**PAY & REWARD IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR – Looking Up and Challenging Ourselves to save our Professions**

***In two previous articles, Napo Assistant General Secretary Dean Rogers has used probation pay difficulties to illustrate how and why pay and reward is becoming a big problem across the public sector. There is already evidence (e.g. the recent HMIP report into London probation) that recruitment and retention challenges are impacting upon service outcomes. This will only get worse until radical revisions are made.***

***Here Dean argues that alongside significant pay reform, wider recruit and retention challenges across the public or ‘social sector’ can only be addressed in the medium and longer term by Government and public sector unions looking at more creative, strategic and structural solutions involving debt management, pensions and incentivising working in difficult, harder to reach areas.***

In December 2016, I wrote and published two articles about the probation pay negotiations I am currently leading at National level for Napo. Whilst doing so the problems I’d mentioned around recruiting and retaining staff, especially in our large (and increasingly expensive) cities was confirmed with alarming clarity via HM Inspectorate for Probation’s report on probation services in part of London. If you missed it, here are some of the key findings:

**“We found the quality of work by the CRC unequivocally poor …with the public exposed unduly to the risk of harm... That is plainly not acceptable.”**

**“Sadly and despite the heroic efforts of some staff, we found that there had been little or no likely impact on reducing reoffending. Staff were sometimes working long hours and were often fire-fighting rather than enabled to deliver a professional service consistently or sufficiently well.” (both quotes taken from the report’s summary – the full report is available via** [**www.gov.uk**](http://www.gov.uk) **)**

The report highlighted Senior Probation Officers overseeing 900 cases. Long term sickness had trebled since the London Probation Trust was split in 2014 and vacancy rates across the Community Rehabilitation Company were up from around 20% to around 33%. In particular, there was a problem finding experienced staff in London – one already familiar to school Governors and NHS managers. The CRC’s response in the short-term is to offer agency workers permanent contracts. How successful this will be time will tell, but the omens are not promising – experience in education, health and social work suggests staff opting for agency work are consciously doing so to give themselves flexibility and often avoid the additional responsibilities and pressures that come with a permanent (and more accountable) position…especially if the agency role is at least as well paid if not better, as the worker utilises the laws of supply and demand and poor pay progression.

***Massively increasing probation pay, not just in London but elsewhere, has to happen soon.*** Salaries that are £5K less than a police constable, classroom teacher, and often £10K less than an experienced social worker will not keep experienced qualified professional probation officers in their roles.

But simply increasing basic salaries will do no more than get the service through the current crisis it’s found itself in. A different recent HMIP report into probation in Kent criticised the National Probation Service whilst also highlighted staff shortages - with qualified officers opting to take London weighting and commute into the outer London boroughs where it’s too expensive for them to live independently.

Increasing London weighting could, in the short-term, simply increase the distance staff commute from to fill posts. Relying upon commuters is unlikely to reduce sickness absence rates. More research is needed to see who these commuters are – Napo suspect they are disproportionally younger and newly qualified staff, possibly still living at home, suggesting that they’ll not solve London’s experience-gap any time soon. The medium and longer term solution requires finding and retaining more probation professionals per se.

If the problem was unique to probation then specific, isolated, targeted monetary strategies could work. Indeed, some specific recognition that probation is due some catch-up investment is essential. Certainly pay scales that take 27 years to progress through have no place in the 21st century and a business case to the Treasury for the additional cost shouldn’t need much more than a basic Age Discrimination Risk Assessment by officials.

***Yet it is also reasonable to say even if we close the gap on other comparator public sector professionals in the short term the bigger problems may not be addressed in places like London and will certainly be back pretty quickly unless the profession as a whole is made more appealing and working I places like London is made more sustainable.***

The kind of salary levels the lucky few probation officers at their maxima may ‘enjoy’ are close to the maxima for a classroom teacher in your typical outer London borough. A newly promoted 5th year professional at a school near me recently used his increment to help buy a one bed studio flat in the next suburb out after spending his career up to that point sharing a house with five or six others. Professional aspiration can’t stop at having sole access to a sink in the morning. These are not good, sustainable, professional salaries in our big cities.

