

Remote Supervision - Getting the Balance Right

A research report by:

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The Covid-19 pandemic brought sudden and significant changes to probation practice. The HMPPS Exceptional Delivery Model required staff and service users to interact in different ways, including making much greater use of the telephone to keep in touch. A small team of researchers (from the Kent, Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company Research Unit and the Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge) set out to explore case managers' views of the benefits and limitations of different methods of remote communication. The research sought to answer two key questions:

- What practice methods, skills and technologies are currently being used by case managers?
- What current practice measures do case managers experience as valuable, with the potential to be retained and developed in the future?

The research gathered data from an online survey (with 79 responses from staff in case management roles) and from 12 semi-structured interviews. These 12 interviews gave the opportunity to dig deeper into the themes that emerged in the survey. Data was gathered from the three CRC divisions run by Seetec. Interviews were conducted by telephone and videoconference in August and September 2020 and the survey was open for responses from July to September 2020.

What did the research discover?

The telephone call was the most common form of remote supervision used by practitioners. Calls enabled a wide range of supervision tasks to take place, with staff deeming them more suitable for routine reporting and unscheduled welfare checks, and least suitable for induction

appointments. Video calls were not used to contact service users (this was a matter of CRC policy) but were regularly used for meetings with other professionals.

Text messages and emails were also commonly used (the former for quick and direct communication, the latter for passing on key health/employment documents) but had their problems in the form of data security breaches and the risk that information might be read by someone other than the intended recipient.

Research participants pointed to strengths and limitations of telephone supervision. It offered considerable flexibility to service users (e.g. for those with childcare responsibilities, work commitments, or physical health problems), but was not always felt to be inclusive (e.g. for those who had English as a second language, or who had hearing difficulties). The flexibility of telephone supervision appeared to increase compliance, but its less formal nature was said to risk complacency. Service users were answering the phone and hence maintaining contact while not necessarily actively engaging. Supervisors deemed remote risk assessment problematic and, significantly, telephone contact almost always felt unsuitable for cases involving child protection and domestic violence.

When working with service users with drug and alcohol problems, who were homeless, or who were experiencing mental health issues, practitioners saw challenges as they were unable to do visual checks for safety and wellbeing. Sight was significant, but telephone supervision deprived practitioners of other senses too. Practitioners also valued their sense of smell as a means of gathering crucial information about the well-being of service users and talked about the importance of tone of voice in difficult telephone calls.

Remote supervision also posed a challenge to building and sustaining professional relationships with service users. Indeed, familiar processes of listening, being friendly, and being clear about the purposes, expectations and options of supervision brought emotional labour, an intrinsic aspect of probation work, into sharper focus. The research was not directly investigating the experience of working from home, but inevitably the pandemic has blurred issues of remote supervision and working from home highlighting the complexity of setting appropriate boundaries for professional relationships. It was not always possible to separate work time from home time and some practitioners (who had not had a work mobile phone prior to the pandemic) found themselves accessible to service users in unfamiliar ways.

Finally, though already a part of frontline practice, the pandemic increased the use of video/ telephone conferencing for inter-agency work. Many staff were positive about this, citing the time saved by not attending in person, but others expressed concern that it was not easy to support someone, especially someone vulnerable, in a difficult virtual meeting.

What did the research conclude, suggest, and recommend?

1. Supervision cannot rely on telephone contact alone - Deprived of the opportunity to see, hear (and sometimes smell) properly, supervisors were not getting the full picture of service users and reciprocally, service users were not getting a full picture of them. Telephone supervision constrained practitioner ability to gather the information needed to make accurate risk assessments, and was not always sufficiently formal given the statutory nature of probation

supervision. Remote supervision was also a difficult experience for vulnerable service users and those with complex needs.

2. However, there is a place for telephone supervision - Telephone supervision can work well in cases where staff and service user know each other well, where the service user's circumstances are stable and where risk is assessed as low. Service users, where this is appropriate, avoid the expense and inconvenience of travelling to probation offices. In some cases, telephone supervision enables conversations and reflections that are more comfortable, genuine, and purposeful than those that take place in the office.

3. The importance of professional discretion - Practitioners would like to continue with elements of remote supervision and would welcome an increase in professional discretion in this area. New guidance is needed to take account of these changes in working practices and professional boundaries, for example around use of work equipment, sharing of email addresses, security of data and recording of decisions about modes of contact. Increasing the scope for the use of professional discretion in this way also brings new support and training needs for staff.

4. Thinking about video calls - The research supports the continued use of video calls for inter-agency meetings. Though staff had no experience of video supervision, many saw the value of it through offering the prospect of seeing (as well as hearing) service users and their immediate surroundings. A trial of video calling would enable practitioners to explore the benefits and limitations of this technology, assess its usefulness and contribute to developing the necessary protocols and practice guidance.

5. Developing the use of internet resources for supervision

The research also points to the possibility of broadening structured supervision by drawing on online resources. Ability to use these resources was sometimes hampered by lack of smartphones (for practitioners), Wi-Fi issues in offices, security settings on work devices, and access issues for service users, but there was significant interest. Staff asked for more information about appropriate good-quality online resources, expressing enthusiasm for a resource library that could be used as part of individual supervision (e.g. a Targets for Change resource for the age of the internet).

6. Flexible working with greater use of remote supervision

‘Working at home’ and ‘remote supervision’ are two different things which, in the context of the pandemic, overlap. Some of the objections to telephone supervision seemed really to be objections to working at home, for example the sense of intrusion into the practitioner’s home. After the pandemic, it was hoped that the benefits of working from home might be maintained (including travelling less, staying late in the office less frequently, and managing their family responsibilities more easily) with staff allowed more opportunity for flexible working.

Getting the balance right

This was a small study conducted within three CRC divisions (and the researchers are grateful to all the CRC staff who supported the study and participated in the survey and interviews). Further research and evaluation would usefully develop its findings by, for example, looking at practice in the National Probation Service, learning from countries elsewhere in Europe and including the perspectives of service users.

The full research report is available to read here:

<https://www.ksscrc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Dominey-Coley-Ellis-Devitt-Lawrence-2020-Remote-supervision-Getti....pdf>

Communication and human interaction are central to probation supervision. This research highlights ways in which remote supervision impedes supervision and hinders the process of building rapport and trust. However, it also suggests that there is a place for the telephone and internet resources as options available to enhance supervision. One of the interviewees in this study spoke for many of the research participants, explaining how her learning over past months encouraged her to continue with some elements of remote supervision alongside more traditional practice:

‘I don't think we ever would have gone to this phone contact if it hadn't been these exceptional circumstances. It's been forced to come in. But there certainly have been some benefits... it's the mixture that's needed. That balance between the two.’