

**An exploration of offenders experiences of being on a  
Probation Supervision Order.**

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**Declaration:**

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Masters in Social Work of the University of Dublin and has not been submitted to any other University. I confirm that this thesis is my own work. Assistance received has been acknowledged. Permission is given to the University of Dublin to lend or copy this thesis.

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## **Abstract:**

This study set out to explore the experiences of offenders on probation supervision orders. The Probation Service in the Republic of Ireland has developed and restructured over the past century. During this time, research evidence about the most effective ways of working with offenders in order to reduce offending behaviour has also developed, and the Probation Service has incorporated many of the changing trends in order to deliver a quality service. However, the impact of these developments on offenders had not been previously explored by the Probation Service in this State. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the main principles of effective practice in probation as described by the research and examine the ways in which probation supervision has helped offenders. It also aimed to assess the extent to which probation supervision has influenced offenders motivation to change and attitudes to crime.

This study used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. It involved interviewing six offenders in total, three offenders individually and another three together in a focus group. From the data it emerged that probation supervision is generally perceived as a positive experience by offenders. It also found that when probation officers adhered to the principles of effective practice, offenders found that they had the focus and support necessary to desist from crime. However, for those who are not motivated to desist from crime, probation supervision also offers a routine and a structure which may reduce their risk of re-offending.

While this study is a small exploratory study and therefore the findings cannot be generalised across the wider offender population, it does demonstrate the value of researching client feedback in order to further develop the effectiveness of probation practice.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Declaration</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iii</i>

### Chapter One

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background to study	1
1.2 Service policy on client feedback	2
1.3 Rationale for study	4
1.4 Aims of study & research questions	5
1.5 Structure of study	6

### Chapter Two

<b>2. Literature Review</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 Overview of the development of the Probation Service in Ireland	9
2.3 Principles of effective practice	11
2.4 Effective relationship based practice	14
2.5 Core social work skills in the Probation Service	17
2.6 From ‘nothing works’ to desistance	19

## **Chapter Three**

<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1 Rationale for the use of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.	25
3.2 Sampling	25
3.3 Limitations	26
3.4 Sources of data	27
Literature review	27
Qualitative research	27
3.5 Individual interviews	28
3.6 Focus groups	30
3.7 Ethical issues	31
3.8 Data analysis	32

## **Chapter Four**

<b>4. Findings and Discussion.</b>	<b>33</b>
4.1 Introduction	33
4.2 General view of probation supervision	34
4.3 Areas probation supervision helped the most	36
4.4 Areas probation supervision helped the least	39
4.5 The influence of probation on motivation to change and attitudes to crime	41
4.6 Importance of the client worker relationship	44
4.7 Individual work versus group work	46

## **Chapter Five**

<b>5. Conclusion</b>	<b>49</b>
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5.1 Introduction	49
5.2 Summary of main conclusions	50
5.3 Reflection on learning	54
5.4 Conclusion	55
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>61</b>
Appendix A	61
Appendix B	62

## **Chapter One**

### **1. INTRODUCTION.**

#### **1.1 Background to the Study**

The Probation of Offenders Act 1907 officially established the Probation Service. For the past one hundred years there have been changes and developments both in the types and levels of offending and also skills and knowledge of probation officers. The Probation Service offers a range of community sanctions to aid the court in disposing of criminal matters at District, Circuit Court and Central Criminal Court level. One of the main options that is provided by the Probation Service to the Court as a means of sanctioning an offender is the probation supervision order, or often referred to in the District Court as a probation bond. This consists of an initial assessment and then an average of a twelve month supervision period designed to assist in the reduction of further offending behaviour. During the probation supervision period, probation officers employ a variety of social work skills, in addition to specific skills that target offending behaviour that have come to be known as the ‘principles of effective practice or ‘What Works’. However, there is a distinct lack of research in relation to how that is experienced by offender’s on probation supervision in Ireland. Therefore this research intends to provide an outline of the social work skills and principles of effective practice which probation officers use and then examine offenders experiences of probation and their perceptions of it’s effectiveness as a means of addressing their problems and reducing the risks associated with their offending. It is hoped that this will further inform the practice of the Probation Service in this state.

The core function of the Probation Service is the effective implementation of the sanctions and sentences of the courts so as to reduce re-offending and protect the public (Dept of Justice, Equality & Law reform, Strategy Statement 2001-2004:27).

It does this by proving a range of community sanctions and programmes for those who are at risk of re-offending. In the current political climate, there has been increasing pressure on all public sector services including the Probation Service to provide value for money. This demands that the Probation Service is accountable for its actions and is able to demonstrate its effectiveness in terms of reducing offending behaviour.

Research on what approaches have been found to work with offenders have been largely adopted by the Probation Service in Ireland, such as Andrews & Bonta's 'What Works Principles' (1990) and Trotter's 'Working with Involuntary Clients' (1999). However, being able to quantify how much an offender's criminal behaviour has been reduced is not a straightforward task. In 2005, the Probation Service has been using two risk assessment instruments tools, the Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R) for adults and the Youth Level of Service - Case Management Inventory (YLS-CMI) for offenders under the age of 18 years old. This risk assessment instrument has twenty years of research and evaluations to support its validity. However, it is still at an early stage in Ireland, and the preliminary evaluation results are due for completion.

A further method for examining the impact of probation intervention is to invite feedback from service users. To date, there has been limited use of this method in the Republic of Ireland. When researching on listening to the feedback of services users in child protection services, Fine, Palmer & Coady (in Shera 2003:279) commented that the 'active pursuit of service participant's voice is a relatively new phenomenon'. Moreover, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in this state have embraced this idea in their policy on customer care in the Strategy Statement 2001-2004.

## **1.2 Service Policy on Client Feedback**

The Mission Statement of the Probation Service clearly indicates that it is service policy to provide a high quality and professional service. It states that

*On behalf of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and in Conjunction with the Courts Service, the Irish Prison Service, An Garda Siochana and the wider community, we provide high quality assessment of offenders and a professional and effective management of services and supports to bring about positive change in the behaviour of offenders (www.probation.ie)*

The Probation Service's customer charter states that it is committed to delivering a quality of service, to all customers and services users, and as part of this commitment, it 'welcomes any comments, suggestions and views on any aspect of the service to help improve the quality and efficiency of the Probation Service'.

However, there has been limited research carried out in the Republic of Ireland in relation to the offender's experience or understanding of the probation supervision Order that they are placed on by Court. The Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform's 'Strategy Statement' for 2001-2004 placed an emphasis on customer care policy and stated that it would

*Provide to the best of our ability a professional and efficient service to our client groups and individual customers in consultation with them and through a process of continuous service improvement (Dept of Justice, Equality & Law Reform, Strategy Statement 2001-04:63).*

This research accepts that offenders are not the only client group of the Probation Service, as their client group also includes the courts and the community as a whole. However, client feedback is a valuable source of information in assessing the effectiveness of a Service overall. It must be noted at this stage that it is not the purpose of this study to critique the work of the probation officers. The main purpose of this study is to add the offender's views to our existing knowledge on effective practice when working with involuntary clients.

### **1.3 Rationale for study**

McIvor (2004) argues that the Probation Services in Scotland and particularly England & Wales has placed too much focus on accredited programmes and this has resulted in there being insufficient acknowledgement of the importance of personal effectiveness and social work skills. He terms this as the ‘personal touch’ – the concern with social work skills and values. He comments that Trotter (1999) found that trained social workers who were supervising offenders in the community actually had much better outcomes than other supervisors who were trained in other areas. McIvor also refers to a number of probation and social work researchers in the late 1990’s who began making attempts to explore with offenders what it was that they valued about the supervision that they received (Mair & May, 1997, Beaumont & Mistry, 1996, McIvor & Barry, 1998, Rex, 1999)

McIvor (2004) pointed out that researchers in various studies found that offenders valued being assisted to avoid future offending and they did clearly appreciate the role of the probation officer and social worker in explicitly trying to enable them to avoid further offending through offence focused work. They also valued help with various practical problems and having the practical problems solved for them’. In McIvor’s own research with young offenders (1998), he demonstrated that they liked a proactive approach or interventions that improved their self efficacy and enabled them to address their own problems and helped to develop skills to deal with the future. His research also showed that offenders valued the personal qualities of their supervising social workers or probation officers and also placed value on the relationships that they developed with them.

In 2005, the Probation Board in Northern Ireland (PBNI) conducted a service user’s evaluation which examined the following areas: the profile of respondents, contact with their probation officer, enforcement of the probation order, and their relationship with their probation officer, factors influencing the propensity to re-offend, their expectations of being on probation and satisfaction with the probation service offered.

In terms of the relationship with the probation officer, the majority of respondents perceived their probation officer 'as a friend' and 'someone who was there to listen and provide help where necessary', rather than an individual who was there to ensure that the probation order passed by the court was enforced. The top three attribute assigned to their probation officers were 'fair', 'flexible' and 'good listeners'.

There was a 98% overall satisfaction rate with their probation officers and this appeared to be due to the fact that they received help when needed and felt listened to without being judged. Despite this high rate of satisfaction with their probation officers, when respondents were asked what factors would make them think twice about offending again, only 24% believed their probation officer would influence them and their families appeared to be the single most important factor that would stop them offending again.

This study will attempt to explore what offenders have found helpful in addressing their offending behaviour rather than their satisfaction levels with the overall service they receive. Beaumont and Mistry's research (1996:200) on client opinion in Gloucestershire also found high satisfaction ratings among their respondents. However, they suggest that this may at worst only confirm that probation supervision is seen as the 'soft option' and at best add to their knowledge base. Nonetheless, they also advocate that inattention to client satisfaction is likely to harm effectiveness. This study will research a sample of offenders on probation supervision orders from the Dublin Metropolitan District Court, and will examine their experiences of probation supervision and their perceptions of its interventions in tackling problems and addressing issues related to their offending behaviour.

#### **1.4 Aim of the Study & Research Questions.**

As outlined above, there is a growing body of research that seeks to incorporate the views of offenders in the discourse on what they have found useful or helpful in desisting from criminal activity or reducing their offending behaviour. However most of this research has been conducted outside of Ireland and to date the

Probation Service in this State has not undertaken any significant research in this area. This study aims to gather information from offenders on what have been their perceptions, experiences and understanding of engaging with the Irish Probation Service. One of the objectives of this study is to identify what the literature and research has found to be the most effective when working with offenders in the Probation Service. Once that is set out, then the main aim of this study is to determine from the offenders perspective as to what they found has been most helpful to them and if being under probation supervision has brought about positive change in their lives.

The research questions will provide a shape and focus to the study. The research will aim to answer the following questions

- *What does the research say is effective in reducing offending behaviour?*
- *What have offenders found helpful when on probation supervision and is this consistent with the literature?*
- *Do probation supervision orders influence motivations and attitudes to crime?*

## **1.5 Structure of the Study**

**Chapter Two** contains a review of the research literature that tracks the origins of the Probation Service in Ireland and examines the various approaches that have influenced practice within the Probation Service from the 1970's to the present day. It will briefly examine the social work skills that have been demonstrated to motivate people to change and it also looks at the guidelines for effective practice with offenders.

