

## ***Notes of the online expert group meeting on Mental Health in Probation***

### ***How Covid-19 influenced Probation Clients suffering Mental Health problems***

*Date and time: 4th November 10.30-12.00h CET*

*Online platform: Zoom*

## **Notes**

### **Participating Experts:**

Brian Santry - Regional Manager at Probation Service, Ireland

Christina Power – Clinical psychologist, Irish probation service, Ireland

Stacey Musimbe – Researcher at the Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Centre, England and Wales

Kristiana Lapina - Senior expert at State Probation Service Supervision and Probation Program Department, Probation Program Unit, Latvia

Pia Andersson – Senior manager and expert at the Criminal sanctions agency, Finland

Duygu Altin – Senior probation officer, Turkey

Gonul Demez – researcher and professor of sociology Akdeniz University, Turkey

Cristina Sanchez – Probation officer, Catalonia – Spain

Ilonka Verkade – Policy Advisor, Netherlands

Miriam Sevasta - Director of Probation and Parole, Malta

Chantal Avellino - Senior forensic psychologist, Malta and Chair of the Expert group on Mental Health

Sandra Scicluna – Professor at the University of Malta, Malta

Willem van der Brugge – Secretary General, Confederation of European Probation

Anna Esquerrà Roqueta – Policy and Liaison Officer, Confederation of European Probation

### **Welcome, purpose of the meeting and short introduction of participants**

Willem van der Brugge, CEP Secretary General, welcomed all participants at the expert group on mental health. After the official welcome there was a round table and each participant introduced themselves briefly.

### **Influence of Covid-19 on people suffering Mental Health Problems**

*Stacey Musimbe researcher at the Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Centre, UK.*

The programme of the expert group meeting followed by a presentation from Stacey Musimbe researcher at the Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Centre in the UK, on the influence of Covid-19 on people suffering mental health problems. The presentation was focussed on an overview of secondary and primary data on KSS CRC probation staff and service user mental wellbeing during the coronavirus pandemic. It explored the effects of economic stressors, health concerns and sex on the mental wellbeing of both staff and service users. It also delved into a subset



of factors that have influenced the mental wellbeing of probation staff including balancing home and work responsibilities and the pressures of working under the exceptional delivery model. The presentation finished with some points of learning for professionals.

**Round table session. Presentation of jurisdictions on How Covid-19 influenced probation clients suffering mental health problems as well as staff.** *Session moderated by Mrs Chantal Avellino, Chair of the CEP expert group on Mental Health and Probation Officer in Malta.*

The expert group members, representing different European jurisdictions, presented the situation regarding Covid-19 in their own jurisdictions. Expert group members produced an abstract on what was presented at the expert group meeting so the information can be shared with other CEP members interested in the topic. The abstracts follow below.

***A brief overview of the work of the State Probation Service with clients who have mental health problems in the context of COVID-19***

*Kristiana Lapina - Senior expert at State Probation Service Supervision and Probation Program Department, Probation Program Unit, Latvia.*

In Latvia, as in other countries, government implemented various types of restrictions. For a while a lockdown was implemented, which meant traveling restrictions, gathering restrictions and operational restrictions for various institutions. Various considerations were taken into account. For example, low risk clients were allocated appointments online, but moderate to high risk clients saw their appointment frequency cut. Some face-to-face meetups got replaced with online ones. Probation programme implementation got interrupted for months, from March to August, to be exact. At present, the programs have been suspended again, but we hope that they will be resumed after the end of the emergency. Clients are seen as usual, but with moderate safety measures in place. At the moment State Probation Service (SPS) has not collected data on what impact Covid-19 restrictions have had on people with mental disorders but it plans to do so in the future, in order to determine how best to organize the supervision process.

There are concerns about reports of increased violence by some crisis centers. This suggests how to better manage the supervision of clients who are characterized by impulsivity and difficulty managing their emotions. In addition, tensions in the social space are growing. It can be assumed that some clients may have employment problems.

Regarding social correction programs: the interruption in the programme that lasted for 2 and a half months had a bad impact on the participants. Some people with anxiety and depression reported they felt left alone. They had no one to talk to about their difficulties. In some cases, access to other mental health professionals has been limited, which is cumbersome. There are changes in the dynamics of the group. They lose their cohesion and have to try to re-establish contact which is very important for the implementation of the program.

Taking their experiences into account, conclusion is that the contact with the client needs to be maintained consistently, even if only online. Clients suffer from stress and they need support. Isolation



and lack of contact is an additional risk factor. This means that in the future, data collection and processing must analyze how best to implement the various functions of the SPS.

