

# Developing an Irish Offender Supervision Framework: A Whole System Approach

Ioan Durnescu, Margaret Griffin and John Scott\*

**Summary:** There is increasing research evidence that the skilled interventions of Probation Officers, based on core principles, can reduce recidivism and facilitate the onset and ongoing maintenance of desistance (Bogue *et al.*, 2007; Raynor *et al.*, 2014; Bonta *et al.*, 2011; Burrell and Rhine, 2013). Arising from the research, a number of practice models have been developed to assist in the translation of these core principles of evidence-informed practice into interventions that can be applied in probation settings. The Irish Probation Service reviewed a number of these practice models, before determining that a bespoke model that reflected the Irish legislative, cultural, policy and practice context was required. This article will outline the background to the decision of the Probation Service to introduce a bespoke model of supervision, the Irish Offender Supervision Framework (IOSF), and it will give a brief account of the processes which were undertaken to arrive at an agreed IOSF. The theoretical underpinnings of the IOSF and the research evidence that supports it will also be described. The authors conclude by reflecting on the challenges of introducing a new model into the Irish Probation Service.

**Keywords:** Offender Supervision Framework (OSF), evidence-informed practice, desistance, recidivism.

## Background

The 1907 Probation of Offenders Act introduced an order enabling Probation Officers to 'advise, assist, and befriend' offenders with the goal of helping them to reform and desist from crime. By the 1930s, in response to growing confidence in the efficacy of rehabilitation, 'treatment'-based community correction interventions grew (Crow, 2001). Probation Officers became recognised as 'experts', capable of 'diagnosing, assessing, and intervening in

\* Ioan Durnescu is a professor at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, University of Bucharest (email: ioan.durnescu@unibuc.ro). Margaret Griffin is a probation officer who works as the Regional Manager in the south west of Ireland (email: mmgriffin@probation.ie). John Scott is a former Chief Probation Officer and is currently associate professor at De Montfort University (email: john.scott@velialtd.co.uk).

the personal and social factors assumed to lie behind offending behaviour' (Chui and Nellis, 2003, p. 5).

In the 1970s, an influential critique of the rehabilitative ideal was beginning to emerge. In a seminal article, based on his analysis of research conducted into the efficacy of offender rehabilitation programmes, Robert Martinson concluded that 'with few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism' (Martinson, 1974, p. 25). This critique contributed to the emergence of a 'nothing works' discourse in community corrections (McNeill, 2006).

It was clear that for probation to remain relevant it would need to develop a credible response to the 'nothing works' discourse. 'Rehabilitation' itself was no longer construed as the problem, but rather the inconsistent, unfocused and theoretically anodyne manner in which it was pursued in practice (Raynor, 2003). An argument was emerging, supported by a growing body of research, that certain forms of intervention, if planned and implemented properly, could prove effective in reducing recidivism (*ibid.*).

What emerged from the 'What Works' literature was the need for structured, standardised and evidence-based offender 'programmes' underpinned by a set of core principles, commonly referred to as the RNR principles; Risk classification; identifying criminogenic Needs and attending to the issue of Responsivity (Andrews and Bonta, 1994; Chui 2003). Briefly, the RNR model proposes that individuals who pose the highest risk should get the highest level of intervention (risk), interventions should target offenders' needs that contribute to offending (needs), and interventions should be delivered in ways that match the learning styles of the service user (responsivity). The dissemination of the 'What Works' research was followed by the emergence of an abundance of offending-behaviour programmes based on cognitive behavioural approaches, underpinned by the RNR principles and predominately delivered to groups of service users with the aid of training and manuals to ensure programme integrity (Chui, 2003; Raynor, Ugwudike and Vanstone, 2014).

Despite the emphasis on cognitive behavioural group programmes, most probation work continues to be delivered by individual Probation Officers in one-to-one contact with people under probation supervision (Raynor *et al.*, 2014). In the last twenty years, this one-to-one contact has become a focus for research, a central question being whether or not the skills Probation Officers use in their individual work makes a material difference to recidivism rates and other positive outcomes for service users (*ibid.*).

