

COVID-19 Pandemic: Practitioner Reflections on Probation Practice

Sheena Norton*

Summary: The announcement of school closures on 12 March 2020, followed by the speech of An Taoiseach (the Prime Minister) on 17 March 2020, was the beginning of the public health emergency in Ireland due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It heralded the beginning of new ways of working for government services across the country. Essential frontline services and other statutory services were catapulted into developing new practices to continue engagement with service users. In line with public health guidance, the management of probation supervision from March to June 2020 was, in the main, delivered through telephone contact by practitioners who were working remotely. This paper looks at the experience and the response of staff in adapting to this new approach. It explores challenges and opportunities both personally and professionally. The opportunity for a more creative delivery of probation services in the future is set out. Service users' responses and reactions are outlined. Finally, lessons learned from this time are considered.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, probation service, practitioner, remote working, service user.

Introduction

As the reality of the pandemic unfolded through March, and in compliance with public health guidance, Probation staff were required to work from home. In these changed circumstances, telephone contact was to be the primary method of engaging with service users. Offices across the country could open only in exceptional and limited circumstances. These arrangements were put in place to support the release and resettlement of people in prison and to manage any potential crises with high-risk offenders on community supervision. Probation work in this uncharted territory continued, with Probation Officers striving to deliver the best possible service. During a time of global stress, pressure and fear, the increased

* Sheena Norton is a Probation Officer based in the North East (email stnorton@probation.ie).

vulnerabilities of those on supervision became apparent. Staff were faced with the task of continuing to address previously established targets of intervention whilst responding to needs for additional supports, in other areas and in different ways. At a time of unprecedented change and challenge to existing practice, it is important to track and reflect on the impact of this upheaval through the experiences and observations from practice. In addition to the author's experience, this paper is also informed by the views of eight Probation Officers across two teams and a Community Service Supervisor. Their responses were obtained through structured conversations and written feedback. Questions posed revolved around the personal and professional impact, the impact on service users, relevant supports, and the learning to take forward.

Personal and professional challenges

Probation Officers, as trained social workers, recognise the importance of balancing issues of care and control as part of case management. The organisation was mindful of its public service duty to uphold and support the communication of government health messages in working with service users. A summary guidance document was issued to support Probation Officers in relaying key messages and explaining the implications of this new way of living, drawing from the principles of pro-social modelling and effective problem solving. Empowering people to develop coping strategies to keep safe during lockdown was considered pivotal in all probation work. Practitioners recognised that a level of stability, in an otherwise unstable time, had to be established before there was a refocus on individual criminogenic risk factors.

A range of issues was identified by personnel working from home. Colleagues admitted to feelings of uncertainty, concern and some degrees of anxiety for their own families and personal networks, particularly at the beginning of the restrictions. There were many often-conflicting demands to manage, from childcare, home schooling, caring for vulnerable and 'cocooning' family members to wider family responsibilities. It was a juggling act at times, to balance the care and safety needs of dependent members of the family with the expressed needs of service users. To counteract this and fulfil work commitments, many adopted a more flexible schedule than typical office hours. It was often easier to make contact with other professional agencies during morning periods and with service users in late afternoon and

evening periods. In some situations, staff worked on a Saturday when other available supports for childcare could be utilised.

Many staff reported the desire to work more productively in the early stages when remote access to the IT system was not available to all staff. Whilst supervision requirements could be fulfilled through telephone contact, the inability to maintain case records and adjust case management plans was a source of frustration. As courts were adjourning all non-urgent cases, the need for the preparation of new and updated assessment reports during April and May was reduced. This freed up some time to focus on other administrative duties, which was facilitated by the welcome extension of remote access to all staff in May 2020.

Adjusting to the sudden instruction not to go to the office was challenging for some, and it took time to develop a routine and establish a new way of working from home. Where people had the advantage of a designated area in the home, such as a study, this allowed for some level of division between home and work life. The majority found it somewhat more challenging to manage the physical space in the home for both work and other responsibilities, like home schooling.

Impact on service users

In accordance with Probation Service guidelines, Probation Officers made contact with all those on their caseload to advise them by phone or letter of alternative ways of working. Some officers also chose to put this in writing, as it represented a more formal approach, reiterating obligations for supervision and providing a solid basis to promote and support compliance. Staff were careful to ensure that all service users had relevant contact numbers, including those of line managers.

