



REPORT of the 4th CEP expert meeting on Technology in Probation

Online, 8th December 2020, 10.00-12.00h CET

CEP Secretary Willem van der Brugge opened the meeting by welcoming everyone to the Zoom platform. He said that regrettably this meeting had to take place online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but that he was very pleased to still see many familiar (and some new) faces, and he introduced the chair of the meeting, Mrs. Pia Andersson from Finland (also CEP Board member).

Pia started by saying that she was happy to see everyone too, and that she was looking forward to nice discussions. She said it would be really interesting to share experiences from the various European countries now the coronavirus had changed the working procedures so much. She announced that in the meeting there would be two presentations on the topic of technology in probation – one from the professional point of view and the other one from the clients' point of view. She expressed her hope that this meeting could be a starting point for a series of meetings in the coming months? In fact since most probably the situation would not get back to "normal" very quickly, it would be really valuable to investigate possible future models for working – perhaps a hybrid way of working could become the new normal?

Pia then introduced the first speaker of the meeting, professor Hannah Graham from the University of Stirling, Scotland.

Hannah thanked Pia and CEP for inviting her and for giving her the chance to present. She said to very much appreciate the European network and all the information that could be found on CEP's website. Between 2017 and 2020 she had been doing research on (the use of) technology in probation, but this had not been an easy task. Available articles were often not published, or were only available in languages other than English.

For what she had gathered Hannah distinguished three types of views regarding the increasing digitization of probation work: the utopian one, the retrotopian one and the dystopian one. These various perspectives originated from the input that she had received during her annual university workshops in Cambridge.

Hannah then mentioned the potential strengths and challenges of the use of technology in probation. Positive aspects could be: the easy access from every computer or other device, the options for personalization (tailoring), the restrictions in time and costs (no travelling needed) and the additional value it brought during the corona pandemic.

However she also saw challenges, of which the main ones were the issues of sensitive information and data protection, the faulty technology, the misuse or unintended use of technology and the cultural differences leading to misunderstandings.



Hannah said that she had looked at the special Covid-19 sections on the EuroPris and CEP websites, and that from the protocols and articles found there she had seen that during the last months indeed changes had been made to (digital) probation work.

She then showed a few practical examples from workers in England and Wales – the “issues in context”. She finished her presentation by saying to be very interested in the experiences from the participants and in hearing the practitioner’s points of view – perhaps they had some good tips for new research?

Pia thanked Hannah for her “*short presentation on such a large topic*”.

She apologized for having forgotten the introductory round of the participants at the beginning of the meeting, and asked everyone to still shortly introduce him/herself. Temur Gugushvili from Georgia and David A. Raho from the UK were welcomed as new members to the group.

Pia said that professionalism was something that the probation world shared in its work – how was this with digital professionalism?

Imants Jurevicius (Latvia) answered that in his country probation work was changing. Because of the corona virus everyone now worked in shifts and technology gave them the possibility to still communicate, also with the clients. People had become more flexible with their working hours and the idea for a next step could be to contact clients outside the official working hours as well, in order to have more efficient contact. All internal communication within the organization was done online, and meetings were much more productive. It was however a very different reality for managers.

Goran Brkic (Croatia) indicated that his main problem was the financial aspect: it was not possible for him to provide a laptop for all staff members. He said that like in Latvia in his country probation officers worked in shifts as well – 5 days from home and then 5 days at the office. He found it very difficult to arrange everything for his staff, and besides that cooperating professionals like social workers and psychologists said to prefer face-to-face meetings to digital ones.

David Raho (UK) said that he had always been skeptical about remote supervision. “*But then Covid came*”, he said, “*And we had to quickly adopt*”. He underlined the importance of the other parties in the criminal justice field – the success of working with technology also depended on how digitalized the courts were, the prisons, the lawyers. He said that Covid had ‘helped’ to speed up the discussion on how technology could support rehabilitation, and it became clear that certain things were definitely possible.

Temur Gugushvili (Georgia) agreed with Imants saying that for managers it was very important how well their management systems worked and that they had access to these from anywhere. Another issue that his organization sometimes faced was that certain platforms (Teams, Zoom) were not allowed to use, which forced workers to get familiar with many different tools (platforms) at the same time.

In the meeting chat Imants remarked that in his organization people were changing their way of working – for example they partly worked during the night in order to have time for family or other personal matters during the day. This almost made them ‘entrepreneurs’ – having the freedom of planning their own time and work since everything needed to be done from the same home. Managers needed to deal with this as they could not see (check) what everyone was doing during the official working hours, but with a good culture and working relationship there would be no need for control or mistrust. It remained however important for the managers to listen to the comments/feedback from the floor.



After a short coffee break the meeting continued.

Pia said that Covid-19 had forced everyone to make a quick and unprepared start in working with technology and she wondered if perhaps some “golden rules for digital probation work” should be drafted? Could technology become complimentary to face-to-face work? For this, she said, the point of view from clients (service users) was very important, and with those words she introduced the next presentation that would be treating this topic – a presentation delivered by Mrs. Gail McGreevy and Mrs. Gillian Montgomery from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI).

