

*The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) is an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Justice. Our role is to commission and provide offender management services in the community and in custody ensuring best value for money from public resources. We work to protect the public and reduce reoffending by delivering the punishment and orders of the courts and supporting rehabilitation by helping offenders to reform their lives*

© Crown copyright 2012  
Extracts from this document may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes on condition that the source is acknowledged.

First published March 2012

ISBN 978-1-84099-540-4

Contact info:  
oep@noms.gsi.gov.uk

**The views expressed in this Research Summary are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Ministry of Justice (nor do they reflect Government policy)**

## The quality of probation supervision – A literature review: summary of key messages

Joanna Shapland, Anthony Bottoms, Stephen Farrall, Fergus McNeill, Camilla Priede and Gwen Robinson

(University of Sheffield and University of Glasgow)

This short report summarises a literature review on 'quality' in probation supervision. The full review is available at:

<http://www.shef.ac.uk/law/research/clusters/ccr/occasionalpapers>. It was funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS), to contribute to the evidence base for the Offender Engagement Programme, the aim of which is to investigate the hypothesis that the relationship between supervisor and offender can be a powerful vehicle to promote change and reduce re-offending.

### Key points

The review of the literature shows that the following seem to be important to good experiences of supervision. They are seen by supervisors and service users as demonstrating 'quality' - indeed their converse may not just be neutral but may harm desistance:

- building genuine relationships that demonstrate 'care' about the person being supervised, their desistance and their future - not just monitoring/surveillance
- engaging offenders in identifying needs and setting goals for supervision, including a supervisory relationship which shows active listening by supervisors
- supervisors who keep on trying to steer supervisees in a desisting direction, through motivating them, encouraging them to solve problems and talking about problems
- an understanding of how desistance may occur, with thoughtful consideration of how relapses or breaches should be dealt with
- attention to relevant practical obstacles to desistance, not just psychological issues
- knowledge of and access to the resources of local services/provision, in order to help the supervisee deal with these practical obstacles
- advocacy, tailored to individual needs and capabilities, which may involve work by the supervisor, referral to others, or signposting to others, depending on the supervisee's self-confidence and social capital

## Context

The literature review draws on literature from a range of countries and particularly the desistance literature. Previous research has only rarely addressed 'quality' as such, but ideas of 'quality' are intrinsically tied up with ideas of 'purpose', 'effectiveness', and 'best practice' It was designed to follow on from the review of desistance by McNeill and Weaver (2010) for NOMS. It concentrated on how quality has been conceived and measured in relation to probation supervision in different countries looking at how the quality of probation supervision has been seen by both supervisors and those being supervised. It also considered a range of influences which have not recently been reviewed but which have been found empirically to be both related to desistance and relevant to probation supervision, particularly accommodation, education and employment, and developing offenders' social capital.

## Approach

The methods used in the literature review included searches of databases on relevant key words, attendance at the European Society of Criminology conference to access ongoing work. Members of CREDOS (the worldwide Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision), were also contacted to seek ongoing work and less widely published literature. Research on probation has been developed most strongly in the UK and other common law jurisdictions, so particular care was taken to see if there was relevant mainland European empirical work.

## The idea of quality in probation supervision

Comparisons with other countries needs to take into account the different purposes of probation over time and between countries. The key recent review of the development of probation is that by Durnescu (2008). His model can be developed (see Table 1 below) to illustrate the different purposes and measures of quality existing in different European countries.

For each purpose of probation, it is important to distinguish two sets of potential meanings of 'quality':

*intrinsic quality*' (concerned with the relationships between quality in practice processes and the

outcomes of a particular piece of work or set of practices – the 'measures' above)

*'comparative quality'* (concerned with how one particular piece of work or set of practices compares against others) - where 'best practice' will necessarily represent a minority of work.

