

Civitas Online Report

Home Office Policy Targets: How Useful Are They?

Summary: The Government claims that Public Service Agreements have increased accountability and transparency to an 'unprecedented level'. However, some outcomes have been reported in misleading terms, reducing accountability; and some useful targets have been dropped, diminishing transparency. In one case, the Home Office concealed a *fall* of 58,000 offences brought to justice by describing it as 'slightly ahead of trajectory'.

Introduction

The declared aim of Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets is to increase public accountability. Targets, according to the Treasury, 'have become increasingly outcome-focused', and are now supported by 'rigorous performance information'.¹ Both accountability and transparency have 'increased to an unprecedented level'.²

It would be more true to say the complete opposite, that accountability and transparency have *decreased* to an unprecedented level. First, some results have not been presented with total accuracy. And second, when the number of targets was reduced in 2002 and 2004, some useful benchmarks were abandoned altogether and others made less demanding.

Narrowing the Justice Gap

The intention of the Home Office, according to its 2004 annual report, is to narrow the 'justice gap' by increasing the number of offenders brought to justice. The aim was expressed more exactly in the 2002 PSA target: 'Improve the delivery of justice by increasing the number of crimes for which an offender is brought to justice to 1.2 million by 2005-06; with an improvement in all criminal justice system (CJS) areas, a greater increase in the worst performing areas and a reduction in the proportion of ineffective trials'. The target was reduced in the 2004 spending review to 1.15 million by 2005/06. However, in July 2004 the target for 2007/08 was increased to 1.25 million offenders.

Initial reporting of progress towards the 2002 target began with the normal honesty expected of a public service. The Home Office *Targets Delivery Report*

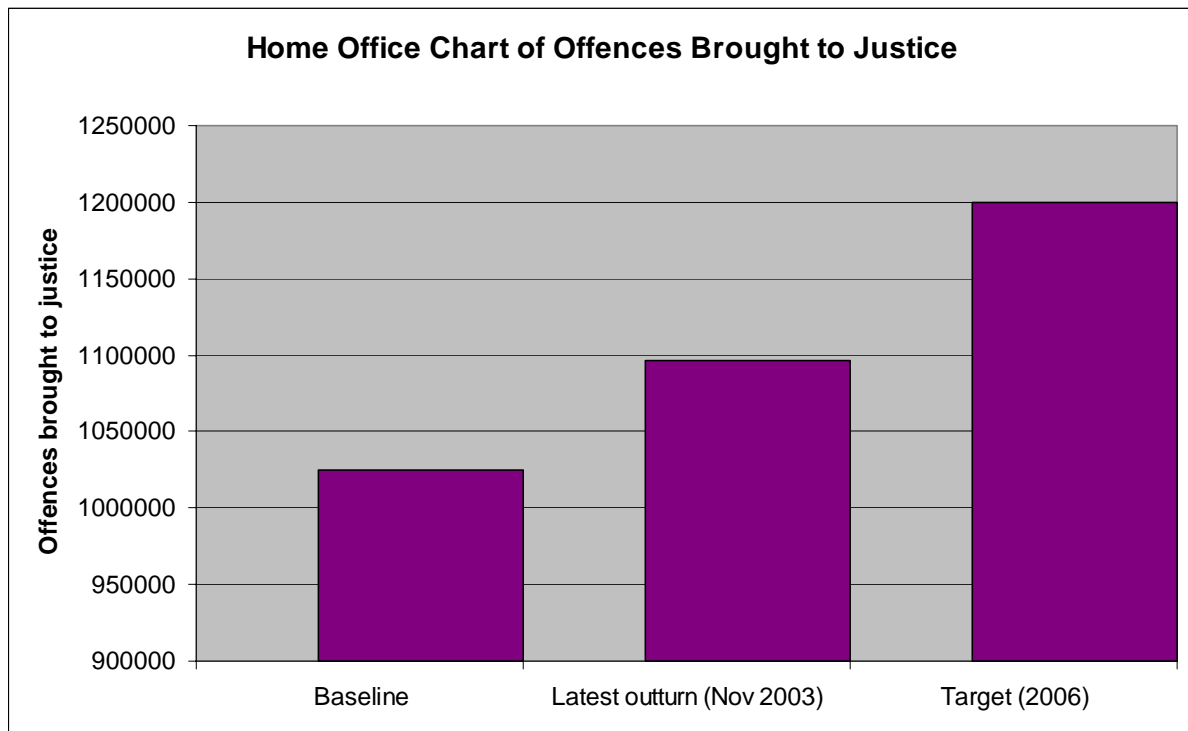
(February 2003) declared the baseline to be 1.104m in 1999-2000 and admitted that, at the end of March 2002, the figure was 1.025m, some 79,000 below the starting point. But later that year, in the 2003 annual report, the attitude of the Home Office had changed, and reports no longer mentioned that the results were worse.

