

Evaluation of Sova's Lincolnshire Offender Mentoring Scheme

2014

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Foreword

by Professor Mike Neary,
Dean of Teaching and Learning, University of Lincoln.

This is a terrific report, showing the contribution that undergraduate researchers can make to improving the quality of life for disadvantaged members of our local population. I am very impressed by the high standard of the research, not only in terms of the clarity and coherence of its findings and the recommendations which come out of these results, but also with the rigor of the research methods on which these findings are based. I would like to thank Gary Saunders and Jill Jameson, lecturers in Criminology at the University of Lincoln, who led this project and who have provided such a rewarding learning experience for these students.

The University of Lincoln has a national and international reputation for the way in which it supports undergraduates as researchers. This research project is an excellent example of undergraduate student research that can only enhance the University's reputation, while at the same time giving the students a real experience of academic life. The research will provide a clear direction about how Sova and the Lincolnshire Probation Trust can further improve its already excellent mentoring programme for disadvantaged offenders.

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Executive summary

In January 2014 a team of researchers from the University of Lincoln undertook an evaluation of Sova's Lincolnshire Offender Mentoring Programme (LOM). LOM is run in partnership with Lincolnshire Probation Trust. LOM works to address the multiple barriers faced by disadvantaged offenders. The project offers community mentoring and a range of intervention activities that aim to enable its participants to realise their full potential and reduce re-offending. The researchers interviewed 12 participants, which included 6 LPT staff, 2 Sova staff, 2 mentors and 2 offenders. Despite LOM being in its infancy, the research found that Sova and LPT had developed an effective inter-agency partnership with excellent levels of communication. The research also found the LOM is valued by both LPT staff and offenders and that it helped improve the service offered to offenders. Whilst the sample size of the research is relatively small there was evidence to suggest that LPT staff and offenders thought LOM had a positive impact on offenders' behaviour. The research concludes that LOM should continue to be supported and further extended to other suitable offenders who would clearly benefit from the programme.

2 Glossary of terms.

LOM > Lincolnshire Offender Mentoring
LPT > Lincolnshire Probation Trust

Headline themes

- Some participants commented on the effectiveness of the inter-agency partnership between LPT and Sova.
- All staff commented that a key aspect of effective inter-agency partnership was communication.
- Communication between the two agencies was supported by having a representative from Sova based in LPT's offices and that the Sova representative was easy to contact.
- Some participants commented that inter-agency collaboration could be further improved by integrating other agencies into LOM, such as housing, local authorities and educational organisations.
- All LPT staff commented that they had learned about LOM through informal networks, i.e. 'word-of-mouth'.
- Some participants commented that more could be done to raise awareness of LOM, i.e. through advertising, conferences and social media.
- Some LPT staff and offenders were unaware that offenders themselves were able to request to be a part of LOM.
- Some participants commented that a wider range of mentors from different backgrounds including age, gender and with foreign languages would further improve LOM by providing a more personalised service.
- All LPT staff commented that LOM helped to improve the service provided for offenders.
- All offenders commented that LOM provides a 'trusting' and 'caring' service.
- All offenders commented that LOM had played an important role in helping them not to reoffend.
- All participants commented that LOM was beneficial in supporting offenders and commented that they would be disappointed if the programme was discontinued.

Methodology

The research gathered data for the evaluation of LOM by conducting 12 semi-structured interviews with members of LPT and Sova staff, mentors and offenders. The participants were selected by employing a convenience sampling method which, fundamentally, targeted key people involved, either directly or indirectly, with LOM and who were willing and available to be interviewed as part of the research. The convenience sample comprised most of the key people involved with LOM, including 6 LPT staff, 2 Sova employees, 2 mentors and 2 offenders.

LOM itself is still in its infancy and, at this stage, there is very little in the way of 'hard data' that can be used to measure the impact of LOM on offenders' behaviour with regards to recidivism, outcomes and satisfaction rates. Nevertheless, conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the research to provide a contextually rich and in-depth insight into key aspects of LOM and offer a 'snap-shot' of how those involved in the programme perceive it to be working in practice.

The data was analysed using content analysis which identified the main themes most commonly cited by participants during the semi-structured interviews. These themes are presented in the main findings of the report and are supported by comments made by participants that best capture the nature of each theme.

Informed consent was gained from all who participated in the research. Participants were informed about the nature of the research and how it would be used by letter (as part of the recruitment process) and in person before the interviews took place. The participants were informed that they were free to withdraw their presence from the research at any time, that the interviews would be recorded, about how the data would be stored and that all details would be made anonymous for the final report.

