

Paving the way

As Centrex takes more of a back seat in training probationers, forces will have to make decisions about how they will prepare new recruits. John Dean reports on a scheme in the North-East where two forces are placing recruits into communities to gain experience.

One of the criticisms levelled at police probationer training over recent years has been that it has tended to be too theoretical and not practical enough.

Now, as forces throughout the country come to terms with the forthcoming changes in training arrangements, two from the North-East of England have devised a programme which takes probationers right back to grassroots.

Durham Constabulary and Northumbria Police are about to start a course which will place probationers at the heart of their communities, not just in their daily duties but also during their initial training.

The idea is that the forces produce new police officers already imbued with a good knowledge of local challenges and issues.

The forces took the decision to establish a joint initiative because, like all forces, they are having to assume responsibility for probationer training. Forces have until next year to do so but Durham and Northumbria decided to move as quickly as possible.

The catalyst was an HM Inspectorate of Constabulary's report, *Training Matters*, published in January 2002, based on its inspection of probationer training. The report concluded that: "The current programme is not wholly fit for its purpose now, nor to support the police service in the 21st Century."

The report was encapsulated into Government reforms with the



Source: Centrex

result that the role of Centrex, the national police training organisation, has changed dramatically. The organisation is due to continue as a training advisory and coordinating body but is losing some of its responsibilities.

A result of this has been that forces are taking responsibility for training recruits during the crucial first months of their police careers.

Joint project

In the North-East, the changes mean that the existing site of Centrex, at Durham's Aykley Heads headquarters in Durham City, will close at the end of March.

Supt James McAloon, Durham's probationer training project manager, said his force was faced with several options when closure was announced; continue using Centrex in the

short term, run training themselves, go outside to an academic institution such as a university, or join with another force.

Having explored the other options, it decided to go for a joint project and Northumbria proved the obvious partner because the forces share a long boundary and already work together; they run joint cross border operations and are joint partners in the air support unit.

Supt McAloon said the combined Initial Police Learning and Development Programme (IPLDP) for probationers, which starts in April, is designed to be vocational rather than theoretical and academic, something the force sees as a significant departure.

IPLDP was devised over several months of planning between Durham and Northumbria, with staff from both forces fully

involved, and those behind it believe that it offers a blueprint for probationer training that other forces could follow. Already others have expressed an interest.

The deep end

Supt McAloon said the course tried to address a key criticism of the old training system, which was accused of tending to throw recruits in at the deep end without having prepared them adequately.

The emphasis in IDLDP, which runs for 31 weeks, is on a more gradual training. Supt McAloon uses the analogy of a swimmer. Under the old system, he said, the new swimmer - or recruit - would be given all the equipment and told to jump in at the deep end and swim a length. By and large,

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Supt James McAloon, Durham's probationer training manager

after a lot of splashing, the swimmer would usually reach the shallow end.

However, under IDLDP, the swimmer starts at the shallow end, swims a few yards then comes back, then swims further and gradually builds up confidence to swim a full length. The result, he said, was better-prepared recruits.

Another significant factor is that the course is non-residential, except for Northumbrian recruits who need to travel long distances from their homes.

The course starts with a three-week induction then probationers spend three weeks based with community organisations in the area they are to serve.

The community section is central to the approach of teaching young officers how to work with other organisations as police forces throughout the UK embrace the philosophy of multi-agency working.

During the community segment, trainees will undergo temporary attachments to outside bodies such as housing departments, probation teams and social services units.

They will also spend time with groups considered "hard to reach" for the police service, such as ethnic and youth groups, gaining an understanding of their per-

ception of the police and what they would like to see the service doing.

Learning curve

The two forces say the aim is to offer trainees a broader view of the needs of the areas in which they will serve so that when they do start their careers, they will be more effective.

Supt McAloon said: 'We aim to give them an in-depth knowledge of the criminal justice process and also help them learn about community organisations. The idea is to help them learn about the community in which they are going to be based.'

'It will be locally based: an officer to be based in Darlington will not be sent to the north of the county to do their community placement in Derwentside, for instance. They will do it in Darlington.'

'And the placement will be a learning process. The probationers will take learning logs and will be debriefed when they get back. The partner agency which gives up the time must also get something out of it. We are responding to local need.'

Phase three is supervised patrol followed by phase four, independent patrols, but although part of the programme is classroom-based, the emphasis

throughout is on training officers on the ground.

For instance, elements of training, such as learning how to stop cars or tackle shop thefts, will be done out in the community rather than on the force campus, Supt McAloon arguing that the trainees' presence will add to high-profile policing methods, reassuring the public and giving probationers first hand knowledge of what life is like on the street and how people respond to the uniform.

Classroom sessions will take place in rooms previously leased to Centrex at Durham, and will be staffed by qualified training officers from both forces, headed by a chief inspector from Durham.

The programme will run initially for three years with about 250 students, 180 from Northumbria and 70 from Durham, due to undertake it, starting with 32 this Spring, 23 from Northumbria and nine from Durham. Several courses will run a year.

Another distinctive element of the course is that it has dispensed with the term tutor constables, to be replaced by Professional Development Officers, part of the new Professional Development Unit. The decision is part of the forces' desire to emphasise the new approach to training. Most training officers will be police, but some will be civilian.

Setting standards

Another distinctive feature is the nature of the qualifications. To have their appointments confirmed, the students must reach set levels in 23 Occupational Standards (OS), equivalent to NVQ level 3 and 4 in policing. Again, this emphasises the strongly vocational, rather than academic, approach. The reasoning is that some older probationers may not be able to adapt well to academia, while many newer ones are graduates already and may not wish to return to the academic life.

The OS training falls into two sections: the first eleven topics include how to arrest, detain and report individuals, minimise

aggressive and abusive behaviour by suspects and how to search individuals.

Supt McAloon said the first eleven would also be used for training of community support officers, meaning that their training comes more into line with police officers.

The final 12, covering areas such as investigations, searches and how to prepare and submit case files, are for the officers alone. Once successfully through, the recruits can begin working in their command areas.

Supt McAloon said: 'At the end of the process, we hope to have competent and confident police officers who have been trained in a vocational manner, which is linked to the job, and are also prepared to continue lifelong learning.'

He said the course represented a "revolution" in training because of the way it combined theory and practical training with a local feel to it.

Supt McAloon said the forces would monitor its effectiveness. He said: 'Every stage will be kept under constant review and in time, as with any new programme, there will undoubtedly be changes.'

'But the overall benefit will be the professionalising of the process, with probationer officers having to achieve nationally agreed levels of competency and accreditation.'

For Supt Judith Common, Northumbria's head of training, it is also important that the students are encouraged to find out as much as they can about their areas themselves during their training.

She said: 'The probationers will go out into communities with very limited policing experience. This is deliberate - it means trainee officers will see community issues and problems from different experiences.'

'They can then put these experiences to good use when they return to us as fully trained officers. The training will be delivered according to a National Curriculum set by the Home Office but with a certain amount of local flexibility.'

