

Working with Homeless People on Probation Supervision – A Practitioner’s Perspective on Collaboration and Co-operation in the Community

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Summary: This article discusses the issue of homelessness amongst those who are subject to Probation Service supervision from a rural perspective. It highlights the increase in the scale of the problem of homelessness and looks at the work of services and agencies to address the ever-changing circumstances of homelessness. The article reflects upon the obstacles and challenges for the Probation Officer in the community when supervising a person who is homeless, and the impact that this can have on offending behaviour. The benefits are discussed of working collaboratively with other agencies and services from a multi-disciplinary perspective. There is an examination of the Housing First model, an approach to addressing homelessness for people experiencing mental-health, physical-health, substance-misuse, social, behavioural and other challenges. The article also looks at the question of Probation Officer as advocate within the homeless services and explores the role of the Probation Officer in the community in supervising a person who is homeless. The author concludes by reflecting upon the ever-changing landscape that is homelessness and the challenges ahead for Probation Officers in addressing the unique risks and needs of the homeless client.

Keywords: Probation, criminal justice, offending, risks and needs, homelessness, interagency working, partnership, community-based supports, social exclusion, intervention, Housing First.

Introduction

In the Irish national media and in public discussion and concern regarding homelessness, the worrying rise in homelessness in rural Ireland has been less visible when compared with the attention given to urban, particularly Dublin-based, homelessness. However, there is a real and significant homelessness problem in rural communities outside the large conurbations.

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Left Out in the Cold, A Review of Rural Homelessness in Ireland (Simon Community, 2019) highlighted that homelessness is not just an urban phenomenon:

It is often 'hidden' in rural contexts which can make it more difficult to see and indeed measure. Hidden homelessness refers to people who may be staying in unsecure accommodation, unfit or overcrowded accommodation, sleeping on couches with friends/family. They are not visible to the public but are in need of a home. (p. 1)

The scale of rural homelessness has been on the increase. *Homelessness in Rural Ireland* (McVerry Trust, 2019) described how there were 1,014 people homeless in rural Ireland in May 2019. By July 2019, that number had increased by 12 per cent, bringing the number of rural homeless to 1,400. These figures are likely an underestimation and may not even tell the complete story. Persons sleeping rough, couch surfing or squatting may not have been captured in the data gathering, because of the methods of collection. It is likely that the real numbers are much higher than the official figures suggest.

Working with homeless people subject to Probation supervision in rural Ireland

In a rural county within which I am based, I have witnessed people squatting in derelict houses, vacant dwellings and abandoned buildings. These living conditions pose serious risks to the physical and mental wellbeing of the people involved, as well as resulting in their feeling demoralised. An additional concern in relation to these living conditions is their propensity to become hubs for drug use and anti-social behaviour. Such unstable accommodation risks increasing and promoting association with other marginalised people involved in offending behaviours.

The county has a population in excess of 160,000, spread over an area of more than 1,600 square miles. Access to services and travel links can pose distinct obstacles for those living in rural locations as opposed to urban, more centralised locations. As a community-based Probation Officer, I have attended regular Homeless Action Team (HAT) meetings. HAT is an interagency forum comprising statutory and non-statutory services in the county, working together to achieve a consistent approach in care and case management to address the issues and challenges for those presenting as homeless or at risk of homelessness within the county.

Other agencies contributing to HAT meetings include An Garda Síochána, addiction services, mental health practitioners, social workers, public health nurses, local authorities, women’s services, including domestic violence support, and other voluntary bodies that work with people who are disadvantaged and socially excluded and who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The voluntary services provide valuable supported housing and outreach support for those in need, including referrals from the Probation Service. Staff from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Focus Ireland also participate. Meetings are chaired by the county council Homelessness Prevention Officer. In 2023, the HAT meetings were restructured as a Homeless Management Committee (HMC), in an effort to provide a more multidisciplinary community-based approach.

Based on my experience in attending meetings, a significant percentage of homeless persons whose cases were discussed at HAT meetings were persons supervised by the Probation Service, or who had been previously known to the Probation Service. Over a four-month period, between 35 per cent and 75 per cent of cases discussed at each meeting had been known to the Probation Service, with a significant proportion having been assessed as at high risk of reoffending, and with significant needs. This snapshot review indicates that a large, shared population of persons accessing homeless services are among those subject to Probation Service supervision.