Sir John Gieve, Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, in the *Departmental Report 2003* said: 'Our latest figures show that 1.046m offences were brought to justice in the year to September 2002, slightly ahead of the trajectory to the target of 1.200m by 2005-06'.³ It turns out that what he meant by 'slightly ahead of trajectory' was 58,000 below the starting point of 1.104m.⁴

The *Autumn Performance Report* of December 2003 continued to be upbeat by summarising progress as follows: 'Number of offences brought to justice is increasing'.⁵ But again, the reported achievement of 1.074m, in the year ending June 2003, continued to be 30,000 below the baseline figure of 1.104m in 1999-2000, a *fall* of 2.7%. Independent observers might feel that it is misleading to use phrases like 'ahead of trajectory' and 'increasing' instead of 'falling'!

The Home Office *Departmental Report 2004* continued the pattern of evasion.⁶ It reported that 1.096m offenders had been brought to justice in the year up to November 2003, and the findings were summarised in a diagram that gave an impression of steady progress. No exact figure was given for the 'baseline', but it was shown in the diagram to be midway between the 1.000m and 1.050m marks, and is presumably the March 2002 figure (1.025m). But it is not the baseline, as the February 2003 had made clear. The achieved figure was still below the baseline (1.104m) and far below the target of 1.200m. The Home Office departmental report for 2004/05 said that 1.131m offences were brought to justice for the year to December 2004. The report claimed that this was an increase of '128,000 (12.9 per cent) on the baseline year'. (p. 46). However, this is using the baseline of March 2002 (1.025m), which was not the original starting point (1.104m).⁷

