

Findings from the evaluation of the Specialist Māori Cultural Assessment

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Overview

- 1 This paper presents the findings and conclusions of an evaluation of the Specialist Māori Cultural Assessment (SMCA). The paper discusses the implications of the findings and suggests a pathway forward to determine the merits of delivery of this intervention at a broader level.

Specialist Māori Cultural Assessment

- 2 The SMCA is essentially an exploration of the cultural needs and strengths of Māori offenders. It is undertaken by independent contracted Māori assessors who have received Departmentally-facilitated training. The SMCA is available to Māori offenders serving sentences of 26 weeks or more (either prison or community-based). The assessment format is a series of open ended questions, taking two to four hours to administer, and occurs during the sentence planning phase of sentence management.
- 3 Assessors produce a detailed report based on assessment findings, for use by both the offender and the Department. The report contains recommendations for both self-directed and Departmentally-directed activities or programmes. Typically, Departmentally-directed activities include referral to cultural services such as Māori Focus Units (MFU) or Tikanga programmes, and to self-directed activities such as undertaking whakapapa research, or registering with a tribal entity. The assessment and resulting report are intended to motivate offenders to address their offending, inform decisions on rehabilitative activities, and ultimately contribute to a reduction in re-offending by Māori.
- 4 A key feature of the assessment process involves assessors inviting offenders to recall memories of their upbringing which revolved around cultural practices and traditions (e.g., speaking Te Reo at home, visiting marae with a nanny, being part of a school kapa haka group). By focusing on their (latent) cultural knowledge and experiences, participants are encouraged to see a culturally-enriched lifestyle as an accessible pathway out of offending.
- 5 Since first being piloted in 2002, the assessment to date has been delivered in the Auckland and Waikato regions only. On average a total of around 30 assessments are completed each month across both regions.

Background of the evaluation

- 6 Policy, Strategy and Research (PSR) is currently managing a series of evaluations of the Department's culturally targeted programmes and services. The evaluations are being undertaken in response to the 2005 Ministerial Review Unit (MRU) review of culturally targeted services. The MRU report resulting from that work noted that the Department's services targeted at Māori and Pacific peoples were based on a clear need to reduce re-offending by Māori and Pacific peoples.

However, the report concluded that the Department lacked sufficient evidence supporting the value and effectiveness of these services.

- 7 The evaluation of SMCA is the second in this series of evaluations to be completed (the MaCRN evaluation was the first). The current project was undertaken by external contractors, Kahui Tautoko Consulting Limited, over the September 2006 - July 2007 period. A comprehensive report on the findings of the evaluation, titled: 'Specialist Māori Cultural Assessment (SMCA) Evaluation Report: Process-outcome evaluation of SMCA for Māori offenders' was received in August 2007 (a copy of this 126-page report is available on request).
- 8 The objective of the evaluation was to ascertain the immediate and intermediate impacts of SMCA assessments on outcomes for Māori offenders, in terms of the extent to which the process facilitated referrals of offenders to appropriate services and agencies, increased individual motivation to change and participate in activities, and led to strengthened links with whānau and community.
- 9 A series of key questions were posed in the evaluation. The questions focused on identifying:
 - the extent to which offenders engaged in, and were motivated by, the assessment
 - the extent to which recommendations from the assessments resulted in relevant sentence plan objectives and subsequent referral to appropriate services
 - evidence of increased pro-social behaviour and improved links to whānau, hapū and iwi as a result of assessment
 - barriers and enablers to successful implementation of SMCA, with particular reference to level of staff engagement.
- 10 The methodology used to carry out the evaluation comprised five elements:
 - (a) motivational assessments with 25 offenders (the "current cohort"), who were evaluated prior to and immediately after¹ their SMCA, to measure immediate motivational impacts of the SMCA
 - (b) interviews with 43 offenders (the "retrospective cohort") who took part in an SMCA within the preceding two years, to identify outcomes resulting from the SMCA and related sentence planning
 - (c) review of case files of retrospective cohort offenders, to further clarify outcomes from the assessment experience
 - (d) interviews with seven offenders who recently declined to undergo an SMCA, to understand reasons for non-consent

¹ Re-assessment was usually completed c. five days after the SMCA experience; for a small number, re-assessment occurred up to 14 days later.