Table 1: Purposes and Measures (adapted from Durnescu 2008)

Purpose	Measure
Promoting community sanctions and measures	Increased 'market share' for community-based sanctions and measures
Assisting judicial decisions	Judicial satisfaction with reports; improved decision making
Rehabilitation	Reduced reconviction
Public protection	Improved community safety
Punishment/enforcement	High compliance, robust enforcement
Offenders' welfare and reinsertion into the community	Improved inclusion and well-being
Victims' interests	Victim satisfaction with process and outcome
Reparation	Constructive and proportionate redress provided

## How has quality been understood and measured?

There is relatively little literature directly addressing 'quality' in 1-1 probation practice, particularly outside the UK. There is, however, literature on 'effectiveness' and 'values', usually in relation to specific aspects of supervision (e.g. presentence reports or programmes). In the context of England and Wales, official attempts to construct and measure 'quality' are generally associated with the emergence, in the late 1980s, of national standards and performance indicators for probation work. There is also the parallel development of the roles of both HMI Probation and managers within the probation service in evaluating performance against

those measures. These regulatory definitions of quality have been criticised for being ‘top-down’ and centrally imposed rather than ‘bottom-up’ and practitioner owned. They have, as the National Audit Office noted, also tended to focus on the measurable, rather than ideal measures of quality practice: *‘There are no targets assessing the quality of engagement with offenders ... with ... a lack of focus on offender management ... there is a risk that service quality could be compromised to meet targets’* (National Audit Office 2008).

There have been official initiatives, for example:

- the HM Inspectorate of Probation and the Offender Management Inspection Programme (utilising case files, OM and service user interviews), though these were not as wide-ranging as the Measuring the Quality of Prison Life programme in prisons
- the European Foundation for Quality Management Model
- the effective practice agenda - ‘what works’, including accreditation of programmes, measurement of criminogenic needs, and the Correctional Program Assessment Inventory in the US.

More recently, internationally, there has been a growing focus on staff skills (in, e.g., Canada, Australia, and Jersey) and 1-1 supervision

## Previous research into quality in probation

### Service users’ views of quality and effectiveness

It is important to consider the quality of probation supervision as perceived both by those being supervised (service users) and those supervising. From studies of probationers’ views of supervision, and recent desistance research, service users seem most often to value:

- developing a relationship with their supervisor, by having sufficient time and consistency to do this, and their supervisor listening and taking on board where they are and their problems, including knowing about their home and their families
- having a supervisor who listens, but who keeps on trying to steer towards desisting by motivating them, encouraging them to solve problems and talking about problems

- provision of practical help and support in relation to the problems users themselves identify, together with referrals to external agencies

### Probation staff views of quality and effectiveness

In the limited international empirical research about practitioners’ views on quality and effectiveness, it appears that, irrespective of the philosophy behind probation which was adopted, many similar aspects are emphasised. They include:

- involving the service user, communication and building a trusting relationship
- starting where clients are and then attempting to motivate them to change
- using a variety of methods (depending on training and the philosophy of the service) to persuade clients to change towards lower re-offending

In comparison with probationers’ perspectives, research on supervisors’ views was far less likely to mention dealing with practical issues, whether by referral or by direct work.

### Supporting desistance

To what extent do these views relate to what is known about one of the key outcome measures for probation, encouraging offenders to stop offending (desistance)<sup>1</sup>? Recent desistance research suggests that:

- desistance is normally a slow and uneven, individual process;
- it is animated by the offender’s own desire to desist (it is ‘agentic’);
- for persistent offenders it requires learning to lead a non-offending life in the community;
- practical obstacles to do with money, work, lack of qualifications, substance abuse, housing need to be tackled; and.
- supportive relationships are important (with partners, relatives - and probation supervisor)

<sup>1</sup> There is no one agreed definition of desistance, given that it can only be shown definitively that an offender has desisted, in terms of stopping offending completely, when he or she dies. The literature has used crime-free (meaning conviction-free) periods of one or more years, or more rarely a reduced frequency of offending.

So, what is important for supervision is then:

- developing and maintaining motivation and hope;
- promoting offenders' strengths and resources (their 'human capital');
- working with offenders (not on them);
- increasing social capital<sup>2</sup>;
- and, for probation trusts themselves, building supportive communities which tackle structural problems

### Social work, change and obstacles to change

How do these desistance processes relate to developments in social work theory and practice? Recognising the importance of the interactions between 'systems' (such as individuals, families, peer groups, communities) in human development, social work does offer some suggestions about the qualities of practice that might be required to overcome obstacles and support processes of change and development. Ward and Maruna's (2007) Good Lives Model for offender rehabilitation is similarly rooted in developmental and ecological perspectives.

The evidence suggests that probation officers prioritise *attitudinal/behaviour* change, whereas probationers want to address and resolve underlying *social* and *structural* problems. There are also differing views about the extent to which probation officers should resolve problems *for* or *with* probationers, or should support probationers to resolve problems themselves. The range of methods by which desistance might be promoted is broad and varied – hence ideas about quality practice aimed at tackling the obstacles to desistance may well be similarly diverse.