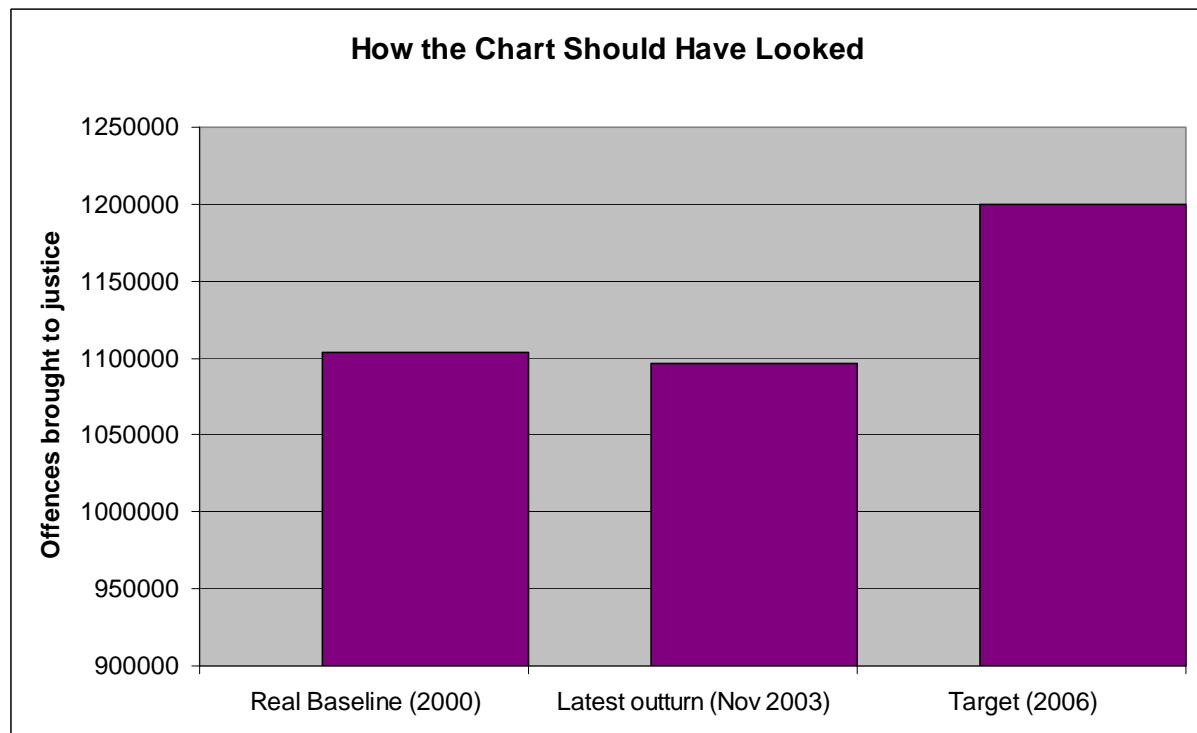
THE MISLEADING HOME OFFICE CHART



HOW THE CHART SHOULD HAVE LOOKED

Reducing Crime

The PSA target in 2002 was: 'Reduce crime and the fear of crime; improve performance



overall, including by reducing the gap between the highest crime Crime and Disorder

Reduction Partnership areas and the best comparable areas; and reduce: vehicle crime by 30% from 1998-99 to 2004; domestic burglary by 25% from 1998-99 to 2005; robbery in the ten Street Crime Initiative areas by 14% from 1999-2000 to 2005; and maintain that level'.

It was weakened in July 2004 to: 'Reduce crime by 15%, and further in high crime areas by 2007-08.' But, the most serious concern is not the watering down of the target but the accuracy of progress reports.

When the results give a good impression of the Home Office, they have usually been presented in a straightforward way. For example, the favoured measure of total crime is the British Crime Survey (BCS). The annual report for 2004 declares the baseline for overall crime to be the 2002 BCS, 12,563,000 crimes. It goes on to report that interviews for the year to December 2003 found 12,079,000 crimes, a fall of about 4%.⁸

The technical notes on the PSA targets published in March 2003 (updated in July 2003) say that vehicle crime and domestic burglary are measured by the BCS, whereas robbery is measured by police records. These were the sources used by the *Autumn Performance Report 2003* (published December 2003) and the Home Office *Departmental Report 2004* (April 2004).

The baseline for vehicle crime is the 2000 BCS (crime in 1999): 2,941,927 crimes. The target is a reduction of 30% to 2,059,349 crimes by 2004-05. BCS interviews in the year to June 2003 found 2,319,000 vehicle crimes (down 21%).⁹ By December 2003 there were 2,263,000, down 23%.¹⁰ By 2004/05, the figure was down to 1,886,000 (Crime in England and Wales 2004/05, Table 2.01).

The baseline for domestic burglary is also the 2000 BCS: 1,261,364 crimes. The target is a 25% reduction to 946,023 by 2005-06. BCS interviews to December 2003 found 949,000 domestic burglaries, down 25%. In 2004/05 the number was down again to 756,000.

So far so good, but when the robbery figures are presented, the attitude changes. The baseline for robbery is police-recorded offences in 1999-2000: 68,782 crimes in the ten street crime initiative areas. The target is a reduction in those areas of 14% to 59,153 crimes. The *Autumn Performance Report* for 2003 honestly reports that, in 2002-03 the police recorded 83,661 robberies in the ten areas, an increase of 22%.¹¹ After that date, presentation of the findings seems to have fallen into different hands.

The latest figures are not given as a separate total and have to be calculated from *Crime in England and Wales 2003-04*. There were 76,777 robberies in the ten areas (a fall

of 7% compared with the previous year) but 11% *above* the baseline and 30% above the target. An honest observer would have reported that robberies were 11% up, in the manner of the *Autumn Performance Report, 2003*. Instead, the Home Office *Departmental Report 2004* does not give the total number of robberies, merely saying there was a 17% reduction from 2001-02 to 2002-03 and that further 'substantial reductions' had been made in 2003-04.¹²

Abandoned PSA Targets

Two particularly useful PSA targets have been abandoned altogether.

