The reflective practitioner in transition. Probation work during reintegration of probation services in England and Wales

Anne Burrell
De Montfort University, UK

Abstract
This article evaluates the recent history of probation services in England and Wales. The author – currently working as a Practice Teacher Assessor in the Probation Service – considers the politicisation of probation, identified as one outcome of a rhetorical narrative to ‘act tough’ on crime and the impact of the New Public Management model of organisational accountability, its focus on performance and targets, and, arguably, the diminution of the professional role. Following semi-privatisation, and currently reintegration, of probation services, the article puts forward an argument for a realignment of practice, to focus on the supervisory relationship, professional autonomy, and the reflective practitioner.

Keywords
probation service, Transforming Rehabilitation, professional relationship, reflective practitioner, professional identity

Introduction
The decade from 2013 to 2023 is likely to prove to be one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of the probation service in England and Wales – a dubious
status for an organisation which celebrated its centenary in 2007.¹ 2013 was the point at which the then Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government pro-
mulgated the possibility of privatisation of the probation service.² Various argu-
ments were put forward to justify this position – that it would enable change and innovation in practice; that it would finally put an end to the revolving door of short-
term prison sentences, and speedy re-incarceration, as a consequence of reoffend-
ing; and that it would provide better value for money (Ministry of Justice, 2013).

In the event, probation was only semi-privatised, via a policy strategy entitled Transforming Rehabilitation (TR.) (MoJ, 2013: 3,4). It would be satisfying to think that the concerted campaign against privatisation, led by a plethora of bodies and individuals, including the Magistrates Association and the National Association of Probation Officers, had a benign impact on this outcome (Magistrates Association, 2017; NAPO, 2013). In practice, it seems equally pos-
sible that the statutory obstacles to wholesale privatisation of a key arm of the crim-
inal justice system proved a step too far – particularly as the then Minister for Justice, Chris Grayling, was clearly keen to implement the measures speedily, abandoning the sole, limited, and possibly not relevant pilot of payment by results – a key plank of the privatisation model – at an early stage (Raynor, 2018: 50). Annison (2019) argues that, from the outset, Transforming Rehabilitation embodied the notion of ‘policy disaster’ in its characteristics, and in its outcomes. He utilises the concept of ‘policy disaster’ to analyse the specific dynamics of British political processes which shape much social policy; and which rapidly move from a gradual process of change, to more radical measures, and which he argues contributed to the ‘unba-
lanced’ outcome of the privatisation reforms (Annison, 2019: 54–55).

The aftermath of Transforming Rehabilitation led to a significant deterioration in the delivery of probation services. An early Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) report was highly critical of a range of issues – the lamentable delivery of the Through the Gate arrangements to address the needs of short-sentenced prisoners; excessive workloads in both the private Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) and the National Probation Service (NPS), which had a corrosive impact on both service users and staff; the escalation in Serious Further Offences (SFOs); and the diminution of supervision, and the professional relationship, as a conse-
quence – at its most egregious, in the ‘call centre’ operations offered by one CRC (HMIP, 2016).

In June 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the then Minister for Justice, Robert Buckland, announced the reintegration of probation services.³ The justification for this decision – which was surprising in its timing, if nothing else – was cited as the escalating costs of continuing with the semi-privatised arrange-
ments. Under repeated pressure from his shadow counterpart, David Lammy, Mr Buckland refused to acknowledge that this decision represented a major U-turn in policy, pointing to the fact that some aspects of service delivery – specialist work with women, and around issues to do with accommodation, and employment and training – would remain outsourced to the third sector and other bidders.

In practice, whilst the financial imperative would undoubtedly appear to have been a major consideration, it also seems possible that the weight of disapprobation
regarding the consequences of Transforming Rehabilitation was proving too signifi-
cant to ignore (See for example: HMIP, 2016, 2017). A draft Target Operating
Model (TOM) for reintegration followed in March 2020 and the reintegration of
the private CRCs and the Civil Service-based NPS finally took place on 26 June
2021. It therefore seems likely that there will continue to be gains and losses in
the restructure. The focus of this article is an evaluation of possibilities with regard
to the future of the professional, one-to-one relationship between supervising
officer and supervisee, historically the foundation of probation practice; and, asso-
ciated with that bedrock of probation, the capacity for front line staff to operate as
reflective practitioners.