**Chapter Three** describes the methodology. This will include a rationale for the use of qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. It will also present the

sources of data used, and a profile of the sample. It will also consider some ethical issues and the limitations of the study.

**Chapter Four** will detail the findings that emerge from both the one to one interviews the focus group. This chapter will also include a discussion and analysis of these finding. It will examine to what degree the objectives of this study were met.

**Chapter Five** will conclude the study drawing on the main themes that emerge from the findings. This chapter will also link this research to social work practice and reflect on what has been learned from this study.

## **Chapter Two**

### **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter will present what is already known about working effectively with offenders by examining the core principles of effective practice and will consider the first of the research questions raised in the introductory chapters - What does the research say is effective in reducing offending behaviour? There is an abundance of research on what is considered to be effective practice when working with offenders. Effective Practice is essentially a collection of approaches used by probation officers that have been found, by a number of researchers (Andrews et al, 2004), to have the most impact on offenders in helping them reduce or desist from further criminal behaviour. Most of these studies have been conducted outside the Republic of Ireland. In addition, this chapter will also examine the approaches and social work skills commonly used by probation officers, and also consider if these approaches include effective practice principles. There is also a suggestion in the literature that there is now a shift from the dominant 'What Works' to the desistance paradigm (Maruna, 2004). The desistance paradigm is not just concerned with what is effective in probation practice; it is more interested in the process of change from the offender's perspective.

By presenting the principles and approaches that probation officers have adopted in this chapter it will then be interesting to find out how these approaches are experienced by offenders at the receiving end of the approach in the findings of this research as presented in Chapter Four.

## **2.2 Overview of the development of the Probation Service in Ireland.**

Since its inception in 1907 the professionalisation of the Probation Service in Ireland has developed continuously and is considered to be the ‘youngest’ section of the criminal justice system (Geiran, 2005:78). The history of the Probation Service has been discussed in a number of articles and reports such as Geiran (2005), the Expert Group Report (1998) and official publications for example Probation Service annual reports.

Following the establishment of the new Irish Free State in 1922 there was just one probation officer (Geiran, 2005:89). However by 1969 this has increased to a staff of nine people<sup>1</sup>. Further developments ensued throughout the next decade and by 1979 the management of the service was reorganised on a regional basis and it was renamed the Probation and Welfare Service. The structure has remained mainly the same up until 2005 which saw a restructuring of the Service with the establishment of a Director’s post as the new key senior role and a change in the name of the service from the Probation and Welfare Service to the Probation Service.

The rationale for this new strategic direction was to ensure *strong leadership, dynamic growth, a united vision and increased effectiveness* (Annual Report, 2005:10). With this change came some key developments including the development and implementation of the Young Persons Probation (YPP), and the development of co-operation and information sharing between the Irish Probation Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the introduction of evidence based risk assessment tools on a nationwide basis.

The main responsibilities of the Probation Service are summarised in the Annual Report (2005: 10) as follows

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<sup>1</sup> Committee of Inquiry into the Penal System, 1985:332 cited in Geiran, V. in Kearney & Skehill, 2005:92.

1. To provide courts with advice and information to assist in sentencing decisions.
2. Implementing and enforcing community sanctions passed by the court
3. To design, provide, and promote effective programmes for supervising offenders in the community.
4. Assisting offenders before and after release to lead pro-social lives which minimises the risk to the public.

The above responsibilities demand the following services from probation officers – pre-sanction reports, community service assessments, victim impact reports, probation supervision, community service supervision, temporary release and consultations with the judiciary to ensure efficient and effective service to all customers and stakeholders.

The demand for services from the courts is increasing and in 2005, it was recorded that probation officers prepared 6,385 pre sanction reports and 2,040 community service reports and 46 victim impact reports. The service supervised over 6, 500 people on probation type supervision and 1, 167 on community service orders and 81 sex offenders on post release supervision orders (Annual Report, 2005:17).

The Probation Service has from its outset concerned itself with the assessment of factors which contribute to criminal behaviour with a view to addressing them and thereby reducing the risk of re offending. Up until 2005, the only way of measuring the effectiveness of this work was to look at reconviction rates. Currently this has been complemented by the implementation of the LSI-R (Level of Service Inventory, Revised) risk assessment instrument.

The LSI-R assessment consists of a two page form with a list of 54 factors related to re-offending (also known as criminogenic risk factors) such as criminal history, education, employment, and family situation, attitudes towards crime, emotional and psychological factors and drug use. This evidence based instrument assists the probation officer in their assessment when considering the level of offenders risk and provides a numeric score that equals the level of risk. The LSI-R score can be measured at the beginning of a probation supervision order and at the end of the

period. By comparing the two scores it is therefore possible to see whether probation intervention was effective in reducing the offender's risk of re-offending.

The most current research commissioned by the Probation Service was an independent audit in June 2006 to examine how services were organised and delivered. Among the key findings which were summarised in the executive summary report (2006:4) the audit found that, overall there was a good commitment from staff to deliver a high quality service, however, there was a need for a more formal approach and accountable structure within which to operate, and the roles and responsibilities of probation staff needed to be clearly defined. The Probation Service today is currently in a period of restructuring and change in order to address this, nonetheless, it remains committed to delivering effective probation practice.

### **2.3 Principles of Effective Practice**

Bonta (2004:3 -19) provides an overview of the various methods of reducing recidivist crime and describes them under three general approaches. The first of these is 'correctional quackery'. This is defined as those interventions that are not based on any theory or knowledge and have not been evaluated such as Music, Drama & Art therapies.

The second approach that Bonta (2004:11) discusses is the 'deterrent approach' or 'get tough' approaches. Research on these approaches has found that when people are put in prison it results in up to 9% increase in recidivism (Smith, Gendreau & Goggin)<sup>2</sup>. Bonta argues that punishment only inhibits behaviour it does not teach new behaviours. He also advocates that offenders have very few pro-social behaviours, and argues that the ones that they do possess must be reinforced, encouraged and rewarded.

Bonta terms the third approach as 'offender rehabilitation' and suggests that the answer to recidivism is in providing human resources. This looks at the importance

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<sup>2</sup> as quoted by Bonta, 2004:7 in his conference paper on 'Personal Effectiveness in Working with Offenders'. He does not attribute a date to Smith, Goggin & Gendreau's research.

of what people actually do within the Probation Service and focuses on what approaches appear to work in reducing criminal behaviour. This has been developed by Andrews & Bonta et al (1990) as the 'What Works Principle' or 'the principles of effective practice' and it continues to be further refined and developed. It suggests that three main principles should be given consideration when working with offenders

1. **The risk principle:** the higher the risk of re-offending the more intensive and extensive the supervision programme should be.
2. **The needs principle:** programmes which target those factors which are likely to be causal of offending are more likely to be effective.
3. **The responsivity principle:** programmes which match the learning style of offenders and employ methods which have been demonstrated to consistently bring about change with offenders are more effective. This principle refers to *how* a probation officer's addresses criminal behaviours.

Ten main interventions have been identified as being particularly effective in reducing re-offending (Connolly, 2001:28). These are

1. **Responding to the learning styles of offenders:** If a typical offender tends to be concrete in his thinking, poor verbal skills, not particularly insightful and needs to be active, then he/she will not benefit from a verbal therapy that involves abstract notions and insight.

*The learning styles of most offenders require active, participatory methods rather than didactic mode on the one hand or a loose structured experiential mode on the other  
(McGuire, 1995:15 in Connolly, 2001:28).*

2. **Having a clear model of change backed by research evidence.** Probation officers should specify which risk factor a programme or intervention will target in order to reduce offending behaviour and how it will do so.

- 3. Targeting criminogenic needs.** Criminogenic needs are identified in the risk assessment which is conducted through using the risk assessment instrument (LSI-R). The probation officer will then help the offender to critically review their past and present offending choices and identify opportunities to meet their needs legitimately.
- 4. Using methods drawn from cognitive or behavioural sources.** Many practitioners believe that using relationship skills and facilitating insight will affect the necessary behavioural changes. Relationship building skills, structuring skills and motivational skills are important for engaging the client and maintaining their participation in cognitive- behavioural and other interventions (Connolly, 2001:8).
- 5. Using methods which are multi-modal.** This means using methods that incorporate a wide range of components or techniques aimed at a number of different targets. For example, McMurrin et al (1993) as quoted in Connolly (2001:30) identified the relevant components of intervention for young offenders with addiction problems as being behavioural self control training, problem solving skills training, emotion control training, social skills training, relapse prevention and general lifestyle modification.
- 6. Using skills oriented methods.** This will help to develop skills in such areas as problem solving, conflict management, and employment
- 7. Recognising that offenders have multiple problems** and this includes interpersonal and internal difficulties as well as external pressures.
- 8. Considering worker influence and style.** Effective probation officers establish high quality relationships and are firm but fair.
- 9. Attending to programme integrity.** This implies paying attention to the delivery of a programme as outlined in its design. It also requires that the programme should be evaluated.

**10. Evaluating the outcomes.** Work needs to be monitored and evaluated in order to know what is effective.

#### **2.4 Effective Relationship Based Practice**

The crucial significance of client-worker relationships are outlined in studies by Rex (1999), Trotter (1999), and Maruna (2004). These studies explored with offenders what they felt was most helpful to them. A pattern emerged that the biggest impact on offenders was when they were treated with respect, offered space to talk about their problems and felt listened to. The most effective client-worker relationships were ones that were found to involve optimism, trust and loyalty. Relationships should also be participative, purposeful, pro-social, and explicit in their negotiation of roles, boundaries and mutual expectations.

Trevithick (2003:163) describes the relationship between client and worker as the 'heart of social work' and cites Biestek's (1957:17 in Trevithick, 2003:165) definition of the casework relationship as

*The dynamic interaction of attitudes and emotions between the caseworker and client, with the purpose of helping the client achieve a better adjustment between himself and his environment'*

In this, Trevithick makes an important point (2003:165) about the relationship being a two way process and that bringing about change is reciprocal in its nature. From the workers point of view every encounter with a service user is an opportunity to build on and to extend their knowledge base and expertise. From the service user point of view, the knowledge base and expertise in terms of the approach offered to them can act as a turning point. However, Trevithick also warns against the over-use of techniques that can be perceived as detached and mechanical. These can fail to respond to service user's real needs and reinforce doubts and fears, mistrust, anxieties and lead to a deepening of defences.

Trevithick (2003:166) argues that during the 1970s and 1980s in Britain, there was considerable evidence on the importance of the relationship in social work literature. She comments that during this period service users valued social workers

who demonstrated a 'sensitive patient understanding'. The characteristics that clients most valued in their social worker were friendliness, reliability, regularity of contact, and attention to detail and openness. If these characteristics were present, Trevithick (2003:166) argues that even where there had been little positive change in the client's circumstances, they valued the significance of having a caring person in their lives.

