



UNISON's
newsletter for
members in the
probation
service

On Probation

ISSUE 8 WINTER 2010

Prospects for 2010

With the new year underway I have been thinking about what the future holds for probation staff in 2010 and beyond. It is with some foreboding that I consider how we should respond to the many challenges that will lie ahead.

The key thing is preparation for what may come and that UNISON is able to offer support and solidarity to all its members and particularly those most in need.

We all have a role to play in this and first and foremost we need to ensure that we continue to increase UNISON membership in all areas of the workforce. Unions are most effective when they have a reasonable level of density.

The key thing is that where we have good levels of membership we have been able to prove time and again that UNISON makes a difference in the workforce. We can help prevent compulsory redundancies, we can ensure a fair and decent pay settlement and we can lobby government against drastic cuts to budgets to protect service delivery. All of these things have been achieved in the past twelve months and we will be working hard to ensure the same in 2010 against an even more troublesome backdrop.

Make no mistake, the battle to save our public services is about to be played out across Britain. We must make the case for probation services delivered by well trained, decently paid, public servants who prioritise protecting the local community where they work and live.

The spectre of large scale cuts and wholesale privatisation of many public services will be a disaster. We have all been exposed to the abject failure of privatised services in probation, notably with the facilities and estates contracts and the bail hostel programme. We need to expose the myth that the private sector is the answer.

We move forward in 2010 knowing that we will face many challenges in the year ahead. but I know that together we can meet these challenges head on. UNISON remains a formidable union with its 1.3 million members of which we are part. This strength will stand us in good stead in the months to come.

Matthew Lay
Chair, National Probation Committee

On Probation newsletter

Welcome to the first edition of *On Probation* for 2010. The newsletter comes out three times a year and there will be further editions in June and October.

This is your publication and the aim is capture the real flavour of working in probation, the good and the bad.

Many members will report the negative side at the moment – the cuts in staffing for instance. But UNISON is working hard to mitigate these and to highlight the false economy of cutting back on a public service which delivers justice more effectively and economically than prison. The union's access to Government, its formidable media machine and its links to other trade union and professional organisations ensure that it will always be listened to and enjoy genuine influence.

But it is also effective at local level defending terms and conditions and challenging knee-jerk cuts.

And there is also the positive side. In the middle of all the cuts members still demonstrate their creativity and initiative – it might be in the workshop, on secondment abroad or a much needed health and safety inspection.

Either way, we need to hear about your experiences and your views. Editorial contacts are below. Do get in touch with me at any time. And please don't be surprised if I get in touch with you. I'm sure there is a great story there, which should be shared with the rest of the members.

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UNISON has more than a million members delivering essential services to the public. Services that protect, enrich and change lives. We want to see changes that put people before profit and public interest before private greed. Add your voice to our campaign to create a fairer society.

To find out more or add your voice to our million voices for public services go to unison.org.uk/million

Thinking on her feet

UNISON's annual probation seminar welcomed Probation and Prisons Minister Maria Eagle. She listened hard and gave thoughtful responses

Delegates heard that Maria Eagle (right) had one thing in common with Anne Widdecombe.

They were both determined to visit every prison while they were in the job. But it is highly unlikely that the Tory minister had shown the painstaking interest in staff views that Ms Eagle displayed.

She said: 'In a big delivery department, engaging with nine million citizens, it is important for ministers to hear from people who do that work and find out what is happening on the ground.'

'Often I do not hear the frontline staff's story in the written submissions.'

If I say the vast majority of the work is brilliant I get accused of being complacent – Maria Eagle

When it came to stories, Ms Eagle said she had to reiterate to a media and public 'that doesn't want to listen' what a brilliant job probation staff were doing.

'I find it very difficult if I get asked about something that has gone wrong. If I say the vast majority of the work is brilliant I get accused of being complacent. I get



Photos: Laurence Pollock

asked impossible questions like what do I say to the mother of someone killed by an individual on probation. I have only a sound bite to reply but frontline staff never get the chance to defend themselves.'

Ms Eagle was candid that probation service spending in 2010-2011 while up £26 million on the original projected budget was still a year-on-year cut. But she acknowledged the benefits of probation work: 'We know that proper spending on community sentences gives sentencers confidence and there is no need to go for ineffective short-term prison sentences.'

The minister took a variety of questions addressing topics that included unpaid work, moves away from national rates of pay and night supervision. Full responses will be sent out by UNISON National Office.