Findings from research in Canada, England, Australia and Jersey concluded that where probation practice is more skilful, reconvictions are reduced (Raynor *et al.*, 2014). The key message emerging from the research is that if staff focus on the right issues, in the right way and with the right people, they can have a profound impact on recidivism (Bonta *et al.*, 2008). Reductions in recidivism, of between 15% and 20%, attributable to the interventions of staff, have been highlighted in the literature (Burrell and Rhine, 2013).

The research conducted by Raynor and his colleagues in Jersey identified nine skill clusters which, when used by Probation Officers, were positively associated with significant reductions in reconviction rates, with two skill clusters reaching statistical significance: 'structuring skills' and 'relationship skills'. Structuring skills refers to the capacity of Probation Officers to purposefully and intentionally influence change in the thinking and/or behaviour of service users. Relationship skills refers to the ability to build positive relationships with service users, helping to engender hope for the future and belief in the individual's capacity to change (Raynor *et al.*, 2014). In addition to finding that more skilful practice is important in probation work, Raynor and his colleagues also determined that the requisite skills 'can be developed through conscious attention and specific training' (*ibid.* at p. 245).

The Irish Probation Service, incorporating the learning from Jersey and further afield, started planning to implement a 'supervision framework' for Probation Officers working with service users (Probation Service, 2016). A supervision framework would structure the contact, and the content of the contact, between worker and client, foregrounding the intentional use of the skills identified as making a difference to outcomes.

## **Why now?**

Every day in Ireland, Probation Officers (POs) manage up to 7,000 offenders on court-related supervision in the community (Probation Service, 2017), providing a unique opportunity to intervene positively in the lives of offenders to reduce recidivism, support desistance, decrease further harm to the public and promote the social integration of offenders. It was recognised within the Service that for this potential to be realised, probation practice needed to be informed by the best available evidence about what is effective in working positively with offenders to reduce reoffending and support desistance.

The first recidivism report completed by the Irish Government's Central Statistics Office on a cohort of probationers from 2007 found a recidivism

rate of 37.2% (Probation Service, 2012), and this figure has remained relatively static for the subsequent years for which figures are available (CSO). The Probation Service recognised that evidence-informed practice has an important role in achieving further reductions to that figure.

While evidence-informed practices, such as validated risk assessments, motivational work and cognitive behavioural programmes, had been introduced in the Service, the Probation Service was aware of the need for a more structured and consistent approach to practice. There was a concern that, while investment had been made in adopting and using assessment tools, supervision and interventions, which should follow through from accurate assessments, had not been given the same attention. Probation practice was at risk of being patchy and inconsistent across the country.

Although there were no external pressures on the Probation Service to introduce change, the timing of introducing a new offender supervision framework was influenced by a number of external factors. The improved national economic outlook in 2018/2019 enabled the recommencement of recruitment, which had not been possible because of the economic recession; 50 new Probation Officers were appointed over the past few years, with more new staff expected in 2020 and beyond. The anticipation of a new Community Sanctions Bill, which provides structure, clarity of purpose and external oversight of probation practice, was also a motivating factor for the Executive Leadership Team of the Probation Service.

There was also a drive within the Service, both from the frontline staff and the leadership of the organisation, to get the best outcomes for offenders and the community, so that the Strategic Plan's statement of 'One Vision, One Team, One Standard' would be a reality across the country.

What was needed was a comprehensive Offender Supervision Framework to weave all the existing evidence-informed practices into a cohesive whole, enabling the Probation Service to meet its moral and operational imperative to be both effective and accountable. It was also recognised that most probation supervision continued to be delivered through one-to-one contact between the Probation Officer and the client. While significant attention had been paid to using formal risk assessment tools and a strengthened approach to case management within the Service, it was timely to throw some light and put some structure on the 'black box' of supervision.