*Thus, what we do (task) and how we do it (process) were both thought to be significant, particularly where this involved providing practical help (Trevithick, 2003: 166).*

In her examination of the relationship based approach, Trevithick (2003: 166) identifies eight areas of social work practice where the quality of the relationship is significant. It is not possible to detail the eight areas in depth but a brief outline of them include

1. Assessment
2. A foundation on which to build future work
3. Helping those experiencing relationship difficulties.
4. For people who are vulnerable and reliant on particular services for their well being
5. Advocacy and mediation for people experiencing difficulties accessing services and resources
6. Addressing anxiety in times of crises
7. As a foundation for capacity building
8. To bear witness and report 'social ills'.

Trotter (1999: 112) viewed the relationship as incorporating four main interpersonal skills. The first of these are empathy and reflective listening. Simply put, empathy is as an understanding a clients feelings and suggested that reflective listening is a practical manifestation of that. Secondly, the use of humour is also a useful skill to incorporate as long as it is appropriate. He draws a distinction between humour as a conscious technique and situational humour. It can be used to

break an impasse in the casework process and humanise situations. The third interpersonal skill is optimism. If the worker believes the client can change and if the client believes the worker can help it seems, from evidence that the outcomes will be better. The concept is perhaps particularly important in work with involuntary clients where there seems to be a tendency towards pessimism. Trotter terms the final interpersonal skill as self-disclosure. He found that by giving some personal information about their own family and interests, workers enhanced their working relationship with their clients.

In addition to building relationships, Trotter (1999) identifies three other effective approaches to practice. These are

**Role clarification:** Outcomes are improved for clients when workers focus on helping them to understand the role of the worker and the role of the client in the direct practice process. This involves ongoing discussions about issues such as authority and how it might be used, the dual role of the worker as helper and social controller, the aims and purpose of the intervention from both client and worker perspectives as well as issues relating to confidentiality. In short clarifying the role is about the question ‘what are we here for?’

**Pro social modelling:** The pro social approach involves workers identifying and being clear about the values they wish to promote and purposefully encouraging those values through the use of praise and other rewards. It also involves appropriate modelling of the values the worker seeks to promote, and challenging anti social or pro-criminal expressions and actions.

**Problem solving skills:** Problem solving involves working with the client’s definition of the problem, developing modest achievable goals which are the clients rather than the worker’s and identifying strategies with the client to achieve the goals.

The above discussion of the literature outlines the key components of effective practices and the characteristics of a probation officer, which assist in implementing the effective supervision of offenders; the following considers the elements of traditional social work that are also part of the effective package. Traditional social

work practice as outlined in this study incorporates a number of skills and approaches that are also used in probation practice with offenders.

## **2.5 Core Social Work Skills in the Probation Service**

Any discussion on the principles, values and methods of practice within the Probation Service in Ireland must first make reference to the framework set out by the Irish Association of Social Workers which have been adopted by the Probation Service. The Irish Association of Social Workers (2005) have defined the primary focus of social work as being

*..to facilitate and enable people identify options and make decisions for themselves so that they may develop strategies to effect improvement in the quality of their lives.*

They also state that the principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. These principles are picked up in their values statement which asserts rights of the individual to their own beliefs,

*..freedom of expression, and action irrespective of nationality, ethnic background, social and economic status, ability, health gender, sexual preferences, age, or contribution to society (Irish Association of Social Workers, 2005).*

The above traditional values emphasise the individual in the client/worker relationship.

Research has demonstrated that the following social work skills are important in helping to motivate people to change. Before looking at the principle approaches, it is worth noting that any approach to working with a client on an individual basis is going to include Biestek's (in Shardlow, 1998:26) seven principles of casework – individualisation, purposeful expression of feelings, controlled emotional involvement, acceptance, client self determination, non judgemental attitude

confidentiality. These principles provide us with a framework of how we should behave with our clients.

**Cognitive Behavioural Theories** (Lazarus, 1932; Beck, 1921; Meichenbaum, 1977) are central to a probation officers work with offenders. Central to this theory is that if one changes his/her thinking, he/ she will change their behaviour accordingly. Offence focused work with an offender is based largely on this principle and will therefore concentrate on such exercises as weighing up the costs/benefits of offending, raising awareness of victim's issues or analysing an individuals role in an offence in order to bring about a more enlightened view of an individuals own behaviour and raise awareness of their risk factors.

**Systems theory** (Pincus & Minahan, 1973) is an approach that is also frequently considered by probation officers. This theory states that people depend on systems in their immediate social environment for a satisfactory life so social work must focus on such systems. Systems theory argues that all parts of a system are connected, therefore what happens in one part of the system will have an effect on all other parts of the system (Coulshed & Orme, 1998). The systems theory approach advocates that the social worker is the 'change agent system', working not just with the individual as the clients system in isolation but also with their network, such as the family. The family can be seen as the target for change. The eight practice skills outlined for working with systems theory (Pincus & Minahan, 1973 in Payne, 2005:114) are

- Assessing problems
- Collecting data
- Making initial contacts
- Negotiating contracts forming actions
- Maintaining and coordinating action systems
- Exercising influence
- Terminating the change effort.

Another approach often employed by probation officers that is central to working with offenders is the **Client centred approach**. This puts the focus on the person rather than on the presenting problem. 'The goal of this approach is the greater integration and independence of the individual' (Coulshed, 1998:88). This approach calls for the worker to be 'genuine and congruent' in their relationship with the client, to have 'unconditional positive regard' for the client and to 'empathise' with the clients view (Payne, 1997:178).

In contrast to the client centred approach, **Task centred** work is used when looking at some of the difficulties being faced. This approach places the problem centre stage, so it is the problem rather than the person that is 'the client' (Doel, in Adams, 1998:197).

Part of the role for probation officers is helping offenders is to build on their strengths and achieve optimal functioning. The **Strengths Perspective** understands client's empowerment as central to social work practice and client strengths as providing the fuel and energy for that empowerment (Saleebey, 2002:108). A strengths perspective assumes client competence.

All of the above traditional social work approaches are known to and frequently used by probation officers in order to reduce the risks associated with offending behaviour. While it is important to consider what skills, approaches and knowledge a probation officer can apply when working with offenders', it is also worth considering the factors that lead to an individual's decision to stop offending. Desisting from offending behaviour is a process, and it is increasingly becoming a recognised approach to working with offenders.

## **2.6 From Nothings Works to Desistance**

The notion of desistance or how people stop offending is becoming more prominent in criminological discourses. This discussion on desistance literature begins with an historical overview of the ongoing changing trends in probation practice. Beginning in the 1970's and against a backdrop of prevailing pessimism known as the

'Nothing Works' period, came an influential piece of work by Bottoms & McWilliams (1979). They argued for a move away from the Medical or Treatment model stating that:

*..probation services traditional values of care and respect for unique individual persons...existed long before 'treatment' and could therefore exist if 'treatment disappeared' (Bottoms & McWilliams, 1979:166).*

Their Non Treatment Paradigm (1979:168) proposed that the 4 basic aims of the Probation Service were

1. The provision of appropriate help for offenders.
2. The statutory supervision of offenders.
3. Diverting appropriate offenders from custodial sentences.
4. The reduction of crime.

The Non-Treatment Paradigm was influential because it promoted a shift from diagnosing and treating clients outside of their control, to helping them and respecting them. This in itself sowed the seed of optimism in probation practice. In response to this, Raynor & Vandstone (1994) argued that the Non Treatment Paradigm was in need of development. According to Smith (2005:626) this period saw the revival of optimism that something could work and that it was more or less possible to specify what this was. They believed that the traditional Probation Service's value of respect for the person had to include the actual and potential victims of crime. McNeill (2006:43) comments in relation to this:

*..that the extent to which an offenders choice could be respected and unconditional help could be offered had some necessary limitations ... probation had to accept an obligation to work to reduce the harms caused by crime, as well as the ills that provoke it.*

This was a period of change and following the publication of Raynor & Vandstone's (1994) article in England & Wales there were two significant developments in the area of organisation and practice of probation work. The first

saw the establishment of the National Offender Management Service which amalgamated prisons and probation to manage offenders with its objectives being to punish offenders and reduce offending. The second development saw the establishment of cognitive behavioural group work programmes which emerged from effectiveness research and the 'What Works' initiative. This was defined as

*The form of practice most likely to work in the sense of reducing the rate of reconviction became in effect the only form of practice that was regarded by probation managers as sufficiently evidence based to be defensible. (Smith, 2005:627).*

The above paradigms are mainly concerned with what types of probation practices will be the most effective when working with offenders. However, this does not include any discourse on how rehabilitation occurs. The discourse on desistance has been opened by Shadd Maruna et al (2001) in their *Liverpool Desistance Study*. The aims of this study was to provide a deeper understanding of the process of 'going straight' from the perspective of the individuals taking this life path. The research involved the author, Maruna, immersing himself in the world of ex-prisoner's living in Liverpool by observing at probation offices, independent reintegration programmes and a month long stay at a men's hostel in Liverpool with former prisoners. Maruna set out to study both those who persisted in their criminal ways and those who did not.

He found that those who desisted from crime had their own form of cognitive distortion or 'positive illusions'. He suggested that desistance from crime was based on three theoretical perspectives.

1. **Maturational Reform:** based on the established links between age and certain criminal behaviours.
2. **Social Bonds theory:** suggests that ties to family, employment or educational programmes in early adulthood explain changes in criminal behaviour across the life course.

3. **Narrative theory:** stresses the significance of subjective changes in the person's sense of self and identity, reflected in changing motivations, greater concern for others and more consideration of the future.

McNeill (2006:47) in supporting the findings of Maruna's (2001) study, comments that desistance resides somewhere in the interfaces between developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions and the individual subjective narrative constructions which offenders build around these key events and changes.

He also found that there were certain common psychological patterns amongst those who desisted from crime. He termed these as 'positive illusions' and outlined three such examples of these. Firstly the offender denied their criminal past. A recurring theme amongst his interviewee's was that they believed that their offending and criminal behaviour just simply was not intrinsic to them. Instead it was something outside of them, for example, the influence of drugs or friends that was making them offend.

The second pattern that emerged was what Maruna termed 'Tragic Optimism'. In this way, offenders felt that by desisting from crime they could turn their experience into something positive and 'transform a life of shame into something of direct and explicit value' (Maruna, 2004:226).

The third pattern identified was that desistance was itself a rebel act. The interviewee's of the *Liverpool Desistance Study (2001)* described the process as 'breaking out of the chains of social control'. By going straight, the individual offender was actually committing the ultimate act of rebellion against 'the System', by breaking out of the cycle of crime.

Farrell (2004: 11) details that the range of factors associated with desistance from offending are related to acquiring something such as employment, the influence of friends or family, a life partner which the desister values, and which in turn initiates a re-evaluation of his or her life and some sense of who they are. He goes on to comment that any attempt to investigate the impact of probation on desisting from

offending needs to consider the role of various social processes such as employment, marriage, ageing etc.

