

NATIONAL STANDARDS MONITORING : EXERCISE TO CHECK ON RELIABILITY OF DATA

Report by HMI Probation

This paper reports briefly on the conduct and outcome of a joint exercise between the National Probation Service (NPS) and HMIP to check on the reliability of data from the national standards monitoring system.

Background and Conduct of Exercise

2. A system for regular monitoring of compliance with national standards by probation areas was introduced jointly by HMIP and NPD in October 2001. Under this system, team managers in probation areas read each month a sample of cases supervised by their teams against standard checklists which measure compliance with national standards and other aspects of effectiveness of NPS work. The completed checklists are sent to NPD for analysis. The information is used by NPD and by HMIP to assess area performance. Also, certain key data items on performance on arranging contacts (as required by national standards) and on breach (ie the requirement to take breach action within 10 working days of a second unacceptable failure on a order (third on a licence)) have been used by NPD for the cash limit performance link allocation for 2001-02. Summary results for these key data on contact and breach (for the period October 2001 to March 2002) are shown at Annex A. The national standards monitoring system is now managed fully by NPD as part of their performance monitoring arrangements.

3. Given the importance of the information it was felt appropriate to carry out an exercise to check on its quality and accuracy once the system had been running for several months. A joint exercise was therefore organised by NPD and HMIP, focusing on checking of the data items used for the performance link. The main quality assurance role was carried out by NPS staff, with HMIP staff carrying out further checking. The exercise took the form of a set of regional file reading events during January- April 2002, comprising file-reading teams from each probation area within the region, the NPD regional manager, and two or three inspectors. Files for a sample of cases covered by monitoring during October - December for each area were brought to the event, along with copies of the checklists submitted originally by the team managers for those cases. Each file was read by staff from another probation area within the region, and a checklist completed, without seeing the form completed by the manager. The two checklists were then compared to assess whether the second reader (ie at the file event) agreed with the first reader (ie the team manager) as to whether or not the case met the national standard (where applicable). Where there was disagreement, Inspectorate staff considered some of the cases and assessed whether they agreed with the first reader or second (or neither).

4. HMIP are satisfied that these exercises were conducted with integrity and objectivity, and that the results therefore give a reasonable picture of the quality and accuracy of information from the monitoring system.

Results on Reliability and Consistency

5. Results were considered separately for the "contact" items and the breach items. Overall the results - set out at annex B - showed that there was a disagreement between the two readers' assessments for 20% of the "contact" items and for 32% of the breach items. The position varied considerably between individual areas. For some, particularly on contact items, the discrepancy was only of the order of 10% while for other areas the discrepancy on breach items was of the order of 50%.

6. The disagreements covered a range of different circumstances, some where the first reader had assessed that the National Standard had been met but the second reader assessed not, and some the reverse. Overall, however, in a relatively higher proportion of cases the second reader's assessment was less positive than the first's, particularly for breach. Of the discrepant cases considered by inspectors in about two thirds (both for "contact" and "breach" items) the inspector agreed with the second reader and in about a third with the first reader.

7. These results, and the fairly high levels of disagreement, are of considerable concern, particularly since most of the items considered should involve straightforward factual assessments rather than judgements about the quality of work. The results raise considerable doubts about the accuracy of information from national standards monitoring. Among other things, they suggest that performance data on breach may tend to overstate.

8. The main reasons for the discrepancies appear to be:

- (the principal reason) poor and incomplete recording on areas' case files
- the substantial variation between areas in the format of records. In some cases this made it more difficult for the readers at the file event from another area to identify material on an area's case file.
- for breach, on occasions some difficulties in assessing whether breach action had been instigated as a result of a second unacceptable failure or subsequently. In part, this reflects some lack of clarity as to what precisely constitutes "taking breach action" in terms of contact with the court, where procedures vary somewhat between areas.
- (possibly) the availability for the exercises of fuller guidance on definitions which was not available for the original reading by team managers.

The way forward and Recommendations

9. It will be important for NPD to take forward work to address these discrepancies - particularly for areas where these are large - and ensure more reliable and consistent data for the future. HMIP understands that NPD will be developing arrangements to address these matters, and will work with NPD on them. In this context, HMIP makes the following specific recommendations. Some of these - particularly on IT - may take some time to implement and so be relatively longer term: but HMIP considers it important that they are taken forward as soon as is possible:

(a) the introduction of a standard, national, IT-integrated case record so that information is held on a similar, and clear, basis in all areas. The need for this was clearly identified in the QA exercise and was called for in HMIP's annual report for 2001-2002. A standard record will also be important in facilitating smooth transition of cases between areas when offenders move, particularly in public protection cases. HMIP welcome the announcement by Eithne Wallis, the Director of the National Probation Service at the recent Chiefs and Chairs conference that NPD will be proceeding with this. It will be important that the standard record is fully integrated with IT arrangements. It is recognised that this may take time.

(b) investigation in more depth of the reasons for discrepancies in a few areas where levels of discrepancy are particularly high.