- (e) interviews with the SMCA assessors and Departmental staff, to validate findings from offender interviews, and to determine staff/assessor views on the SMCA and its processes.
- 11 All interviews used a structured interview guide and were conducted face to face. A motivational assessment tool was specifically developed for the evaluation and used with the current cohort. This instrument measured changes in motivation to address needs across nine cultural and offending-related domains as a result of participation in an SMCA.

Findings

- 12 Findings from the evaluation are presented below in relation to each of the key evaluative questions outlined above.

(i) *Engagement with the SMCA*

- 13 The overall extent to which eligible offenders are given the opportunity to participate in the SMCA process was difficult to determine, as participation by offenders is voluntary, and refusal to participate is not always recorded. However, interviews with staff made it clear that a great many instances occurred where the option of undergoing the assessment was not raised with offenders. Lack of awareness or understanding of the assessment, and “insufficient time” were identified as staff members’ reasons for not offering the assessment.
- 14 On the other hand, uptake of the opportunity, when offenders were presented with the option, was relatively high. Two factors emerged as influencing whether offenders agreed to take part in an assessment: a current desire to learn more about one’s Māori identity, heritage or whakapapa, and the degree to which the sentence planner actively encouraged participation in an SMCA.
- 15 Of those offenders who completed the assessment, the great majority reported that they found the experience very positive, rewarding and worthwhile. Most reported that they felt able to talk openly and honestly with the assessors. A commonly expressed idea from offenders was valuing the unique focus of the assessment on the individual and their life, rather than solely on their offending. That it was undertaken by a Māori assessor was also mentioned as a reason for it being a positive experience.

(ii) *Motivation following the SMCA*

- 16 For the majority of participants, evidence was found for immediate motivational effects. Scores on the motivational assessment tool revealed an overall increase in average motivation levels. Many offenders reported “thinking about” or having “made a decision” to change, prior to the assessment but, following the assessment, reported having begun either to seek help to change, or take some specific actions in order to make changes. Average motivational ratings across nine domains are summarised in the following table.
- 17 The results in Table 1 below reveal that the largest motivational effect occurred in relation to attending rehabilitation programmes. Prior to the SMCA, the majority of the 25 offenders described themselves as considering, or seeking information

about, attendance at a programme. However, following the SMCA, the number at the decision-making stage reduced, and the number who had taken a specific action to ensure participation increased.

Table 1: Average motivational rating for each domain, before and after SMCA assessment (n=25)

Motivation to:	Average rating before SMCA	Average rating after SMCA	% increase in motivation
Participate in cultural programmes	2.80	3.16	11.4%
Learn whakapapa	3.76	4.12	8.7%
Develop Māori identity	4.72	4.76	0.8%
Learn Tikanga Māori	3.52	3.52	0.0%
Develop whānau relationships	4.16	4.40	5.5%
Learn Te Reo	3.72	3.80	2.1%
Improve health	4.16	4.13	-0.7%
Complete rehabilitation programmes	3.25	3.92	17.0%
“Address offending”	3.20	3.48	8.0%

Motivation was rated from 1-5 as follows: 1= no motivation, 2= thinking of change, 3= made a decision to change, 4= seeking help /guidance, 5= taking specific action(s) to change.