The challenge of homelessness amongst Probation clients

Persons who present to the Probation Service with no fixed abode (NFA) can pose unique challenges for a Probation Officer in terms of assessment of risk and needs, responsivity, effective management and meaningful supervision. Persons supervised by the Probation Service presenting to the homeless services often have complex needs and can struggle to change their behaviour, sustain change and integrate back into society. Persons assessed as at high risk of reoffending present with particular needs that require a high level of intervention. They are often on the margins of their communities and find it difficult to navigate the services and structures that are there to assist them. Challenges such as poor mental health, addiction, unemployment, literacy problems, loneliness, isolation and shame can prevent them from accessing and receiving the services and assistance they require. It is quite a problem to address these challenges without the foundation of a home and the security and stability that go with it.

Sometimes, in small towns or close-knit communities, local reputation, distrust and animosities can be a real contributing factor when assessing the obstacles that prevent a Probation client from obtaining and/or sustaining suitable accommodation. The person can be 'demonised' for their own, their family's or their associates' past or current behaviour, which can result in further obstacles in striving for accommodation, acceptance and social inclusion.

Offending behaviour

Seymour and Costello (2005) reported that offending has not been shown to be the inevitable consequence of homelessness. However, they cite the finding by Snow *et al.* (1989) that there are:

a number of processes by which homeless people and rough sleepers in particular are more likely to commit an offence. These include engaging in criminal behaviour to survive on the streets, the criminalisation of street life including intoxication in public, and the stigmatisation of street homelessness whereby the visibility and suspicion of rough sleepers as potential threats to community safety mean that they may be more likely to be formally processed for offences that may otherwise have been ignored. Regardless of the motivation for offending, the implication is that many homeless people are likely to end up in the criminal justice system due to a combination of risk factors, motivations and circumstances.

According to Seymour and Costello (2005, p. 9):

Homeless people had a higher number of charges against them than those in the non-homeless group. The average person appearing in the courts had 1.5 charges against them in comparison to 4.5 for those in the homeless group. However, offences committed by homeless individuals were generally not of a serious nature.

They noted:

Overall, it appeared that the majority of offences committed by homeless individuals were minor in nature. (Seymour and Costello, p. 47)

These findings are arguably as valid today in rural Ireland as they are in cities and urban centres. As can be witnessed in local courts, a person assessed as

high risk may commit repeated offences of a low-tariff nature during periods of homelessness, such as public order offences, intoxication in public places, minor thefts and drug possession. Many of these people are referred by the courts to the Probation Service in an effort to prevent reoffending.

Multi-agency and multidisciplinary collaboration

The local county council, as lead agency as provided for in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2009, includes the Probation Service among its work partners in addressing homelessness, and as an agency striving to achieve best outcomes for homeless persons supervised on court orders. Andrea Bourke, in her paper discussing the work of J-ARC,¹ an interagency initiative to reduce prolific offending, writes:

Prior to the introduction of J-ARC, agencies often worked independently of each other with the same service-users. Information-sharing, when it happened, often occurred in a more piecemeal fashion. The evident benefit of information-sharing through a formal process is seen in the context of a shared understanding of the participant’s situation that enables a more holistic and integrated approach to problem-solving and the provision of support’. (Bourke, 2021, pp 248–9)

The same experiences can be recognised when working with homeless clients within multi-agency and multidisciplinary forums. Information-sharing protocols in place within the homeless services accept that all participating clients are treated fairly and their right to confidentiality is respected. For this reason, any client involved with the services will be made aware of their rights as set out in the Confidential Policy, Information Sharing Protocol, GDPR and the Data Protection Act, prior to referral or any offer of service.

The Homeless Management Committee (HMC), in setting out its strategic goals for service provision, recognised that best practice should be a client-centred service with the aim of strengthening links with existing service-providers. The sharing of information and resources is a crucial aspect in striving for better outcomes for homeless clients. While similar work had been undertaken in the past on an ad-hoc basis, depending on attendees at HAT meetings, the newly restructured service sets out to manage its homeless

1 Joint Agency Response to Crime (J-ARC) https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/e4ced-joint-agency-response-to-crime-jarc/?referrer=http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Joint_Agency_Response_to_Crime#

clients in a more streamlined way, introducing individual care plans for each client who presents as homeless. In essence, the service provides a 'more than just Housing' focus, with co-ordinated support and care being an essential component. Work begins with new homeless presentations from point of contact at clinics.

