

‘How we work as Probation Officers in times like these’

Reflections from a community-based Irish Probation Service team working in Dublin North Inner City, Jan Alvey, Senior Probation Officer.

In May, 2020 the team of 6 Probation Officers assigned to the Dublin North Inner City team and myself met to reflect on our work and consider our practice within the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst it was reassuring to hear each others’ voices, the ‘new norm’ of meeting via teleconference was recognised as being a very different experience compared to our usual face-to-face meetings that had up until March, been the norm. As we considered this ‘new norm’, associated practice dilemmas and innovations, our reflections focussed on the questions that follow in this article. Central to our discussion was the recognition that our social work skills and ethos remain a core component of the service delivery albeit with the ‘added dimension’ of COVID-19.

What has worked well?

Probation Officers expressed confidence that the clients who were previously compliant with office-based appointments were continuing this pattern with telephone supervision appointments. Probation Officers agreed that features such as well-established rapport, clear supervision plans and recent progress in addressing risks of re-offending, all contributed positively to the ‘transfer’ of supervision from office to telephone. Indeed, Probation Officers described how some clients ‘felt reassured’ to receive supervision telephone calls and know that their supervising officer was still ‘checking in’. The provision to work remotely was enhanced via the roll-out of access to our internal case tracking systems. Probation Officers report feeling an increased sense of ‘connection’ to their work. They can also assist clients further through updates about developments in their cases before the courts or remind them of previous supervision plans and goals that had been co-worked in supervision meetings.

Whilst always a vital part of our work, in COVID-19 times multi-agency working is viewed as ‘critical’. Probation Officers have leaned on the very positive working relationships with the Irish Police force- An Garda Síochána, Irish Prison Service, Courts and probation-funded projects in managing the risks of re-offending posed by some higher-risk offenders in the community. Contact with other statutory agencies like the Child and Family Agency, Health and housing services has supported clients’ presenting needs/difficulties. Referrals to community/voluntary services to assist clients with managing issues such as addiction and social deprivation also remain vital. Whilst Probation Officers have adapted to working on their phones/laptops it has been hugely reassuring for them to connect/co-work with these agencies in addressing the risks and needs clients on supervision continue to face. Where there have been concerns about dis-engagement from some clients at times, Probation Officers reported that continued writing to clients, connecting with their extended family members or other services, that they were known to access, have proved effective means to re-establish contact.

What are the challenges?

Probation Officers reflected on the challenge of beginning a new supervision relationship without having a face to face meeting with clients. However, the requirement to engage via telephone has

led to enhancements in our telephone interview skills. The team reflected that this has helped to overcome concerns about missing all those visual cues, that previous to COVID-19, were used in our work to 'build a picture', establish rapport and gain trust with clients. The team hope that increasing use of videolink or secure apps enabling us to engage face to face with clients will further support relationship building and service provision. This remains a work in progress!

Worrying about clients (is this anything new??). The team reflected on how COVID-19, and the resulting public health measures implemented, have been reported by clients to have exacerbated their feelings of being 'more isolated' than usual. Clients have reported increased anxiety for themselves and family members' health and fear relapses into 'old coping mechanisms' such as alcohol/substance abuse. Probation Officers also acknowledged that many of their clients reported and faced food poverty, reductions in income, loss of employment and the pro-social bonds associated with same. Many of these are factors currently beyond the control of both the client and the Probation Officer, but create huge concerns and for some an increase in risks of reoffending.

Probation Officers reflected about the impact of COVID-19 on the management of specific categories of clients in particular those convicted of domestic violence and sexual offending. Probation Officers recognise that vigilance to the home environments and a recognition of how Covid19 restrictions may result in isolation and lack of access to/contact with services that support victims and families at risk of harm. This has underpinned their engagement with clients, other services and where appropriate victims. By using increased access to technology in their new remote working practice, Probation Officers have been able to gather information to share with clients about how other services are working to put in place supports to address the risks that present. Furthermore the 'new opportunities' in the online world of Covid19 are viewed with concerns that sex offenders may have increased opportunities to engage in online offending. Ongoing inter-agency work to manage those risks has continued within our team using the technology available to us.

Finally and perhaps most importantly we reflected on how Probation Officers have and will 'stay safe and healthy' whilst providing a front line service within the new COVID-19 restrictions. This is in the context of the value the officers place on their role in managing and supporting clients to desist from offending and remain in the community. In addition to remote access facilitating the team to use the case management system, it has also facilitated access to online HR supports, guidance documents, and other online resources that support self-care practice. Telephone support from team members, colleagues, managers and our human resource team, has gone some way to strengthen resilience and unite us in overcoming the challenges together. Although we continue to miss those bonding chats over a cuppa!

Final thoughts

Probation Officers work every day to find solutions to what may seem like impossible tasks. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has brought with it challenges that require this same solution focussed approach. We can continue to meet these challenges by using our professional training, practice experience, social work skills of relationship-building and co-working through these times. Adapting to using new technologies for our work, whilst a bit daunting, has also been met with optimism and a sense of 'self-achievement'. Mastering these new skills and surviving the teleconference or zoom meeting keeps the social work ethos of building resilience going. This remains a key strength for us to incorporate in our work right now.