Pilot Learning Group

Round Table Action Learning Session 2: Localism

Introduction

The Academy for Justice (AJC) pilot learning group was established following a requirement to develop Learning Groups for members. The pilot learning group focuses on one key area of commissioning; provider development, that was seen by the AJC membership as important in improving learning.

The make-up of the pilot learning group consists of members of the AJC who come from public, private and voluntary sector backgrounds. The bringing together of people from all business sectors will significantly help in developing a better understanding of provider development and will ensure that any learning disseminated via the AJC is suitably informed. Whilst this mix of people from different sectors is beneficial, each member of the group is also committed to adopting an open approach to engaging in the pilot, exploring differing issues regardless of the sector they work in, which will ensure any learning is not biased towards a specific market sector.

The inaugural meeting of the pilot learning group took place on the 24th February 2012 in Birmingham. Future activity will consist of a series of facilitated round table action learning sessions with a view to the sharing of experience and learning across the group and to report back to Academy for Justice Commissioning for wider dissemination.

There will be five round table events covering the following subject areas:

	Subject	Location	Date
1	Models of partnership working	Havant	April 2012
2	Localism	Norwich	June 2012
3	Procurement (Competitive Dialogue) - sharing of experiences	Wakefield	August 2012
4	Balancing operational and commercial interests in commissioning	Poole	October 2012
5	Influences - Government, Media, Public Sector – what is the evidence base?	Luton	December 2012

On completion of the round table sessions it is proposed to share the findings and experiences of the Pilot Learning Group with members at one of the formal AJC evening seminars early in 2013.

Round Table Action Learning Session 2: Localism

The second round table action learning session focused on the role of the local community and whether localism had a part to play in the wider public sector commissioning activities. The discussions highlighted the complex relationships between the community and public service provision with differing elements being explored by the group.

The following learning points have been recorded to share with the AJC membership and other interested parties.

- To understand fully the implications of localism on the commissioning agenda it is important to define what localism actually means. It soon became apparent to the group that the term localism cannot be clearly defined and will be interpreted differently by different stakeholders. For example localism to a County Council or London Borough will be the geographical boundaries for which they are responsible whereas central government may interpret it as a geographical region. Primary care Trusts will assume localism relates to their patient cohorts while small voluntary organisations may interpret localism to mean specific service users within only a small part of the local community, for example a housing estate or a few streets within a section of the community.

The inability to define localism highlighted a number of risks to commissioners especially when designing or redesigning public services. These include:

1. The need to clearly understand service user needs at the right level in the community where the public service will be deployed.

2. Where cost pressures dictate that only a generic service can be deployed to meet the needs of all but the neediest in the community, then alternative arrangements must be put in place to help those not receiving the service, if the commissioner is to avoid excluding part of the community.

3. Policy makers, politicians and central government commissioners will need to develop outcome based public service objectives which facilitate local operational design and delivery if they are to mitigate the risk of over specifying service design and commoditising service users. The group recognised the need for government to set policy based on the wider needs of citizens across the country and that financial pressures are such that all potential service user needs will not be met. However there was a consensus that whilst government dictated policy (based on informed consultation, see bullet point 1 above), the service design and delivery should be devolved to those local organisations (probably a mix of public, private and voluntary sector) that are engaged with the community and understand local need. Whilst it is unlikely that funding will cover all requirements, the local knowledge and closer partnership working will ensure that only services that work (i.e. evidence based) are deployed, maximising access to the service for as many service users as possible whilst meeting the government's policy requirements.

- The group had a long discussion on local stakeholder engagement and whether this was currently being maximised by the public sector in the commissioning cycle. Whilst the level of engagement with

stakeholders was mixed across the group, it was recognised that engagement with service users and other stakeholders was an extremely important requirement for any future commissioning activity. The role of voluntary organisations was highlighted as an essential vehicle through which services users (particularly hard to reach groups within the community) could communicate with commissioners to help shape future service design. Many around the table felt that often the service user's voice was ignored by commissioners. This was not because they had not listened, but because commissioning decisions were taken three of four layers away from the point of delivery and those commissioners were often divorced from the local community. It was felt that this was particularly relevant where commissioning for community based public services was taken by central government departments.