Participants were asked to sign the consent forms to signify their informed consent and were provided with a copy of the consent form for their own reference. The data gathered from the interviews has been kept securely by members of the research team and will be destroyed after the final report has been published. All names and any information that would reveal individuals' identities have been made anonymous.

To increase participation rates, offenders were offered a gift voucher to the value of £10 to participate in the research. Using gift vouchers as an enticement to participate in research is not unusual, especially when desired participants may be apathetic towards being involved. Measures were taken to ensure that this did not coerce participation by:

- (i) gaining informed consent (as outlined above)
- (ii) informing participants that they were still entitled to receive their gift voucher if they decided to remove their presence from the research at any time after the interviews had commenced.

Main findings

This section of the report focuses on the main themes that emerged out of the semi-structured interviews with LPT and Sova staff, mentors and offenders.

The themes are supported by comments made by participants and address the following areas:

- > Inter-agency partnership
- > Communication
- > Advertising
- > Reducing workloads
- > Mentors
- > Impact on offenders

1 Inter-agency partnership.

The research found that there was a good working relationship between LPT and Sova and, on a number of occasions, both organisations were commended by participants for the effectiveness of their inter-agency partnership.

1.1

LOM was created, as one member of LPT staff commented -

“because of gaps that the probation service itself had identified within their service.”

However, it appears that LPT were unable to provide this service themselves -

“I think there was a real gap and there is only so much that probation officers can do. They have to see their offenders and they assess risk and manage the case but they can't go and support them outside of the workplace.”

1.2

The research found that not only was Sova able to provide this support in the form of LOM, but was able to form an effective partnership with LPT that actually helped to improve the service offered to offenders, which was highlighted by one member of LPT staff -

"It has given me an insight into how probation can work in partnership with other agencies really effectively and bring something in to improve services for offenders that, perhaps, we couldn't provide ourselves."

1.3

The offenders themselves were also complimentary of the inter-agency partnership between LPT and Sova, with one offender commenting -

"It's a combination of both. Obviously my probation worker does what they can and they're good, but then my Sova mentor does what they can and it's good. So it's like I get two instead of one. So it's almost like I've got two probation workers."

1.4

Whilst the research found that the inter-agency partnership between LPT and Sova was effective, some respondents commented that this could be further improved by working with other agencies -

"I think they could make partnership links with other external agencies... accommodation providers especially."

1.5

Some participants commented that this could be extended to encompass a wider array of agencies to help create a network of support for offenders -

"...if they got a network in place where...direct contacts in, let's say, councils or colleges ... If they had a proper network like that it would be beneficial in the long run."

2 Communication.

2.1

LPT staff commented that effective communication was a key aspect of the inter-agency partnership between LPT and Sova -

"It's been very good, Sova have kept me involved all the time, kept me updated. Even to the point where sometimes I was not available to see an offender myself and the Sova representative would see them on my behalf then update me."

2.2

LPT staff also commented that Sova were easily contactable and responded quickly to enquiries. This view was also shared by the mentors -

"The Sova representative is always on-call, so we've got their number, so if there's anything we need to talk to them about we can ring them or text them straight away and then they'll get back in touch with us straight away."

2.3

LPT staff also commented that communication was further enhanced by having a representative from Sova based in LPT's offices -

"It makes it a lot easier to have someone in the office. So just by asking for a mentor, literally the Sova representative came to speak to me face-to-face. We discussed what sort of mentor I'd be looking for, the reason that I'd want a mentor and then we undertook a sort of four-way meeting with the mentor, myself, the Sova representative and the offender."

3 Advertising.

3.1

Most LPT staff commented that they had only become aware of Sova's LOM programme through 'word-of-mouth' rather than any formal advertising -

"It was really from the Sova representative, rather than any publicity."

3.2

Having a Sova representative based in LPT's offices helped, informally, to raise awareness of LOM as LPT staff could speak to a Sova representative directly about the programme -

"I took it upon myself to go and ask the Sova representative about it to find out more information."

3.3

Nevertheless, LPT staff commented that it would have been helpful if awareness had been raised through formal advertising -

"... there could have been a bit more publicity about the programme which provided further information about it: what Sova were hoping to do; the service they were offering..."