### Surmounting practical obstacles

A key element in desistance is learning to lead a non-offending life and surmounting practical

problems in relation to this: acquiring income legally, finding and keeping accommodation, getting trained. Offenders typically have low resources themselves to do this and need advice. There is little research specifically on effective advice-giving in probation supervision, but the considerable literature on legal advice shows that people are sent to the right place to obtain advice either through:

- referral (making specific appointments to a named person)
- or signposting (telling the person to go to an agency)

There is a tension in offender supervision (also found in legal advice work) between getting people to do it themselves - and their lack of social skills and social capital, so there needs to be consideration of whether referral, signposting or an intermediate method (e.g. sitting by the service user while they make the contact) is best. One cannot empower people who feel totally helpless or unable; it requires a gradual training process.

The review looked particularly at two potential major practical obstacles for desisting offenders: obtaining suitable accommodation and education, training and employment deficits (ETE). On both, the substantial research literature is not specifically oriented towards probation. It also considered the opportunity probation supervision provides to create social capital for service users.

On **accommodation**, the research literature shows:

- finding some accommodation is not a major problem for most offenders, even for those released from prison; some, to desist, may need to move away from their previous geographical area (and friends etc.)
- a lack of suitable pre-release support with accommodation and difficulty in making prison-community links
- prisoners are likely to have over-optimistic views of their accommodation options; so support is important pre-release and for some weeks thereafter
- only a minority of offenders are homeless/living on the streets or in shelters, for them homelessness is *the* priority during supervision
- advice on housing availability, debts and financial management requires specialist

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Social capital' refers to the social networks and support that underlie opportunities for change for offenders. These will include contacts, friends, family, acquaintances and community people which facilitate offenders being able to 'make things happen', including employment opportunities. Offenders typically have low social capital compared to others of their age, but probation officers can provide useful links and opportunities.

knowledge from other agencies. Probation staff need to be aware of local homelessness, tenancy support and financial advice agencies and may need actively to put offenders into touch with such agencies

- if local housing markets are difficult, with a shortage of good, short-term accommodation, then supervisors are likely to have both to 'sell' the offender to providers and to 'sell' the housing to the offender

On **education, training and employment deficits**, research, particularly by the former Department of Trade and Industry researchers shows:

- gaining employment should not be seen as a single event, but a process towards a longer term goal of having a good job: it needs to be presented to offenders as such, in order to create and maintain motivation
- the most successful programmes for getting prisoners back into employment are those which co-ordinate work in and out of prison. This may require information to be shared between agencies
- when programmes only start post release from prison, it is important that the individual is engaged as soon as possible post release
- probation staff can act as advocates to employers for their supervisees, explaining how they would be particularly suitable for specific jobs, as well as putting offenders in touch with relevant employment schemes and self-employment training

On **creating social capital**, there is evidence that:

- offenders tend to have low human and social capital. They need to have the motivation to desist and to address problems, but require assistance as to where to go and what to do
- re-establishing prosocial contacts with family members is important - relevant family members may need to be sought out
- restorative justice conferencing can sometimes help to address criminogenic needs, with the support of those close to the offender and the victim
- probation practice in some countries has moved away from work with service users' families, a

trend which does not help with increasing offenders' social capital

- putting offenders in touch with other social agencies itself increases social capital - supervisors and potentially mentors are helpful
- probation may have a key role to play in developing new ideas about community engagement and reparation (not just 'payback') in which offenders could participate, and in helping local communities to work with ex-offenders

## Implications

The review provides insights on how quality in supervision is understood by supervisors and service users. Although there is a lack of empirical research linking quality to measured reductions in re-offending, there is evidence that the supervisory relationship plays an important role in promoting desistance. The research and evaluation supporting the offender engagement programme will add to our understanding of what makes for good quality engagement and its impact on supervision outcomes including re-offending. An important element is the evaluation of the Offender Engagement pilots: SEED (Skills for Effective Engagement and Development), which is developing practitioner skills in effective engagement through training and continuous professional development; SPA (sentence planning approaches), which is testing tools to engage offenders in sentence planning); and RSM (reflective supervision practice) which focuses on management practices to support effective engagement.