Current context

From 26 June 2021, probation services – the NPS and the Community Rehabilitation
Companies - became known simply as ‘The Probation Service.’ The Probation
Service now has a new strapline: ‘assess, protect and change.’ (The century old
‘advise, assist and befriend’ had previously been side-lined by the ‘enforcement,
rehabilitation and public protection’ mantra of the early 20th century NPS). How-
ever accurate a description of the reconfigured priorities of probation work,
it remains possible to feel nostalgic for the values expressed in ‘advise, assist and
befriend,’ and somewhat agnostic regarding the prosaic nature of ‘assess, protect
and change.’

Prior to reintegration, transition events were held across the divisions, between
CRC staff and their NPS colleagues. At a joint meeting for staff from both sectors,
held in the author’s own Probation Delivery Unit (PDU), feelings amongst staff
appeared to be mixed. On the one hand, there was excitement at the possibility
of working together with former colleagues; of probation practice with a mixed
and varied caseload and of picking up the best practice from both organisations.
There was also trepidation, some of it around which organisational culture will
prevail – many staff in the CRCs valued the relative autonomy of flexible working
which they had experienced, whilst NPS staff remain apprehensive about
working with a more volatile and chaotic client group than previously.

It is also critically important to remember that most probation practitioners will
have little or no experience other than working for a CRC or the NPS, and that
the folk memory of a lifetime’s probation work is likely to be restricted to a very
few individuals – the author of this article being one of them. Several studies have
investigated the impact of Transforming Rehabilitation on practice, and considered
the subsequent specific shifts in practice, and in professional identity, in both the
NPS and in the CRCs. Millings et al. (2019) studied practitioners who were trans-
ferred into a CRC, and explored the role of senior leaders in the process. They
describe the feelings of uncertainty generated by TR and note that ‘under threat
was not just their personal career aspirations, but a deeper set of cultural norms
and values.’ (Millings et al., 2019: 73). Meanwhile, Walker et al. (2019) carried
out a study with former practitioners who had left probation work in the aftermath
of TR, and who identified a loss of meaning in the work, alongside ethical dilemmas
regarding working contexts, which contributed to a ‘sense of alienation and disillusionment.’ (Walker et al., 2019: 121).

In this context, it is also worth noting the shift in profile of probation practitioners, from a predominance of Probation Officer grade staff to a predominance of Probation Service Officer grade, reflecting organisational policies, notably in the CRCs; and the attrition of PO practitioners post TR (HMIP, 2021i). Whatever the level of experience of probation work, it seems likely that the majority of current probation workers will experience what Robinson (2013: 95–96) described as ‘professional ontological uncertainty,’ a stage in organisational change where role boundaries become blurred, and practitioners are working in a state of professional anxiety and uncertainty.

Within this context, the TOM for Probation (HMPPS, 2021a) outlines in significant detail the aims and aspirations for the integrated Service, including an ‘open learning culture;’ (HMPPS, 2021a: 4); and a commitment to reflective supervision via the SEEDS model (Skills for Effective Engagement, Development, and Supervision.) This approach to staff supervision will require training for all practitioners, and particularly for middle managers, to enable effective implementation of the model (HMPPS, 2021a: 181). The roll-out of SEEDS 2 is planned for 2022, and it is worthy of note that the briefing materials make a distinction between what is described as process-centred practice, with a focus on targets, procedures and monitoring performance; and person-centred practice, with a focus on one-to-one engagement (HMPPS, 2021b).

It is also worth noting that a model of reflective supervision is a key component of the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (OPD), devised by HMPPS in collaboration with the NHS, and operational in the NPS. A key theme of the practitioner guide to working with personality difficulties identifies self-care as key to effective sustained practice. It describes staff as ‘the vital heart of any service for individuals with personality difficulties.’ (HMPPS NHS, 2020: 99). Additionally, the guidance for self-care and resilience highlights the significance of training; ‘regular protected reflective time;’ management of workloads, and the value of individual and group-based supervision and reflection to review practice (HMPPS NHS, 2020: 105). Both SEEDS 2 and the OPD model rely on a culture of reflection, facilitated by the mechanisms to support reflective practice, notably via supervision, but also including workload and caseload management (Fellowes, 2018). In both the SEEDS 2 and the OPD models, the role of middle managers – Senior Probation Officers – suggest a return to an arguably more traditional role, with an emphasis on casework supervision, and – perhaps – less emphasis on performance and targets.

