Effective Practice in Probation Supervision*

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Selected by Olivia Keaveney†

Joining the Probation Service in 2019, I quickly realised the tremendous wealth of experience and knowledge across the service. I was hugely impressed by the ongoing commitment to social work theory and evidence-informed practice. On my own journey, I came across this article in the *Irish Probation Journal* that significantly influenced my approach to the work. 'Effective Practice in Probation Supervision' I believe to be every bit as relevant today as when it was penned eighteen years ago. The article highlights the importance of personal effectiveness, effective interventions as well as organisational effectiveness in achieving our overall goal of reducing risk of harm and further offending while contributing to public safety. This article has guided my day-to-day management practice as well as enhancing my knowledge and understanding of key concepts in quality probation supervision. As Director of Operations, I now find myself revisiting this article. Connolly's emphasis on ensuring quality assurance at key points of service delivery by use of audits of case-management plans is one key message I found particularly pertinent. In summary, this article has been instrumental in providing me with a clear framework and practical strategies guiding our approach to the delivery of effective probation supervision to achieve better outcomes for staff, clients and the communities we serve.

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Summary: This article presents the research on effective approaches in working with offenders on supervision from three interlinked perspectives: personal effectiveness, effective interventions and organisational effectiveness. It suggests that such a holistic approach to effective practice provides guidance to probation organisations in relation to the official goals of public protection and achieving a reduction in offending as well as what might be termed the instrumental goals of probation officers and offenders. It concludes that elements of traditional social work, when at its best, are part of the effective package.
Keywords: Effective practice, personal effectiveness, effective interventions.

Introduction

There is a robust and growing body of research that offers guidance on effective approaches or practices in working with offenders on probation supervision. Use of research findings as a primary source of knowledge for practice is referred to as empirical practice. Empirical practice in probation involves a worker employing his/her knowledge of what the research findings reveal about which practices are effective in engaging offenders, assisting them to desist from crime and responding to their needs. Knowledge about which approaches work enables probation officers to achieve improved outcomes, that is, less offending, better compliance with supervision and ultimately a better service to offenders and other stakeholders (Home Office, 1998).

Appraising the research evidence provides a context in which probation staff and management can discuss and clarify their goals and determine the most effective strategies to achieve them. Furthermore, a commitment on the part of the probation organisation to evidence-based practice enables it to respond more confidently to demands for accountability and public scrutiny.

Effective practice in supervision may be looked at from three perspectives:

1. Personal effectiveness in working with offenders
2. Effective interventions and programmes
3. Organisational effectiveness in working with offenders.

These three interlinked perspectives provide a useful framework for the presentation of the research findings.

Personal effectiveness in working with offenders

There has been a growth in interest in effective approaches to practice, and in personal effectiveness in particular, that assist probation officers to supervise offenders effectively. A number of researchers have explored what it is that offenders valued about the supervision they received (Beaumont and Mistry, 1996; Mair and May, 1997; Rex, 1999; Calverley, *et al.* 2004). All of these studies gave out consistent messages that offenders appear to value having someone to talk to about their problems, receiving practical help or advice, being treated with respect and being helped to keep out of trouble and to avoid reoffending.What also emerges from these and other studies is a description of the personal characteristics of the probation officer that assist in helping offenders engage in supervision and desist from crime. Probation officers who establish relationships characterised by loyalty and optimism, which are active, participative, purposeful, prosocial and explicit in their negotiation of role boundaries and mutual expectations, are more effective. Trotter (1993) emphasises the need to harness relationship skills in a specific manner with criminal justice clients. He states that, in addition to relationship skills, as outlined above, three key practices of the effective probation officer are role clarification, prosocial skills and problem-solving skills.

- Role clarification
  The dual role of the probation officer as helper and social controller with responsibility for public protection can be difficult for offenders to understand, and exploring the implications of a statement such as 'My job involves making sure you carry out the conditions of the court order. It is also an equally important part of my work to help you with any problems which might have caused you to be put on probation' can assist understanding (Trotter, 1999, p. 50). The effective probation officer:
  — Balances the investigator and helper roles and is careful not to adopt an exclusively forensic role or an exclusively helping role
  — Talks about his/her role in managing a court order and, in particular, emphasises the aim of helping the offender to address the problems that have caused him/her to be put on probation
  — Discusses expectations – what is negotiable and what is not
  — Discusses his/her authority and how it can be used.

- Prosocial skills

   The use of prosocial modelling was consistently, strongly and significantly correlated with lower offence and imprisonment rates in Trotter's 1993 study and is viewed as a core competence for practice by all people who work in probation (Home Office, 2000). The effective probation officer:
   — Models prosocial behaviours and comments
   — Encourages and rewards the comments and/or behaviours that he/she wishes to promote
   — Challenges pro-criminal rationalisations and behaviours, not in a critical or judgemental way but with a focus on why the offender feels and acts that way and on positive ways of dealing with the situation
   — Aims for four positives or rewards to every negative or challenging comment.