## The review process

The Learning and Development Unit was tasked with conducting an exploratory scoping exercise to identify an 'off the peg' Offender Supervision Framework that was suitable for implementation in an Irish context. The proposed OSF needed to meet a number of key objectives. It needed to:

1. Build on already well-established good practice within the Service;
2. Be underpinned by empirical evidence;
3. Provide a framework for a consistent and accountable approach to offender supervision across the Service;
4. Support staff to further develop practice and deliver effective interventions for offenders;
5. Provide mechanisms for the measurement and evaluation of interventions delivered by the Service; and
6. Enable the Service to meet stakeholders' expectations for effectiveness and accountability.

In determining what OSF would best match the needs of the Probation Service, a review of the literature on the effective supervision of offenders was conducted, and three models were reviewed in detail:

1. Strategic Training In Corrections (STICs) (Bonta *et al.*, 2010)
2. New Model for Probation and Parole: Ramsey County Model (RCCCD) (Bogue and O'Connor, 2013)
3. Skills for Effective Engagement and Development (SEED) (Sorsby *et al.*, 2014).

Each of the three models was considered under the following key headings: context; outline and description; theoretical underpinnings; research and evaluation; training and development implications; and compatibility and fit within the Irish context.

All three models have significant areas in common: the use of validated risk assessment tools; the focus on the relationship between the Probation Officer and the client as a key factor in fostering change; the need to have structured, planned sessions with clients; the incorporation of motivational techniques to promote readiness to change.

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All three models have particular strengths:

- STICS is embedded in the Risk/Needs/Responsivity (RNR) model of correctional treatment, which has good empirical support. It is essentially a training programme designed to change the behaviour of Probation Officers towards greater adherence to the RNR principles in their contact with offenders. The skills required of Probation Officers are explicit and can be learned; clients of the trained staff who applied these skills had a 15% lower two-year recidivism rate than staff not trained in STICS (Bonta *et al.*, 2010).
- RCCCD sees assessment not as an event but as an ongoing process, and it provides for Probation Officers attending to crises in offenders' lives. RCCCD pays attention to the benefits of social support for offenders in their change journey, and it fuses the evidence-based practice of cognitive-behavioural interventions with an appreciation of the wider social and economic needs of clients. RCCCD also recognises the complex needs of offenders, and emphasises the need for workers to use their knowledge and skills to broker essential services for clients to ensure that their non-criminogenic needs are met.
- SEEDS brings together insights from the two dominant paradigms in offender management: Desistance and 'What Works'. It places importance on working collaboratively with clients to identify needs, and it aims to counter overly prescriptive practice by enhancing practitioners' capacity for exercising professional discretion.

Having reviewed the literature, and examined the three OSFs mentioned above, it was evident that there was a strong cogent argument for the adoption of an OSF in the Service. However, no single model examined, in its entirety, met all of the cultural, contextual and practice requirements of the Probation Service.

The recommendation from the review was to engage an external 'subject expert' to work with an internal group in the Service to design a bespoke OSF for the Irish Probation Service.

## **The Offender Supervision Framework design project**

Following an international competitive tendering process, Velia Ltd<sup>1</sup> was chosen to undertake the task of designing a bespoke Irish Offender

<sup>1</sup> The Velia team members were John Stafford, Ioan Durnescu and Esther Montero, with John Scott as the project lead.

Supervision Framework for the Probation Service. Over the months from February to June 2019, Velia set about designing the IOSF collaboratively with staff, building consensus within the Service for the need for the IOSF and creating excitement about, and commitment to, the proposed change.

Velia's task was to consider existing practice and explore how a new design could incorporate the best of the new methods with the traditions upon which the Irish Probation Service was established. All the members of the Velia team came from outside the Irish probation setting, so although there would be fresh international perspectives, it was important that the project was characterised throughout by listening to staff and learning about what already worked well in the Irish context.

It was vital to agree with the leadership of the Irish Probation Service that the project approach matched their expectations, and that the proposals for engaging with staff would work. Essentially, the Executive Leadership Team gave unfettered access to staff and clients across the country. Through the mechanism of a Working Group composed of managers and staff, they enabled the project to proceed rapidly with high levels of support and cooperation.