3.4

Moreover, some LPT staff also recommended that it would be useful if advertising raised awareness that offenders could self-refer -

"Making it easier so that the offender can identify the LOM programme & say, 'Oh, what's this? Can you tell me a bit more about that? That would be great.'"

4 Reducing workloads.

4.1

Most LPT staff commented on how their workload had decreased or had heard of someone's workload decreasing as a result of the implementation of LOM -

"It does help me and it actually saves me work sometimes."

4.2

Some LPT staff commented that having someone focused on mentoring was helpful because -

"We often don't get time to deal with some of the more practical issues like taking the offenders to the bank."

4.3

LPT staff commented that LOM provided an important service that LPT staff might have not time to do themselves -

"It's helped take quite a bit of the of the additional 'add on stuff' that if the mentor wasn't there I'd be bogged down with doing it all. So it takes a lot of that away from me... the real practical stuff that we haven't got time to do but can be really big, important issues to the offender."

5 Mentors.

5.1

Sova's mentors are volunteers but, through a matching process, Sova attempts to match mentors to the needs of the offenders. Sova has a database of their mentors with the intention of being able to match mentors to a diverse range of offenders which, as one participant commented, is an important part of the programme -

"All our clients are different. Different offences, different needs and Sova tailors the mentor to their individual needs."

5.2

Some LPT staff elaborated on why it was important that Sova had a diverse range of mentors -

"Some might prefer older people because of the experience."

Or,

"Some people might prefer younger people because they can relate."

Also gender could be a consideration -

"I've got somebody who needs a male mentor because he gets attached to female staff and Sova's sorting out a male mentor for this guy."

5.3

Some LPT staff commented that it was beneficial that some Sova mentors could speak a foreign language -

"To deliver it to a foreign national you need to be able to speak the language, you need to have an interpreter there."

6 Impact on offenders.

6.1

Several members of LPT staff commented that LOM improved the services they were able to offer to offenders by providing a more -

"holistic service"

and extra support -

"I think mentors are a brilliant way in bridging that gap and giving extra support."

6.2

LPT staff also commented that LOM builds on the service, provided by LPT, by offering -

"emotional and physical support to offenders that are struggling; to help them improve community ties and provide pro social modelling."

6.3

Overall, LPT staff were positive about LOM and commented that it had helped make progress with individual offenders -

"I don't think we would have got half as far as we have done without having the mentor in there as well ... we would not have made the progress with this particular case that we have done if that wasn't there, if that wasn't available to him."

6.4

Most LPT staff commented that the LOM programme allowed them to get a better overall picture of the offender -

"The offender in this particular case is being quite a lot more open with a mentor than they have with me, you know, in certain cases, about personal things. It gives me a better picture of the issues that are affecting that person."

6.5

A key aspect of the LOM programme is that mentors are able to form a different kind of relationship with the offenders as one LPT staff commented -

"At the end of the day I can send them back to prison, I can breach them. A mentor can't do those things so ... the impression I got was that this guy was more open with the Sova mentor than he was with me."

6.6

This view was also held by offenders, one of whom commented -

"...what's actually nice, knowing there's someone there you actually like, that's trying to help me. Rather than like, send me back to prison."

6.7

One offender commented that it was a much more 'caring' relationship -

"It's almost like having someone check up on you that cares. To be fair no one else does."

6.8

LPT staff commented that LOM had a positive impact on the offenders' overall well-being -

"Their well-being, emotional well-being has vastly improved. Self-esteem has improved as well. At the time when ... they were very close to going off the rails, but because of the support that they've had they've managed to turn that around."

6.9

Some LPT and Sova staff commented that not all offenders based in rural areas would be able to access a programme based in central Lincoln because of transport issues -

"We can't expect offenders to travel into Lincoln to meet a mentor. We've got to have them locally for the needs of those people."

Therefore, as the project develops, it will be necessary to expand into new areas rather than expect offenders to travel to the current base -

"Transport, I think, is a crucial thing."

"If the service expanded then that would be even better to have a representative in the East and somebody in the West, that would be good."

6.10

The offenders were also positive about LOM and commented that the programme had an impact on reducing re-offending -

"If it weren't for the Sova mentor I'd be back in jail, hands down ... to be fair, I'm grateful."

The offenders were also positive about LOM and commented that the programme had an impact on reducing re-offending -

"If I weren't going there, if I weren't seeing the mentor, I would probably have done something to that dude you know... I was literally ready to run round and kick his head in, I was going to kick his door off and everything ... I tell you once the Sova mentor stopped me like, they took me back to the centre. I would have like smashed him up or just like cut him or something ... I'd be in prison now."