The new HMC model seeks to enable easier access to the homeless services for those in need, including Probation Service referrals. In the past, a 'staircase model' was adopted, where clients had to achieve a number of goals (e.g. sobriety) to become ready for housing. This approach was time-consuming and set unrealistic goals for marginalised people already burdened with homelessness and other issues. The new model, based on a best-practice approach, aims to be more client-centred and trauma-informed.

Key working will be managed by the service-providers who are already engaged with the person. As a protective measure, the Homeless Team will oversee the care plans, link with existing services and manage the movement of the person through the homeless network. Co-operation and collaboration are key elements of this model.

One of the most basic, yet often overlooked, needs for a Probation Officer working with clients who are homeless is to familiarise themselves with the terminology/jargon, the different housing pathways, roles and interventions used within the homeless services and other partner bodies. Terms such as HAP (Housing Assistance Payment), Placefinder, TSS (Tenancy Support and Sustainment Service, provided by Focus Ireland), RAS (Rental Accommodation Scheme), Housing First, and Own Front Door can be unfamiliar for those working within the criminal justice system, let alone for homeless clients.

What is Housing First?

From a client-centred perspective, the Housing First approach provides wraparound support that is tailored to the needs of the client, which can be most beneficial.

Housing First provides a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing homelessness for people experiencing mental-health, physical-health, substance-misuse, social, behavioural and other challenges. The programme consists of three major components:

- Permanent affordable housing
- Mobile case-management and treatment services
- A programme philosophy based on client choice and recovery.

Housing First can provide solutions for persons who have previously, and repeatedly, tried and failed to exit homelessness or who have previously been regarded as resistant to interventions, hard to reach or not housing-ready.

The *Housing First Manual for Ireland* (Tsemberis, 2020) defines and supports the implementation of a set of principles and practices to create a well-organised, multi-agency Housing First team, and it outlines structures that collaborate to provide housing and support services that aid recovery and community integration for its participants.

Chapter 10 of the *Housing First Manual* provides suggestions on how to modify the Housing First programme to operate effectively in rural areas, including suburban communities, small towns and villages. Building on the strength of community ties and resources, the HMC, which comprises various stakeholders within that community, including the Probation Service, can identify those persons most suited to the Housing First programme.

One Probation Service-referred client, Michael (not his real name), is currently residing in a Housing First home and receives weekly home visits from a support worker employed by Focus Ireland. His Probation Officer also makes home visits, alongside his Focus Ireland support worker. Michael was referred to psychology services through the Housing First programme and receives weekly visits from a consultant psychologist employed by the HSE. In addition, he has support from outreach services through Novas.²

This interagency approach ensures that all services are working from a shared case-management plan, thus reducing duplication of work. It ensures clarity of roles, collaboration and co-operation between the client and the services involved, with the shared goal of achieving better outcomes for the client. It can be seen ‘on the ground’ that when a client obtains suitable and appropriate accommodation that matches their needs, it has a ripple effect that benefits their families, children and communities.

Notwithstanding its benefits, it is important also to acknowledge the challenges in effective interagency and multidisciplinary working. Effective interagency and multidisciplinary working requires clarity in purpose, mutual understanding and respect, clear and acknowledged boundaries and protocols and, above all, good, open and frank communication. While everyone may be in favour in principle, it can be exceptionally difficult to implement in practice, requiring a lot of commitment and hard work to make it happen.

² Novas is a voluntary organisation working in local communities across Ireland with those who are disadvantaged and socially excluded, primarily those homeless or at risk of homelessness: <https://www.novas.ie/>.

New model explained

The restructured committee (HMC) meets once each month. This committee oversees the five categories as outlined below. During the month, there is one sub-group meeting representing each of the five identified categories outlined. Each sub-group meets once per fortnight. The chairperson of each sub-group reports back to the HMC meeting in relation to progress made or issues arising.