The TOM also makes explicit its commitment to the one-to-one supervisory relationship as key to effective probation practice. (HMPPS 2021a). The document identifies:

Facilitating relationship building through offering continuity of probation practitioners supervising an individual throughout their order, helping them to achieve better outcomes.’ (HMPPS, 2021a: p52, emphasis mine)...And ‘our planned approach to
Sentence Management is based on building strong, meaningful relationships with supervised individuals that provide them with comprehensive support throughout their probation journey, with the aim of achieving better outcomes for them and enhancing public protection (HMPPS 2021a: 54, emphasis mine).

Finally, a key aspect of ‘change work’ will be ‘building a trusting relationship to promote compliance, increase hope and sustain motivation.’ (HMPPS 2021a: 63).

It is encouraging to consider the many positive objectives described in the TOM, and there is a natural inclination to wish the new Probation Service well in its new form. Equally, it would be foolish to abandon the healthy scepticism which is a hallmark of probation practice regarding the possible challenges which these changes will present.

**Probation work and the professional relationship**

The evidence shows the importance of the role of supervision and the relationship between offender and offender manager. Good quality supervision, case management and holistic, tailored approaches can support and enable rehabilitation and reintegration. In addition, the review has set out the evidence on individual approaches and interventions (Ministry of Justice, 2013: 28).

In the light of subsequent events, it is somewhat ironic that the original paper containing the proposals for *Transforming Rehabilitation* asserted that the one-to-one relationship is key to effective probation supervision – albeit with the proviso that a second aim would be ‘evaluating what it is that enables people to change.’ (MoJ, 2013: 28).

Other authors have reinforced the perspective that the professional relationship between supervisor and supervisee is the single most significant component of probation work. In their review of practice post-*Transforming Rehabilitation*, Kirton and Guillaume note that: ‘the relationship with clients is central to probation professionalism.’ (Kirton and Guillaume, 2019: 940). Meanwhile, Canton asserts that the key to effectiveness in probation work is ‘a respectful professional relationship.’ (Canton, 2012: 578).

It is probably accurate to state that the continuity of one-to-one work with people subject to supervision is likely to be the most appealing part of the role for practitioners. Research over time has demonstrated that this is the key motivational factor for trainee probation officers, one which has proved remarkably consistent throughout the varying iterations of the probation officer training programme (Annison et al., 2008; Carr, 2020; Collins, 2016; Deering, 2010). Likewise, research with probation practitioners has demonstrated the continuing commitment to one-to-one supervision, to enable positive change. In their study of probation work, Mawby and Worrall cite the comment by a research participant regarding the motivations of probation practitioners:
because of the interest they have in working with people, and that bonds people
together... I think the majority of people are motivated by individuals that they work
with, who are on their caseload... (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 143).

Mawby and Worrall conclude that this aspect of the work is a key factor in job
satisfaction in probation practice (Mawby and Worrall, 2013: 142).

Equally, it seems likely that therein lies the essential dilemma of probation work.
Mair suggests that measuring effectiveness has consistently been particularly prob-
lematic for probation, as ‘its public persona was shrouded in mystery, and it was
used to operating in the back room.’ (Mair, 2016: 7). In a study of social workers
in criminal justice in Scotland, Grant and McNeill concluded that participants typic-
ally struggled to articulate material skills and knowledge used in the routine supervi-
sion of offenders, seeing it fundamentally as an approach, rather than as a
technique (Grant and McNeill, 2015: 160).

The mystique – or scepticism – regarding the one-to-one relationship, of what actu-
ally takes place during supervision, was enhanced during the period when offend-
ing behaviour programmes, based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy principles,
came to be perceived as the alpha approach to working with supervisees. The
organisation and content of programmes were tightly defined and delivered, with
little room for deviation or of professional agency for practitioners. Enrolments
and completions appeared to present straightforward mechanisms for evaluating
effectiveness, in contrast to the often rather messier business of supervision.

In 2007, a network of academics established CREDOS, (Collaboration of
Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision), a global initia-
tive which aimed to highlight what was happening in one-to-one work, and to evalu-
ate probation practice. Ugwudike, Raynor and Annison note that:

At that time, research on the effectiveness of work with offenders was dominated by eva-
ulations of programmes and by meta-analyses that aimed to draw out the broader prin-
ciples of effective practice. Although most work with people under supervision was...
carried out through one-to-one contact rather than in groups, less research had been
done on such individual work, and CREDOS members were interested in filling this
gap (Ugwudike et al., 2018: 6).