Government contact

Matthew Lay, chair of the national probation committee flagged up the value of high level government contacts which UNISON had brought about.

As a result of intervention by the union's general secretary, Dave Prentis, there was regular monthly contact with Justice Secretary Jack Straw and Probation Minister Maria Eagle.

Under the Management of Change procedure, probation areas had to be accountable for the decisions they made.

'This significant agreement would not have happened without UNISON pushing ministers to act,' Matthew added.

'Employers wanted freedom and flexibility. They didn't want to offer terms above the minimum to volunteers for redundancy. Management of Change is not perfect – we wanted the no compulsory redundancies agreement to be stronger – but areas have to respond to it.'

He looked forward positively, however, to the position of probation in UNISON's new Police and Justice service group - now the largest criminal justice trade union in the TUC.

'We will have a common purpose with others and a bigger say in how our union is run.'

Dedicated local branch structures would be developed but he stressed, 'Only you can make that happen'.

Matthew flagged up UNISON's *Million Voices* campaign: 'Privatisation is not working and it must stop – It is not just the members who suffer but service users, the local economy and the Government by losing the support of core voters.'

We will have a common purpose with others and a bigger say in how our union is run - Matthew Lay



Photos: Laurence Pollock

UNISON's role in all-Wales trust

UNISON has been playing a key role in the run-up to the bid for an all-Wales Probation Trust

The trust application outcome has still to be confirmed by the Ministry of Justice and a decision is expected in February. But Fergus Macdonald, UNISON rep in the current North Wales area reckons the hardest work will come after that: 'We will be trying to make to make sure redundancies are as small as possible.'

UNISON was originally left out of the equation – something which partner union Napo protested about, says Fergus.

In the four existing areas, voluntary redundancies and early retirements are already going ahead prior to the establishment of the trust. There will now be a further period of consultation before final redundancy figure is reached. Meanwhile UNISON has seen its membership grow by 10 per cent.

UNISON is concerned that with no extra money there are no enhanced terms and even a disparity between the current four areas. While South Wales, Dyfed-Powys and Gwent will receive redundancy based on actual salary North Wales will only receive the basic statutory minimum.

Fergus says UNISON wants to see this adjusted but obviously upwards and not down to North Wales levels. There are equal concerns about the impact of geography on all-Wales institutions. Headquarters in North Wales, Dyfed-Powys and Gwent will be closed.

Some UNISON members who work as support staff may be absorbed into continuing facilities but there is uncertainty over relocation options for others. The potential trust is not planning a major,

centralised headquarters but has not specified where local centres will be established.

Fergus comments: 'There is a worry that some administrative functions will inevitably be centred on the south because the Wales Assembly Government is based there.'

UNISON is currently reviewing its own structure to reflect the new merged trust. But Fergus says the establishment of the new criminal justice service group in UNISON is timely as some members currently with their local county branch have had closer connections with police branch members.

Wood works for Cardiff scheme

Liam Maidment launched a new career working in probation after he retired from the chemical industry. The UNISON member is based in a Cardiff carpentry workshop offering skills, self-fulfilment and future job prospects to individuals on probation orders.

It is self-financing and some participants ask to stay on. They can work for Open College Network (OCN) certificates while producing wooden artefacts for community organisations such as churches and charities. Products include everything from park benches, and play houses to shelving units.

Liam explains: 'We have made benches for country parks. These were simply not being replaced, due to cost, and the picnic areas looked terrible. It's interesting that they do not seem to get vandalised - the people who made them know who the vandals are.'

The workshop tries to accommodate those who have enjoyed the work and want to stay on. Offenders get priority but others can continue if they are working on OCN certificates. Good work is celebrated with an annual learner of the year award and a significant £250 prize.



Liam (right) with colleague Mark Skyrme and some of the objects produced at the workshop.

Nevertheless, Liam is concerned about the future of this great project. An attempt was made seven years ago to close it along with others. Only a high level campaign, which included questions in Parliament, saved the day. His worry now is about too many offenders being referred to an individual workshop.

'We have a limit of eight at the moment but if they are increased we will be spending less time with each of them. Instead of teaching them you are just monitoring them.'

Liam believes the concept should be expanded but proposals for one in Merthyr fell through. Their fame has spread far and

wide thanks to open days and a presence at the Eisteddfod when it is held in south Wales. Judicial visitors include local magistrates and judges from Japan and a radio programme was broadcast from the workshop.

He hopes that any probation merger proposals will not lead to a squeeze on the workshop facilities or affect their future.

