

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN PAROLE - AND THE PAROLE BOARD

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Parole is all about risk and risk assessment. However accurate that assessment, it is inevitable that at some stage, a Parole Board will release someone who goes on to commit a serious offence. The Parole Board has a duty to do two things - the first and most important is to do all possible to ensure that its decision making and the systems that underpin it are sound; the second is to do what it can to inform and engage its stakeholders about its work.

A few years ago, when I was Chief Executive of the Parole Board for England and Wales, we had two cases in a very short period when men we had released had gone on to kill. We had already taken many actions to “up our game” in terms of quality of decision-making. We had also done quite a lot to inform and involve stakeholders. Those actions helped a little in dealing with the media storm that we faced. But we knew that they had to be built on and I set out below the key elements of our strategy - our quality agenda.

- **The four pillars of wisdom** - our starting point. This was a stringent appointment process for recruitment of new members, excellent training and mentoring arrangements, a formal (and meaningful appraisal system for members - we were the first organisation to appraise judges' performance) and lastly a review system where people we released re-offended.
- The **Review System** looked at all cases where a person we released went on to commit a violent or sexual offence. A Committee of experienced members, chaired by the Board's Vice-Chairman, a High Court Judge, considered all such cases. The system was strengthened by having distinguished external members on the Committee, including a Chief Constable. Feedback on the Committee's views was given individually to members and learning points shared both by inclusion in the Board's member newsletter as well as feeding into training. We also involved an external academic psychologist to utilise outcomes to look for patterns as well as setting up a Joint Review Process including other agencies such as the Prison Service and the Probation Service to see if there were shared learning points to improve public safety.
- **Member accreditation.** We set up a system of career progression for members so that they moved on to more challenging work only after additional training and formal accreditation. We also set up a Quality Unit which supervised the routine monitoring of panel decisions to test a sample of decisions for each Board member. Again, feedback was given to individuals and further training or mentoring arrangements made if necessary.
- **Research.** Our budget was not large but we managed to set up our lifer database which recorded the outcomes of all lifers we released with a complex coding system. We had one research project with Oxford University which considered the data and produced one important report. We co-hosted a conference with Cambridge University from which a book was published.
- **An international profile.** We joined the Association of Paroling Authorities International and attended and presented at conferences, learning much from other practices. We hosted many international visits and assisted in setting up or improving parole systems in other countries.
- **Regular stakeholder events.** We held events where we explained what we were doing and asked for input and feedback. We launched our annual reports in this way. We used the events

to involve stakeholders in policy development and to consult and share information.

- **Working with victims.** We attended many victim events - presenting where invited. We appointed one of our Directors to the Victim portfolio. We ensured that victims were included in all our stakeholder events and that they were fully involved in setting up our new website. Victim representatives were invited to observe panel hearings and contributed to member training (as did ex-prisoners).
- **Prisoners maintaining innocence.** We took the same steps here as for victims. We hosted a seminar which investigated what could be done to improve and make fairer the systems for those in prison maintaining their innocence.
- **VIP visits.** We had a programme of invitations to policy leaders, politicians, senior members of the judiciary and other VIPs to observe panels to ensure a better understanding and respect for the Board's work.
- **Media.** We appointed a full-time Head of Communications who ensured good relations with specialist journalists and led on media contact to ensure a single voice. We worked with the BBC on radio programmes about the Board and three television documentaries - "Lock them up or let them out" which were well received. The Chairman and I spoke regularly at high profile public events and conferences, on radio and TV and wrote articles for appropriate journals.
- **Website.** We won the best website award from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations. On our website, we included a short film trying to "debunk" the main criticisms levelled at the Board and showing some of our members to show that they were impressive and part of the community. There are also contributions from some of our stakeholders. This film is what I will show to delegates at the workshop.