HM Inspectorate of Probation

THEMATIC INSPECTION REPORT

'Realising the Potential′

A short focused inspection on the Offender Assessment System (OASys)

Home Office

2005

Foreword

The implementation of OASys across England and Wales is a significant achievement for the National Probation Service (NPS). For the first time all probation areas are able to benefit from a comprehensive offender assessment and review system that is common to all. The system has also attracted the interest of other jurisdictions abroad.

We undertook this inspection because we were concerned about the potential unintended adverse impact of the new national standards on offender assessment and sentence planning, once the new standards took effect in April 2005. Our fear was that the NPS was about to reduce its usage of OASys so much (in order to save staff time) that it would lose some of the key benefits it should be gaining from deploying OASys as a system. In short, our concern was that the full potential benefits that OASys should provide for the work of the NPS were not going to be realised.

Having now conducted our inquiry, our report reveals both positive and negative findings. On the positive side, we found that, following the considerable efforts that have been expended on implementing the system, managers in probation areas are now turning their attention towards improving the quality of OASys assessments. They are also taking tentative steps towards using data from OASys to measure performance, and plan future patterns of service delivery. We commend these developments and would like to see them extended further.

However, we have continuing concerns about the quality of assessment and management of offenders' risk of harm to others. We have documented these previously in many of our Effective Supervision Inspection reports and in our Annual Report for 2004/2005. Furthermore, while we acknowledge the resource constraints under which the NPS operates, we do still believe that one effect of the new national standard on offender assessment and review has been to reduce the level of scrutiny of some offenders to an unwise level. We take the view that this places the NPS in a vulnerable position with regard to demonstrating that it takes its public protection duties seriously.

The evidence in this report leads us to acknowledge the positive progress achieved by the NPS in a number of respects. But we also think that a higher standard of OASys completion is both possible – as some areas are already demonstrating – and desirable. OASys is of crucial importance. When implemented consistently and comprehensively it provides the following benefits for probation practice:

(i)   it identifies the 'criminogenic needs' of individual offenders (i.e. their offending behaviour and what needs to be done to reduce it);

(ii)   by doing this for the whole population of sentenced offenders it can enable improved planning of resource allocation;

(iii)   it links the assessment of each individual offender to their personal sentence plan;

(iv)   its assessments assist the management of risk of harm, and provide a basis for defensible decision making, and being accountable;

(v)   through the facility to 're-score' offenders when conducting reviews both during and at the end of sentence, it provides a basis for measuring and demonstrating the effectiveness of work with offenders.

There will always be scope for periodically refining and developing the detailed design of OASys. Overall, however, both the NPS, and increasingly the new National Offender Management Service as a whole, should take this opportunity to ensure that they realise the potential of what OASys has to offer as a key component of effective work with offenders.

ANDREW BRIDGES
HM Chief Inspector of Probation

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Contents

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ANDY SMITH HM Inspector of Probation
SALLY LESTER HM Inspector of Probation
JOHN HUTCHINGS HM Assistant Chief Inspector of Probation

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Glossary of abbreviations

CP	Community punishment
CPO	Community punishment order
ESI	Effective Supervision Inspection
HMI Probation	HM Inspectorate of Probation
HQ	Headquarters
MAPPA	Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements
NOMS	National Offender Management Service
NPD	National Probation Directorate
NPS	National Probation Service
OASys/eOASys	Offender Assessment System/electronic Offender Assessment System
O-DEAT	OASys Data Evaluation and Analysis Team
OGRS2	Offender Group Reconviction Scale
PSR	Pre-sentence report
SARA	Spousal Awareness Risk Assessment
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bounded
SSR	Specific sentence report
UPW	Unpaid work

1. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE INSPECTION

1.1 The overall aim of the inspection was to:

help ensure that offender assessment and review is an integral part of offender management by identifying the key learning points from the implementation of OASys in the NPS.

1.2 The specific objectives were to:

- identify the role and purpose of OASys

- identify key implementation decisions

- evaluate progress on implementation of OASys

- identify strengths and areas for improvement in offender assessment and review.