The Working Group co-ordinator and her team managed the logistics and practical arrangements for eight intensive visits. The activities that took place included: visits to 12 probation offices for team meetings; 16 workshops involving over 170 staff; interviews with ten clients; observations of client interviews with supervisors; a file-reading exercise; sessions with specific staff groups (CS supervisors, admin staff, sex offender supervisors, prison staff, Restorative Justice and Victim Services); meetings with judges, partner organisations, stakeholders; a meeting with the Trade Union; two symposiums attended by about 160 participants in Cavan and Dublin; working sessions with Senior Probation Officers and regional managers; meetings with the Executive Leadership Team, the Senior Management Team and individually; planning meetings with the Working Group and regular liaison meetings.

The design process for the project was based upon the RIBA<sup>2</sup> stages for architecture projects — 1. Brief, 2. Definition, 3. Concept Design, 4. Developed Design, 5. Technical Design, 6. Report. Each visit aimed to provide the material to progress to the next stage.

The starting point was to agree a working definition for the word 'framework':

<sup>2</sup> RIBA refers to the Royal Institute of British Architects.

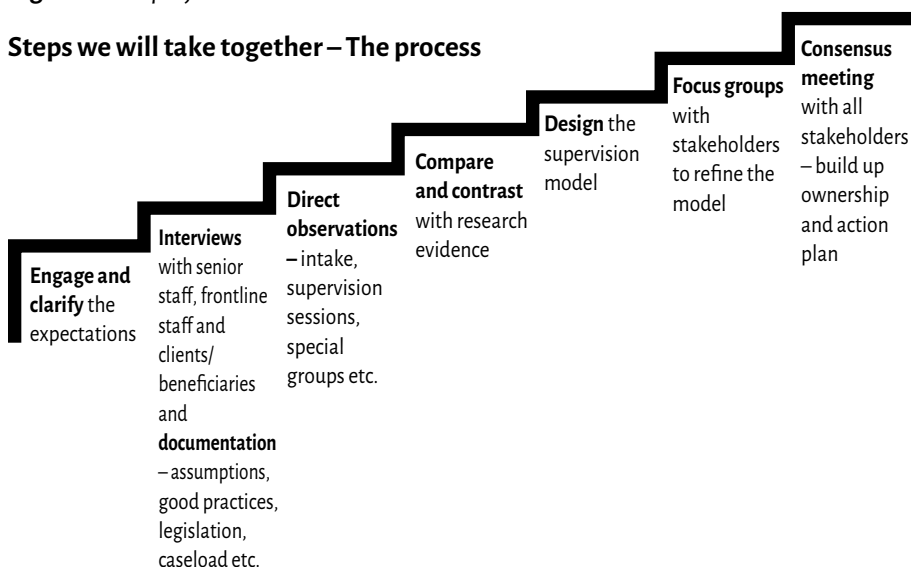
'The Offender Supervision Framework is the essential supporting structure for supervising offenders in Ireland.'

The project aimed to create a framework that was simple, that could be implemented throughout the Service, and that allowed the Probation Officer space to practise effectively within agreed structures — an image that helped the thinking was how tent poles created the living space for a tent.

The methods involved a lot of active listening, stimulated by workshops and asking the right questions of clients, staff, managers and partner organisations. Figure 1 shows the methods proposed at the outset of the project.

**Figure 1.** *The project outline*

### Steps we will take together – The process



As the project developed, some modifications to the process were agreed with the Executive Leadership Team and the Working Group Co-ordinator — workshops were used rather than focus groups and the confirmatory events were with staff in professional symposiums in Cavan and Dublin, rather than a single consensus meeting with all stakeholders. In addition, Velia undertook a whole staff survey to test acceptance of the OSF and willingness to adopt it across the country.

The principles of the approach remained unaltered through the 20 weeks of the design project:



- *Working in Partnership with the Working Group* — involving staff and managers in developing the framework and presenting options
- *Listening* — engaging with staff, management, stakeholders, service users
- *Asking basic questions* — sharing ideas, findings and thinking
- *Building on the good that exists* — identifying strengths and quality work
- *Involving stakeholders and partners* — seeking the views of Probation's many active and valued partners in the community
- *Placing the work in a criminal justice context* — focusing on the supervisor role and the offender's experience.