McNeill (2006: 49) also points out that the potential of social networks is highlighted by resilience perspectives, which in contrast with approaches that dwell on risks and/or needs, consider the protective factors and processes involved in positive adaptation in spite of adversity.

McNeill (2002:5) goes some way to envision what desistance focused practice might look like. He argues that throughout the stages of intervention- assessment, planning, engagement, intervention & evaluation- would have to be entirely individualised. Given the diversity of individuals needs, it would appear necessary to employ approaches and styles of practice that will accommodate value and exploit that diversity.

In her research of the experiences of sixty offenders, Rex (1999) found that those who attributed changes in their behaviour to probation supervision described it as *active*. They conveyed a sense of being engaged in a partnership highlighting the pivotal role that relationships play in effective interventions. Trotter (1999) also highlights the importance of the worker-client relationship in working with involuntary clients. He defines it as including empathy, optimism, humour and self disclosure.

Maruna (2003) drawing on psychological and criminological evidence, argues that the development of strengths based narrative approaches would be likely to enhance compliance. It can be argued therefore that promoting desistance involves striving to develop the offender's strengths, both on an individual and social network level. In an article entitled 'Applying the findings of the Liverpool desistance study in probation practice', Cluley (2004 :234) argues that this is not a new departure for probation officers as effective probation practice currently draws on the use of multi modal practice to address criminogenic needs. She goes on to comment that 'Practitioners draw on a variety of interventions including motivational interviewing, brief solution focused therapy and cognitive behavioural approaches'. While there is no doubt that Probation Service policies and strategies are written

within a risk focused discourse, it is nonetheless the skill of the practitioner that can help to translate this into meaningful and positive dialogue during supervision.

## **Chapter Three**

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Rationale for the Use of Qualitative Methods of Data Collection and Analysis.**

This research lies within an interpretivist paradigm. The interpretivist perspective is interested in more micro concepts, such as the individual's perspective, constructs, meanings, definitions of situations (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002:16). From this point of view reality is socially constructed, it depends on peoples experiences and how they interpret their life. In this way it rejects the notion of objectivity as research can never truly be value free and is interested in the subjective. (Alston & Bowles, 2003:10). The focus of this study is from the perspective of the offender and as such is interested in their experience of a service and to what extent it has had an impact on them.

#### **3.2 Sampling**

As the nature of this piece of research is largely exploratory, it was decided that non probability sampling is more useful for its purpose. This study does not claim that the sample is representative of the offender population and therefore the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of offenders. A small sample of six offenders, who have engaged and complied with their probation supervision order, were selected to provide information on their experiences of attending the Probation Service. It was hoped that this would provide an insight into a previously unexplored area. For the purpose of gathering and analysing similar data, it was decided to select offenders who had all been convicted of offences in the District Court. These types of offences ranged from shoplifting to possession of illicit drugs

to public order charges. This study did not include Circuit Court offences as these offences are generally more serious in their nature and include sex offences, which requires a different type of risk assessment and case management which is not dealt with in the literature review.

It was initially envisaged to interview eight to ten offenders from the same geographical area, however, there was some difficulty in recruiting offenders to participate. The senior probation officer in one geographical area was contacted and asked to identify any offenders over 18 years of age, who had completed their probation supervision order within three months prior that would consent to taking part in this study. This particular avenue resulted in making contact with one offender. It was decided to open up the geographical area and the senior probation officer of another probation community team was approached with the same criteria. This led to more promising results with the names of five offenders being put forward. However, only two agreed to participate in the end. This resulted in three offenders consenting to participate in individual interviews.

Given the low level of interest and attendance of individual offenders to take part, and the time constraints of this study, it was decided to conduct a focus group involving four or more offenders. The Probation Service runs an accredited group work module programme. This is an intensive supervision programme and runs groups modules on offending behaviour groups, anger management, and an alcohol and drug awareness group. The senior probation officer of this programme was approached and she encouraged a number of offenders to participate in this study. Four agreed to participate and agreed to come in one hour prior to their group module and three turned up.

The sampling technique that this study will use is purposive sampling which as the name suggests, the sample will be selected for a purpose.

*We may have prior knowledge that indicates that a particular group is important to our study or we select those subjects who we feel are 'typical' examples of the issue we wish to study (Alston & Bowles 2003:90).*

Only offenders who consented to participate in this research were selected. All the offenders who participated in this study were male and between the ages of 25 – 40 years old. It was not intended to exclude women from this research, however, only two women were identified as suitable to participate and both eventually declined due to having other pressures on them such as no childminder for their children and the demands of the Christmas period.

### **3.3 Limitations**

This study is limited in that it is researching the experiences of offenders and will take only a small sample of six offenders in a particular area. This is by no means representative of all Probation Service clients therefore the findings can not be absolute. However, the purpose of this study is merely to gain insight into client views and experiences of probation supervision and not to make recommendations about service improvements.

### **3.4 Sources of Data:**

#### **Literature Review**

Consideration has been given to the principles of effective probation practice and the core social work skills that have been proven to impact positively with clients from a probation officers point of view. The review of the literature also incorporated an historical overview of the trends in approaches that have influenced probation practice. This overview included a section on desistance literature which becoming increasingly recognised as a valid approach to use when working with offenders. By providing this backdrop of what is already known and debated about what is effective when working with offenders, it is hoped that the views of the participants of this study will support previous research. However, by incorporating the views of offenders on what they have found to be most helpful, it is also hoped that probation practice can be further refined.

## **Qualitative research**

As this study is exploratory it will use qualitative research methods which allows for a flexible research design. Using this method allows for

*...a flexible open interviews so that the conversation can cover topics, perspectives and meanings that are important to the people being researched.*(Alston & Bowles, 2003:10).

This flexibility with the proposed respondents is essential as the research must allow for their priorities and viewpoint to be noted and not restricted. In this way the process is open to change and will aid the refinement of the research.

In this case the primary method of data collection was semi structured interviews and a focus group. The interviews were with offenders who had just completed their probation supervision order. The semi structured interviews followed a set outline on topics that directed the interview while allowing for flexibility to explore additional information that the respondent has raised. According to Alston & Bowles (2003:116) the skill of the interviewer is central to the success of producing a wealth of valuable data. According to Bell (1999:138)

*... conversation about a topic may be interesting and may produce useful insights into a problem, but it has to be remembered that an interview is more than just an interesting conversation.*

While the interview allowed for questions to vary in accordance with what the participant raised, it was essential that the interview did not get sidetracked and used the set outline of topics for direction.

As the content of this piece of research involves the service users of the Probation Service, it was considered appropriate to explain the purpose of the study to the Probation Service and get consent to interview their service users. In order to do this a meeting was arranged with Mr Michael Donnellan, Director of the Probation

Service, and he was provided with a copy of the dissertation proposal. Mr Donnellan then gave his consent for this study.

### **3.5 Individual Interviews:**

#### Rationale

The main objective of conducting semi structured interviews on a one to one basis with offenders was to elicit the unique and individual experience that they may have had. Offenders who have been placed on a probation supervision order attend with their probation officer on an individual basis. As all workers have their own personal style and approach to working with offenders, it was intended to draw on what elements of a particular approach were more or least helpful.

#### Profile

The three offender's who agreed to participate in the individual interviews were all male. Their ages were from the mid 20's to the early forties. All three had a history of drug or alcohol addiction and had been before the courts on a number of occasions in the past over charges directly or indirectly related to their addiction. All three had previously been placed on probation supervision orders. One had also previously been subject to a community service order. The charges that they had been placed on probation supervision for this time were public order, shoplifting and handling stolen goods. None of the three offenders had offended in the past 12 months or more.

#### Content

The individual interviews took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> December 2006 in the probation offices in Smithfield Chambers and a local sub office in Dublin's inner city. The duration of the interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and with the verbal permission of the interviewee, they were recorded by a digital voice recorder. All three participants were asked about their understanding of the Probation Service; what were their expectations when placed on a probation supervision order; what helped the most; what helped them the least; did it change their attitude to crime in any way; what would influence them away from crime in

the future and how would they describe their relationship with their probation officer.

### Limitations

Two respondents who agreed to partake in the individual interview gave 30 – 45 minutes of their time. The other respondent in the individual interviews arrived late and could only stay for a maximum of 20 minutes. This led to brief responses and an inability to probe on certain areas as the participant was eager to finish the interview.

## **3.6 Focus Groups:**

### Rationale

It was not initially intended to conduct a focus group. However, due to the difficulties in recruiting offenders to participate and the time allowed it was decided to run a focus group which would increase the sample size and could be conducted within a relatively short period of time.

### Profile

All the offenders who took part in the focus group were aged between 25 – 35 years old. All three had a history of drug or alcohol addiction and had been before the courts on a number of occasions in the past over charges directly or indirectly related to their addiction. All three had previously been placed on probation supervision orders. The first of the participants had been serving a three year sentence in prison, of which he had served two. He was then granted temporary release on condition that he was supervised by the Probation Service. This is known as a post release supervision order and he was referred to the group work programme as part of this order.

The second of the participants had been placed on a 12 month probation supervision order by the District Court and had been responding positively to work with his probation officer. However, he had one serious charge outstanding before the Circuit Court for a violent assault. As he was already on a probation order, the

Judge in the Circuit Court sought a probation report on this case. He had received a favourable report in respect of his progress on probation supervision, and therefore placed him on a second probation supervision order in relation to his Circuit Court offence. It was in relation to this charge that his probation officer referred him to the group work programme for anger management, offence focused work and alcohol awareness. The third participant was ordered to 30 months of probation supervision by the district court and had been referred directly to the group work module.

None of the participants in the focus group had offended within the previous 12 months or more.

### Content

The focus group took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 2007 in the offices of the Intensive probation supervision programme. The questions followed closely those that were asked in the individual interviews. The focus group was limited in the time allowed as the participants had agreed to come in over their lunch break at 1:15pm and they were due to begin their group work at 2pm. They had requested 10 minutes at the end for a break before they went into their group. The focus groups ran for approximately thirty-five minutes.

### Limitations

The participants in the focus group were due to start their group work module at 2pm and agreed to come in 45 minutes early, however one was late and could therefore only participate in some of the discussion. These time constraints placed considerable pressure on the amount of information that could be yielded on each question.

## **3.7 Ethical Issues**

Ethics is a vital part of every research project. Alston & Bowles (2003:21) have outlined five ethical criteria that researchers should be in mind of,

- *Autonomy/ self-determination (includes informed consent and confidentiality)*

- *Non-maleficence*
- *Beneficence*
- *Justice*
- *Positive contribution to knowledge.*

Stringent efforts were made to ensure that all the above were adhered to. As already stated, prior to selecting participants for this research, a meeting was arranged with the Director of the Probation Service in order to seek permission to interview the clientele of the service and to clarify the purpose of the study. This permission was granted. In selecting respondents to participate, an agreement with the managers of the community probation teams was also sought with regard to the topics that will be covered in the interview.