About employees. During the first wave of COVID-19, the CSP manager wrote an encouraging e-mail every day to all employees thanking them for their contribution. This practice is still used, reduced to one e-mail per week and judging by the informal feedback from employees, it is very uplifting. Overall, the work of the SPS in this crisis can be considered effective however, more serious conclusions will certainly be drawn after some time.

### ***Catalonia - How COVID-19 influenced Probation clients suffering Mental Health problems***

*Cristina Sanchez – Probation officer IRES, Catalonia.*

During the lockdown due to COVID-19, most mental health services were interrupted meaning no face-to-face visits with psychiatrists or psychologists as well as the suspension of group therapy and integration programs. When talking about probation clients suffering from mental health problems in our jurisdiction, we must consider different scenarios such as the type of measure (outpatient or inpatient) as well as other associated problems. While the inpatient clients experienced suspension permits and psychiatric units' reorganizations, the use of drugs or rehabilitation rejection were real problems for the outpatient ones. Aside from that, other associated problems such as violent situations at home, administration and paperwork delay, recidivism, job-loss, rejection of following rehabilitation programs or fear of taking the public transport were/are realities hard to deal with. Due to Covid-19, the role of probation officers changed into a way that the clients follow up was and is mainly by phone. This means adapting ourselves and exploring new ways of case-working to give good quality attention to our clients, as well as courts and the rest of involved actors.

### ***Ireland - Living with COVID-19***

*Brian Santry – Regional Manager at Probation Service, Ireland*

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Irish Government developed a national plan: 'Resilience & Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 (Government of Ireland)'. There are five levels to the plan outlining guidelines and various restrictions. Ireland is currently at level 5 (the highest level).

In 2019, Dr Christina Power (senior clinical psychologist) conducted research into the mental health need among people supervised by the Probation Service. There were 3 studies conducted; the third study focused on 500 cases. Therefore, prior to the pandemic, the Irish Probation Service had the benefit of Dr Power's findings from her research relating to mental health needs and mental illness prevalence amongst people subject to probation supervision.

The Probation Service developed on-line COVID-19 Folders for staff to support our working 'in a new way' and to provide practical assistance in continuing service delivery. An example of this were guidelines for phone supervision of offenders, tips/techniques for problem solving over the phone, guidelines for face to face when and where safe to do so, information for offenders, as well as other practical supportive material.



Regarding the emotional experiences of clients during the 'lockdown', feedback from some Probation Officers indicated that anxiety, fear, isolation, loneliness, boredom and vulnerability were experienced by their clients.

The Probation Service promoted measures to support clients during the 'lockdown'. These included prioritising certain categories of offenders (e.g. women, young people, sex offenders). Also the use of phone contact as well as other forms of technology were used to maintain contact and support, and was referred to by some as a 'lifeline' when other services were not operating at full capacity. Community based projects, funded by the Probation Service, also provided valuable and practical support to their clients. Probation Officers also supported their clients in linking with community mental health services.

In supporting staff, the Probation Service managers maintained regular contact with their team members both individually and in teams, including the provision of supervision. Staff members are also able to access external support from the external health care provider contracted by the Probation Service to assist staff when requested, as well as accessing the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service. The Wellbeing Probation Committee provided tips for staff to help maintain positive mental health.

### ***Netherlands - Covid-19: Dutch measures & way of working***

*Ilonka Verkade - Policy Advisor, Netherlands*

In the Netherlands we have a "partial lockdown", which means roughly that schools and shops are open but restaurants, theatres and others, are closed. Alcohol and cannabis is not sold between 20pm and 7am. We have to wear a face mask in indoor public spaces and work from home if possible.

At this moment there are no extra measures for the criminal justice system. All professionals who work in the criminal justice system are labelled as a "vital professional", which means they come under the exemption of the measures.

The basic principle is that we continue our primary tasks for a safer society. For the performance of primary tasks, if the work can be done at home, we do it at home. If the quality of the work calls for physical contact with the client, then that is possible.

So, probations officers still work, they see clients face-to-face or they are video calling with them. Face-to-face contact always takes place with high-risk clients or when we think this is essential. Probation/ rehabilitation in Corona times requires creativity. Fortunately, there are a lot of colleagues who adapted very quickly to the situation and continue to do their work in an inventive way.

We also have worries;

- Like, for families affected by domestic violence and child abuse. This is certainly being felt now that other safe havens are disappearing and the stress in households is increasing. Probation officers are asked to be extra alert and to engage in a conversation with clients about the home situation.