The work of CREDOS sought to identify key skills and characteristics of effective
practitioners, and thus to examine what Bonta et al. (2008) had previously defined
as the ‘black box’ of supervision. Evaluating a number of research studies across
Europe, Vanstone summarises these qualities and approaches as including princi-
ples of risk, need and responsivity in the working relationship; professional model-
ling of prosocial behaviour; the use of legitimate authority by the practitioner; and
motivational interviewing (Vanstone, 2018: 26).

Similarly, a research study evaluating practice skills in correctional work in
Canada identified that ‘core correctional practice’ was seen to incorporate two
sets of skills. Firstly, structuring skills – the types of behaviours and interventions
with which most probation practitioners will be familiar, including prosocial
modelling, problem-solving, and advocacy. Secondly, relationship skills ‘to engage service users in relationships which are respectful, caring, enthusiastic, collaborative, valuing personal autonomy, and [...] motivational.’ (Raynor, 2019: 5). It is of note that the evidence from this longitudinal study formed the basis for the SEEDS model (Raynor, 2019: 6).

These principles were put into practice in the Jersey Study, pioneered by Peter Raynor; and went on to be implemented via the SEEDS model, subsequently rolled out across the probation service in 2013, with unusually high levels of enthusiasm from practitioners, and with similarly high levels of satisfaction in its implementation. Another irony of Transforming Rehabilitation was that the possibility of privatisation was introduced at roughly the same time that staff were embracing SEEDS, with its emphasis on one to one work, a focus on positive and protective factors, and a commitment to shared and localised practice. Also of note is that, whilst SEEDS is referred to in the TOM for the Probation Service post reintegration, it is currently related solely to the supervisory relationship between manager and practitioner, rather than that between supervising practitioner and supervisee.

This dichotomy seems to encapsulate a position of continued wariness regarding the value of one-to-one supervision – notwithstanding the now extensive body of knowledge which identifies and supports the principles and approaches of effective practice. Robinson and Dominey (2019: 452) have noted the diminution of the place of the Supervision Requirement ‘as a cornerstone of effective rehabilitation…’, being replaced by the use of Rehabilitative Activity Requirements. The reintegrated Probation Service seems destined to operate at a point of tension between a commitment to such core principles, but also a continuous search for data to support its effectiveness. It could be argued that these strands are mutually exclusive, and that it will only ever be possible to indicate evidence of a correlation, (as opposed to a causal relationship), between effective supervision, and successful outcomes, however defined.

**Probation practice and the reflective practitioner**

Ainslie (2020) a former probation practitioner and manager, now an academic at Sheffield Hallam University, and tutor on the Professional Qualification in Probation (PQiP), notes that: ‘the importance of reflective practice is stressed throughout the current graduate diploma undertaken by the PQiP.’ She identifies that this attribute is challenging to master, but also that it is vital for the development of effective probation practice (Ainslie, 2020: 10).

Ainslie draws on the work of Schon, who formulated the notions of the reflective practitioner, and of reflection in action, as key to professional roles in a range of settings, including social work, education, and criminal justice. He identified what he described as the ‘messes’ where practitioners operate, which inform day to day practice (Schon, 2016: 42).

There are those who choose the swampy lowlands. They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their
methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through (Schon, 1991: 43, emphasis mine).

It could be argued that this observation resonates with key characteristics of probation practitioners, and which frequently appear to be overlooked. Probation workers actively choose to operate alongside people who may have committed dangerous and reprehensible acts, possibly arising from their own experience of trauma. Perhaps inevitably, a typical day in the working life of any practitioner is unlikely to follow whatever is mapped out in their diary at its outset. This capacity to operate within an incessant state of flux requires particular skills and attributes – as does operating in an environment with scant rewards, whether financial or appreciative; and a setting where the outcomes of the work may be opaque for some considerable time.

Within this context, Schon considered that each professional encounter generates a different set of problems and challenges; and that the skill of working in such an uncertain and unstable environment results in the generation of new knowledge for the practitioner. He noted that practitioners are required to reframe the presenting problem; seek to put in place strategies to address the problem(s) as assessed; and then to deal with the unintended outcomes and consequences (Schon, 1991: 155).

It is, therefore, not surprising that a key focus for probation officers in training is to seek to develop the requisite skills and capacities to draw on an existing body of knowledge; to think in real time of strategies for problem solving; and to reflect on practice simultaneously whilst doing the work. It is also no surprise that this process is challenging; and that it is an approach which continues to develop over the life course of a practitioner. Fundamentally, it is important to consider: what is the situation in which the trainee practitioner is operating? What prior knowledge did the trainee bring to this situation? What did the trainee consider went well, and what was less effective and helpful? And – how can the trainee develop their knowledge and skills to enhance their future practice?