- 18 Desire to develop one’s identity as Māori was high at the pre-assessment stage, with many offenders already reporting having taken action in this area. This motivation was largely sustained after the SMCA. The relatively small increase in motivation levels signifies that those who consented to the SMCA were generally already motivated towards that end.
 - 19 Evidence from post-assessment qualitative interviews further supported findings that, within days of being assessed, most offenders were sufficiently motivated to take concrete actions relating to the recommendations made in the SMCA report. Examples of actions taken included writing to register with their iwi, or asking Sentence Planners or Probation Officers to enrol them on a tikanga programme, or arrange for their transfer to an MFU.
 - 20 The evidence suggested however that initially high levels of motivation (after the SMCA) declined over time. Sustained positive motivation was observed mainly in those offenders who had been placed in relevant services (MFUs or tikanga programmes). However, as is discussed immediately below, placements of this nature were identified as having arisen as a result of standard sentence planning processes, rather than as a result of the SMCA.
- (iii) *Referral to interventions and activities after the SMCA*
- 21 The evaluation revealed little evidence of sentence management activity ensuing as an outcome of an SMCA. Most of the offenders interviewed, and those whose files were examined, were found not to have been referred to cultural interventions as recommended in their SMCA report. If support was given to undertake self-directed activities, there was no record of this in files, nor could offenders recall any such instances.
 - 22 Further, when SMCA reports were observed to contain recommendations for self-directed activity, no instances were observed of these being recorded in the offenders’ sentence plans. Many reports (87%) included recommendations for

Departmental-directed activities, but in just one instance was a sentence plan objective found that related directly to an SMCA recommendation.

- 23 A problem with the timing of assessments emerged as a significant issue. Almost two-thirds of the completed SMCAs examined by evaluators were completed after sentence planning had concluded. As a result the likelihood that recommendations were incorporated into sentence plans was markedly reduced (e.g., in the prison context, assessment reports unavailable to the sentence planner are sent directly to the case officer).
- 24 A majority of staff members (78%) who had dealt with completed SMCA reports acknowledged difficulty in understanding their content, or how to deal with the recommendations. This lack of understanding inevitably functions as a further barrier to linking offenders to appropriate interventions. Reasons for not understanding the reports included non-familiarity with SMCA concepts and terminology, and staff members' fears that they might misinterpret or mishandle cultural concepts.
- 25 SMCA assessors themselves are not expected, or indeed able to make referrals to mainstream rehabilitation interventions (such as alcohol and drug programmes). Thus, even were SMCA processes improved to ensure all recommendations were included in sentence plans, there is no provision for SMCA participants to be referred to some mainstream programmes if the assessor and the offender had agreed that this was desirable.
- 26 Finally, ensuring that participants are provided with a copy of their SMCA report is an important part of the assessment experience, particularly in terms of building and maintaining motivation. Only a third of the offenders in the retrospective cohort recalled having received it.

(iv) Evidence of improved whānau, hapū, and iwi links among offenders

- 27 Interviews with participants revealed that approximately one third reported the desire and intention to strengthen whānau, hapū and iwi linkages following the assessment. Prior to the SMCA, 20% of the sample were motivated to take action to strengthen whānau links, and 56% were already highly motivated to strengthen whānau relationships. After the SMCA these figures increased to 32% and 60% respectively.
- 28 File review did not uncover clear examples of whānau links being enhanced following offenders' assessments. However, offenders themselves reported taking steps to strengthen such links; examples included registering with their tribal entity, and writing to key whānau members to ask for information on whakapapa. Many offender respondents reflected that the assessment had changed their attitudes to their immediate whānau including partners, children and grandchildren. For example, a male prisoner is recorded as saying:

I was already strong with my Māori side but it's made me determined to get to my son and teach him. I need to get my act together so he is strong with his family and doesn't take my path. It [the SMCA] just pushed me to work harder to get out.

(v) *Evidence of maintained pro-social attitudes and behaviours*

29 While there was also limited documented evidence of changes to behaviour and attitudes being maintained following SMCA, a significant number of both offenders and staff reported such changes, which were attributed by them to the SMCA experience. Pro-social cultural attitudes also developed among some offenders. Many offenders reported having re-oriented their perception of what it is to be Māori, and to look more favourably on their Māori identity. Evidence was gathered to suggest that these changes were manifested in decreased inclination to behave aggressively, and a greater willingness to respect others' opinions and differences. Again, such attitudinal and behavioural changes were maintained over time mainly in offenders who had subsequently become engaged in interventions such as the MFU.

(vi) *Staff confidence in the value and utility of the SMCA*

30 The evaluation revealed that the majority of interviewed staff did not express confidence in the value and utility of the assessment. As suggested by material above, many staff had made, or dealt with, very low numbers of referrals, and the lack of follow-up in relation to SMCA recommendations also had an impact.