- Problem-solving skills

   The effective probation officer:
   — Encourages the offender to define the specific and real problems which he/she faces – with a focus on the problems which have led to being on probation
   — Reaches agreement with the offender on the problems to be addressed
   — Reaches agreement with the offender on goals and ways to achieve them
   — Has ongoing contact with the offender and if referrals are made, they are made as part of a problem-solving process.

In Trotter's 1993 study, probation officers who used these practices had better outcomes in terms of higher rates of compliance on probation supervision orders and lower rates of recidivism and subsequent imprisonment over a four-year period.

   Bonta (2004) also emphasises the importance of relationship skills and of structuring skills in bringing about change in offenders. Structuring skills include prosocial modelling, effective reinforcement, effective disapproval, problem solving and community advocacy. Many of these structuring skills are essentially the effective practices outlined by Trotter; for example, Bonta's 'effective disapproval' mirrors Trotter's key practice of identifying, discouraging or confronting anti-social comments or behaviours by balancing at least four

positives to every negative or confrontational comment. Community advocacy, however, is an emerging area that has to do with managing referrals and can be described as giving information about resources, monitoring use of resources, following up with the resources agencies and providing assistance to overcome obstacles.

Much of the research on personal effectiveness in working with offenders is not new to probation officers. What is important therefore is the commitment at both personal and organisational levels to applying the findings consistently. Bonta looked at probation officer interventions over six months using his structuring skills criteria. He discovered that probation officers had reasonably high relationship skills but did not engage in the structuring skills that the research suggests are important. In about two-thirds of cases, he found appropriate reinforcement being given; however, there were very few instances of prosocial modelling. Probation officers linked people into community resources but offered little follow-up support for use of these.

The mobilising of resources and, in particular, what is described as the 'building of social capital' for offenders is a key theme in the desistance research of Farrall (2004). In Farrall's research, motivation and the social and personal contexts of the offenders are dominant forces in determining whether the obstacles which they face are resolved. There is evidence that probation officers can improve offenders' chances of success by supporting changes in their employment and family relationships, in particular, and by enhancing their personal motivation.

Case management and case planning are critical to orchestrating the various strands of the supervision programme. Huxley (1993) describes a co-ordinating model of case management which encompasses assessment, planning, referral, some advocacy, direct casework, support and reassessment. In the context of the Probation Service (PS), the case management approach adopted is one where the probation officer works directly on some problems with the offender, while linking with in-house providers of groupwork programmes and/or outside agencies in relation to other offender needs. The probation officer plans and co-ordinates the various interventions, ensuring that needs/risks are addressed over time. Case management is sometimes referred to as 'casework' in the PS and in other social work agencies.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2002) suggests that case management involves tackling the multiple risk factors for criminal behaviour – such as drug abuse, homelessness and unemployment – which characterise most supervised offenders. The evidence from the United Kingdom (UK)

indicates that programmes or structured probation interventions will not work unless delivered in the context of effective case management (Kemshall *et al.*, 2002).

Case management involves having a case-management plan with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) objectives that are reviewed at regular intervals with the client and that are monitored by the organisation. Kemshall *et al.* (2001), in their study of the implementation of effective practice, looked at 297 case files and described how the supervision plans lacked focus on objectives and outcomes, with staff confusing objectives with descriptions of the routes that lead to achieving them.

Motivational interviewing skills have proven effectiveness in the engagement of offenders in changing their behaviour (Trotter 2000). In order to engage offenders to make the necessary changes, their motivation has to be identified and tackled. Although probation officers are aware of this need, Kemshall *et al.* (2002) suggest that insufficient attention is being given to motivating clients in the early stages of case management and there is a need to be explicit in supervision plans about how motivation is going to be enhanced and encouraged.

Positive approaches to securing compliance are receiving increasing attention. Offenders tend to be poor completers, thus it makes sense to deploy the full range of strategies for promoting compliance and to avoid over-focusing on coercive threat. Bottoms (2001) outlines a number of strategies that probation officers could utilise proactively:

- Make attendance the norm: Trotter's practice of 'clarifying what is negotiable and what is not' is paired with efforts to make attendance the norm, such as arranging appointments to coincide with other activities such as 'signing on' and exploring and reducing possible obstacles to attendance;
- Reward compliance: This involves reducing restrictions or lessening the demands that the overall community supervision imposes, for instance fewer ongoing appointments conditional on progress;
- Offer a graduated system of positive rewards: These may include early termination of supervision for good behaviour.