With regard to the respondents, every effort was made to ensure that those asked to participate gave consent on the basis that they understood the nature and the purpose of the research. The option of refusal was specified. Respondents were assured of their anonymity, but they were made aware that any disclosures of a sensitive nature would be reported to the appropriate authorities. Given the above, respondents were informed that they were contributing to the Probation Services understanding of what they believed to have worked for them and what didn't.

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

Qualitative research will produce a vast amount of non numeric data that needs to be analysed. Alston and Bowles (2003:68) point out that 'the success or failure of any research endeavour lies in the researcher's ability to work with data and to actively generate understandable theoretical arguments'. In order to analyse the data from the semi structured interviews, I first recorded interviews with the permission of the participants, and then transcribe any taped material as soon as was practical. Each participant was given a letter so all participants are referred to as Offender A – F. The first three that participated in the individual interviews are referred to as A, B & C. The three participants in the focus group are referred to as D, E & F. The main research questions were then coded according to concepts and themes that

were raised by the respondents. When the coding was completed, the data was grouped into categories. The core categories could then be labelled as soon as possible. (Alston & Bowles, 2003:215). Recurring themes and patterns of response that emerge could then be analysed in the context of the research questions.

## **Chapter Four**

### **4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION.**

#### **4.1 Introduction.**

The rationale for this study began by examining other studies in the UK and Northern Ireland who conducted research in order to explore with offenders what it was that they valued about the supervision that they received. No study of this kind has ever been conducted in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore one of the aims of this study was to add to the growing knowledge base on what offenders have found helpful in addressing their offending behaviour. Chapter one addressed the first research question which examined the literature to identify what was effective in reducing offending behaviour. This chapter will attempt to answer the other two research questions set out at the start of this study – What have offenders found helpful when on probation supervision and do probation supervision orders influence motivations and attitudes to crimes?

This chapter will also outline the main themes that arose from the interviews and the focus group. The first section will look at offenders overall view of being placed on the probation supervision order and discuss this view in relation to the literature. Section's 4.3.and 4.4 will examine what aspects of the probation supervision order offenders found to be to most helpful or the least helpful. This section will detail the best and the worst aspects of probation supervision as found by offenders. Section 4.5 will examine the influence that the probation supervision order has had on offender's motivation to change and their attitude to crime. This section will also reflect on what other research has found on this area. Section 4.6 will discuss the importance of the client/worker relationship both in terms of what was found in this study and how that reflects the research. The final part of this

chapter will consider the differences observed between offenders on a group work programme and those doing one to one work with their probation officer.

#### **4.2 General view of probation supervision.**

The overall view of being placed on a probation supervision order was generally a positive reaction for different reasons. One participant viewed it 'as a relief' to be placed on a probation supervision order because they didn't have to go to prison, another said 'it was like getting a second chance' in terms of addressing their addiction.

*I'm a problem alcoholic and this led to a lot of my troubles but I was given a second chance and took it. Between court appearances I had found A.A. and gone into recovery so when I was given probation I saw it as a second chance.*  
(Offender B).

However, one offender's perception of the Probation Services was based on what his older brothers had told him. He said that probation officers could 'play God' or will 'hang you' if you don't do things their way. However, he also admitted that he has not had this experience himself while on probation supervision and he stated quite clearly that

*Instead of a sentence I'll take probation any day of the week. If you walk out of court and say 'I got probation' it's like a victory.*  
(Offender D).

Most of the participants had been placed on probation supervision orders before and therefore had a good knowledge of what to expect and what would be expected of them. All of the participants had a relatively clear understanding of the probation supervision order. Five of the respondents understood that they needed to keep their probation appointment or their case could be returned to court. They also understood that they needed to stay out of trouble and not incur any new charges.

This was not an unexpected finding and is supported by the research conducted in the U.K (Beaumont & Mistry, 1996) or Northern Ireland (PBNI, 2005) as outlined in Chapter One. These studies almost unanimously found that offenders valued the assistance offered, and were satisfied with the services provided to them by their probation service. However, Beaumont and Mistry (1996) have placed a caveat on this type of finding as they believe that it may reflect that the probation supervision order is viewed as a soft option over a prison sentence, nonetheless, they also point out that if this type of feedback is not sought, it is consequently difficult to get an idea as to the effectiveness of Probation Service intervention.

Consideration also needs to be given to how the research was conducted as offenders who are currently under a supervision order are unlikely to respond negatively for fear that it may affect their working relationship with their probation officer. In addition, there is a possibility that offenders often attempt to give the 'right' answers and only say what they think their probation officer wants to hear. However, this study interviewed three offenders who had already completed their supervision order and three who were involved a group work programme and were therefore not assigned to an individual probation officer. All were given a guarantee of anonymity and all were encouraged to be as honest as possible. It was hoped that these measures will help yield an unbiased view from the participants on a probation supervision order.

Offenders' understanding of the supervisory or control part of a probation officers role is evidence that in practice probation officers take the time to clarify their role, and the expectations on their client in terms of meeting the conditions of the District Court order. All participants were asked what they saw as the probation officers role and if they knew what to expect on a probation supervision order. Most had been on probation supervision before and said they did know what was expected of them and when probed further on this, the recurring theme that emerged was the supervisory aspect of the probation officers role.

*To supervise me being good (Offender A)*

*There supposed to relieve your shoplifting issues, to see are you keeping out of trouble, have you any more charges, are you working. If you're caught and you have been seeing your probation officer and you have been keeping your times well, it stands up in court for you (Offender C)*

However, none of the participants viewed the Probation Service as having a caring or therapeutic element to their role. As outlined by Trotter (1999:3) while there is a surveillance part of the probation officers role, there is simultaneously a caring or therapeutic role and both elements of the role should be outlined to the offender on initial contact. The dual role of the worker as carer and controller involves ongoing discussions throughout the supervision period.

Five out of six of the participants admitted that in the past they viewed it as easy to get through a probation supervision order because all they had to do was tell their probation officer whatever they thought he/she wanted to hear.

*I didn't trust them whatsoever. I would just tell them what they wanted to hear and then go (Offender F).*

#### **4.3 Areas probation supervision helped the most.**

All participants unanimously agreed that the best thing about being placed under probation supervision is that they didn't have to go to prison, however, they also felt that the community sanction helped them in a variety of ways. These ranged from being given the chance to change, to helping them stay grounded, it helped them stay out of trouble and it provided a focus and gave them a routine.

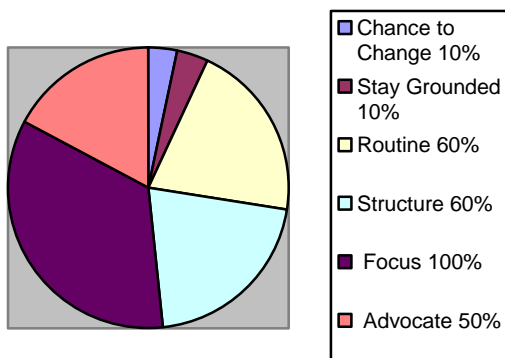
*It kept me grounded. I knew it was there so I kept appointments. I know people who have broken their probation and they have gone to jail for it. That was in the front of my mind so it kept me focused (Offender B).*

*It gives you a routine which is pretty good but the amount of times that I've had to do something for the group work programme, it serves as a reminder*

*and its good even coming here today is a reminder. It keeps you focused (Offender E).*

One of the main themes that emerged from all of the interviews was that probation supervision was perceived as providing a focus and supporting them where they were at. While on the one hand they were ordered to attend a probation officer and did not necessarily want to go, on the other hand, they found that having that kind of checking system helped them to focus on addressing their particular issues relating to their offending or acted as a motivator to avoid further involvement in criminal activity. Half of the respondents also saw their probation officer as someone who would advocate on their behalf to the court and they appreciated that kind of practical help.

Figure 4.1: Areas that probation Supervision Helped the Most



The participants in the focus group could easily identify how probation supervision helped them the most. One person said that he found it very difficult to fill time by himself. He admitted that he was easily bored and this led to him using drugs which in turn led to anti social behaviour and crime. Being unable to fill his time often left him feeling down and depressed because he felt he should be out working. He was referred to an Intensive Probation Supervision Programme and was expected to attend two days a week for 10 weeks. He reported that he enjoyed the structure afforded to him through attending the group work modules.

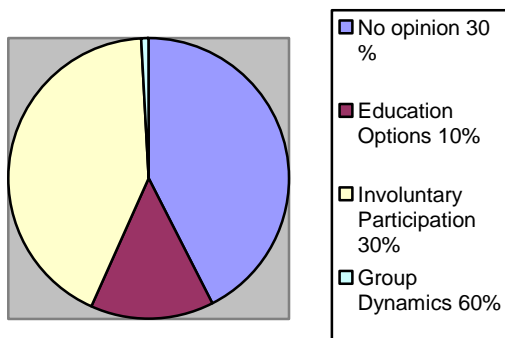
*Personally I find it very hard to fill time and time is an issue in terms of boredom or leading back to using drugs. I'm still young so since I left school I've always worked and I've had a drug problem over the years since I was 17 so I've had to lead a double life so to speak. So when I'm not working I don't feel very good about my self. I get very down sometimes in the morning when I'm in bed because I know I should be out doing something. You hear the traffic and people going to school and going to work. So being on the groups that I did, they were 10 and 12 week groups so 2 days a week (Offender D).*

Another offender from the focus group, said that once he started engaging with his probation officer, he began to learn about a number of choices and opportunities open to him in terms of treatment and recovery. Prior to attending his probation officer, his main difficulty was with alcohol. He refused to go to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A) as he viewed them as a '*bunch of lunatics*'. However, he said that the Probation Service '*opened his eyes*' to what A.A was about and what it could provide for him. He also regarded the probation run group work programme as providing him with a routine which he believed kept him focused on what he needed to do in order to address his addiction.

The focus group participants regarded the group work programme on the one hand, as something they had to do, but on the other hand, they were also of the opinion that the structure and routine and focus that it provided also acted as a safety net for staying out of trouble. This is a noteworthy experience for offenders and appears to support that view that offenders are actively engaged in offence focused work, and the approaches taken by probation officers appear to work in reducing criminal behaviour.

#### 4.4 Areas Probation Supervision helped the least.

Figure 4.2: Areas that Probation Supervision helped with the least



Two out of the six participants did not consider there to be any area in which they did not receive help or there being a ‘worst thing’ about being on probation supervision. However, this may also be an untruthful or cautious answer. All participants were provided with the opportunity to be directly critical about the Probation Service, however, as outlined above, this may sit uncomfortably with people who spend most of their lives trying to give the ‘right’ answer and be agreeable for the sake of getting out of a meeting quickly.

One offender said that he would have liked more practical help with education and training.