Probation Officers contacted reported that people reacted well to the changed supervision format and engaged well, particularly at the initial stages of adjustment. Some described 'going back to the basics', such as role clarification, to reinforce the importance of maintaining good contact through this new format for supervision. As the situation evolved and, with that, the realisation that matters would extend beyond a couple of weeks, clients began to expect 'the phone call', and some chose to initiate contact themselves for support. Calls became longer and conversations more intense as issues began to emerge and more in-depth discussions took place. Many reported that the success of supervision by phone was intrinsically linked to

the quality of the pre-existing worker–client relationship. In cases where a therapeutic relationship was well established, the transition to phone supervision was, according to colleagues, further enhanced. There was feedback that some service users appeared more at ease than in the traditional office setting, allowing for deeper levels of engagement. This raises the interesting question of the importance of tailoring supervision modalities to the needs of individuals.

Colleagues observed that women were more likely than men to talk openly on the telephone, more likely to share their experiences, and more able to acknowledge the support from the contact. Working with female service users required adoption of a gender-sensitive approach, in recognition of their specific needs and in accordance with existing Service guidelines. Many male service users, on the other hand, required some level of coaxing to ‘open up’ on the phone. It was generally reported that most service users were comfortable with the contact, understood it to be a supervision requirement and expressed appreciation. They welcomed contact and guidance with queries regarding issues such as social welfare payment post release and liaison with the Irish Prison Service in relation to conditions of ‘temporary release’.¹ Some service users valued the opportunity to talk about what was happening for them and the stresses encountered during such strange times. As one Probation Officer put it:

Obviously it has to be accepted that there are major limitations in what can be achieved but if anything it has been a reminder that maintaining the ‘client relationship’ and providing support, information, using counselling skills, motivating and advocating on their behalf remains the crucial part of our job and this can still be achieved (with some limitations) over the phone.

Similar to staff working from home, clients equally had family issues and responsibilities which they were managing. Some did not have the personal space to take phone calls — there were privacy issues, with other people present in the home, which in turn had an impact upon meaningful engagement.

¹ Temporary and conditional release from prison in accordance with the Criminal Justice (Temporary Release of Prisoners) Act 2003.

Key themes covered during supervision process

A range of risk-assessment tools are used to support Probation practice in estimating risk levels and to identify targets for change. This allows for structured interventions to be identified in the Case Management Plan. These measures support and inform the effective management of rehabilitation activities/programmes with due regard to community and public safety. This continued to be the template adopted by Probation Officers for maintaining the supervision process during the COVID-19 period. The level of phone contact reflected the identified levels for risk of re-offending

Key themes covered during the supervision process included:

- Addiction supports, relapse prevention or harm-reduction techniques. Referrals continued to avail of community-based services and residential treatment programmes, with staff supporting clients through this process and advocating on their behalf. Some clients used the time to engage in reflection with their Probation Officer and move forwards in the Motivational Wheel of Change² to action phases. This is evidenced in the fact that four clients from the sample workloads entered residential treatment during the period.
- Mental health was frequently mentioned, even in some cases where this had not previously been a concern. Supervision explored techniques for stress and anxiety management during the period, including the importance of maintaining a routine and taking exercise. In a small number of cases, Probation Officers were proactive in liaising with statutory mental health services where there was a clear need.
- Supervision of people convicted of sexual offences continued to address key areas as identified in risk assessments. Forefront to the mind of supervising officers was how the impact of increased social isolation in this category could contribute to increased risk in the community. For some people, Probation Officers were their only source of interpersonal contact.
- Supervision of domestic violence offenders continued to address their particular risk factors. There was a recognition that the period of restricted movements outside the home heightened risks for victims and this required a particular focus. In response to this, there was a high level of collaboration with partners that provide group work

² Stages of Change Model (Prochaska and Diclemente, 1983)

programmes. Project workers had increased their levels of remote contact with participants and continued to focus on the material from the programme in conjunction with supervision interventions.

- Significant issues arose for those involved in delivery of Young Person's Probation.³ Young people under the age of 18 and even young adults were reported as the most difficult to engage. This is perhaps reflective of a generational gap where a phone is more typically used by these cohorts for texting rather than conversation. Where teams had access to the services of Probation-funded project workers, it was possible to increase contact, support and additional supervision through these mentor workers. Social media platforms were often employed by project workers to engage with young people. As many young people are more familiar, comfortable and expressive using such technology, Probation-funded project workers could then liaise with Probation Officers in relation to any emerging risks and needs. Colleagues expressed concern that this group's general lack of adherence to public health guidelines might be challenged by law enforcement, leading to escalation and the danger of further court appearances. Consequently, there was a heightened awareness of the need to explore and encourage socially responsible behaviour with this cohort.