1.3 The findings in this report are mainly informed by the first 29 area inspections that have taken place under HMI Probation's ESI programme. Where appropriate they have been supplemented by information gathered from visits to four probation areas (Cheshire, Leicestershire & Rutland, Northumbria and Teesside), where a series of focus groups were organised that included both managers and OASys users. We chose these areas because the findings from the ESI programme suggested that, whilst there remained scope for improvement, they had made good progress in implementing OASys. In addition, we have consulted staff from the NOMS OASys Unit and the Public Protection and Licenced Release Unit.

2.   THE POLICY INTENTION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

2.1   In 2001 an ambitious programme to implement a consistent and structured offender assessment framework in all probation areas started (OASys). Previously, there had been a number of different systems in use by the probation service, none of which were seen as totally satisfactory. It was also intended that the system would eventually be adopted by the prison service. OASys was designed to support, and be a crucial component of the overarching 'What Works' strategy that placed prime importance on the assessment of offenders and the consequent targeting of interventions. The OASys User Manual summarised the position as follows:

'The assessment of the risk posed by an offender, and the identification of the factors which have contributed to the offending, are the starting points for all work with offenders.' (Home Office 2001)

2.2   Traditionally there have been two main approaches to assessment: the clinical model which relies on professional judgement and the actuarial approach whereby assessment is based on data derived from sample groups. The main drawback to actuarial scales (such as OGRS2) is that they are based on historical information that does not allow for positive change. An important benefit of OASys is that it combines both clinical and actuarial approaches to assessment by combining static, unchanging data such as age and previous offending history with dynamic (changeable) factors such as the employment status of an offender.

2.3   OASys was implemented in a staged way, initially as a paper-based system, but the NPD made it clear that all probation areas should be using the electronic version of OASys (known as eOASys) by April 2004. Similarly, OASys is gradually replacing the sentence planning arrangements in prisons as prison staff are trained to use the system. In practice not all probation areas and prisons have managed to achieve full coverage of all cases using OASys. For example, the implementation of the system in some probation areas was delayed and the slow progress in achieving electronic links between probation areas and prisons has hindered the flow of information between the two agencies. The electronic link is due to become operational in autumn 2005. OASys based PSR templates are also available and are in use in around 25 areas. Implementation of a single national template has been held up owing to ongoing OASys connectivity work and is expected in the New Year.

2.4   Following the original launch of OASys there were a number of important policy revisions. These included the publication of further operational guidance to supplement the OASys User Manual. There has also been development of further assessment tools designed to complement OASys, for example SARA, and a number of circulars proscribing the role and function of OASys. These included:

-       Probation Circular 38/2004 *Revised targeting matrix* – describes the use of OASys in targeting offenders into relevant accredited programmes

- Probation Circular 53/2004 *PSRs and OASys* – describes when OASys should be used at PSR stage

- Probation Circular 59/2004 *Revisions to the Enhanced Community Punishment Scheme* – reduces the need for full OASys assessments on low-risk offenders

- Probation Circular 10/2005 Public Protection Framework – clarifies the relationships between OASys and MAPPA

- Probation Circular 15/2005 *National Standards 2005* – describes when OASys should be used

- Probation Circular 18/2005 *New Sentences and the New Report Framework* – describes use of OASys at the PSR stage in the context of the Criminal Justice Act 2003and introduction of two types of PSR: the Fast Delivery Report and Standard Delivery Report

- Probation Circular 48/2005 *OASys Quality Management Plan* – outlines the arrangements for assuring and improving the quality of OASys

- Probation Circular 49/2005 *Assessment and management of risk of harm action plan* – sets out a strategy to improve the assessment and management of risk of harm in the NPS.

3.   MANAGING OASys INTO PRACTICE

3.1   ESI reports provide evidence of significant progress in probation areas in implementing OASys; this has required considerable resources not only to implement the system but also to train staff. Most areas are able to identify the extent to which OASys has been completed on new and existing cases, although monitoring of this aspect of performance is less well developed at national level.

3.2   The factors contributing to successful implementation were explored in our visits to the four probation areas. Successful implementation appears to have been linked, amongst other things, to having:

- previous positive experiences of using assessment tools

- good links between technical support staff and OASys users

- strong leadership amongst senior managers that placed OASys at the 'centre of practice'

- clarity about role boundaries when using OASys

- good arrangements for quality assurance of OASys

- an ability to use information from OASys to inform area strategy and individual practice.