*If I didn't get help it was down to myself. This pride we suffer from can get in the way. Maybe I didn't ask the questions I should have asked particularly regarding courses (Offender B).*

Two of the participants from the focus group, who were attending the group work programme disliked the involuntary participation element of the groups, and regarded the Probation Service as having a ‘hold over them’ and said that their lives were in their probation officer’s hands. They said that while they appreciated attending the groups, because of the structure and focus it provided, they disliked

being ordered to go. This is not surprising as many offenders have a deep mistrust of authority and rebel against following orders or taking direction. One offender put it

*It's forced upon me, but it's not really because you can choose to participate. I was **asked** to do this course so I said I'd do it, but then I got a letter to say I **had** to do it (offender F).*

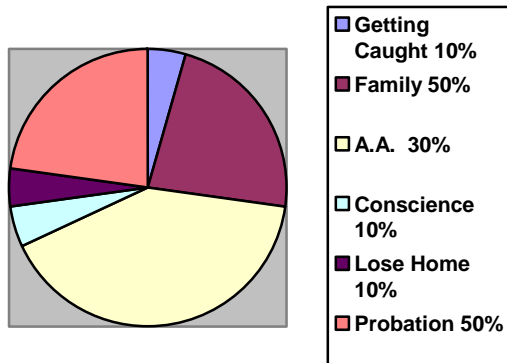
Participants in the focus group said that the worst thing about having to attend the group was that some of the other participants in the group work programme were not ready for change, and therefore behaved in a manner which held the entire group back. They felt a certain frustration at this as they felt they were not in a position to tell those group members to be quite or not to come to group under the influence of any drugs. Within this they indicated that they would like the Probation officers that are facilitating the group to be stronger in this area.

*The worst thing is probably some of the groups because of some of the participants. They mightn't even be ready for the groups. They can prolong it and drag it out and just not be with it at all. There could be 8 people who would be focussed on what they're doing and 2 who'd be holding the group back. (Offender D).*

*I can't say to a person, don't come in like that again because that's not down to me. That's the worst thing you have to come to these thing or you go back to jail and sometimes you don't want to come in and listen to all that. (Offender F)*

#### 4.5 The influence of Probation Supervision on motivation to change and attitudes to crime.

Figure 4.3 Factors influencing a move away from crime.



Many of the participants believed that they had come to a point where they no longer wanted to come before the Courts or be involved in the criminal justice system. Therefore their attitude during their most recent involvement with the Probation Service was more positive and predisposed to change. All six of the participants stated that when they were brought before a court for an offence on previous occasions, they did not care what happened to them. They said that if they were made subject to a probation supervision order, they were not upset because they could tell their probation officer what they thought he/she wanted to hear and then leave. By doing so, the implication was that probation supervision had no real impact on their lives. However, all participants found that this time around, when they changed their attitude about how they would approach probation supervision, they found it a very positive experience. One participant commented

*When I started on probation I was living in a hostel and said I'm going to stick at this and give it a try, and it was good. I knew that if I kept being responsible that things would get better (Offender A).*

The participants in the focus group attributed their change in attitude to crime directly to the group work they were doing with the Probation Service. In relation to this, they said

*It makes you think a little more about what you're doing. (Offender D)*

*I've done a few things before being sent on this course where you wouldn't think twice[about offending], but now I find myself avoiding places where I know I'm going to get into trouble. (Offender F)*

*In some ways you're never going to stop coming across situations where you could commit crime. In that sense, it [the group] helps you to put things in perspective (offender D).*

The main factors influencing the participants away from committing further offences as outlined in Figure 4.3 above, ranged from getting caught, to their family, to their conscience and having too much to lose (e.g. home, respect, trust) Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12 step programme, and the group work modules in the Intensive Probation Supervision Programme were also highlighted by the participants as being significant..

These factors that influence offenders away from criminal behaviour may be very influential in kick starting the process of desistance. Chapter Two presented Maruna's (2003) three theoretical perspectives of desistance research as maturational reform, social bonds theory and narrative theory. All of the offenders interviewed were over the age of 25 years old. Research (Maruna, 2004) has now established links between developing personal maturity and moving away from criminal behaviour.

*I had enough, and I'd come to a stage where my life was a nightmare, so I suppose it was a relief to find a way out (offender A).*

Therefore it would appear that a person's age can be a significant factor in moving away from criminal behaviour and anti social lifestyle if they are provided with routine, focus and structure. In this way, probation supervision can act as a lever in moving a person forward by providing a focus and guidance.

For those who had to attend the group work programme, they reported that it provided them with an outlet to meet people who had also moved away from crime and were interested in pro-social living. This is also supported by Social Bonds Theory as advocated by Maruna (2004) and outlined in Chapter Two. This theory suggests that *'ties to family, employment or educational programmes in early adulthood explain changes in criminal behaviour across the life course.'* Attending a group work programme or a 12 step programme would appear to give a person a sense of purpose. They may gain recognition amongst like-minded peers for 'doing well' or being a positive role model within the group. These various social processes need to be considered when examining the impact of probation supervision on desisting from offending.

The third theoretical perspective that Maruna (2004) categorised from desistance research is the narrative theory. This he argues stresses the significance of subjective changes in the offender's sense of self and identity and it reflects their changing motivations and shows a greater concern for others and more consideration for the future.

Maruna (2004) also found certain psychological patterns amongst those who desisted from crime. The first of these is what he termed as 'positive illusions'. In brief this is a belief that their criminal behaviour stemmed from something outside of them such as drugs, alcohol or friends. This study also found this to be a recurring theme amongst most participants.

*I was shoplifting just to feed my habit for the past two years (offender A)*

*I was a problem alcoholic and this led to a lot of my troubles (Offender B)*

*The people I hung around with, they start robbing, I start robbing..... If you didn't do it you get slagged and they say you have no bottle (Offender C).*

A second pattern that emerged from Maruna's work and also within this study was what he termed as 'Tragic optimism'. By moving away from crime and all

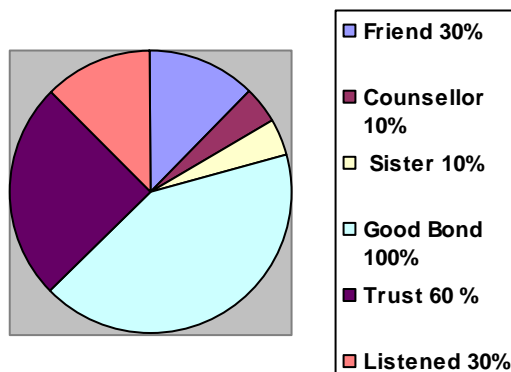
associated risks, a person can turn their experience into something positive and give something back.

*Through this recovery programme [A.A.] they say the world is your oyster if you're willing to change. Now I get a great deal out of helping people because that in itself is a complete change in some form. To give back rather than keep taking. It wouldn't be for financial reward but where I could feel I was giving back and enjoy it. So for the enjoyment rather than the financial rewards, because I took for so long (offender B).*

#### **4.6 Importance of the Client/Worker relationship.**

When asked to consider how would they describe their probation officer. Two clients said they were 'like a friend'. One viewed their probation officer as a 'counsellor' and one even went so far as to say that talking to his probations officer was 'like talking to his sister'. All participants described having a good relationship or bond with their probation officer and four participants felt they could trust their probation officer. Two said that they 'felt listened to' and felt that 'they could be honest'. It would appear from the participants in this research that it was important to them to feel that they could trust their probation officer as this seemed to encourage them to open up and be honest.

Figure 4.4 Participants perception of their probation officers.



As shown in the figure above, the majority of offenders described having a good bond with their probation officer and said they could trust them. This is hugely significant because as one offender explained

*'We're in the game of not trusting anybody' (offender F).*

Others were equally surprised that they could trust their probation officer.

*I would just tell them what they wanted to hear and go, then one day I just came clean with her and then I started getting on good with her. I didn't realise that she was trying to help me (offender F).*

*You let you guard down eventually (offender D)*

*I said to my probation officer 'I'm probably hanging myself here' and told him all about it and it was fine. Then I was going home and I thought 'what did you tell him all that for' (offender E).*

As mentioned above there was a preconception by some offenders that the Probation Service would 'hang you', and were therefore surprised that they could open up and be honest without negative consequences.

One of the principles of effective practice outlined in Chapter Two established that effective probation officers create high quality relationships that are firm but fair. This is crucial in attempting to motivate a person to bring about positive change in their lives. The client- worker relationship has already been found by research (Trevithick: 2003) to have the biggest impact on offender's motivation to change. The findings of this study show that offenders felt comfortable enough with their probation officer in a one to one setting and said that they could trust them. It could be argued that this ability to trust their probation officer enabled them to open up and become actively engaged in the change process. This engagement would appear to be the turning point for offenders. Being offered the space to talk and to feel listened to was also important to offenders.

*I felt no pressure whatsoever. I wasn't being directed in any direction I didn't want to go. This thing, you have to get a job or you have to do this or that, there was none of that there. I felt listened to. There was a rapport there and a feeling of trust and I knew no matter what I said it would be held in confidence so I could open up and explain exactly how I felt (Offender B).*

Even though they were Court ordered to attend the probation service, the participants appear to value being involved in the planning of their supervision and having a role in meeting their own needs. They indicated that they did not like being dictated to and this approach would appear only to deepen their mistrust of authority. This fuels the attitude of 'I'll-go-in-tell-her-what-she-wants-to-hear-and-then-go'.

The effective principle of pro-social modelling was also highlighted as significant in this study. One offender who was deeply mistrustful of the probation Service found that once he began the process of opening up to his probation officer he was frequently met with praise. He recalled

*We did some good stuff and she'd say 'fair play to you'. People are usually there to knock you but something simple like saying fair play to you meant a lot to me, so basically I got on well with her (offender f).*

Trotter (1999) found that pro social modelling was one of the key effective approaches to practice. In this case, when the offender had openly discussed issues with his probation officer and described how he would or had addressed a situation in a pro-social way, he received praise for doing so. While a simple phrase will suffice, it was experienced by the offender as momentous.

#### **4.7 Individual work versus Group work.**

As already stated, this study yielded data from both offenders who were placed on a probation supervision bond and met with their probation officer on a one to one

basis, and also offenders who were placed on a probation supervision bond and who were referred to a group work programme in order to complete modules in offence focused work, anger management and addiction awareness. In conducting this study, a number of differences were observed between both categories of participants in terms of their experiences of probation supervision. The respondents who did individual programmes with their probation officer appeared to be more concerned about their addiction and recovery than their criminal behaviour. When considering their answers regarding their motivation to change and their attitudes to crime, they attributed their offending behaviour solely to their addiction and appeared to believe that once they had addressed their addiction they had somehow simultaneously addressed their criminal attitudes. While there is an obvious link between drug use and crime, it is not in itself a cause of crime.

However, participants from the focus group who were attending the group work programme appeared to have a deeper insight into their own criminal behaviour, their risk areas and how to address/avoid those risks. As they were adhering to a specific accredited programme targeting criminogenic risks it was easier to examine exactly what offenders had done while on probation supervision.

Those on individual programmes also attributed their change in motivation or attitude to something within themselves or an external programme such as A.A. Those on the group work programme, on the other hand, attributed their change in attitude directly to the work they had done with the Probation Service.