31 Negative staff views about the assessment appeared related to poor understanding of the purpose and intended outcomes of the assessment. Sentence Planners - particularly at Waikeria Prison - mostly demonstrated confidence in the SMCA, and routinely offered it to offenders, but the majority (80%) of Case Officers interviewed were actually unaware of the existence of the SMCA, let alone its intended purpose, the associated processes, and related expectations of them as Case Officers.

32 Probation Officers displayed a higher level of awareness of the availability of the SMCA process. However, significant numbers acknowledged that they made very few referrals, typically citing "time pressure" and high workloads. The fact that participating in an SMCA is optional appeared to be interpreted by staff as signifying that discussing it with offenders was similarly optional. In many cases staff members appeared to view the process as "outside of standard business", and thus of little importance.

33 Low levels of "buy-in" in Community Probation and Psychological Services (CPPS) were also evidenced by the finding that just two SMCA referrals were generated from CPPS during the entire evaluation period. Evaluators also observed instances of particularly strong resistance to SMCA use. In certain offices, hostile views held by a small number of (Māori) staff had influenced other staff towards the same view. The negativity seemed to revolve around the idea that sacred cultural values and traditions should not be allowed to become enmeshed with offender management processes.

(vii) *Success factors of the SMCA*

34 The evaluators were asked to report on factors which were contributing to the successful support and maintenance of the SMCA process. The existence of an SMCA Coordinator, who trains assessors, promotes the assessment, and quality-checks each report, was seen as crucial. Also noted was the skill and

experience of the current group of assessors. The quality of the assessment tool, particularly its broad and encompassing nature, was also identified as a key success factor.

- 35 Most staff appeared supportive of the national roll-out of the SMCA. However, the view was commonly expressed that this ought not to occur unless issues associated with the sentence management process were first resolved.

Summary of findings

- 36 This evaluation has indicated the SMCA as effective in generating valued insights for offenders to their Māori heritage, sometimes provoking awareness of offenders' own cultural knowledge and strengths that had been forgotten. This effect was seen as a very positive feature of the process. Offenders also reported the SMCA experience to be somewhat unique in the way that it attended to offenders' positive characteristics and strengths, rather than focussing solely on offending-related needs and deficits. This appeared to engender hopeful feelings about themselves and their future prospects.
- 37 The SMCA is in most instances a positive experience for offenders, and that an intended outcome, of generating motivation towards change, was frequently achieved. Interestingly, the strongest impact appears to be on desire to complete rehabilitative programmes. However, a key finding in this area was that this elevated motivation tended to diminish rapidly over time. A lack of relevant follow-up activities, such as referrals to or placement in recommended cultural interventions, or support to undertake self-directed activities, seemed largely responsible for this effect.
- 38 Finally, the SMCA appears not to be fully supported or well understood by all staff. There are also significant problems in terms of alignment with sentence planning and subsequent referral and uptake of services.

Limitations of the evaluation

- 39 The evaluation is subject to a number of limitations. Firstly, the procedurally-related issues identified above impacted on the evaluators' ability to collect relevant outcome-related information from file reviews. Consequently, little documented evidence on medium-term outcomes was available, and most outcome findings rely on self-reported information collected during interviews. Further, offenders in the retrospective cohort were asked to recall events which had happened up to two years previously, and data from their interviews is therefore likely to be subject to recall bias.
- 40 It is also acknowledged that, although based on existing motivational rating instruments, the motivational assessment tool was developed specifically for this evaluation, was used on just a small sample of offenders, and has not been thoroughly tested for its validity or reliability. It is also somewhat "transparent", which means that offenders can readily identify the more socially desirable response options.
- 41 Further, qualitative information on change in prosocial attitudes and behaviours (e.g., self-reported reductions in fighting) must be interpreted in light of the fact

that more objective data sources such as incident reports were not accessed to corroborate reported changes.