3.3   ESI findings indicate that the management arrangements within areas have impacted on the implementation of OASys. In some areas management responsibility for OASys was disconnected from public protection management, including MAPPA policy. This meant that the development of the two strands of work was not always well coordinated and had an adverse impact on the management of high risk of harm cases. In other areas, conflicting policy and information has been issued to staff (for example incompatible guidance regarding risk of harm levels or criteria about referral to MAPPA). To some extent this separation of functions has also been replicated at national level in the NPD, and NOMS HQ, with different units responsible for public protection and the OASys project. The situation has improved, however, with the recent creation of the Assessment and Management of Risk of Harm Improvement Programme Board, that includes representatives of the Public Protection and Licenced Release Unit, the OASys Unit and HMI Probation.

3.4   The two most recent Probation Circulars on risk of harm (10/2005 and 49/2005) recognised that there was a need to make sure that OASys use was firmly embedded into risk of harm assessment and management and that better coordination of systems was required. It was clear that in a large part these decisions had been taken in response to adverse reports from HMI Probation in relation to risk of harm assessment and management in many probation areas.

3.5   NPD/NOMS has also paid attention to increasing the quality of OASys, through area and/or regional-based quality assurance exercises. Despite this, inspections by HMI Probation have shown that there remains a need to improve quality in all areas and at

all points in the assessment and offender management process. Areas have set targets for completion of OASys, although at times some staff whom we interviewed for this inspection felt that speed of completion had sacrificed quality. An OASys quality action plan was also issued in June 2005 by the NPD clarifying the arrangements in areas for assuring the quality of OASys assessments. Improvements to risk of harm assessment and management have been made a priority in probation area business plans for 2005/2006, and Probation Circular 49/2005 sets out a strategy for the improvement of risk of harm assessment and management at both NPD/NOMS and area level.

3.6 ESI reports provide evidence that there have been different decisions taken in areas about the grade of staff who can undertake OASys assessments, although in most areas these decisions have led to a logical and cost-efficient approach to implementation. Areas have also differed as to which grade has the authority to countersign OASys, for example in relation to high risk of harm management plans or exemptions from full risk of harm analyses. The grade of staff was important to ensure organisational accountability, but in some areas this has led to very tight turn around times because of delays in seeking authority to carry out a particular course of action.

3.7 With such a large and complex project there has been considerable concern on the part of probation areas and the NPD about the time and resources needed to ensure that OASys was implemented and operated as intended. At the start of the implementation process attention had focused on the amount of time required to complete an OASys assessment. Areas had allocated notional timings to the activity but it was clear that with increased familiarity, and confidence in OASys, staff had become quicker and more efficient at completing the assessments. Whilst it was difficult to describe a typical case, estimates for the time taken to complete a full OASys assessment varied, but two hours seemed to be the average time reported by staff in the four areas visited. This did not seem to be an excessive amount of time given the importance of accurate and thorough assessment and planning, especially at the start of supervision.

3.8 We take the view, which was reinforced by interviews with staff as part of this inspection, that the move to an electronic version of OASys was a significant improvement on the paper-based system. It has led both to better quality assessments and reduced the time taken to complete them. However, there have also been some disadvantages to the move. The frequent software updates released as part of the roll out of the electronic version of OASys had an impact on efficiency and effectiveness. As different versions of the programme were introduced to cater, for example, for the needs of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, staff were required to learn new ways of using the system, or discovered that the way the system operated had changed. This was a cause of some frustration. It was difficult, however, to see how this could have been avoided given the frequent need for adaptation brought about by policy and legislative change and by user requests.

Good practice example:

Cheshire Probation Area had participated in a number of regional OASys quality audits and had committed itself to completing two internal audits per year in order to improve quality. The audits were intended to focus on specific aspects of OASys. The area had already completed an audit on the quality of OASys sentence planning. The clearly defined focus of the audit meant that improvement priorities were clear, as were the recommendations for managers and users.

