professional staff.

As an SSC we aim to support employers, employees and volunteers to ensure that they have the right skills and knowledge to undertake their work, and the opportunities to achieve them.

A clear investment has been made in the development and delivery of the PQF and there are many positives to this. I hope very much that it helps you to meet the challenges you all face in your work, and that through ongoing investment in the skills and abilities of employees, we can work together to deliver an effective, efficient and above all, fair, justice system.

I want to leave you with a quote, which I am sure you are familiar with but one which I feel sums up the agility and ability to learn new ways of doing things, challenge old ways of working and the need to embrace change that will be so important in the coming years.

It is from American Futurist Alvin Toffler who said in 1980:

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

Thank you very much.