An inspiring image for the Velia team was of the famous Samuel Beckett Bridge in Dublin — designed by a Spanish architect from Seville, Santiago Calatrava; constructed by a joint venture in Rotterdam; and involving civil engineers and project managers from Roughan & O'Donovan, Irish consulting engineers. A simple design delivered by an international partnership that does the job every day for thousands of people, using the motif of the Irish harp: this is exactly what the project team and the Working Group wanted to achieve together.

### ***The context***

No justice organisation operates in isolation from the social, political and economic context within which it operates. Velia invited the senior managers of the Service to undertake PESTLE<sup>3</sup> exercises, which are designed to assess the environment in which a company or organisation is operating. All senior managers were invited to undertake the exercise, so it provided a 'step back opportunity' to scan the current operational setting for Probation — a Point A, which will make repeating the exercise in future years interesting and a helpful method of monitoring trends and influences upon the Service. The results, reflecting the views of participants about the priorities for Probation in their current context, are published in the project's background report, but the main contextual 'drivers for change' were identified as:

*Politics:* Department of Justice and Equality transformation — and increased accountability

<sup>3</sup> PESTLE is an analysis template and an acronym of the headings used for the 'drivers for change' in this paragraph – see example developed by CIPD 20 2 20 (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development website).

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*Economy:* Brexit — long-term impact and uncertainty — recruitment issues

*Social:* Ageing population — more diverse society — population growth

*Technology:* Slow development of ICT in Probation — lack of investment — access to better information — big data

*Legal:* Community Sanctions Bill — delays — New Agency status

*Environment:* Commuting issues — flexible working conditions — remote working and ICT — the need for Probation to be greener — remote rural offices.

Other organisational contextual perspectives, which need to be factored into understanding the Irish Probation Service and where it fits into the spectrum of international probation services, were highlighted in the engagement phase of the design project:

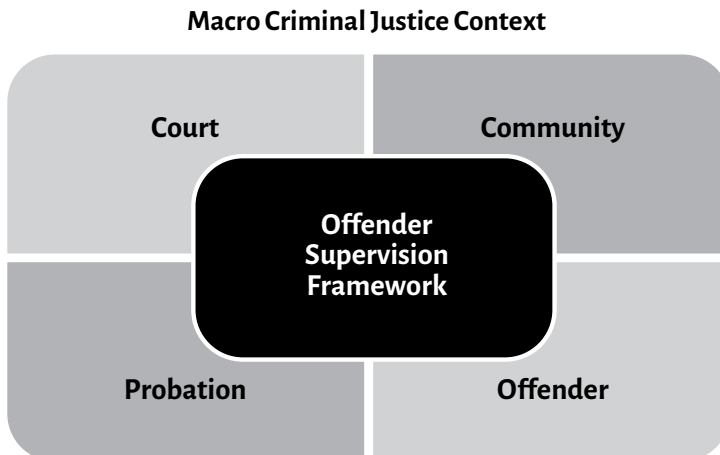
- Probation had been subject to the same public sector pressures as other Irish organisations as a result of the 2008 banking crisis, which had led to cuts and a real-terms reduction of staff and resources of about 25%;
- The historic long-term commitment to social work values had been reinforced in the past two years by exclusive recruitment of qualified social workers into the Probation Officer role;
- One-third of the Probation revenue budget is spent through partnerships with other organisations, who provide key services to offenders in the community;
- The Irish Probation Service has a high investment in internal training and development because the graduate social work programmes dedicate only limited attention to criminal justice practice, theory and policy issues;
- The Service has a highly dispersed workforce and has to cover many rural towns and settings — it is important to ensure that the differences between urban and rural probation are understood
- The independence of the judiciary is a respected and protected cornerstone of the Constitution, and salaried judges adjudicate matters at each level of the court structure. Good relationships are key to effective liaison, but the Service experiences variation in sentencing practice (for example, in breach proceedings and outcomes), which are not amenable to policy influences.