Conclusions

- 42 The key questions which the Department needs to resolve with the SMCA at this time appear to be twofold. The first is whether the SMCA is effective in achieving the outcomes expected from it and, therefore, whether its retention is justified. Assuming that answers to the first are affirmative, the second question is whether the service should then be made available to eligible offenders throughout the country.
- 43 The evaluation findings point to a number of important conclusions which should assist in answering these questions. With respect to the first question, insofar as assessment is deployed a means of identifying relevant needs in order to link assessed individuals with services to address identified issues, then it must be acknowledged that currently the SMCA is not functioning at all well. The evaluation found very little evidence of assessment processes being meaningfully integrated with sentence management. However, the problem appears to lie not with the assessment *per se*, but rather with elements of the framework within which it sits, which are not geared to make optimal use of assessment findings.
- 44 This points therefore to a need to review the alignment of the SMCA with the sentence planning/management process, to identify and develop the means to rectify the problems. However, although developed as an assessment procedure, evaluation findings seem to point to a different role for the SMCA. The experience appears in fact to be functioning quite effectively as a standalone motivational intervention. The appropriate pathway forward may therefore not so much be in improving the linkages between sentence planning and sentence management, but rather in reconsidering when, with whom, and for what purpose, the service should be offered.
- 45 The costs of an SMCA assessment is roughly similar to the per-offender cost of placement on other motivational interventions, such as the Short Motivational Programme, various Tikanga-based courses, and placement in a Māori Focus Unit. It may well be an appropriate decision then to redesignate this assessment accordingly, and develop new business rules for eligibility and timing. It is noted however again that the positive motivational benefits of the SMCA experience would still need to be maintained through adequately integrated offender management.
- 46 The finding that offenders displayed initially high level of motivation as a result of participation in interventions that target this state, but which then decline when follow-up services are not forthcoming, is unlikely to apply only to the SMCA, but to all of the Department's motivational interventions. Therefore the findings here are likely to have important implications generally for sentence management.
- 47 While this problem can perhaps be readily addressed with community offenders, the situation for many prisoners is that length of sentence and/or security classification issues may mean that they cannot participate in relevant activities

until later in their sentence. The findings therefore may have important implications for the wider framework of interventions and their timing or phasing.

- 48 The SMCA was launched five years ago, and although now “business as usual” in two regions, it has essentially retained the reputation and appearance of a pilot. With regard therefore to the ultimate question of whether the service should not simply be maintained but rolled out nationally, relevant considerations include the fact that the Department appears to have been successful in contracting a number of capable assessors in the Auckland and Waikato regions who have been able to provide a good standard of service over the past few years. It is not known whether this can easily be replicated in all other regions.
- 49 While there are good reasons for the Department to consider rolling out the SMCA nationally, the evaluation makes clear that a number of issues must first be resolved. It appears that further investigation, analysis and consultation is required before the questions posed at the start of this section can be answered. The Māori and Pacific Policy team within Policy, Strategy and Research have the capacity to undertake this work, and it is therefore recommended below that two distinct pieces of policy work are undertaken, informed by the findings of this evaluation, to determine the future deployment approach for the SMCA:
- Optimal placement of the SMCA within the sentence management framework: ought the service to remain primarily as an assessment? If so, how can the process issues identified in the evaluation be resolved or should it be delivered as a motivational intervention? If so, what business rules should apply?
 - National implementation: how could the services delivered in the Auckland and Waikato regions be replicated in all regions? What are the financial and logistical implications of doing so? How can the staff-related issues identified in the two pilot regions be adequately resolved?
- 50 This policy work is expected to take six - eight months to complete. In the meantime it is proposed that SMCA is retained in the pilot regions, with the current applicable business rules retained in effect, with one change for PS. This is that, when reports are forwarded to the prison in cases where a prisoner has completed sentence planning, the SMCA coordinator is instructed to send reports to both the current Case Officer and the sentence planner, with the latter required to review and update the plan with any new recommended activities.
- 51 Once its place within sentence management has been determined, and the necessary support processes have been put in place, it is concluded that the SMCA has considerable potential to challenge and motivate Māori offenders to address their offending behaviour, thereby contributing to the Department’s goal of reducing re-offending among Māori.