4.   ASSESSMENT OF RISK OF HARM

4.1   ESI reports have documented concerns about the content and timeliness of risk of harm assessment and management. Based on the results from 29 inspections we found that at the start of supervision only 65% of risk assessments were considered to be adequate, and only 40% were subsequently satisfactorily reassessed every 16 weeks as required by the national standard.

4.2   Concerns have also been expressed by the NPD about the number of exemptions from the OASys requirement to complete a full risk of harm analysis (whereby the assessor, subject to the approval of a manager, makes a professional judgement that a full risk of harm analysis is not needed). A report prepared for the NPD found an exemption rate of 36% across all areas and significant discrepancies between them in the proportion of exemptions granted.

4.3   The NPD has been aware of the evidence demonstrating the poor quality of risk management assessment and planning and has responded in a number of ways. These have included commissioning a report on risk of harm issues and issuing a number of circulars and instructions. For example, the additional operational guidance identified the components of the OASys risk management plan and was added to by Probation Circular 10/2005 that set out further guidance on the plan's content. This has led to some confusion and it would have been preferable if Probation Circular 10/2005 had made it clear that it superseded previous guidance.

4.4   Overall, however, we take the view, based on ESI reports and on contact with probation staff as part of this inspection, that the quality of the guidance provided by the OASys User Manual and similar material was impressive and a source of authoritative direction. What was less impressive was the fact that many practitioners were unaware of it as greater familiarity would have led to much sharper practice. Earlier research, carried out by the NPD on OASys, also concluded that as staff used OASys more they increasingly failed to follow the prescribed guidance. There is also now no national training programme for OASys trainers; this means that some of the discipline that characterised the original training programme as regards consistency of scoring and completing OASys is in danger of dilution.

4.5   A consistent message from staff at all levels interviewed as part of the ESI programme and for this inspection was that OASys did not place risk of harm at the centre of the system. A view was expressed that risk of harm felt like an add-on to the main function of OASys, which was seen by many as being primarily about the assessment of likelihood of reoffending. We have found some evidence to support this view from the ESI programme and from our discussions with staff in the four areas. We would, therefore, endorse the objective in the national risk of harm improvement strategy to address this shortcoming.

4.6   Prior to the introduction of OASys considerable attention had been directed at risk of harm assessment and management training for staff in probation areas. With the priority

afforded to the practicalities of the introduction of OASys, less attention has been paid to ensuring that practitioners are suitably equipped to assess and manage risk. For example, ESI reports record confusion amongst many staff about the distinction between imminence and seriousness of harm and the consequent level of MAPPA engagement. More attention needs to be given to staff development and training to ensure that they fully understand the nature and implications of the risk of harm categories contained within OASys. The national risk of harm improvement strategy had also highlighted the need to re-invigorate risk of harm training.

4.7   Probation Circular 59/2004, issued in December 2004, marked a retreat from the policy of completing an OASys on all offenders subject to supervision. The circular indicated that a full OASys was not required for offenders made subject to CPOs who scored under 41 on OGRS2, had undergone a basic skills assessment and been subject to a risk of harm screening that did not suggest the need for a full analysis. This decision was taken in response to concerns about the resource implications of completing OASys on low-risk offenders subject to CPOs where the sole priority was to ensure that the work requirement of the order was completed.

4.8   The revised national standards introduced in April 2005 build on the changes to CPOs. The standard makes it clear that a full OASys assessment is not required when a court report is prepared on any offender who has scored under 41 on OGRS2 and been subject to a risk of harm screening (that showed that a full analysis was not needed). Whilst the resource implications underpinning this decision were understandable (and the fast delivery report format provided some background information) a number of staff in the focus groups commented on the fact that risk of harm screenings at court were often completed under pressure and when time was short. They took the view that, as a result of this, the assessments were often inadequate. For example, an analysis of 400 SSRs, completed in Cheshire Probation Area between July 2003 and March 2004, concluded that in 45% the assessment of low risk of harm was incorrect and should have been higher.

4.9   OASys guidance makes clear that a risk of harm screening section requires a consideration of issues that have been identified in the main OASys assessment. Risk of harm assessments that have failed to take this into account lack key pieces of information to inform the assessment.