The Irish Probation Service has a strong and assured sense of its history, and its commitment to working with clients in constructive ways to reduce offending, support their integration as positive members of society and contribute to community safety. The need was for a simple design framework that would build on existing practice strengths and enable long-term adaptability for the Probation Service to operate in the complex criminal justice setting in Ireland.

### ***The macro level***

Throughout the various listening exercises, Probation Officers expressed the view that some clients present with complex and urgent needs, often relating to mental health issues and homelessness. There was broad agreement among the staff that, in the absence of other accessible services, they have a role in advocating for clients to have their needs met, which is both time consuming and resource demanding. This work may not always yield the desired results and it can distract from the core task of the Probation Officer, which is to work with the client to support and encourage efforts towards desistance, and help reduce the risk of reoffending.

**Figure 2.** *The macro level*



The Probation Service is well placed to represent the interests of offenders, both within the criminal justice system and in broader governmental and interagency arenas, where policies are developed and priorities are decided.

The Probation Service Directorate is well placed to 'hold the ring' for offenders in interdepartmental discussions, with a view to seeking national arrangements with relevant service providers to enable vulnerable clients to have access to basic essential services. When memorandums of understanding are agreed at the macro level, it will give leverage at a local level to ensure practical and fast implementation.

The Probation Officer working face-to-face with the client needs to locate their micro engagement within this macro context, and the OSF proposed the diagram in Figure 2 (facing page) to illustrate the interconnected nature of the engagement.

All Probation work has its origin in the *court*. *Probation* is the state service to work with offenders. The *offender* is subject to requirements of the court. Crime happens in the *community* and needs to 'be put right in the community' for reparation and rehabilitation. The Offender Supervision Framework is placed at the centre of the diagram and relates to the whole.

## The Irish Offender Supervision Framework

The IOSF draws principally from the two dominant paradigms which have informed offender supervision and engagement over the past number of decades, the RNR literature and the Desistance literature. However, it also draws inspiration from other contemporary studies on legitimacy, engagement and psychotherapy.

Key principles from this diverse body of literature were adapted to the realities of the Irish probation culture and context, and translated into different practices and priorities that largely follow the Pre-ASPIRE model: **Prepare, Relate, Engage-ASsess, Plan, Implement the plan, Review and Evaluate** (Sutton 1999, McNeill 2009).

The IOSF recognises the centrality of the relationship between the Probation Officer and the client as a mechanism for effecting positive change, and it emphasises the concept of co-production as a defining feature of the framework. Co-production requires that clients have access to all information (with some legitimate exceptions), are involved in decision making (apart from the non-negotiables) and, most importantly, share the same understanding of the supervision process as the Probation Officer. Probation supervision in this context is an active, participatory process that necessitates mutual understanding and trust, ongoing dialogue and a commitment to working in partnership. In order to emphasise the partnership principle, the IOSF<sup>4</sup> was

<sup>4</sup> A diagrammatical representation of the IOSF is available from the authors.

created as a mirror, describing in parallel what each participant is doing and understanding at each stage of supervision. The conceptualisation of probation supervision that is represented in the framework emphasises that it is a joint journey, undertaken by the Probation Officer and the client together, with reciprocity and mutuality at its core.

At the start of contact, the task of the Probation Officer is to establish a helpful working relationship with the client; the *Engagement* stage. The relationship between the Probation Officer and the client needs to be based on trust, respect, empathy and genuineness, which are the cornerstones of all positive and helpful relationships. Building positive relationships will involve having open and honest conversations about what supervision entails; doing a cost-benefit analysis of being on supervision; outlining what is expected of the client and the Probation Officer; being clear and transparent about court or organisational conditions *and* about what is likely to happen in the event of non-compliance. It is important that the client is given a written document which outlines the nature of the relationship, their rights, expectations and responsibilities, and details of the complaints' procedure and other practical information. While there is a focus on relationship building at the start of contact, it does, of course, require attention for the duration of the contact between the Probation Officer and the client. To assess the quality of the relationship, and to focus attention on maintaining the relationship, Probation Officers are encouraged to use the Session Rating Scale at least once a month (Johnson, Miller and Duncan, 2000).