This reflective approach to practice is important. In a paper published in 2021, the Centre for Justice Innovation argued that the limited continuing professional development available to probation practitioners was a key factor in failures in recent probation practice, (Bowen, 2021), citing Serious Further Offence reviews (for example, the case of Joseph McCann, HMIP, 2020i); and a review of decision-making regarding recall (HMIP, 2020ii). Both these reviews referenced a lack of professional confidence in decision making by practitioners, and, worryingly, by senior managers, which served to undermine the capacity to exercise critical judgement in situations of escalating risk. Similarly, Robinson (2013: 99) suggests that a focus on public protection underpinned a heightened approach of defensive decision making in the NPS, post-TR, which she argued presented a threat to the professional skills, judgement and approaches of probation work. Tuddenham (2000) develops the notion of reflection in practice further by outlining what he describes as a ‘reflective’ approach – that is, one which is cognisant of the context for professional decision making. Commenting specifically on reflexivity regarding risk assessment and management, he notes that:
The ability to assess this dynamic process is a skilful task, which requires the knowledge and confidence provided by a theoretical leaning towards reflexivity, rather than defensibility (Tuddenham, 2000: 179).

Tuddenham (2000: 174) further notes that, if reflection considers the practitioner’s own prejudices and ideologies, then reflexivity is concerned with cultural relativity in defining risk, and considering the impact of the assessor on the assessment of risk, which he describes as a ‘dynamic, self-questioning process’. Similarly, Ainslie (2020: 10) identifies that reflective practice enables practitioners to challenge their own knowledge base and assumptions (arguably, as well as the assumptions of their organisation, particularly with regard to ‘what works’). It is of note that, in 2021, HMIP published a report into the ways in which probation services work with Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) service users, as well as the experiences of BAME staff, which was highly critical of what it saw as a retreat from anti-discriminatory practice following Transforming Rehabilitation (HMIP, 2021ii). Skills of reflection enable practitioners to identify, and to address their own unconscious biases; and to have an acute awareness of issues of power in the supervisory relationship, and the impact of practitioner decision-making on the lives of supervisees.

**Challenges to reflective practice; New Public Managerialism – targets and performance**

There is a tension here, between the individual as a reflective practitioner, and the increasingly actuarial approach to probation work, characterised by the use of assessment tools for a range of categories of offending behaviour, including currently the Offender Group Reconviction Scale (OGRS and OGRS 2); the Offender Assessment System, (OASys); and the Risk of Serious Recidivism tool (RSR), utilised in the courts to assess the likelihood of offending and risk of harm. This last instance is also notable in that its original primary purpose was to enable the speedy allocation of cases to the CRCs (for low to medium risk of harm cases) or the NPS (for those people on probation assessed as high risk).

Feeley and Simon (1992) identify this trend in their account of ‘the new penology,’ in which they argue that actuarial models of assessment and management had become increasingly prevalent in probation work from the late twentieth century onwards, reflecting a paradigm shift in approaches to criminal behaviour. The authors were describing the USA, but their observations have relevance to shifts in thinking regarding penal policy and practice in the UK. Examples include their assertion that ‘the new penology’ is characterised by a change in language and terminology, notably that ‘clinical diagnosis and retributive judgement’ are replaced by notions of ‘probability and risk.’ (Feeley and Simon, 1992: 450). They identify that a specific consequence of this shift is a change in focus away from the individual to that of the aggregation of people, both in assessment, and in supervision. They conclude that ‘the new penology is neither about punishing nor rehabilitating individuals. It is about identifying and managing unruly groups.’ (Feeley and Simon, 1992: 455).
Several authors have cited the link between the shift in probation culture, away from working to form effective professional relationships with supervisees, to public protection and the management of risk. Tidmarsh (2020) argues that this shift ‘gave rise to managerial practices focused on controlling offender risks and the costs of criminal justice.’ (Tidmarsh 2020: 112, emphasis mine.). Whitehead (2007) argues that New Public Management (NPM) is characterised by standardisation, performance, and measurable targets, and suggests that this has contributed to an inevitable diminution in professionalism. Further, Robinson and McNeill (2004) contend that the managerialist trend reflected a shift towards a culture of public protection in probation, in which the public, not the person subject to supervision, is the ‘client’ of the service; and that public protection was welcomed as a way of legitimising probation work. Within this context, the utilisation of risk and needs assessment tools were seen as generating credibility for probation work.