Overall, Probation staff reported employing similar strategies and methods to those applied in the office setting. Crisis Intervention, Task-Centred, Motivational Interviewing, Relapse Prevention, Harm Reduction and Brief Intervention approaches continued to underpin practice.

Support for practice

Access to the office, albeit on a limited basis, continued to be a necessity at times for the safe management of the building and to enable the use of scanning and printing facilities. A level of access was needed, in particular, for the preparation of probation reports on those in custody, as these were a priority for completion. The open style of communication employed by managers assisted staff in responding to challenges with workload management, particularly during the period when wider remote access was awaited.

Strong and participative leadership skills were evident. There was regular contact from line managers, offering support and exploration of new ways of

³Young Persons Probation is a specialised division of the Probation Service that operates in urban areas, working with children and young people who appear before the courts.

problem solving to continue to meet Service objectives and goals. Frequent updates from Probation senior management and the human resources section provided clarity and cohesion during a rapidly evolving and changing public health situation. The publication on the intranet of a suite of documents to guide and inform practice supported practitioner confidence and reinforced standards and purpose across the Service.

The extension of remote access to the Probation IT system for all staff, enhanced productivity and facilitated more efficient internal and external communications. The use of teleconferencing for professional meetings was also considered a support, allowing for the continuation of team meetings and interagency collaboration and networking.

A crucial support to practice was the existence prior to the pandemic of established relationships with Service colleagues, criminal justice stakeholders and other statutory and non-statutory agencies. Well-established and productive networking practices and interagency collaboration meant that these professional relationships could support optimum service delivery. Partnership networks were regarded as crucial, with staff maintaining strong links with colleagues in An Garda Síochána (police), the Irish Prison Service, Court Services and other statutory services. This allowed for information flow to continue in a coherent manner throughout the period. Other good practices, such as the digital retention of updated service-user consent forms, ensured the continuation of third-party collaboration that was compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Every crisis an opportunity: Learning for the future

It was agreed across all conversations that remote contact cannot replace the value of face-to-face work with service users. In its absence during such a unique period, it was felt that whilst telephone contact had many advantages, the utilisation of a wider range of technologies enhanced and added to the overall supervision process. Some colleagues suggested that in particular contexts and with particular client groups, digital tools could usefully augment traditional methods of working.

It is evident that remote working will continue for longer than anticipated at the start of the crisis. Public health guidelines will continue to require a blend of remote and office work as Probation offices re-open to the public and some face-to-face contact with service users resumes. The recent investment in IT infrastructure has opened up new possibilities, providing an

important platform for further developments. It has become evident that many aspects of our work can be completed on a remote basis, and a strategic approach to this new reality that incorporates elements of reorientation and training will ensure the ongoing effective and efficient delivery of Service. Building on the experiences of recent months, there are now opportunities for further conversations to explore new methodologies that enhance service delivery, maintain productivity and support staff wellbeing.

Colleagues identified that a key lesson from the pandemic experience was the reminder of the importance of remaining focused on the very basics of probation work, building on the 'relationship with clients' and adapting a 'flexible approach'. When there was less focus on such demands as assessment reports, creation of case management plans and supervision agreements, 'you are left', in the words of one Probation Officer, 'with the relationship you had started, trying to maintain it and develop it'. This is in no way to suggest that these aspects of the job are not vital and critical to probation work and the effective management of offenders in the community. However, the shift in emphasis seemed to allow for more reflective practice and more person-centred engagement with clients, reminding us of many of our core social work values.

COVID-19 may be with us for a long period, and society as a whole needs to implement new ways of being. Working collaboratively and creatively, the Probation Service adapted to the challenges presented. New operational arrangements were developed to support work practices. Appropriate measures were put in place to protect the health and wellbeing of staff, service users and the general public. Staff at all grades were committed to the development of new and innovative work practices, maintaining and building on the momentum that the crisis demanded from us. While the crisis was neither anticipated nor welcome, it has undoubtedly released new energy, reframed productivity and, somewhat counterintuitively, remote working has reinforced and highlighted the strength and unity of purpose across the Probation Service.

Reference

- Prochaska, J. and DiClemente, C. (1983), 'Stages and processes of self-change in smoking: Towards an integrative model of change', *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology*, vol. 51, pp. 390–395