The economic cost of crime

PSA target 4, aimed to reduce the economic cost of crime, an important consideration for householders facing higher insurance bills and bearing the cost of installing security devices in cars and homes. A reduction of 20% by 2000-01 was reported, followed by an increase in 2001-02, which still left a 5% reduction, compared with the 1999-2000 baseline. The closing date for the target was 2004, but no further outcomes have been reported after the annual report in 2003 and the target has now been dropped altogether.

Reducing reoffending

The aim of reducing the reconviction rate has also been dropped. Moreover, the results achieved under the 2000 and 2002 targets have never been fully reported. The aim was to achieve a 5% reduction in the actual reconviction rate compared with the predicted rate by 2005-06. According to the *Autumn Performance Report* in December 2003 the baseline was reconviction rates for the last quarter of 1999-2000 - information which was not available at the time.

However the report claims that reconviction rates based on an earlier baseline were lower. The one-year rate for juveniles who ended their sentences in 2001 was said to have been 22% (in Online Report 18/03, published in February 2003). There has been no further report. The result for adults in 1998/99 (based on 1997 baseline data) found that 3.2% fewer offenders were reconvicted. The *Departmental Report 2004* declared the baseline for young offenders and adults to be the first quarter of 2000. However, in April 2004, the results were still not out and were not expected until September 2004.¹³ In July 2004 the target was dropped and it seems unlikely that the results of the 2002 target will ever be reported.

The routine reconviction data, published by the Home Office in *Prison Statistics*, show a high rate of reoffending. Fifty-nine per cent of all prisoners discharged in 1999 were reconvicted for a standard list offence within two years of discharge. For young males (under 21 at the time of sentence) the proportion was 74%.¹⁴ The trend over the last few years does not tell us very much. In 1987, 57% of all prisoners were reconvicted within two years. The proportion fell to 51% in 1992, only to increase again to the current 59%.

The overall figure for those commencing community sentences in 1999 was 56%. For males aged 10-17, 76% were reconvicted within two years. For some groups, the rate was extremely high. Ninety-five per cent of all offenders aged under 21 with eleven or more previous convictions who commenced a community sentence in 1999 were reconvicted within two years. For all aged under 21, it was 69%.¹⁵

Privately, Home Office officials acknowledge that attempts to reduce reconvictions have failed. High hopes were placed on offending behaviour programmes, but they are now considered unsuccessful and nothing has been found to replace them. Rather than admit failure, which might have stimulated public debate and led to a re-doubling of efforts and a reappraisal of current methods, the Home Office has tried to cover up its bad performance.

Conclusion

The lesson is that political parties cannot be trusted to control public access to the information citizens need to evaluate government performance. Politicians view information as ammunition that could be used against them by opponents. The remedy is a truly independent information service, accountable to Parliament, not to the government of the day.

David G. Green

Notes

¹ *Public Service Agreements 2005 - 2008*, Spending Review 2004, July 2004, p. 1.

² *Public Service Agreements 2005 - 2008*, Spending Review 2004, July 2004, p. 2.

³ Home Office *Departmental Report 2003*, Cm 5908.

⁴ Home Office *Targets Delivery Report*, February 2003, Cm 5754.

⁵ Home Office *Autumn Performance Report 2003*, p. ii.

⁶ *Departmental Report 2004*, p. 12.

⁷ Home Office *Departmental Report 2004/05*, p. 10.

⁸ Home Office *Departmental Report 2004*, Cm 6208, April 2004, p. 11.

⁹ Home Office *Autumn Performance Report 2003*, Cm 6057.

¹⁰ Home Office *Departmental Report 2004*, p. 11.

11Home Office *Autumn Performance Report 2003*

12*Departmental Report 2004*, pp. 11 and 39.

13*Departmental Report 2004*, p. 13.

14*Prison Statistics 2002*.

15*Probation Statistics 2002*, Table 9.10.