Accordingly, a possible conclusion is that a managerialist culture has inexorably contributed to a diminution in professional discretion and decision-making regarding the management of individual cases. In day-to-day probation work, practitioners describe a constantly shifting agenda, much of it resource based, but sometimes in response to significant case failures which attract negative publicity. This lack of professional autonomy is described by HMIP in a report into recall culture and practice, which noted that ‘many staff constantly lived in fear that mistakes would be made which would result in harm to the public.’ (HMIP, 2020ii: 24).

It is possible to assert that, in and of themselves, structured assessments of need and risk do not inevitably lead to a diminution in professionalism. In a study of risk and governance in the Probation Service in England and Wales, Robinson (2003) considers the concepts of technicality – work which can be programmed, or standardised; and indeterminacy - the exercise of practice based upon specialist knowledge. Her case study of an early structured risk and needs assessment (the LSI-R, the precursor to OASys), in two probation areas, identifies practitioner anxieties from the outset regarding the potential diminution of their professional role by the use of actuarial assessment tools. She notes that, in the event, practitioners identified that their core professional skills were required perhaps more than ever, to elicit relevant information from the person being assessed, and with regard to the professional response to the conclusions of the assessment. She tentatively concludes that ‘a professional future lies not in wholesale rejection of technicality but rather in seeking a positive workable balance between technicality and indeterminacy.’ (Robinson, 2003: 607). Her research suggests that ‘the binary use of actuarial and rehabilitative measures enhanced the credibility of probation work.’ (Robinson, 2002: 11, 2016: 18). Developing this theme, Carr notes that ‘...in the area of risk assessment...any tool should be used to assist professional judgement, rather than to replace it.’ (Carr, 2020: 8, emphasis mine).

The key issue seems to be therefore, not the validity of actuarial tools, but their status within the Probation Service, and the uses to which they are put. The widening of offences for which people are subject to supervision, to include very serious sexual and violent offences, as well as terrorist crimes, means that, as Robinson (2003) points out, practitioners value the security provided by making a judgement
informed by the risk and need assessment tools. Perhaps the issue of most concern to practitioners is the use of assessment tools to measure and monitor performance, with strict milestones for the completion of OAsys assessments, in particular. Practitioners describe feeling compromised at having to complete a detailed initial assessment within a narrow time frame, often in far from ideal circumstances. It is salutary to learn that these issues were identified as early as 2005, when an HMIP thematic inspection report into OASys noted that ‘areas have set targets for the completion of OASys, though at times some staff have felt that speed of completion had sacrificed quality.’ (HMIP, 2005: 11).

It is therefore possible to conclude that the recent culture of probation work has been characterised by its focus on targets and quality assurance. Both these metrics appear designed to undermine a sense of professional confidence and professional identity, since practice is evaluated in terms of failures, rather than successes. This dominance of the New Public Managerialist approach is at odds with evidence regarding effective probation supervision – what works (Phillips, 2011; Tidmarsh, 2021). Equally – aspects of probation culture may remain intact, including a commitment to the supervisory relationship; and the recognition of the practitioner’s professional skills in the appropriate use and application of assessment tools.

Challenges to reflective practice - workloads

The whole thing about professional identity I feel has gone and you can’t measure that, can you. You can’t quantify what that means to you as a practitioner, what you see going on around you. But it just feels like a series of tasks, every day you have a to-do list and a set of targets to meet. You are making decisions and, somewhere in the middle, you might exercise your professional judgement. It doesn’t actually feel that way, because all the time it’s about a process rather than about looking at anything, having the capacity to reflect on what you’re doing and look at the bigger picture and understand what’s going on and have time to talk to anybody about what it is you’re trying to do at any point in time (NAPO branch official and Probation Officer in Kirton and Guillaume 2015: 36).

The work is not manageable, in the sense that you can do the basics, but have no time to dig into the detail. No time for reflection or professional curiosity (Probation Officer, National Probation Service. HMIP, 2021i: 24).

The first quotation above is derived from a research study conducted in the immediate aftermath of Transforming Rehabilitation, which sought to evaluate the impact of the restructure on probation practitioners and, in particular, on their sense of professional identity. The second is from an HMIP report, considering the impact of caseloads and workloads on probation practitioners. (HMIP, 2021i).