Having established a working alliance with the client the **AS**essment process can begin. Validated risk assessment tools have been in use in the Irish Probation Service for a number of years, with the Level of Service Inventory — Revised used with generic offenders, and other instruments used with special categories of offenders such as sex offenders, perpetrators of domestic violence and those offenders posing a risk of harm. The IOSF requires Probation Officers to go beyond the mere application of a risk assessment tool; Probation Officers will need to involve the client in the assessment process, making sure they understand what the assessment tools measure and the outcome of the assessment. In addition to identifying problems or challenges to be addressed, it is vital that assessments focus on identifying the client's strengths, which may be intrinsic to the client or located in their familial and/or community networks. While it is accepted that there may not be full alignment between the Probation Officer and the client at this stage of the supervision process, it is very important that there is

shared understanding and some agreement between them about what issues will be the focus of attention in supervision.

Having completed an initial assessment, and agreed the targets for intervention with the client, a Case Management Plan (CMP) is co-produced with the client. The CMP is the main document that guides and monitors the supervision process and the related interventions. It contains court conditions and the results of the risk/needs/strengths assessment, and it also explicitly ascribes responsibilities and timelines. The CMP is a shared document, and is created and owned by both the Probation Officer and the client; it is individualised to meet the needs, address the risks, and articulate the plans and aspirations of the particular client and Probation Officer who co-produce it. It is a dynamic tool which can facilitate reviews of progress, and it can be updated to reflect changing circumstances and priorities. Essentially, the CMP provides a roadmap for supervision.

Probation practice in Ireland is informed by the RNR principles, with resources targeted at medium- and high-risk clients, and every effort made to divert low-risk clients away from the criminal justice system or to minimise their engagement with it. While, depending on the outcome of the assessment, the supervision process takes different routes, the objective is always to *manage change* and support desistance from offending. High-risk clients may be *prioritised* for involvement in interagency initiatives designed to identify prolific offenders and those likely to pose a risk of harm, such as the Joint Agency Response to Crime (JARC) or the Sex Offender Risk Assessment and Management (SORAM) process. Probation Officers also use a number of special programmes, which can be delivered individually or in groups, on a single-agency basis or in collaboration with a community-based project. These programmes are designed to address particular criminogenic needs, such as alcohol and offending or pro-criminal thinking, and they can assist with skills development.

Notwithstanding the availability of JARC and SORAM, most probation contact with clients continues to be provided on a one-to-one basis, with weekly meetings for high- and very high-risk clients, fortnightly meetings for medium-risk and monthly for low-risk clients.

The IOSF describes a clear structure for every session between the Probation Officer and the client, with a logical and unequivocal link to the CMP. The structure will support the Probation Officer to act with intentionality, giving a stronger sense of direction and continuity for both the client and the Probation Officer. It will involve:

1. Check-in;
2. Identification of current issues, and responding to crises, if any;
3. Review of the previous session/homework;
4. Agreeing the objective(s) of the session;
5. Work on the objective(s);
6. Summary of the session and setting homework;
7. Agreeing date for next session.

In order to get maximum benefit from these structured sessions, Probation Officers will have access to a 'toolbox' of interventions, which can be used depending on the individual characteristics and the needs and risks that the client presents with. The toolbox will contain methods and techniques related to:

1. Core correctional skills:
  - a. pro-social modelling,
  - b. motivational interviewing,
  - c. problem solving,
  - d. cognitive restructuring;
2. Crisis interventions;
3. Family interventions;
4. Victim awareness and restorative justice interventions;
5. Special programmes — e.g. Choices and Challenges, Bridge etc.;
6. Advocacy — referrals;
7. Empowerment;
8. Local team resources — tools and referrals;
9. Feedback tools.

The 'toolbox' allows for professional discretion, which is a core principle that is strongly emphasised in the IOSF. The Irish Offender Supervision Framework is based on a simple two-layered architecture: a skeleton that ensures a general consistent approach to offenders for the whole Service, and a more flexible structure that allows POs to individualise the clients' supervision experience.