'When you have half a dozen working on a bench together it works like an informal assessment centre,' he says. 'You get to know them and they talk to you about, for instance, drugs, anger management, literacy and numeracy problems.'

Why join UNISON in the probation service?

- more members mean a stronger union able to defend your job and the probation service
- UNISON is campaigning on a wide range of probation issues that affect you in the workplace, including privatisation, role boundaries, workloads, unpaid work, equality and health and safety hazards
- you will have the strength of Britain's biggest union supporting you
- you will receive expert representation on workplace issues.

If you require further information or wish to join UNISON, call 0845 355 0845 (Textphone) 0800 0 967 968 (Text Tel)

Lines open from 6am to midnight, Monday-Friday and 9am to 4pm Saturday. Alternatively visit UNISON's website unison.org.uk

Jobs blow despite extra funds

Despite a boost of more than £700,000 in funding from the Ministry of Justice, probation service managers in South Yorkshire are still planning drastic cuts to establishment.

The trust believes 540 staff can do the work of 640 employees but has failed as yet to publicise the resource model they are using to justify it, UNISON has pointed out.

Last year 40 jobs were cut and there are currently 30 unfilled vacancies, increasing the workload for existing staff.

'As usual they want more for less,' said Neil Richardson, UNISON convenor. 'They are saying they will "manage" the workload but we have heard that before.'

'We are concerned that any changes to workload should be negotiated with recognised trade unions - but they have not entered into any of that.'

Neil warned that management appeared to be engaged in delaying tactics.

'South Yorkshire Probation were among the first to adopt the Management of Change policy but we are now tied up having meetings to discuss what we are going to discuss and never seem to get anything resolved.'

Pleased to meet you...

Ann Sowah (right) has a law degree from the Philippines and specialised in commercial law and the registration of companies there. When she moved to Britain she initially needed a job and worked as a health administrator but wanted to be in the criminal justice system. She has worked, part-time, for Thames Valley Probation Service since 2004.

A UNISON member, she has a strong interest in equalities and is a member of the disability equality group at Thames Valley. Ann's walking is affected by a genetic condition and she has a strong interest in access issues.

'I have some frustration over these issues because the building I work in, in Milton Keynes, is not very accessible - for instance there is no lift which is a nightmare for wheelchair users.'

'The management have tried their best but if a wheelchair user needs to go upstairs they have to go round to the adjoining court building and use the lift there.'

'I'm not a wheelchair user myself but stairs are still difficult. At least when I worked on the top floor they had a fax put in so that I did not have to go up and down to use the ground floor fax.'

She finds the lack of accessibility strange since the building won an architectural award.



Ann has a strong desire to highlight the benefits which good efficient administration brings. Ironically less serious cases present her with greater demands.

'These cases often involve individuals who are very erratic and there are a lot of breaches requiring enforcement. The bigger cases usually involve offenders who are in custody and are more compliant.'

Ann is frustrated by popular distinctions between 'front line' workers and backroom or administrative staff but feels local Thames Valley management recognise the contribution of admin staff.

'They do welcome our input into how to make the office more efficient.'

But the poor profile that 'administration' has does affect her in other ways. Ann, as a part-time worker with two children, struggles with housing needs. She is conscious of the houses for key workers programme but feels that staff who have roles like her own get overlooked.

'This is something that needs to change.'

Learning to work together

As UNISON embarks on the creation a 50,000 police and justice service group, probation and police staff are already feeling the benefits of a shared branch.

One headline result in Thames Valley is a quadrupling of probation membership. In the past, probation members were simply allocated to the Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire local government branches.

Lucinda Gwynne, UNISON probation coordinator in Thames Valley Probation Service says numbers have risen from 40 to 170 since the link-up with police. She acknowledges that branch meetings can seem very police-oriented but there is a pragmatic approach.

'When the agenda is completely police related, the probation reps have a side meeting and we rejoin the police to give a

report and take part in the more general issues. It's the most sensible way we can manage. We have a lot more in common than we did with the local authority branches.'

Lucinda is fulsome in her acknowledgement of the benefits, particularly help from police and probation branch secretary Rod Matheson: 'I took over from my predecessor Alan Norman without any training or experience. Without Rod I really would have been sunk. His experience and the strength of the branch kept me afloat. We have regular meetings and we go through the cases. He has acted as a mentor and he is always at the end of a phone.'

Lucinda also praises the police staff members generally: 'They have really welcomed us. I have never felt that we are there on sufferance.'