In addition to performance and targets, there seem to be two further key issues which currently shape and determine the nature of the work which probation staff undertake; and, importantly, how they feel about it. The first relates to the volume of work – the number of cases held, and the impact of the type of work undertaken. A recent HMIP (2021i) report identified that excessive case and workloads were
proving highly detrimental to standards of supervision, as well as to the health and well-being of staff. Additionally, the impact of TR resulted in highly specific case-loads for each sector of The Probation Service, with potentially deleterious effects.

Consequently, an aspect of practice which has changed significantly has been the longevity of supervisory relationships. At one point in its history, a probation officer would complete a Pre-Sentence Report for the court, a full assessment of needs and risks relating to offending and harm. Sentencing disposals would be considered and a proposal made. Post sentence, it was likely that the court report author, or a colleague in the same team, would take responsibility for supervision. This localised and simple model of assessment and allocation brought enormous benefits, in terms of the engagement of service users in the process, resting in large part on the validity of assessment, and the formation of a relationship with the Service and its practitioners from the outset. In addition, I would argue that it provided practitioners with a sense of mastery, agency, and ownership over their work.

In this context, the TOM is encouraging, in that it notes the delivery of probation via PODs (Probation Operational Delivery structures):

> a small cross grade grouping of Probation Practitioners and a case administrator that draws on the skills and experiences within that team to support each other’s probation work and enables service users to benefit from a familiar relationship with a small team to help improve continuity and engagement (HMPPS, 2021i: 206, emphasis mine).

This model seems designed to foster a sense of belonging and continuity which could provide positive benefits for supervisees and practitioners – with a possible positive impact on successful completion of orders and licences, and the retention of staff over time.

**Training and continuing professional development**

Secondly, the current model of Probation Officer training, the PQiP encompasses all the tensions relating to current probation practice. Several authors have suggested that PQiP learners consider that the training programme as currently configured presents a model of practice which is not borne out by their experience (see Annison et al., 2008; Tangen and Briah, 2018). It is disturbing that trainees continue to experience these dissonances in probation officer training – perhaps in part reflecting the tension in their (binary) role, in that they are employed as Probation Service Officer grade staff, with operational commitments; and as trainee probation officers, with notional workload relief to enable both academic study, and opportunities to develop professional competence. Competence is assessed via the Vocational Qualification (VQ) element of the award; assessment is based upon key indicators of effective practice which have been evidenced in several studies. The assessment of skills of engagement with service users is the first VQ unit required for completion – in recognition of the reality that an absence of these skills and attributes is likely to nullify the effectiveness of supervision. Yet, to revisit an earlier argument, Tangen and Briah suggest that there has been:
a move from individuals educated to critically reflect on their practice, to technicians trained to implement specific processes, eroding the professionalism and autonomy of probation practitioners (Tangen and Briah, 2018: 143).

Carr (2020) asserts that training for probation practitioners is required to encompass theoretical knowledge, alongside;

Advanced skills demonstrating mastery and innovation required to solve complex and unpredictable problems, (and) a degree of responsibility and autonomy involving the ability to manage complex professional activities (Carr, 2020: 7).

The current culture of probation work seems to oscillate between dual tensions, firstly between the managerialist approach, and the motivations for practitioners to sustain the professional relationship with the people whom they supervise, and which, for most probation workers, is the primary driver for motivation to do the job (Phillips, 2014; Tidmarsh, 2020). Secondly, within a context of managerialist approaches, the artistry of the reflective practitioner described by Schon seems a remote vision. The reality of overwork, targets, now set against a backdrop of further organisational change – which is additionally likely to involve an extension to remote working, at least in part, in the wake of the Exceptional Delivery Model response to the COVID-19 pandemic – suggests that at least some of the aspirations of the TOM may be difficult to realise, in the short term at least

These latter tensions are explored by Ainslie et al. (2022) in a paper which evaluates the findings from very recent research into the implementation of the Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) within the NPS (RPSS is a key component of the SEEDS framework, originally delivered in probation in 2013/14, shortly prior to the implementation of Transforming Rehabilitation). The study highlights the value placed by practitioners on opportunities for reflective supervision, whilst simultaneously noting the barriers to its effective implementation (as outlined above). The title of their paper, ‘A nice idea, but…’ neatly encapsulates this conflict in demands on probation workers, and on their supervising managers.