It was strongly agreed that devolving commissioning and service design to local responsible bodies was only part of the jigsaw and that the puzzle could not be completed if all of the pieces, including robust stakeholder engagement fell into place.

- One of the concerns identified by the group during the discussion was the knock on effect of the government's protracted public sector restructuring agenda. It was suggested that this was impacting on funding flows directly to front line provision as organisations adopted a 'wait and see' approach to the changes. For example the impact of the new Police and Crime Commissioner on criminal justice budgets, the outcome of the probation consultation and police and local government reforms are all now acting as barriers to normal funding flows. This has immediate implications to current services provision, particularly for voluntary sector organisations. It was agreed that restructuring plans were of sufficient timescales to be manageable by most funding organisations and that commissioners/contracting authorities needed to pay more attention to the impact on locally recognised, well performing and cost effective services by adopting an unreasonable risk averse culture.

It was felt that as custodians of the public purse, commissioners had a responsibility to manage change effectively including minimum disruption to effective public services with a proven track record of successful outcomes. This would not be achieved unless robust evaluation (including local benefits) of services was carried out before disrupting funding streams.

- The final part of the round table discussion focused on effective local commissioning and the need for local distribution of any savings based on an integrated community model. The outcomes of the discussion were similar in concept to place based (or total place) budgeting but with local communities retaining control of a portion of the savings to invest in preventative initiatives. Figure 1 below provides a high level flow diagram of how such an initiative would work, using criminal justice sector as an example.

Savings from reduced crime

Crime prevention initiatives

Local Gov

£ +

Crime

£ +   Health

Detection

£ +   Police

Prosecution

£ +   Court

Prison Sentence

Offender Rehabilitation

£ +   Prison Service

Community sentence

Offender Rehabilitation

£ +   Probation Service

Savings from Reduced Reoffending

Collective savings from reduced reoffending

Collective savings from reduced reoffending invested in crime prevention activities