(c) dissemination throughout NPS of the fuller guidance on definitions used in the QA exercise.

(d) the introduction of a clear standard procedure across NPS for taking breach action, agreed with courts, and investigation of the need for clearer definitions and procedures on other national standards.

(e) the development of IT arrangements to allow for regular “factual” monitoring of national standards (ie of matters of fact such as contact levels and enforcement action) to be carried out directly from operational probation IT systems in future.

This would remove the need for separate monitoring of these arrangements through samples of cases as above, which is time consuming for the NPS staff involved. It should be borne in mind that these arrangements were only introduced as an interim system in the absence of IT arrangements. It is recognised that development of these IT arrangements will take time. However this was a recommendation of HMIP’s thematic inspection report in 2000 *Using Information and Technology to Improve Probation Service Performance*. HMIP considers that this - along with the other recommendations in the thematic report - should be given priority in NPS IT developments.

HM Inspectorate of Probation

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Annex A: Results on Performance on Contact and Breach

	Contact	Breach
Region/Probation Area	% meet NS	% meet NS
SOUTH WEST		
Avon & Somerset	88%	52%
Devon & Cornwall	87%	59%
Dorset	85%	37%
Gloucestershire	85%	54%
Wiltshire	82%	55%
SOUTH EAST		
Hampshire	93%	39%
Kent	90%	47%
Surrey	92%	58%
Sussex	85%	55%
Thames Valley	77%	54%
LONDON		
London	79%	31%
EASTERN		
Bedfordshire	85%	77%
Cambridgeshire	86%	62%
Essex	83%	60%
Hertfordshire	81%	44%
Norfolk	88%	66%
Suffolk	88%	55%
EAST MIDLANDS		
Derbyshire	92%	92%
Leicestershire & Rutland	85%	38%
Lincolnshire	87%	72%
Northamptonshire	85%	29%
Nottinghamshire	85%	72%
YORKS & HUMBERSIDE		
Humberside	87%	73%
North Yorkshire	92%	49%
South Yorkshire	86%	65%
West Yorkshire	86%	54%
NORTH EAST		
Durham	94%	73%
Northumbria	95%	74%
Teesside	96%	69%
NORTH WEST		
Cheshire	90%	50%
Cumbria	92%	45%
Lancashire	91%	51%
Greater Manchester	95%	68%
Merseyside	92%	41%
WEST MIDLANDS		
Staffordshire	85%	44%
Warwickshire	93%	68%
West Mercia	87%	58%
West Midlands	78%	32%
WALES		
Dyfed-Powys	87%	54%
Gwent	81%	51%
North Wales	85%	53%
South Wales	81%	53%
ENGLAND & WALES	87%	53%

Annex B: Results on Reliability of Data: Proportion where Disagreement

Region/Probation Area	<u>Contact</u>		<u>Breach</u>	
	% Agree	Not Data Items	% Agree	Not Data Items
SOUTH WEST				
Avon & Somerset	20%	133	26%	42
Devon & Cornwall	15%	120	21%	39
Dorset	23%	114	24%	37
Gloucestershire	22%	88	30%	27
Wiltshire	21%	111	24%	33
SOUTH EAST				
Hampshire	25%	145	40%	48
Kent	23%	151	35%	51
Surrey	15%	109	43%	35
Sussex	18%	101	52%	33
Thames Valley	22%	152	38%	53
LONDON				
London	27%	435	36%	146
EASTERN				
Bedfordshire	15%	102	19%	31
Cambridgeshire	26%	100	26%	31
Essex	28%	131	40%	43
Hertfordshire	18%	102	35%	31
Norfolk	31%	102	19%	32
Suffolk	18%	98	35%	31
EAST MIDLANDS				
Derbyshire	25%	91	27%	30
Leicestershire & Rutland	22%	78	28%	25
Lincolnshire	19%	107	12%	34
Northamptonshire	14%	105	18%	34
Nottinghamshire	19%	139	27%	44
YORKS & HUMBERSIDE				
Humberside	32%	79	30%	27
North Yorkshire	22%	69	33%	24
South Yorkshire	25%	155	34%	50
West Yorkshire	19%	253	26%	80
NORTH EAST				
Durham	18%	82	30%	27
Northumbria	10%	181	28%	58
Teesside	12%	83	11%	27
NORTH WEST				
Cheshire	13%	92	17%	30
Cumbria	21%	120	31%	36
Lancashire	16%	153	35%	51
Greater Manchester	20%	287	43%	92
Merseyside	15%	166	44%	54
WEST MIDLANDS				
West Mercia	17%	87	29%	28
West Midlands	25%	261	36%	85
Staffordshire	13%	86	23%	30
Warwickshire	17%	81	41%	27
WALES				
Dyfed-Powys	19%	93	30%	30
Gwent	26%	98	47%	30
North Wales	20%	96	26%	31
South Wales	17%	155	30%	50
ENGLAND & WALES	20%	5491	32%	1777