During the 'manage change' stage, the client is encouraged to develop an alternative crime-free lifestyle, by developing human and social capital and connecting to pro-social opportunities. The Irish Probation Service has longstanding relationships with community-based organisations, which can contribute to the client's progression by providing education and training,

employment, accommodation and drug services, all of which can be relevant for the client's future prospects. Probation Officers are encouraged to use the victim's perspective as much as possible, both for offender rehabilitation and also for bringing more justice to victims.

Depending on the level of risk, each case is *Reviewed* every three or six months. The review involves three parties: the client, the PO and the Senior Probation Officer. This process is conceived of as an occasion to celebrate small steps towards success, and also an opportunity for the Senior Probation Officer to support frontline practitioners.

The *Ending* of supervision is an opportunity to review the whole journey and think about the prospects for a positive future. Successful cases will be appropriately celebrated where the client will present a portfolio of their work alongside their PO (e.g. assessments, recommendation letters from employers, completed exercises) and the Senior Probation Officer will hand over a certificate for positive citizenship. The ceremony will also consolidate identity gains and progress made by clients, with an acknowledgement that even small steps can be significant. Effective attention to 'closure' can help to build links with the community for clients and ensure that post-supervision help is appropriately signposted. The IOSF also encourages practitioners to work with former clients as mentors or 'professional ex'-advisors.

The IOSF pays attention to many other pertinent aspects of probation practice, including the role of Senior Probation Officers, supporting compliance and enforcing breach, measuring efficiency and implementing feedback loops. Unfortunately, there is not space in this paper to elucidate on these aspects of the framework.

## **Concluding reflections**

The IOSF may look and feel familiar to Probation staff who recognise in it aspects of their own practice, and who see that it delivers on a key objective — it builds on established good practice within the Service. Despite its accessibility and simplicity, and its apparent recognisability, the IOSF does not represent 'business as usual'. The IOSF introduces robust feedback and evaluation mechanisms, which will enable Probation Officers to get feedback regarding the impact of their work, and will provide an opportunity for them to adjust their practice, if deemed necessary. The IOSF also calls on the leadership of the organisation to establish strategic alliances within, and external to, the criminal justice system, to have the needs of homeless clients



and those with mental health difficulties responded to appropriately. The IOSF foregrounds the need to work collaboratively with clients, co-producing assessments and case management plans, and sharing responsibility for the supervision process. The framework also identifies the need for Probation Officers to plan and structure individual sessions with clients, using a variety of skills and knowledge from a practice 'toolbox'.

The design of the IOSF was, ostensibly, the easy part. Left to its own devices, research indicates that it takes an average of 17 years for practice informed by the best available evidence to become routine (Balas and Boran, 2000). To quote Lipsey and his colleagues (2010, p. 2), the challenge is not 'a lack of knowledge of what works, but rather is in translating the robust body of knowledge into practice'. 'The challenge of technological transfer' was also reiterated by Bourgon and colleagues (2010, p. 92) when describing the implementation of STICS model in Canada. In the past number of decades, a body of knowledge about facilitative approaches and methods, known as Implementation Science, has been developed to promote the systematic uptake of research findings into routine practice (Nilsen, 2015). Fixsen and his colleagues (2005), reminding us that evidence-based practice is not self-executing, describe implementation as a complex process, requiring systematic changes in practitioner behaviour and organisational processes. There is no doubt that the IOSF requires change at all levels in the organisation if it is to be implemented effectively and if it is to yield the positive outcomes that are anticipated and intended for clients and the community.

Ensuring that the framework is implemented consistently across the Service is the next stage of the journey on which the Irish Probation Service has now embarked. From the outset, and as part of the initial scoping exercise, the Service agreed that implementation was in itself a distinct project; it intends drawing on the learning from implementation science to promote and support readiness for change, to meet the inevitable challenges and to build further on the collaboration that underpinned the design phase of the framework.

Implementation of the IOSF is progressing in perhaps the most challenging environment in the lifetime of the Probation Service, in the middle of a pandemic with the related social, structural and fiscal pressures. However, based on the energy, commitment, knowledge and excitement that was present throughout the design phase, there are certainly grounds for optimism.

## Acknowledgements

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