The above examination of the key effective practices and characteristics of the probation officer that assist in implementing the effective supervision of offenders reveals that elements of traditional work are part of the effective

package. The majority of these elements are drawn largely, though not exclusively, from the helping or social work research and literature.

Effective interventions and programmes

When the goals of intervention have been outlined, it is important to pay attention to how they are addressed. The guidelines for effective programmes outlined below apply to structured one-to-one programmes as well as to groupwork programmes run by probation officers.

- Respond to the learning style of offenders. The learning styles of most offenders require active, participatory methods of working, rather than a didactic mode on the one hand or an unstructured experiential mode on the other (McGuire, 1995)
- Have a clear model of change backed by research evidence. Probation officers should specify which risk factor a programme or intervention will reduce and how it will do so. A theoretical model or evidence from existing research should support the methods used (Antonwicz and Ross, 1994). A programme, whether one-to-one or group, is described by Chapman and Hough (1998) as:

   A planned series of interventions over a specified and bounded time period which can be demonstrated to positively change attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and social circumstances, designed to achieve clearly defined objectives based on an identifiable model or empirical evidence. (p. 8)

- Thus, an individual probation officer who wishes to target a risk factor such as drug addiction will look to the research evidence on effective interventions with drug-users and design the series of interventions accordingly or access an accredited or evaluated programme. There will be occasions when probation officers are piloting new approaches which have not hitherto been researched or evaluated. In such circumstances, it is important to state the gap in the research evidence, to outline why the particular approach is being adopted and to commit to evaluate the new approach thoroughly.
- Target criminogenic needs which are identified in the risk assessment. Probation officers in the PS use a risk assessment tool, the Level of Service Inventory – Revised (LSI-R) with adults and the Youth Level of Service – Case Management Inventory (YLS-CMI) with juveniles, to help

identify criminogenic needs. In using these tools, probation officers assess and address risk factors under the following key potential areas of risk known as criminogenic needs: education and employment, financial management, family, accommodation, use of leisure, companions, alcohol and drug use, mental health and attitudes (Andrews *et al.*, 1990). The risk assessment instrument assists the probation officer to make more accurate assessments of the likelihood that an offender will reoffend and the interventions required to address the offending. Offenders with high levels of risk or of criminogenic needs will require a high level of intervention and those with low levels of risk or of criminogenic needs will require little or no intervention (Andrews *et al.*, 1990).

- Use methods drawn from behavioural, cognitive or cognitive–behavioural sources in order to achieve cognitive and behavioural change. Research confirms the effectiveness of cognitive–behavioural interventions when change in anti-social thinking and behaviour is the goal (Lipsey, 1992; Losel, 1995; Andrews, 1995). Many practitioners believe that using relationship skills and facilitating insight will effect the necessary behavioural changes. It has been suggested that while psychotherapeutic-type strategies may be effective for other problems, there is little evidence that their continued use in offence-focused work with offenders is rewarded by useful outcomes (McGuire, 1995). Nevertheless, relationship-building skills, structuring skills and motivational skills are important for engaging the client and maintaining his/her participation in cognitive–behavioural and other interventions (Andrews, 2000).

- Use methods that are multi-modal (Lipsey, 1992; Losel, 1995), that is, methods which incorporate a wide range of components or techniques aimed at a number of different targets. This recognises that changing behaviour is a complex task and needs to be broken down into parts to be worked on, using a range of techniques. For example, McMurran and Hollin (1993) identified the relevant components of intervention for young offenders who are substance-abusers as behavioural self-control training, problem-solving skills training, emotion control training, social skills training, relapse prevention and general lifestyle modification.

- Use skills-oriented methods which are designed to enhance skills in such areas as problem solving, relapse prevention, conflict management and employment (Lipsey, 1992; Losel, 1995). In order to learn new skills in

these and other areas in which offenders have difficulties, there is a need to offer opportunities for structured learning in one-to-one or in group situations (Golstein and Keller, 1987). The requisite skills are described, demonstrated, practised and reinforced by the probation officer in a structured, sequential manner. Role play, role rehearsal, coaching and modelling are useful methods of teaching new skills.

- Recognise that offenders have multiple problems, including inter-personal and internal difficulties as well as external pressures (Palmer, 1992). Thus, notwithstanding the effectiveness and importance of cognitive–behavioural interventions for targeting offending behaviour, there is a need to draw on other social work methods and techniques, such as linking, task-centred work, solution-focused therapy, crisis intervention, advocacy, case management and family counselling, in order to address behaviour in the context of family and community (McGuire, 1995; Ross *et al.*, 1995). This is not to suggest an unconsidered 'scattergun' approach, and probation officers will need to think clearly about which methods are likely to be effective.
- Consider personal effectiveness in working with offenders (as outlined above).
- Attend to programme integrity, which involves attention to the delivery of a programme as stated in its design (Hollin, 1995). Evaluate what was delivered against a plan that specified what was intended.
- Evaluate the outcomes. Work needs to be monitored and evaluated in order to assess its effectiveness. Evaluation is itself a critical and inseparable part of being an effective practitioner, and the use of a risk assessment tool such as LSI-R offers the opportunity to re-apply the risk assessment on completing the intervention in order to evaluate the outcomes.