Nonetheless, consideration must be given to a number of possible reasons for these apparent differences. Group dynamics play an important role in addressing criminal behaviour. As the groups consist of people who are largely within the same age range and social background, the peer support and ability to challenge each other can have a bigger impact on a person's views than on a one to one basis where the probation officer is seen to have a mainly monitoring role. The group work programme is also an intensive supervision programme where participants are expected to attend twice a week, therefore the level of frequency that they attend may also help to maintain their focus. It is also provided with sufficient staff resources and financial support.

Those on individual programmes, however, are expected to attend their probation officer in relation to their risk level. For example, high risk people should be seen on a weekly basis, whereas lower risk offenders may be seen once a month. However, the frequency of contact between offender and probation officer is dependant on their resources and other demands on staff such as court duty, community liaison and administrative duties.

## **Chapter Five**

### **5. CONCLUSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The main aim of this study was to examine the experiences of offenders on probation supervision orders to ascertain whether or not it was a valuable rehabilitation experience and if they felt the Probation Service effectively targeted their offending behaviour. In order to do this, this study has focused on a number of key research questions. These were:

1. What does the research say is effective in reducing offending behaviour?
2. What have offenders found helpful when on probation supervision?
3. Do probation supervision orders influence motivations and attitudes to crime?

Chapter Two presented the literature on effective practice and looked at a number of theories, techniques and skills that have been found by research to be the most effective in reducing offending behaviour. Chapter Three outlined the methodology used to collect data and how it would be processed. Chapter Four examined the results from the interviews that were undertaken and presented those findings with analysis and discussion. This chapter will now collate all of that information by summing up the main points of learning from the research and relate it back to the research question to see to what degree the objectives were met.

## **5.2 Summary of Main Conclusions.**

### Role of probation officer

Following the sequence of the findings chapter, the first main conclusion that can be taken from this research is how probation supervision is viewed by offenders. This study has established that offenders' experience of being on probation supervision as a whole has been quite positive. It was found that probation officers are explicit in their role clarification that they have a supervisory role and if the conditions of the court order are not met, the offender's case will be returned to the courts. All offenders that participated in this research had a clear understanding of the consequences of non-compliance. However, offenders did not appear to be as clear in their understanding about the therapeutic/rehabilitative side of probation supervision, therefore, it seems that probation officers were not as clear about the caring or therapeutic aspect to their role. Probation officers have a defined role as helper as well as controller but apparently do not make it as explicit to offenders that they are there to help. Overemphasis on the supervisory part of the role has led some offenders to believe that probation officers cannot be trusted and this appears to have resulted in offenders being surprised to find out that they were actually there to provide help.

Promoting the therapeutic side of the probation officers role, may serve to dispel mistrust and anxiety, and encourage offenders to engage with the service. The results of this study found that offenders were more likely to engage and address their most problematic issues when they felt they were in a safe and confidential environment, where they would be offered a space to talk and be listened to, and could be honest about how bad things were for them without negative consequences. They also responded well to praise. According to offenders in this study, the experience of receiving praise has served to create the foundation blocks of a good working relationship with his probation officer.

### Effectiveness of probation supervision.

This study also explored the areas that the Probation Service helped offenders with the most while they were on supervision. The main finding that emerged was that probation supervision provided them with a routine, structure and focus, which in turn has served to support them in living a pro-social lifestyle. This is a significant finding in that it adds to the knowledge base of what works with offenders in terms of staying away from criminal activities.

The importance of providing a routine cannot be underestimated. Offenders in this study have reported that they frequently have difficulties in keeping busy. This has also been reflected in the work of Andrews & Bonta (1995) who researched extensively into the causes of crime and how they should be targeted. This led to them drawing up the risk assessment instrument presented in Chapter One- the Level of Service Inventory Revised (LSIR). One of the areas they included as a dynamic risk factor was how a person makes use of their leisure time. Being at a loose end or having a lack of pro-social activities, when combined with other factors leaves a person at risk of becoming involved in further criminal behaviour.

Participants in the study also reported that probation supervision helped them to focus on the consequences of becoming further involved in criminal activity. This was cited as one of the main influences for not committing a new offence when faced with an opportunity for re offending. Participants admitted that they frequently came across opportunities where they could steal something or resort to a behaviour that they knew would get them into trouble. However, they also stated that having to face their probation officer in Court or their office with a new charge sheet before the Court at times, helped them to think through their actions and diverted them from anti social behaviour.

A number of respondents attributed this directly to the work they did individually with their probation officer or as part of an offence focused group. This would therefore suggest that where probation officers apply offence focused programmes to target a specific risk, it can be experienced by offenders as an effective method to deepen their insight into their own behaviour and subsequently reduce offending

behaviour. The principles of effective practice outlined in Chapter Two identified that probation officers should specify which risk factor needs to be targeted and how they will do that and then help the offender to critically review their own offending behaviour.

Relationship based practice is crucial in addressing offending behaviour.

The Probation Service is currently operating in a climate of change. This period of change has implemented a number of new service guidelines in terms of the community, the courts and the prison, including the development of the Young Persons' Probation Service, in order to improve service delivery to all of probation's clients and customers. These include offenders, the Courts and the Community. In June 2006 the Probation Service commissioned external consultants to undertake a review of Probation Service delivery. One of the key findings in the audit was that in terms of client supervision they found that

*Overall there appears to be a low level of consistent contact with offenders. If this is the case it would indicate little prospect for lasting change in clients (Executive Summary, 2006:7).*

The findings of this study would appear to support the view that offenders need to be seen frequently in order to provide the structure and focus as mentioned above. More importantly, this study found that the single most important factor in an offender's motivation to change his behaviour and engage in programmes with that as its purpose was their relationship with their probation officer.

As previously outlined by one of the principles of effective practice is that probation officers are more effective when they establish high quality relationships. This reflects the experiences of offenders as found by this study. They reported that when they developed a good bond with their probation officer, they began to realise that their probation officer was there to help them and this in turn led to a trusting relationship. The participants said that they 'were not in the game of trusting anybody', therefore when a probation officer did gain their trust, it was hugely

significant to offenders. They felt that once they could trust their probation Officer they were more inclined to examine their offending behaviour.

### Group Work is effective.

This piece of research interviewed six offenders in total. They had a number of things in common. They were all from a similar area in Dublin's inner city, all were male, all had District Court offences for drug or alcohol related charges and they all had a previous history of drug or alcohol abuse, and none of them had offended within the past 12 months. However, there was one striking difference between them. Three offenders were placed on a one to one probation supervision order with their probation officer and three of them were referred to a group work programme.

It emerged that the offenders that had been referred to the group work module appeared more insightful into their criminogenic risk factors and their offending behaviour. They seemed to have a clear plan of change as to how to address those risk factors, which they attributed directly to the intervention of the Probation Service. Those who were on one to one supervision, however, appeared less insightful and attributed the positive changes in their lives to group programmes outside of probation supervision such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Chapter Four looked at a number of possible explanations for these differences. These include the role of peer support, being challenged by their peers, frequency of contact, the intensive nature of the work and the resources provided.

Some consideration must be given to this point because the Probation Service in Ireland only has two such accredited group work programme in Dublin and Cork. To be truly effective in reducing offending behaviour the Probation Service needs to recognise that offenders will respond more positively to specific offence focused work that is frequent and consistent whether it is in a one to one or group setting. The added bonus of the group setting is the effect of group dynamics. Brown (1996, in Adams et al 1998:152) advocates that group work is *anti oppressive in its context, purpose, method, group relationships and behaviour.*

## **5.2 Reflection on learning.**

Having conducted a study that aimed to incorporate the views of offenders into an existing knowledge base, it is important to consider how the information yielded transfers into social work practice. Chapter two outlined the various social work skills employed by probation officers against the backdrop of effective practice and this study has sought to find out how that had been experienced by offenders. The findings from this limited study appear to be consistent with the larger pieces of research conducted in the UK and Northern Ireland. It appears that offender's derive positive benefits from being under probation supervision which helps them to make changes for the better in their lives.

While there is extensive research on what is effective practice when working with offenders, there is also a growing body of research to suggest that a person will desist from crime when a number of factors come together and these are actually outside of the principles of effective practice. These factors are age, positive social bonds and a change in self narrative. This study has demonstrated that when these factors which promote desistance are present in an offender's life, probation supervision using the principles of effective practice can subsequently provide a specific focus and support for the person. For those who are not motivated to desist from crime, probation supervision simply offers a routine and a structure which may reduce their risk of re-offending.

Coulshed & Orme (1998: 61) suggest that the involvement of service users in the design and delivery of appropriate and effective services are essential. Chapter one alluded to the Probation Service's policy on client feedback clearly suggesting that the agency has a value base that espouses user-involvement. However, there is no specific strategy in place that ensures that clients will have the opportunity to provide feedback. Hoyes & Lart (1992 quoted in Coulshed & Orme, 1998:63) suggests a number of procedural models of consultation with offenders. These involve open days, public meetings, documentary consultation, surveys, and involvement on committees or setting up forums.

However, as was experienced in conducting this research, there are difficulties in getting offenders to attend in any consultation process. It may therefore require the provision of incentives such as being clear as to how their views will be put into effect for their benefit. Coulshed and Orme (1998: 64) advocate that engaging clients in a consultation process requires each individual worker to uphold the principles of empowerment. They also make the point that empowerment practice reflects the value base of social work however it also includes concepts of 'participation, citizenship and empowerment'.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

It was hoped that this study will contribute to the current level of knowledge regarding what is most effective when working with offenders by adding the views of offenders to the debate. While this study was small in scale and limited in its scope and as a result, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of offenders, however, it hopefully has demonstrated the value of including the views of offenders in the discourse on effective probation practice.

Evidently more work needs to be done in this area with the wider offender population. Should the Probation Service fully embrace their commitment to inviting feedback from service users, there is enormous scope for developing probation practice and services through research on offenders' perspectives. Such research could include an exploration of women's experiences on probation supervision and compare that with the experience of men. It could also explore the experiences of juveniles on probation supervision, or working with long-term prisoners on life sentences, or the supervision of sex offenders in the community. As the Probation Service is in a period of restructuring and is currently evaluating its policies, it is a good time to reflect on its practice and consider the areas that need to be researched in order to be further developed in the interest of effective practice.

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[www.probation.ie](http://www.probation.ie)

## Appendix A

### **Guide questions for individual interviews and focus group.**

1. What age are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. What was your offence?
4. How many times were you on probation before?
5. What did you understand by the term 'probation supervision order'?
6. How did you feel about being placed on probation supervision?
7. Did you know what would be expected of you on probation supervision?
8. In what ways did probation supervision help you the most?
9. In what ways did probation supervision help you the least?
10. Has being on Probation changed your attitude to crime? If so, in what way?
11. Have you made any changes in your life as a result of being on probation supervision?
12. If you saw an opportunity to offend again, what would be the main thing that would stop you?
13. How would you describe your Probation officer?