The sub-group categories are:

- Category 1: Rough sleepers, entrenched homeless, couch surfers
- Category 2: Emergency accommodation, short-term temporary accommodation
- Category 3: Mental health – long-term stay in Department of Psychiatry (DOP)
- Category 4 : Domestic violence
- Category 5 : Youth homelessness and aftercare.

It is important to note that the categories are not listed in order of priority. They are constituted separately to ensure that the clients' needs are best met within the appropriate category. Relevant professionals involved can attend the category meetings best suited to their client, whose needs are matched with existing services. The new client-centred homeless model will also allow for better access to the homeless services for Probation Service clients. Each person presenting as homeless will receive care and case management, regardless of their housing needs. There is a focus and a priority to increase and support interagency work across the county.

The model allows services to share resources, skills and knowledge in their area of expertise. It identifies the risks and needs of the homeless population in the county and seeks to fill the gaps in service provision. Homeless clinics are moved away from the offices of the county council and into the communities, which makes the service more accessible and user-friendly.

The information-sharing aspect of the new model and interagency philosophy should also benefit those clients upon release from prison. Collaboration is a crucial aspect of addressing the needs of prisoners returning to their communities, where information needs to be shared in a timely manner. It is sometimes the case that prisoners who have served short-term sentences or who are subject to unplanned releases can present themselves on the day of release to the homeless services. A prisoner who is serving a short sentence

may not declare their homeless status as they feel it might reduce their chances of release. An integrated and collaborative approach has the potential to be the most effective way of preventing such obstacles.

Probation Officer as advocate?

It could be a valid point to query whether the Probation Service has a function or role to play within the structures of the homeless services. Some may question whether the attendance at the various meetings only adds to the work of a Probation Officer and could result in nothing more than a paper exercise or a talking shop with no results. It would also be valid to state that by helping a person to navigate through the homeless services and by familiarising themselves with the knowledge that is required, Probation Officers can effectively advocate for and access services for and with their clients in a more holistic and effective way. The multi-agency and multi-disciplinary approach provides a rich opportunity for Probation Officers to network and connect with other professionals and agencies sharing common goals and clients within their respective communities.

Through participation and collaboration with the homeless services and partners, the Probation Service can advocate for and promote accessibility to community-based resources for the client who is subject to a community-based measure. This not only provides fair opportunities for clients but can also reduce the stigma of homelessness and criminality, while promoting social inclusion within the person's own community or locality.

In supervising the homeless person, the core probation skills of developing the therapeutic alliance, responsivity, motivational interviewing techniques and the use of cognitive behavioural interventions that foster problem-solving ability, decision-making and emotional regulation can all be employed to assist in securing a better outcome with the support of the homeless services and partner agencies. Seymour and Costello (2005) acknowledge that while their study focused largely on the social factors and context of people's lives and experiences, this did not overlook the importance of cognitive behavioural and other offence-focused work, essential in probation supervision, in developing the person's thinking and coping skills and supporting their journey towards change and desistance.

Conclusion

Since Seymour and Costello penned their report in 2005, the landscape of homelessness in Ireland has changed significantly. Probation Service practitioners are striving to assist their clients in an ever-changing society that has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and other events since. This year, there are many challenges, including the rising cost of living and housing crisis and the social impact of the needs of those seeking refuge and fleeing war. With the ending of the temporary moratorium on evictions, more and more marginalised people and Probation Service clients will face the threat of homelessness.

Seymour and Costello's comments on diversion from custody, citing the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) report (2002) and the work of Chapman and Hough (1999), remain true today despite the ever-changing face of homelessness.

[E]ffective probation supervision must incorporate and work in partnership with other services including housing and employment agencies to reduce the risk of re-offending amongst probation clients.

(Seymour and Costello, 2005 p. 28)

'[O]ne of the most effective ways of promoting an offender's reintegration is to reduce the risk of marginalisation in the first place ... assisting individuals to remain in the community increases their likelihood of abstaining from offending in the long-term. Community-based sanctions provide such an opportunity to the offender if the content of the sanction is targeted to his/her criminogenic needs. Failure to provide appropriate intervention to meet these needs often results in an unsuccessful outcome for the offender and service provider.'

(Seymour and Costello, 2005, p. 30, quoting NESF, 2002)

If ever there was a time to come together, for more co-operation and co-ordination among the services and professionals, it is now.

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