Organisational effectiveness in working with offenders

It has been suggested that effectiveness can be achieved when practice is directed and supported by effective management and information systems (Roberts, 1996; Losel, 1995). To be effective, organisations working with offenders need to:

- Have accurate risk assessment and review the validity and reliability of the instrument on an ongoing basis

- Ensure that there are supervision plans in place in which the offender is involved
- Provide what is needed internally and make requisite connections to ensure external provision. Hence the importance of partnership arrangements and agreements with other agencies. Many plans encourage the notion of referral but do not emphasise following through on referral and helping people across thresholds;
- Have case managers who have clear roles and responsibilities and are supervised
- Have case managers who have case-management plans, which are reviewed and modified according to progress, with consideration for early terminating for good progress
- Specify what constitutes good practice and monitor that it is in place.

The implementation of effective practice requires a strategic and whole-system approach in which attention is given to supporting the mechanisms and processes required to ensure effective delivery. Evidence-based practice should be seen as a continuing interrelationship between research and practice. A probation service which has a culture of evidence-based practice is more likely to evaluate and test models of good practice. Much research remains to be done and many complex questions regarding effective responses to the problems of offending remain to be answered.

Probation Service

In an earlier research study, I concluded that the Probation Service (PS) was applying the research evidence in its practice but only to a limited extent (Connolly, 2001). Since the introduction of risk assessment instruments in 2005, the integration of evidence-based practice has progressed apace, but much remains to be done. There are a number of key mechanisms, some of which are being put in place by PS management, which will assist the process of integrating the research evidence into practice:

- Communicate clearly what is required and what is no longer required. The publication of standards for practice presents an ideal opportunity to state clearly what is required.
- Integrate effective practices into the performance development objectives of PMDS (Performance Management Development System), for example incorporating such objectives as 'All staff contact with

offenders will exhibit prosocial modelling' or 'All service delivery must contain SMART objectives as evidenced in case-management plans'.

- Include references to the research evidence where appropriate in policy and practice documents or, alternatively, research briefings should accompany the policy and practice documents.
- Communicate effectively with staff, face-to-face, to increase awareness of, and belief in, effective practice.
- Ensure quality assurance at key points of delivery by use of audits of case-management plans and discussions with customer panels which include offender perceptions.
- Establish a steering group which would identify and promote effective practice and establish 'champion' groups to focus on specific areas of work, such as female offenders or sex offenders.
- Model the effective practices and actively reward good practice.

Conclusion

The research evidence provides a map for the probation officer in search of effectiveness and moves away from a practice culture characterised by individual probation officers practising forms of social work based on theoretical or personal preference. Raynor (1996) argues that the consequences of such individualistic practice can be biased outcomes for offenders.

Much of the research about personal effectiveness is derived largely from the field of social work, whereas the research about effective interventions is drawn largely from the field of psychology. Utilising the research evidence to address offending behaviour and promote compliance with supervision will involve probation staff using social work skills and values. The research literature confirms that much of what is considered good practice in social work is also good probation practice (Coulshed, 1991; Trotter, 1999).

Effective application of the research evidence also has implications for the work of projects and partnerships created between the probation organisation and the various agencies involved in community-based work with offenders. Where projects funded by the probation organisation have criminal justice aims, such as the integration and rehabilitation of offenders, the research knowledge provides guidelines in relation to appropriate interventions and clarity in relation to the respective roles of partner agencies. For example, Raynor (2004) suggests that projects which provide social integration are more likely to be associated with reductions in offending if they adopt a 'responsibility model'. Such a model views the offender as

responsible for his/her behaviour and offending and as capable of making changes; viewing the offender as a victim of social circumstances is described as a 'deficit model'.

The research on effectiveness has become almost exclusively associated with the effectiveness of groupwork programmes. There is now a need to a have a broader approach that will ensure that all aspects of effectiveness are integrated into probation practice. The broader framework of research evidence outlined in this article provides guidance for probation organisations and for individual probation officers on how best to achieve the official goals of public protection and reduced offending, and other person-related goals which are not as prominent in official documents but which are expressed by both probation officers and offenders (Robinson and McNeill, 2004). These goals include such things as addressing housing, employment and support problems, many of which are instrumental in achieving the official goals. The research framework presented in this article allows for a holistic, personalised approach to the supervision of offenders that offers a realistic expectation of meeting both public and person-related goals.

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