## **Appendix B**

### **Transcript of Focus group on the 10/01/2007**

#### **Are you all on Probation Supervision?**

**D:** Yes, I'm on post release supervision. I was serving a sentence and I got out a bit early, and before I got released the judge made it a condition that I attend post release supervision with the probation service and whatever that entailed for that year. But I offended within 4 months of getting out and it was extended.

#### **Was it a condition that you attend the bridge project?**

**D:** No just probation, but I would prefer to be linking in here rather than just one on one. Because I was on 3 groups during the year on the original sentence that I wouldn't have done in prison or on the outside was it not that I was subject to doing it. I done offending, drug and alcohol and anger management. Not that I felt I needed all of them but if you participated, you participated and if you didn't you didn't.

**E:** I got a 3 year suspended sentence back in July. And I had been attended the Probation service for 8 months before that. They just thought that it would be a good idea that I got involved in a drug and alcohol group and anger management. Do you mind if I ask you what your offences were?

**D:** Robbery

**E:** stabbing somebody.

#### **How did you feel about being placed on Probation, did you know what to expect?**

**D:** there are a lot of myths out there about it. I have an older brother and I am the youngest of 3 bothers so over the years I have heard a lot about the probation service. And how they can hang you and how if you're attending someone that you mightn't necessarily a great relationship have with you probation officer. And in that sense then he can put you in a bad position if he wants to and they can play God with you in some situations. There were a couple of names circulated over the

years who you wouldn't want to get. Personally I haven't found it that way but I can see how some people might see it that way.

**And when you say a probation officer might play God or be out to hang you, what do you mean by that?**

**E:** Different personalities, instead of being there and giving you time that they tell you what you should be doing instead of asking you what you'd like to do. Maybe you tried it before and it didn't work.

**D:** if you don't go along with their specific ideas you're not sticking with the programme. It's not a certain criteria that they all work with they all have their own methods and ways and some have their own agendas.

**E:** I got the Probation about 4 or 5 times in the past when I was 16 and 17 and all and I don't think they ever did anything for me back then. They were interested so long as you played ball and stuck to the criteria.

**D:** I know that there were times my brothers would miss appointments and yet he'd go for 3 sessions and maybe miss one session and just out of sheer badness the probation officer would highlight the bad stuff. He was sent down on a few occasions because of a probation report. He had been put back to a probation officer that he had previously been assigned to, which I think in terms of their policy and how they do things that was wrong; he should have been given a different probation officer.

**E:** I was given a different probation officer when i was put back for a report. I don't mind though because I always seem to get a good one.

**Did you find that they all did things their own different ways?**

**E:** I never found it was hard to get a good probation report.

**D:** It's down to you as well. If you expect a good probation report you know your urines are alright, no charges. Their straight down the line with you basically you know what to expect with them. If you're putting in the work and they see that they'll give you a balanced report.

**E:** If you go to them it easy for them to know who's genuine and who's messing.

**D:** it's helped me certainly to keep on my toes. But in saying that I've never been to prison only that time in 2003 and it was a shock to the system. That changed me more that the actual aftermath. The confined space makes you readjust your life and see what's happening. That was my wake up call.

**What did you understand by the probation supervision order?**

**D:** just going in to see someone.

**E:** in the past I would have thought I'll just do the time will run out soon enough. At the moment now I'm taking a different view of it. I have got a lot out of it this time around. I'm actually talking to them now rather than just saying what they want to hear.

**D:** instead of a sentence I'll take probation any day of the week. Now if you walk out of court and say I got probation it's like a victory.

**E:** but now there's a change on my behalf that now I've opened up it easier to see the help that I could get and probably should have got years ago from the probation services had I done it right.

**So did you find the motivation to change before you came on probation?**

**E:** No it was during this time on probation.

**What was it that motivated you?**

**E:** It was giving up alcohol. I could see things a bit clearer.

**What was it that probation did that helped you?**

**D:** Put a bit of structure in your life.

**E:** Yeah, it start giving me ideas of choices, I didn't know that their was so much there. I used to think that AA was a bunch of lunatics and they were just a nosey old bats listening to me. When I first went to one I went straight to the pub after listening to some of the stories. I didn't cop onto what AA was all about and the 12 steps and all that but being on the probation service kind of opened my eyes up to what AA is all about. And about myself being an alcoholic and messed up. Where it was all bleak and black there about a year ago, it's not so bad now and things are starting to brighten up now.

**D:** Personally I find it very hard to fill time and time is an issue in terms of boredom or leading back to using drugs. I'm still young so since I left school I've always worked and I've had a drug problem over the years since I was 17 so I've had to lead a double life so to speak. SO when I'm not working I don't feel very

good about my self. I get very down sometimes in the morning when I'm in bed because I know I should be out doing something. You hear the traffic and people going to school and going to work. So being on the groups that I did, they were 10 and 12 week groups so 2 days a week.

*Offender F joins the focus group.*

**What was the best thing about being on probation?**

**D:** I didn't have to go to prison.

**E:** yeah I think so, only for the probation report that I did get. It wouldn't have helped my case anyway because I wouldn't have got probation for it. Its only because of the minor charge of drunk and disorderly that I got the probation act and that kind of added to it. They said since your on probation at the moment give us one of them probation reports and see how you're doing.

**F:** I got 30 months and if you mess up you know the story you go to prison.

**D:** It gives a focus as well if you're doing this each week.

**E:** It gives you a routine which is pretty good but the amount of times that I've had to do something for the group work programme, it serves as a reminder and it s good even coming here today's as a reminder. It keeps you focussed.

**D:** You still have your ups and downs but as long as you're showing up and being part of the programmes you're seeing to be doing what you had to do.

**F:** If it wasn't for this you would go straight back to doing what you were doing before.

**Do you feel it support you in what you're doing now?**

**F:** Of course,

**D:** It's changed a lot over the years, I was known for don't go near them or they'll hang you.

It sounds like whether you get on with your probation officer or not counts for a lot.

**F:** some of them just don't have time for you and are just imposing what they want to do and they don't care what you want.

**D:** their not willing to work with you, you have to work with them. Sometimes you meet brick walls along the way.

**F:** Once I missed an appointment and I got brought back (to Court) so after that I never had any faith in them. I would just go in and tell them what they want to hear and tell them absolutely nothing because you couldn't trust them.

**E:** For the young people as well there told in court by others 'oh that's bad don't go near them'. There's people that have been through the probation service and they know the ins and outs of it.

**D:** I was warned not to near them, it was suggested in jail when I was in one of the workshops and there were other people there. I was discussing going into probation in the prison to look for temporary release and they all said you mad. Even if you do get out they'll still have a leash on you so to speak.

**Did you experience that yourself when you came to probation?**

**D:** not really, I just looked on it as I would rather be outside with a leash on me than in here with a leash on me. It doesn't seem like the probation and the prison service are in tune at all. Even if your sentenced to 3 years and are told at the end that you have to see probation, the common sense thing there to do before the person leaves the prison the probation should come on board then and come in on a monthly basis and introduce themselves so if the persons wanted to pull out of it and serve their prison sentence until the last day, they could.

**F:** I knew I had to do 30 moths of probation a week before I was due out I wasn't called to see probation.

**What was the worst thing about being on probation?**

**F:** they have a hold on you.

**D:** it your life in their hands

**Is that how it feels**

**D:** personally with my probation officer I don't feel that. I don't feel that she would necessarily pull the carpet out from under my feet. The worst thing is probably some of the groups because of some of the participants. They mightn't even be ready for the groups. They can prolong it and drag it out and just not be with it at all. There could be 8 people who would be focussed on what they're doing and 2 who'd be holding the group back.

**F:** It's not our job to be telling these people not to be like this or like that.

**E:** people have alternative motives for being there. You're trying to be honest with people and you know these people are just there because they have to be and no other reason.

**F:** I can't say to a person, don't come in like that again because that's not down to me. That's the worst thing you have to come to these thing or you go back to jail and sometimes you don't want to come in and listen to all that.

**E:** sometimes the groups are good because everyone can relate to one another and we know the stories. The stories are the same just different issues.

**D:** and after you putting up with them for a few weeks, half way through a 10 week course they're gone and your thinking all that for what.

**Has been on Probation changed you attitude to crime?**

**D:** It makes you think a little more about what you're doing.

**F:** I've done a few things before being sent on this course and you wouldn't be able to think twice, but now I find myself avoiding places where I know I'm going to get into trouble. And my probation officer, I didn't trust her, but now I'm starting to get on with her a bit and she's helped me a lot. So yeah it did help.

**E:** my criminal behaviour was surrounded by alcohol. Its part of the recovery programme that you have to keep away from your old gang

**F:** you have other people to talk to through this course that you don't think of crime.

**Is that specifically from being on probation that you think like that now?**

**F:** yes definitely. I never thought that way before so it is through this course. It's forced upon me but it's not really because you can choose to participate. I was asked to do this course so I said I'd do it but then I got a letter to say I had to do it.

**D:** In some ways you're never going to stop coming across situations where you could commit crime. It helps in that sense it helps you to put things in perspective.

**If you saw an opportunity to offend again what would be the main thing that would stop you?**

**D:** getting caught.

**F:** If I was given the choice to come here or do something else over there at the same time, I'd come here.

**E:** even after I did the anger management course, I found that brilliant. It does make you think of the consequences.

**F:** before I used to think I don't care what's going to happen, well I do now, missing Christmas, communions, and christenings

**E:** every time I got arrested I was drunk

**D:** Sometimes you can get set backs if your known by the guards and your trying to do your best and doing relatively well you can still get arrested

**E:** but once you're not in trouble anymore that stops

**D:** but some of them just love to stop you and your thinking would you ever just move on to someone else.

### **How would you describe your probation officer?**

**E:** well the new one I have at the moment I've only been with her since the beginning of December and I had someone else for over a year before that. He was very good he opened up my eyes. He only made suggestions he never said I had to do this or I had to do that. He would just put suggestions to me. It kind of grew from there, because when I first met him I didn't want to talk to him, but that changed from going in. There was a good bond in the end.

**F:** I'm the same I didn't trust them whatsoever. I would just tell tem what they want to hear and go and one day I just cam clean with her and then I started getting on good with her. I didn't realise that she was trying to help me. So I thought I'd give it a go and tell the truth to a certain extent and took it from there. We did some good stuff and she'd say 'fair play to you'. People are usually there to knock you but something simple like saying fair play so basically I got on well with her.

**E:** I said to my probation officer, I'm probably hanging my self here now and told him all about it and it was fine

**D:** you let your guard down eventually

**F:** and then when you let your guard down you say to yourself I'm probably going a bit too far there

**E:** I was going home and I thought what did you tell him all that for.

**D:** the first day I went into my probation officer and I said to her I wouldn't give her any hassle and I'd tell her everything that was going on and we worker from there.

So it sounds that it's important for probation officers to gain your trust

**D:** yeah not just dictate.

**F:** You can see through us but we can see through youse. We're in the game of not trusting anybody.