Conclusion

Overall, the research found that LOM had clearly had an impact on offenders' behaviour which was supported by comments from LPT, Sova, mentors and offenders. It appears that Sova mentors were able to develop a more 'trusting' and 'caring' relationship with offenders compared to LPT staff, which encouraged offenders to open up and discuss their problems. The research found that the reason for this might be because Sova mentors do not monitor offenders' behaviour in the same way that LPT staff do and Sova mentors cannot punish the offenders for non-compliance. The research also found that there was an effective inter-agency partnership between LPT and Sova which was supported by good lines of communication between the two agencies and further augmented by having a Sova representative based in LPT's offices. The research found that LOM not only helped to reduce LPT staff's workloads, but also improved the service that is provided for offenders. The findings of this report suggest that Sova's LOM programme, despite being in its infancy, provides an important service for offenders. Although the findings are based on a small sample size, there is clear evidence from offenders themselves, that if LOM was not in place they would have probably engaged in further criminal activity. Based on this, the research concludes that LOM should be continued to be supported and, furthermore, extended to other suitable offenders who would clearly benefit from the programme.

Recommendations

The research offers the following recommendations to support and further extended Sova's LOM programme:

- LOM should be continued to be supported and the programme further extended to support other suitable offenders.
- Help offenders access the LOM programme by considering transport issues.
- Raise awareness of LOM through formal advertising, conferences and social media.
- Embed an evaluation of LOM into the programme to provide 'hard data' on the impact on offenders.
- Expand inter-agency partnership working to include housing providers, local authorities and educational organisations.
- Increase diversity of Sova mentors in terms of age, gender and ability to speak foreign languages.

Appendix

Additional quotes

Inter-agency partnership.

"It's an additional service hopefully for our self that we can refer them to, to help them improve their situation and hopefully they won't reoffend"

"I know that certainly a lot of my colleagues think it's been long overdue having this service and facility"

"I think they could make partnership links with other external agencies, I think anything, accommodation providers especially"

"I think it's good for Sova and Lincoln Probation Service but I think there'd be no harm in extending it, my only sort of concern would be that there are things already in place for other agencies"

"I'll tell you on area they can improve yeah ... if they got a network in place where like they've got direct contacts in, let's say, councils or like colleges ... If they had like a proper network like that it would be beneficial in the long run"

Communication.

"Generally I think communications between both organisations is very good"

"She's always there if we need her ... from what I know she does, like, quite a lot and it's quite impressive how much she does and can handle"

"It's been very good, it's kept me involved all the time, kept me updated. Even to the point where sometimes I wasn't available to see an offender myself and she would see them on my behalf then update me"

"The Sova representative is always on-call, so we've got her number, so if there's anything we need to talk to her about we can ring her or text her straight away and then she'll get back in touch with us straight away"

"She's always in contact if you need something"

Advertising.

"I know that through our offices, through the Transport Co-ordinator, through Sova, through our intranet; flyers; briefings that have been given at senior management, middle management and team meetings, the message has got out ... the message is out there."

"I think it works better if an offender approaches you about something because it shows their motivation"

"I found out from a friend who suggested it"

"I just think publicising it a bit ... there could have been a bit more publicity about it generally, you know, this is the scheme, this is what we're hoping to do, this is the service that we're providing, this is what we're looking for"

"I took it upon myself to go and ask Sova about it, to find out more information. I think it would have been a bit, a lot more helpful for us as a group to know that there's this service coming on, this scheme starting"

"I'm trying to get hold of my probation officer, couldn't get hold of her, she was never there. I spoke to my mum about all of this, and like yeah, I need to get some help and move out and my mum says "Why don't you try to find yourself a mentor or something?, see what there is" and that's when I went on the internet and I found one thing that then pointed my in the direction of Sova"

Reducing workloads.

"It's certainly helped my work. I think it provided a more of a holistic service to this particular offender"

"Personally I find it very beneficial. It's helped take quite a bit of the, what I would probably see the additional add on stuff that if the mentor wasn't there I'd be bogged down with doing it all. So it takes a lot of that away from me, you know, that I would have to do"

"Everyone is busy, everyone's got things on. So to have someone who primarily focuses on mentoring I think is a good idea"

"I think mentors are a brilliant way in bridging that gap and giving extra support"

Mentors.