Focus and funding migrate from offender services to preventative activities over time.
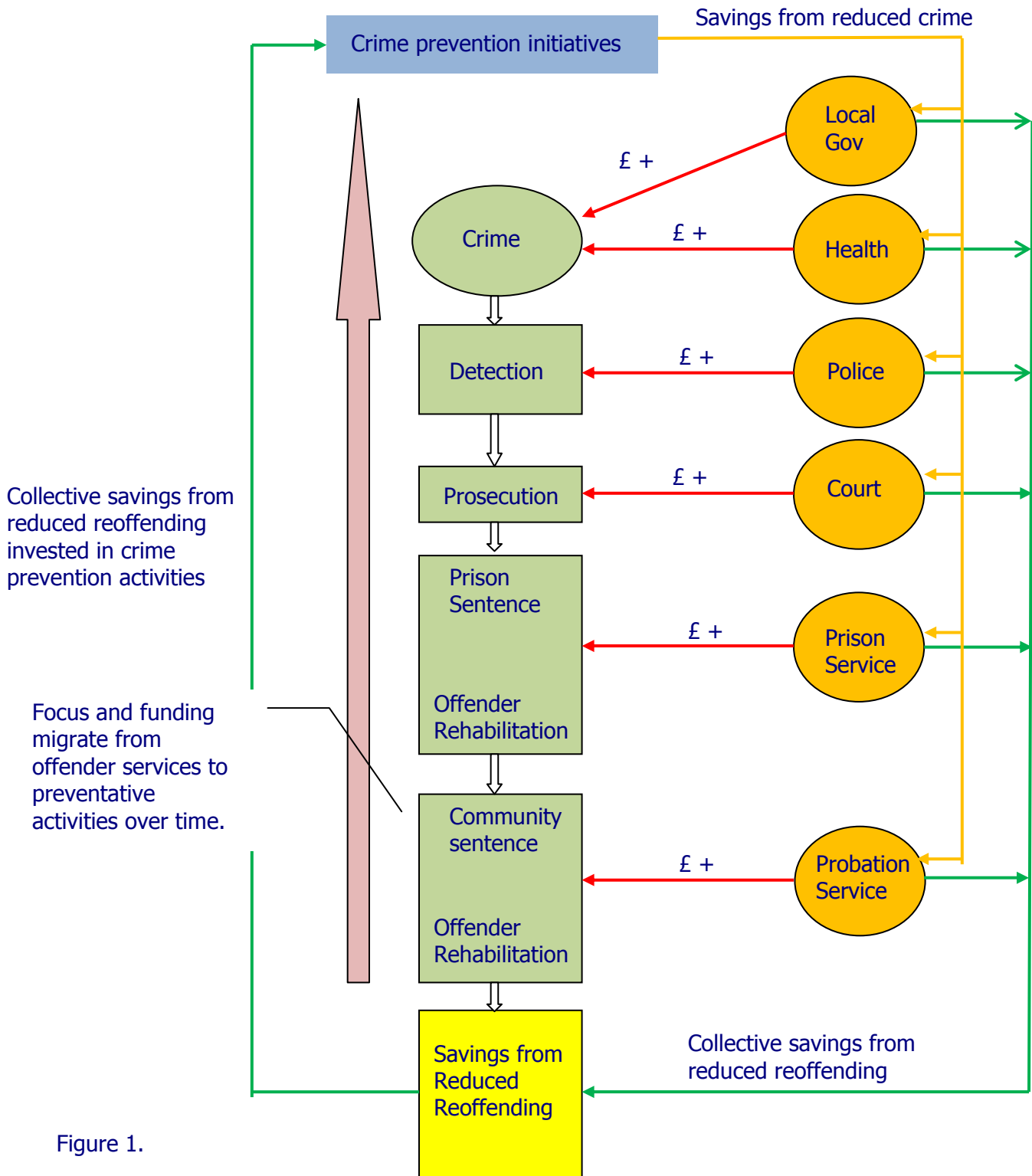
Figure 1.

- Using the example identified in figure 1, the group discussed the advantages of moving from a model which focused on the rehabilitation of offenders, once they had committed a crime, to one which focused on preventative interventions to stop people entering the criminal justice system. It was agreed that local communities would benefit significantly from a reduction in crime both in terms of the ability for statutory agencies and their partners to prioritise investment in public services and to design new services that improve the overall wellbeing and growth of the local community.

  The group also recognised the difficulties in reducing reoffending but suggested that a local community approach where all agencies, their partners and local citizens worked together to deliver evidence based interventions known to be effective in reducing the risk of reoffending would provide demonstrable improvements. However they also agreed that these focused interventions needed to be complimented by investment in preventative interventions to stop those at risk of offending from entering the criminal justice system, i.e. targeting both ends of the system at the same time. This could only be achieved if sufficient funding was made available to operate a coordinated set of activities.

  The current economic climate suggests that the public purse would not be able to directly fund the initiative described above so other solutions would need to be found. The adoption of a shared community investment model (as described in Fig 1) where each of the statutory agencies and their partners reinvest savings made from reduced reoffending into preventative work, would provide a sustainable funding mechanism going forward. The preventative activities would in turn reduce the level of crime, providing further savings to all agencies with the added advantages that brings to the community.

Conclusion

The subject of this round table discussion proved to be more complex than the group expected and some challenging issues were discussed. What was clear from the experience and range of expertise in the group was that local community and service user voice is vital to the future success of public sector commissioning. The need to design, procure, implement and deliver effective public services through a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations, focused on the needs of local communities can only be achieved by commissioners fully engaging with that community.

Localism, however it is defined, is a vital ingredient in the successful delivery of public service and if commissioners, when designing community services, adopt an approach that treats a service user as a commodity they will not achieve the outcomes they desire. A fully integrated approach where services are designed in the community for the community and where savings form reduced reoffending are pooled and used to fund preventative programmes would be a more innovative way of achieving desired outcomes.