**Conclusion - the future of probation work**

If events of the last decade teach us anything, it is that prediction and forecasting are futile endeavours, as much in probation as in the wider global context. During the early years of the 21st century, Nash (1999) considered it likely that probation officers would become much more aligned with the police – and possibly become known as ‘polibration officers,’ with the loss of autonomy that such a job title implies. In 2016, Mair suggested that ‘the probation service is under threat […] faced with extinction…’(Mair, 2016: 4). Subsequently, writing in 2018, Vanstone noted that:

The probation service in England and Wales is much reduced, a substantial amount of work transferred to private sector community rehabilitation companies. It may not
survive but now, part of the civil service and confined to the oversight classified as being at high risk of reoffending, more than ever it needs innovative and effective practice in order to continue its unique contribution to the rehabilitation of people who have offended (Vanstone, 2018: 17, emphasis mine).

So – it is impossible not to be acutely aware of predictions of the demise of probation as a unique and valuable part of the criminal justice system, by several authors, over a period of time. And yet – against the odds, the Probation Service remains, unquestionably battered and diminished, but with the appearance of seeking to hold its core values and approaches intact. Mair (2016) asserts that these traditional values and approaches of probation work will inevitably place the service at a disadvantage in fighting its corner with regard to tougher approaches, and achieving measurable outcomes. He attributes this, in part, to ongoing bemusement about the mystery of the core professional relationship; and, also, to the fact that probation practitioners are notoriously bashful at asserting their professional skills, and the evidence base for their practice. Mair asserts that, historically, the identity of probation was that of ‘doing good work with bad people - and that was its own justification.’ (Mair, 2016: 5). Phillips (2020: 66), citing Tomczak, suggests that ‘there are too many ‘directors and detractors’ who highlight what has gone wrong and what needs to happen next, but an insufficient number of ‘effectors’ to put those recommendations into practice.’ Probably both are correct, placing probation work in the invidious position of being good at what it does, yet limited in its capacity to assert its validity as an organisation, and seemingly reluctant to aggressively pursue its unique agenda in the political arena – a significant deficit within the context of an increasingly politicised service. Deering (2010: 13)suggests that ‘ultimately, perhaps, probation practice is based in faith that it is an effective moral good’. In this regard, the values and approaches of contemporary probation practitioners would not seem out of place to the original Police Court Missionaries.

Much has been lost and much has been gained in probation work over its hundred-plus years of existence. It is ironic that, at a point in time when significant organisational change is being revisited for overtly positive and constructive reasons, it also could be at most risk of losing its defining characteristics – of purposeful, humane, one-to-one work with people to effect change; and the informed, reflective approach of practitioners to operate effectively in the liminal world of probation practice. It is possible to applaud the retreat from privatisation, and to remain fearful for the survival of the core values of probation work.

Mawby and Worrall (2013: 154) refer to probation as ‘an honourable profession,’ and conclude by asserting that:

It would be courageous for...the government to respect that this work inevitably involves a willingness to work holistically and optimistically, though not naively, with uncertainty, ambivalence and (to a degree) failure. Someone has to do it.

With these thoughts in mind, it seems ironic that, at a time when there is much to celebrate, in the reintegration of probation work into one public sector organisation,
there is also much to fear. The current phase of probation organisation provides
grounds for optimism; and yet, it seems possible that this is a period of considerable
jeopardy for the traditional values and culture of probation work, the primacy of the
professional relationship, and the professional identity of practitioners. These con-
cerns reflect the tension between official stated aims and objectives; and the
reality of the lived experience of people who work in, and who are supervised
by, probation. Subjectively, I remain of the view that it is entirely possible that the
Probation Service will survive in recognisable form for another century, for the
reasons outlined by Mawby and Worrall; and, perhaps perversely, I remain
hopeful, if appropriately sceptical, regarding its future organisation, and the deliv-
ery of its service.

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ORCID iD
Anne Burrell https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9403-0432

Notes
1. The Probation of Offenders Act was passed in 1907.
2. It is fair to point out that earlier legislation passed by a Labour government in
2007, and predicated on the Carter Report, introduced the concept of ‘best
value,’ and the principle of probation services, thus arguably paving the way
for privatisation in some shape or form. (Carter, 2003)
3. Robert Buckland’s predecessor as Minister for Justice, David Gauke MP, had out-
lined his proposals to abolish the CRCs, and to reintegrate probation into a
national service, in speeches in February and July 2019.

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