"In my experience my expectations would be that a mentor would be there to offer emotional and physical support to offenders that are struggling, help them improve community ties, pro social modelling and that type of thing"

"That woman in there's a diamond, she's done a lot for me and I know for a fact she's done a lot for other people as well and that's a good thing ... she's got a good heart and a good soul"

"The mentor role is there to try and assist them and support them ... be it going to the Job Centre and completing an application or attending an interview with a housing provider"

"Some might prefer more older people because of the experience. Some might prefer younger because they can relate ... so realistically you've got to recruit from as wide a circle as you possibly can"

"You need to look into that guy. You need to look into his soul to work out what this guy is good at, what his strengths are. That's takes a lot of judgment and yeah, I don't think everyone can do that sort of thing"

"To be a mentor you've got to have certain things about you, not everyone can do it. You've got to be understanding for a start because there're people from ... different walks of life with different problems and you've got to recognise you can't judge"

"I've not really got the chance to meet any of the mentors, I guess that would be quite useful because I think sometimes for different offenders its quite important to match certain offenders with certain mentors ... so probably being able to meet some of the mentors could have been helpful"

"She's there for like support, emotionally as well"

Impact on offenders.

"Any relationship of that nature that sort of impacts on one of the pathways or at least gives somebody an indication of where they can go for support, at a time when they are ready to receive it, has got to be a positive and it has got to ultimately reduction in reoffending"

"I don't think we would have got half as far as we have done without having the mentor in there as well ... we would not have made the progress with this particular case that we have done if that wasn't there, if that wasn't available to him"

"At the end of the day I can send them back to prison, I can breach them. A mentor can't do those things so ... the impression I got was that this guy was more open with his mentor than he was with me. Which is a good thing I think."

"It's like putting a bit of sense in me ... It's something to get off your chest and someone to listen to you, whereas most people won't really bother"

"She basically kicks my arse a little bit and it's all good. That's what I kinda need you know. That's why it's a good experience"

"I can see improvement in myself. When you can say that you know you've done something right"

"I feel like someone wants me to go and achieve something"

"Now I'm starting to turn things around and it's starting to get better"

"Most of the people that we deal with have some issues. Be it employment; training; accommodation; benefits; there's always something that they need assistance and support with. So anything that we can do is going to be a step forward in, you know, reducing their risk of reoffending and hopefully them moving on and not committing any more offences"

"Someone to try and motivate me ... also like, help me find solutions as well"

"At the end of the day it's doing me good"

Recommendations.

"Having a second member of staff attached to the project, particularly involving the training side and particularly as a sort of visible point of contact within the new office. I think it's going to be important and if we work forward with the project then that's the sort of structure I'd like to see"

"I'm sure there's people in the Boston area that would benefit from it"

"It was good to start off in Lincoln to try and just start the project going ... but we didn't want to set up something that was just for Lincoln."

"Makes sense if we are just as much needed over there ... making it accessible by having people over there is only going to be a positive thing"

"I think it would be a good idea to expand to Boston"

"I think the more it's rolled out across the county the better"

"There was clearly a need for a service across the county but historically we've got two major areas. One is in Lincoln ... and the other one was in Boston which is centrally placed to cover the East area. So there's a logic behind why we chose those two sites."

Thoughts on discontinuing the service.

"I think so many of the people we work with have different people coming in and out of their lives that I think continuity to that is really important. So I think if mentors could continue then you know it could be a kind of 6 months/year-long relationship then that could have further benefit"

"I think he personally would be very disappointed because he's found it very helpful ... I think if you asked him, I think he would say he wouldn't have made the progress he's made without the support of that mentor"

"I don't think they'd be very happy about it because they'd be losing out in terms of the input that Sova gives. So I don't think they'd be happy at all."

"It would just be another sort of unlucky blow on the long list of being let down"

"I think the ones that are already engaging would be upset at the withdrawal of the support that they're getting"

"I think it would create a void because, like I say, he's built up the rapport with his mentor and appreciates the practical support"

"I would be very, very disappointed because it's only just, you know, it's taken a while to get up and running and I've seen the benefit of it and if it finished tomorrow I'd be, you know, it would be a thing of shame"

"I think it would impact the offenders mainly ... but I think it would be frustrating for everybody who's put their time in to it"

"I think it's in the early stages and I think there's a lot that could be gained from keeping a project like this going"

"I think it's a very, very worthwhile service ... long overdue"

"Yeah, I would be annoyed"

"It would be a bad thing"