

Trusted to get on with it?

As one of the six "first wave" Probation Trusts, West Mercia is participating in a "learning year", in which the various freedoms promised and the practical arrangements for the contracts with the Ministry of Justice will be explored in a spirit of "co-creation". We have opted to retain the national branding, because for us it is about being a better part of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), rather than moving outside of it. Can we be better at arm's length?

We believe local solutions that engage local people and organisations are likely to have the most effect in tackling offending. In 2006 we made a TV series featuring our locally-based TV gardening expert, Monty Don, working with offenders on a smallholding. A characteristic of this work was the involvement of local people; it was about confronting the problem of offending locally, not pushing the problem over a border, whether real or metaphoric to make it somebody else's problem. We need a "paradigm shift" that makes probation responsible for assisting communities to deal with their own problems.

In order to do that we need longer-term budgets and planning horizons, and we welcome the three year budgets for Trusts, but we also need things that have not been forthcoming yet. We need changes to the property policies to move out of the large town centre buildings and get back into those communities, perhaps co-located with partners. We have to find ways around the constraints imposed by IT requirements and security issues. Most of all we need national standards that allow new forms of supervision to be recognised for performance purposes.

The mandate to work these things out has to be national, but the specific proposals have to be local to meet local needs. National prescription needs to be about "what" we need to do, local freedom should be about "how" we do it through working with local people, stakeholders and organisations. West Mercia Probation Trust exists to provide an effective, local and responsive service, not to shelter behind a monopoly.