**With so much wider political and economic uncertainty now is exactly the time for politicians and unions to look up, draw breath and consider a new strategic direction for pay and reward – one that aligns different pressures and look to hit a few sixes I the same over**.

**Re-Inventing Saving:**

The recruitment pressures are greatest where it is most expensive and most demanding to live and work. So if staff can’t afford to live and save in these areas, rather than inflate pay, why not use the tax and benefit system to afford incentives to save…they’ve used the principle to good effect for businesses and the super rich for decades so let’s afford the same status on vital social servants.

If saving is a problem, ***government could pay all but 1% of pension contributions for those choosing to work in harder to recruit and retain areas***. That would instantly put about £2000 back onto a social servants disposable income; reduce the risk of the same person opting out of the pension scheme anyway (and thus in the long run pay for itself); raise general awareness of the value of the pension amongst a new generation of graduate entrants; help social servants afford to live in their new communities; and even give them a chance to save for themselves, or at least minimise their own debt - all wins in a more targeted and efficient way than simply increasing pay.

**Target Student Debt:**

Next could be tweaking the graduate tax, masquerading under the misnomer of ‘student loans’. This is a totemic issue for those under 25. As well as improving the range of paid professional entry pathways into probation, if supported by credible professional regulation that Napo has long backed, now is exactly the time to be more creative. Government has stopped budgeting for most graduates to pay back all of these ‘loans’ (largely because of their crippling high interest rates) so why not pay the ‘loans’ for those social servants who take hard to fill posts for as long as they fill those posts – with the incentive of writing them off completely if they complete ten years service in their new community? Such a move would be reasonably cheap but have a disproportionately positive impact on individuals supported by it – incentivising them to stay and, having the added softer morale boosting benefit of saying Government genuinely values its caring professionals.

If that’s too imaginative or too difficult for the Treasury bureaucracy to cope with (and given May and Hunt’s approach to student nursing currently let’s assume it’ll be a stretch) then why not just convert these loans to real loans at more competitive interest rates with banks bidding for new professionals’ accounts; or businesses bidding for Government contracts buying the debt off the state and converting it at fixed low interest rates as part of an allowed package for public servants?

**Housing Crisis:**

In my last article I detailed how vulnerable to potential homelessness probation staff could be in London. Generally, ‘affordable housing’ is a term that’s often meaningless and possibly the biggest piece of our jigsaw to find. The housing crisis in our capital and larger metropolis isn’t going to change until government policy changes radically – we’re screaming out for strategic investment and planning (if we’re being really imaginative incorporating carbon neutral housing and sustainable public transport infrastructure); developing mixed stock; and a return to rent control instead of landlord subsidies via millions in work.

In the recent past some interesting initiatives have been tried with mixed success, partly I suspect as they’ve happened in isolation. For example, shared housing and reduce mortgages for public servants sound great until your housing buddy gives up and takes their debt back to Yorkshire and you’re stuck.

But ***as more and more social servants are living in shared rented accommodation why not allow public authorities to build and rent out subsidised housing blocks? They could give a range of fixed term leases at heavily subsidised rates to directly encourage saving.***

Now imagine placing the ad. looking for a qualified probation officer. Where currently you’re trying to convince a sceptical, battered agency worker to come over for a few quid more than the going rate - how about a package that offers a competitive salary; an escape from student debt; pension incentives and almost free housing with colleagues in a similar position, whilst you save up and find your feet? Now that’s valuing a professional…

This isn’t fanciful stuff. It isn’t impossible. France and parts of the States have offered incentivised pay and pension breaks for teachers working in inner-cities for years. It needs imagination and will. It would also need a high level of engagement and some tweaking so that it met the next generation’s needs – but that’s the opportunity for unions to listen and then deliver with and for a generation they’re currently not reaching.

**More than anything it requires current leaders to look up and challenge themselves to find a better way to solve the challenges facing them across the public sector.**

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