- It is a tough time for clients, the world is stressful, there are no daytime activities etc.; this increases the risk of reaching for drugs or alcohol. And motivational interviewing is more difficult by telephone, if you don't see someone's body language. For clients who suffer from substance misuse or serious psychiatric problems it is difficult. So we have to pay close attention to that.
- Clients with violence issues, impulsive behaviour and people with an intellectual disability who benefit from additional and appropriate support in the current situation we offer individual - online – training, which we developed during Covid-19.

We also see positive developments;

- Forensic care, so mental health care and drug rehabilitation, is still available for our clients.
- Probation officers discovered that a walk and a talk instead of a static conversation in an office works very well.
- And there are also a lot of calls via telephone or video calling which are going very well. Probation officers noticed that they have more and more intensive contact with clients than before the Corona outbreak. Especially with young people.
- We had some digital court hearings: until recently, that sounded like future music. But the corona crisis has accelerated digital working. So less traveling for clients and probation officers; we gain time.
- In spring, during the first lock down, we had less significant recidivism.

*Has it effected my work/ life balance?*

Yes, but me and my colleagues cope well I think. We have a lot of video meetings so I still see my colleagues though I miss the chitchat, seeing each other. And we still have supervision groups, digital. And I am grateful that I have a job and that I can contribute something to society at this moment. And if possible I take endless walks, fortunately that is still allowed here. It clears your mind.

*Long term or lessons learned*

We think this crisis also offers opportunities. For example, because group meetings are not allowed we asked ourselves, can community service orders also look more like a training order? Or can we come up with new original community service projects?

We are also thinking about things we can learn from this crisis. For example, that much more is possible in the field of digital working than we thought. We have made more progress on this in the past months than in the past five years. We have to stick to that. So research to develop this has started. We have also seen that in a situation like this everyone puts their best foot forward. Also a lot of our clients.



## **Finland – The impact of Covid-19 in Probation services**

*Pia Andersson- Criminal sanctions agency, Finland*

The probation staff has been working from home during the spring time. After the summer period the staff is working half of the week in the probation offices and half of the time from home, in a so called hybrid model. Necessary hygienic precautionary measures are followed in all form of work. The probation officers are trying to find a balance with the remote work from home and personal life. The managers are giving support to the probation officers in online meetings. How to give support to the probation officers with a shorter working experience and due to this, with not as large scale of skills in client work in Probation Service as staff with longer experience, has been one topic we have discussed in our service. Constantly organized national meetings to discuss how to combine remote work with treatment and support work has been one way of supporting the implementation of tools and work methods for online remote work. The probation staff is committed to work according to national principles and has been flexible in changing work methods and in taking new tools in use. Digital probation work has taken a big leap forward during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A lot of the client work in the Probation Service has been done by phone. Many of the client don't have a computer or find it difficult to use digital platforms with the smart phone. Especially clients with mental health issues have been keeping frequently contact with probation officers by phone. Concern of the clients with both mental health issues and substance misuse is shared in the Probation Service and the co-work with help organizations has been relevant due to the fact that many of the service providers' in house services have been closed. Some of the service providers have organized their own work in a new way, for example they are patrolling on the street to get contact with vulnerable client groups.

Community sanctions and measure are in use and presentence reports are made. Online exercises, courses and self-help platforms is used in the Probation Service. Individual treatment programs are continued and organized through Skype, phone or with digital rehabilitation platforms. The content might have to be revised to fit the new communication means and we have defined national standards in revising the content.

The experiences we have are that probation clients with severe mental health problems have been more in contact with the probations officers than usual during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the support services organized for persons with mental health issues are closed and probation officers might be the only contact the client have at the moment. The importance of working and having proper methods and means to work with this client group has been discussed before in our Probation Service and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it evident that this is something we have to develop more. The governmental psychological and psychiatric services and institutions' resources are decreased due to economic factors and the effect of this can be seen in the Probation Service.

The aim is that the work continues as usual in a so called hybrid model with both physical meetings with clients and with Skype and phone calls. All community sanctions and measures are implemented and presentence reports are made. Ongoing community service continues if the place of work is open. If the community service place of work is closed, alternatives are taken in use, if possible. Control work is done by the phone and with on place visits by keeping a physical distance. Planning for new community service cases is ongoing. Electronic monitoring programs are implemented as usual by



following hygienic and safety precaution measures. The contact frequency with all community sanction clients remain the same as before. The probation officers don't visit clients at remand prisons and prisons. The contact is made by phone or with Skype. These precautionary measures have been taken in order to limit the spread of COVID-19.