Gail started by naming their positions – she herself was responsible for the communication work and Gillian was associate director of PBNI and had the work with service users in her portfolio.

One of the tasks of the Probation Board was to prepare pre-sentence reports, and after the official sentence (imposed by the judge), they either supported the work in prison (preparing the offender for release) or worked together with the community. Building up relationships was a very important issue said Gail, as “*human relationships are at the heart of what we do*”. Technology should not replace face-to-face contacts, it should enhance them.

Gail then mentioned the four digital aspects that PBNI used: the app “Changing lives”, video and telephone for supervision, the online victim registration and the digital service users groups.

After the creation of the **app** a survey had been done among service users to hear from them what worked and what didn't. The response rate was high and the feedback positive – at the moment there were 6000 downloads of the app. The app consisted of 6 sections, one on probation (to inform the service users of what their probation orders meant), one on mental health (information on anxiety and depression – 65% of the clients experienced these feelings – including a help module for crisis moments), one on addiction (including a help function as well), one on self-assessment, one on victims and the last one on community service (again including information).

The feedback on the app from service users was mostly positive, but there were a few barriers: the wifi did not always work, some people did not have a smartphone of the necessary software and there was the issue of suspicion: several clients were afraid that the app had some sort of gps function that could “spy” on them.

Gillian took over talking about the use of **technology in supervision**. She said that the start of this had been good, but that the lockdown had brought many challenges. Initially the probation officers made phone calls to clients, but after a while they also started to use whatsapp video calls – this depended on the preference of the client. All the time they kept on asking feedback from their service users. The reactions were very positive – clients said to miss the face-to-face contacts, but were very happy with the calls. Another positive point was that they did not need to leave the house, which saved them money and time.

The next technological issue that Gillian mentioned was the **victim registration system**. There were now over 340 victims registered, and every registered victim was contacted by phone. The Probation Board hoped to have the blended form moving forward.

The last point were the **service users groups**. Until the lockdown there were 8 active groups in the country. Normally the group members met face to face, so it took a lot of effort to get the groups together again when the lockdown came. Several of them were now up and running again, contacting each other via whatsapp. Gillian said that PBNI was keen on receiving service users' feedback in order to further develop this technology. Her experience was that male groups were quite happy to meet remotely, the female ones less – they were a little more cautious.



Pia thanked both ladies for their presentation and asked the group members what experiences they had in their own countries?

Séverine Dubaissi (France) said to be impressed by the app from Northern Ireland. Her organization was also in the process of developing one but it was a complicated process that took a long time and encountered many technical issues. She hoped that in the beginning of 2021 it would be ready for testing.

David Raho (UK) asked how much consideration they had given to self-management with this app? Gail answered that they had grand ideas in the beginning of what they wanted to achieve with the app. They made the clients part of the process and based on their comments had taken out parts that did not work. The cooperation and feedback of these service users was of great importance she said.

David reacted that even before the existence of apps it had always been important to involve the (feedback from) service users.

Pia agreed that indeed the involvement of clients was a key point for probation work, and that it should remain so when working digitally. She said that probation services were eager to develop digital tools, but that perhaps other community organizations were not yet that far?

Willem indicated that he found the service user groups very interesting and asked Gillian if she could tell some more? Gillian answered that these groups were voluntary – every service user was informed on their existence, but it was not mandatory to join. Offenders and victims were always in separate groups. At a certain point requests came for specific female groups, so these were then created. Gillian said that people in the groups were very motivated – they brought in topics for discussion and arranged the agenda for meetings.

Temur said that he had had a few face-to-face meetings with ex-prisoners to talk about their experiences and what prison or probation staff could have done better. This had been very helpful he said, also because he had given the clients the feeling that they contributed to their own process.

Imants indicated that in his country there were no such groups or apps. However for 2021 a research was planned on service user engagement, and their opinions. Also they had an online portal for people in the criminal justice system, the “e-criminal case”. Here people could see what was happening in court, in prosecution, prison, probation and police and thus follow their own process. The next step would be to create an app and connect this to the portal.

Then Pia took the floor again saying that unfortunately it was time to wrap up the meeting and come to an end. She thanked everyone for the interesting discussions and the speakers for their presentations. And she asked the group whether it would be an idea to organize a next meeting in Spring 2021 on the various digital platforms? They could share experiences and give tips on what worked and what didn't. And hopefully in November a live (face to face) event could be organized.

Lastly she once again mentioned the question if there would be a need for golden rules in digital probation?

Willem closed the meeting by saying that he had found it very interesting and had learnt a lot. There were challenges and concerns, but on the other hand the developments kept on going. One of the benefits of meeting online was that it is easy to organize, but of course he also recognized the need of meeting in person.

He thanked the group members for their engagement and wished everyone a nice afternoon.