4.10   The national standard to complete a full OASys if a community sentence is imposed is welcomed. However, the opt out in the case of stand alone UPW means that there is a potential risk that CP staff could be placing and working with offenders without reference to adequate risk of harm assessments thus putting themselves, other offenders and members of the public at risk.

4.11   Our concerns also centre on questions of defensibility. Offenders assessed as presenting a low risk of harm at the start may not remain so; without a full OASys such cases are unlikely to be properly reviewed and reassessed as to their level of risk. It should be borne in mind that a significant proportion of serious further offences have occurred in cases originally assessed as presenting a low risk of harm at the commencement of supervision: 39% in the period April 2002 to March 2004 (93 out 240 cases where the risk of harm classification was clear). Whilst a full OASys assessment in such cases would not necessarily reduce the likelihood of reoffending, there might well be serious

media criticism of NOMS/NPD if a low-risk offender had committed a serious further offence and the organisational position was that a full risk of harm assessment had not been required at the start of the case.

5. ASSESSMENT OF LIKELIHOOD OF REOFFENDING

5.1   One of the primary justifications for the introduction of OASys was that it would assist in the appropriate targeting of interventions through a systematic assessment of criminogenic factors relating to each offender. The offender management model has taken this a stage further in that OASys (when completed) will form the basis for allocating cases to one of four tiers of supervision.

5.2   Whilst OGRS2 has remained the primary means of targeting, OASys has begun to make an impact in ensuring that criminogenic factors are identified (77% of assessments of the likelihood of reoffending were satisfactory in ESI reports). In the words of one probation officer interviewed, it was important *"to use OASys not do it"*. Despite this, contact with staff during the ESI programme suggests that many still regard OASys completion as an extra bureaucratic task to be completed rather than as a tool to assist in the management of an offender.

5.3   HMI Probation has found evidence from this inspection and from ESIs that the continued over-reliance on the static (actuarial) OGRS2 as an indicator of risk of reconviction has meant that the dynamic nature of the OASys likelihood of reoffending assessment is underplayed in managing offenders. In order to redress this situation managers in Cheshire had reviewed the allocation of cases to tiers and found that (unsurprisingly) if OASys scores were used these gave a different distribution of the reconviction profile than if OGRS2 had been used.

5.4   A number of staff interviewed for this inspection commented on the repetitive nature of the OASys assessment (sections 1-13), particularly where the factors, e.g. accommodation need, were deemed not to be linked to the offending pattern. To some extent this was a justifiable criticism. However, we consider that factors not thought to be linked to offending should still be given due prominence in case managers' work. These can be seen as 'protective factors' in preventing reoffending and they should be given as great a prominence as criminogenic factors in the assessment and planning of interventions. A number of ESI reports have referred to the need for probation staff to improve the use of evidence in the supporting information used to justify the scores.

5.5   Updating information in OASys presented particular operational problems for the operational staff we met in the four areas. The imperative to complete and 'lock' assessments promptly meant that if information subsequently came to light staff would tend to wait until the next review time to enter it. The alternative was to commence a fresh assessment that was time consuming. Whilst professional judgement was needed there was the danger that important information was not recorded and accessible.

5.6   An integral part of OASys is the facility to score and monitor progress by calculating an OASys risk of reconviction score. The offender management model sets out four tiers of intervention based on risk of harm and likelihood of reoffending. The 2005 national standards require all Tier 2/3/4 cases to be re-scored at 16 weeks and then at the termination of each supervision requirement. Whilst there are clear benefits to such an

approach in that it is less arbitrary than the previous every 16 week review standard, there is a danger that cases will not be reviewed and re-scored as regularly as before. For example, the length of time to complete some supervision requirements can be extremely lengthy, sex offender treatment programmes being a case in point. Offenders may continually drop out of interventions and fail to complete a requirement and may rarely be reviewed. In addition, the management monitoring systems required to ensure that offenders are reviewed will require considerable adaptation.

5.7   The national standard does require a review to be completed more frequently if this is needed to monitor risk or record significant change, and it was pleasing to see policy, in some areas visited, requiring frequent reviews of high/very high risk of harm cases. Overall, however, the staff interviewed for this inspection felt that the national standard was a lessening of the requirement and that in many cases the default position would be the minimum set out in the national standard. This gave an ambiguous message to staff about the centrality of OASys to effective offender management.

