Some Contemporary Concerns

Much of this book has been taken up with considering the central principles of youth justice practice as laid down in the 1980s, and updating and adapting them to the contemporary context. Yet there are features of the current landscape which were simply missing when many of these basic principles were being developed. From the new phenomena, those have been selected which seem to be already having an impact upon the daily business of practice, and which seem likely to continue to do so in the future. These issues are: National Standards, risk assessment, restorative justice and young people and criminal responsibility.

National standards and management control

Ten years ago no-one thought that the government would issue documents which specified in some detail how social workers and probation officers should write court reports and supervise offenders, but National Standards (Home Office\(^1\) 1992, 1995) are here and they appear to be a fairly fixed feature of the modern criminal justice system. There are eight separate Standards covering different areas of practice: the preparation of PSRs, Probation Orders, Supervision Orders, Community Service Orders, Combination Orders, Bail Information schemes, Management of Hostels and the supervision of offenders before and after release from custody. In the government’s terms:

The aims of these National Standards are to strengthen the supervision of offenders in the community, providing punishment and a disciplined
programme for offenders, building on the skill and experience of practitioners and service managers:

by setting clear **requirements** for supervision, understood by all concerned

by enabling service practitioners’ **professional judgement** to be exercised within a framework of **accountability**

by encouraging the adoption of **good practice** including the development of local practice guidelines (which should be in line with the requirements set by the standards)

by ensuring that supervision is delivered fairly, **consistently and without improper discrimination**

by setting a priority on the **protection of the public** from re-offending (and from fear of crime)

by establishing the importance of considering the **effect of crime on victims**

by ensuring the public can have confidence that supervision in the community is an **effective punishment** and a means to help offenders become responsible members of the community. (original emphasis, Home Office 1995: 2)

Thus the Standards contain mainly procedural requirements in respect of such things as the speed and frequency with which certain tasks should be completed by the supervising officer (that is timescales for completing PSRs, contact between supervising officer and supervisee and so on), the manner in which social workers or probation officers should undertake certain tasks (such as the content of court reports, the challenging nature of supervision and so on), and how non-compliance by supervisees should be dealt with (for example breach proceedings and so forth).

The previous government clearly favoured National Standards and invested a great deal of significance in them. The present Home Office Ministers show no signs of departing from that enthusiasm. Those working within the government inspectorates also appear to highly value National Standards as, *inter alia*, they evidently preoccupy inspectors and the reports they compile (HMIP 1994; SSI 1994). In local agencies, too, both senior and middle managers appear to value the extent to which National Standards add a hitherto absent clarity to the function of a managers’ role (that function is now, in large part, to manage the Standards into practice). And at the level of youth justice practitioners, or front-line