### ***Turkey – The impact of Covid-19 in Probation services***

*Duygu Altin - Probation officer, Turkey*

During covid-19 pandemic we mainly go on working with probationers under drug testing order since this is a high risk group having high comorbidity with mental disorders. As probation branches we refer probationers having mental disorders to hospital where they apply voluntarily. During pandemic, people are hesitant to go to hospital in general due to spread of virus. This hesitation has affected rehabilitation process mainly for probationers having mental disorders and in need for treatment including medical interventions. Wearing masks is another factor since it makes reading probationers' facial expressions harder in our meetings. Within our probation services, it is planned to apply online interventions for probationers. We have already started several online trainings including ones about several structured intervention programmes as well as the ones during which we, as probation experts, discuss online interventions pros and cons of those interventions for probationers with academicians. Normally, within our probation services probation experts frequently attend face to face interactive trainings. Apart from informing about interventions, those trainings make staff know each other, share ideas, problems they face in the field and possible solutions. So they are useful to learn from experience of other branches. Online trainings during pandemic helped us to keep connected as probation staff and to adapt "new normal". A flexible model of working is applied which there is minimum number of staff in branches so that we can lower risk for virus in high risk areas.

### ***Malta - Overview of the new measures implemented since the onset of Covid-19***

*Chantal Avellino - Forensic Psychologist of Probation and Parole, Malta*

The presentation focused on providing a brief overview of the new measures implemented since the onset of COVID-19. This included mandatory requirements such as having temperature checks upon entering the premises, wearing a mask/visor throughout the office, the installation of Perspex within the counselling rooms, booking of rooms/urine testing facilities in advance of the sessions, the provision of sanitisers, adaptation of the transport schedule for court sittings, videoconferencing facilities for both community-based offenders and inmates, to name but a few. The measures introduced have offered both staff and probationers an added layer of security in reducing the propagation of the virus, however, these new measures have brought with them some limitations when supervising offenders (such as a reduction of face-to-face contact hours, reduced urine testing, or offenders using the current situation as an excuse to miss appointments).

In terms of mental health issues, it seems there were some mixed views on this front, potentially reflective of the changes throughout the whole pandemic. Initially, it seems some offenders struggled to adapt to the changing circumstances (such as reporting increased anxiety and then resorting to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance misuse), whereas some clients seemed to have



flourished (for example, avoiding parties and abstaining from drugs, in favour of spending more time engaging in family-oriented activities).

This sense of adaptation was also noted in the manner by which the staff operated. The increased use of telecommunication has become an essential tool in improving the supervision of those clients who are digitally literate or at least have the basic prerequisites to keep in touch through electronic means, via online communication platforms or even through messaging applications. In particular, messaging or “chatting” with clients has created a new avenue for communication between probation officers and their clients. This has been especially useful when reaching out and offering support during these trying times. Conversely, this new way of communicating, especially when carrying sessions remotely, has brought with it a number of difficulties when trying to maintain boundaries with clients (for example, when teleconferencing as some members of staff felt that this encroached upon their personal space or awkward situations with clients holding sessions from their bedrooms).

The changes brought on by COVID-19 seemed to have also had an impact on the staff’s work-life balance. Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been an increased use of teleworking. Working from home has created both advantages and disadvantages. Some probation officers indicated that teleworking has enabled them to improve their time management. On the other hand, some members of staff have struggled when working from home, especially when living with other persons who are also working from home or taking care of children. In some cases, staff indicated that they tended to feel isolated, especially when spending long periods of time working remotely.

Moving forward from COVID-19, it seems there is a consensus that despite some of the limitations indicated above, there are some good practices that should be retained. The recent provisions, such as the increased use of telecommunication tools and teleworking are two examples of such. The use of technology to reach out to clients in this digital age has created new platforms for communication, that go beyond face-to-face appointments increasing the dialogue between probation officers and offenders. Teleworking should be made available to all members of staff to promote a healthier work-life balance, improve time-management, and also stagger the number of staff at the office at any given time, as this had the added benefit of minimising distractions, staff tension, and reduce the potential for burnout.

### **Next steps, new meeting beginning of 2021 and close of meeting**

Willem van der Brugge informed the members of the expert group that the Council for Penological Cooperation (PC-CP) working group of the Council of Europe is working on a recommendation on Probation and Mental Health. For doing this the PC-CP is working with Charlie Brooker, professor and researcher at the University of London | RHUL · Centre for Criminology and Sociology.

Willem van der Brugge suggested to have a new expert group meeting beginning 2021 in which professor Charlie Brooker will be invited to give a presentation of his latest research and will also be able to consult the expert group members on several issues regarding mental health and probation in different EU member states.

Utrecht, November 2020