5.8   For Tier 1 cases the national standard simply requires a review at 16 weeks and termination. For Tier 2 cases with a stand alone UPW requirement, the standard is the same. Whilst the intention of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 is to restrict probation involvement in Tier 1 cases to a minimum, it is a matter for concern that the benefits of OASys will not apply to these cases. Discussions with staff in the four areas visited suggested that the time taken to review and re-score is minimal and failure to do so also means that much information about the needs profile and impact of interventions on individual offenders will be lost.

> **Good practice example:**
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> In Teesside, a call centre had been set up to assist probation officers in targeting proposals to court and identifying relevant interventions such as accredited programmes. Call centre staff were able to access OASys electronically and advise the probation officer on an offender's suitability for an intervention based on their expert knowledge of the interventions and on the content of the OASys assessment.

6. SENTENCE PLANNING

6.1   ESI findings indicate that there is scope for improvement in the quality of supervision planning with only 51% of initial plans judged to be satisfactory. (N.B. from April 2005 sentence plans replaced supervision plans.) Whilst timeliness has been a particular problem the content of plans has also proved to be an issue. Staff in the areas visited as part of this inspection reported that they had little time to complete proper plans and that they struggled to write SMART objectives. The NPD and areas have paid attention to this issue. OASys now has a 'menu' of 'drop down' objectives and a number of area and regional training events have focused on this aspect of practice. HMI Probation has found some examples of good sentence planning practice but these are rare and in many cases plans were not well linked to the risk of harm assessment.

6.2   There was a strong view amongst practitioners interviewed for this inspection that the layout of the plan hindered meaningful offender involvement, and the use of codes, whilst important for capturing management information, made the document overly complex and not user friendly.

6.3   Staff in the four areas also felt that meaningful engagement with offenders was made worse by health and safety considerations that meant most offenders were interviewed in secure interview rooms without access to a computer and, therefore, rarely participated jointly in the production of the sentence plan. For many staff the sentence plan was thus seen as another bureaucratic chore. There was a strong feeling that some of the difficulties could be resolved by designing a simpler and clearer section of the sentence plan that succinctly and clearly sets out the commitments of supervision, was more accessible to an offender and could be easily printed. In relation to UPW cases where (in large number of cases) there was no OASys assessment, CP staff had been forced to design 'in house' sentence plans because the only way to start a sentence plan was to commence an OASys. This seemed to be an anomaly.

6.4   A number of staff interviewed remained unclear how the sentence plan linked to the risk of harm management plan where one existed. This was an example of the way in which public protection policy development in probation areas was sometimes disconnected from the mainstream assessment and sentence planning processes.

6.5   Overall, whilst the document was complex (reflecting the various purpose for which it was designed), the sentence plan was considered to be a useful part of OASys and that the focus needed to remain on lifting performance in the quality of plan objectives. Staff were very clear that time spent on good sentence planning meant that objectives were more likely to be operationalised and performance would be more easily measured.

> ***Good practice example:***
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> In Leicestershire & Rutland, probation staff based in courts routinely sent the OASys Self-Assessment Questionnaire to offenders who were due to have a PSR prepared on them. There was a high rate of completion of the questionnaire by offenders and the information supplied helped probation officers in compiling the OASys assessment.

7.   OUTCOMES

7.1   The large number of OASys assessments that have now been completed means that the NPS has access to an unparalleled database containing information on criminogenic factors, risk profiles and measures of individual and organisational performance. Probation areas have the ability to generate reports from their OASys data and O-DEAT staff have encouraged the use of these data to inform and improve practice. However, ESI reports indicate that to date there has only been limited use of this facility. Not surprisingly the priority for areas has been OASys implementation followed by ensuring data accuracy and quality assurance. From our visits to four areas there are now promising signs that these issues are being tackled and attention can now turn to using OASys data to inform planning, service provision and measure organisational performance. This makes even more important the need to ensure that all relevant cases have a full and comprehensive OASys assessment that is re-scored at regular intervals.

7.2   Individual case managers also have the ability to interrogate the OASys database, but there was very little evidence either from ESI or from the focus group interviews that this facility was used to inform their own practice with offenders.

> **Good practice example:**
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> Northumbria Probation Area had produced a risk and criminogenic needs profile of offenders based on OASys data collated from individual assessments. The information was used in a variety of ways, including assisting with the targeting and provision of interventions, the allocation of resources and to inform funding decisions in relation to partnerships, particularly those linked to the integration of offenders within the community.

8.   LINKS WITH PRISONS

8.1   OASys was also designed to be used as an assessment and planning tool in prisons. However, the roll out of OASys there took place some time after implementation in the NPS and differed in some important respects. The system replaced the sentence planning arrangements and therefore a smaller group of staff were trained to carry out assessments in each prison. This was in contrast to probation areas where all operational staff were trained as well as most managers. Prisons were trained to a timetable during 2004 and were required to be fully operating OASys within 12 months of their training (the last training was in December 2004). However, the delays in connecting prisons with probation areas to enable transfers of assessments meant that prisons did not receive large numbers of probation-prepared initial assessments and the workload was also far greater than anticipated. In practice, some prisons are doing better than others but until full connectivity is achieved the benefits of OASys in custodial settings will not be realised.

8.2   The experience to date of using OASys in prisons is very limited. Probation staff in the four areas visited spoke of receiving assessments of variable quality, but the main area for improvement was in making sure that OASys assessments sent into prisons from probation areas were used, updated and then sent back to the probation area on the release of the prisoner. Unfortunately transfers of prisoners between institutions meant that much needed continuity was lost and many OASys assessments seemed never to be used or were just returned to the home area. The imminent arrival of an electronic system of transfer of OASys between prisons and probation areas has the potential to improve this situation. Probation staff, however, remained concerned about access to OASys when an offender is serving a custodial sentence, as the 'ownership' of the OASys document passes to the prison until release meaning that potentially there may be difficulties in accessing and updating the document. This is an issue that will require careful management as NOMS and the arrangements for offender management are developed.

8.3   Specific enquiries of staff in the four areas we visited indicated that contracted out prisons were not always using OASys. It was unclear as to whether this was a contractual issue or an information technology problem. NOMS takes the view that it is the latter and whilst at the present time only two contracted out prisons are using OASys, it is confident that in the future OASys will be used in the same manner in all prisons once the technological problems have been resolved.

9.   CONCLUSIONS

9.1   A start has been made on implementing OASys across the NPS and, as a result, the NPS has the potential to become a world leader in the field of offender assessment. Managers and practitioners appreciate, for the most part, the system and the potential it offers, although significant concerns remain about its perceived time-consuming nature. In the face of a number of difficulties a critical point in the process has been reached as far as use is concerned.

9.2   When used properly OASys provides a shared and well understood way of assessing offenders, planning interventions, and measuring their effectiveness. A probation manager in one of the areas visited commented: *"I don't know how we ever managed without it"*. The quality of the guidance material is impressive and the support offered by the OASys Unit gives it added authority. Considerable attention still needs to be paid to ensuring that risk of harm issues are properly managed within the OASys framework, although there are clear signs that this is now being addressed by NPD/NOMS.

9.3   Effective offender assessment and review will be a crucial component of the future success of NOMS and, in this respect, we believe that the following findings of this inspection are particularly important:

- the revised national standards mean that the ability of the NPS to demonstrate comprehensive offender assessment is compromised and also that some offenders will not be the subject of regular reviews

- risk of harm is not currently the central component of OASys and any future development of the system needs to rectify this

- sentence plan formats are not relevant to the needs of offenders

- probation staff do not consistently make use of the OASys guidance

- a number of probation staff lack the knowledge, skills and understanding to assess and manage risk of harm

- the development of OASys policy and risk of harm policy and practice are not always effectively coordinated in probation areas

- the sharing of OASys assessments and reviews between prisons and probation areas remains underdeveloped, and is particularly so in the case of contracted out prisons.

REFERENCES

Home Office (2001) *Offender Assessment System: User Manual*, London, National Probation Service.