THE IMPLICATIONS OF ‘TRANSFORMING REHABILITATION’ AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PROBATION PRACTITIONER SKILLS, METHODS AND INITIATIVES IN WORKING WITH SERVICE-USERS

Jamal Hylton, Probation Officer, London Probation Trust

Abstract
With the anticipated reform of probation and rehabilitation services, it is important that existing practitioner skills, methods and initiatives are maintained and developed. This article is based on the research findings of a pilot study and subsequent introduction of a one-to-one structured supervision programme in Hertfordshire Probation Trust. This was a practitioner led initiative and was found to assist with effective use of the supervision session, whilst highlighting the importance of developing professional skills in working with service-users and vulnerable groups.

Keywords
Probation; supervision; offender engagement; best practice; training; Transforming Rehabilitation.
**Introduction**

I recall my first few days in probation as a trainee probation officer and being allocated my very first cases. I had worked with the offender client group previously and had an understanding of supervision processes and ways to help people to change and improve their lives. I found amongst my fellow Trainee Probation Officers a range of experiences in working with vulnerable people, and we passionately discussed supervision practices and debated whether probation was an enforcement or support agency. Throughout my probation career I have found that probation practitioners are renowned for navigating legislation and government policy, and for developing innovative skills, methods and practice techniques to fill the gap in the research base that underpins effective offender management. Understandably, many of the probation workers I currently come into contact with are preoccupied with developments with the ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ reforms proposed by the Ministry of Justice and the subsequent uncertain future of the service.

The recent reducing re-offending statistics released (Ministry of Justice, 2013) reveal that the probation service has been producing good results in terms of reducing reoffending, with a number of probation trusts performing better than expected. This success is in addition to the Probation Service winning the British Quality Foundation gold medal for excellence in 2011 (Ministry of Justice, 2011) and with a number of Trusts individually awarded 4 and 5 star status for excellence. There has also been a recent report by HM Inspectorate of Probation (2013) which provides positive results about the performance and practices of probation trusts. Nonetheless, in the not too distant future the Ministry of Justice intends to change the landscape of probation as we currently know it. Although there are positive aspects to the ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ proposals such as the provision of supervision to short term adult prisoners and the increased used of mentors, there are also less favourable aspects of the proposals such as the splitting of offender management, the creation of Community Rehabilitation Companies and the introduction of ‘Payment by Results’. Needless to say, it is paramount that the Ministry of Justice strikes the right balance between ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ and protecting existing offender rehabilitation services. However, due to the level of uncertainty and lack of detail, over on the frontline it is difficult to assess the extent to which the proposed reforms may impact on existing probation practice initiatives and quality of service. This includes the skills, expertise and status of probation practitioners that we hope will not be undermined or lost in the proposed new era of probation and community rehabilitation.

**The supervision session**

In 2011 I became involved in the NOMS Offender Engagement Programme by co-delivering one of the initial Skills for Effective Engagement and Development (SEED) pilots, and I was later involved in delivering Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision (SEEDS). SEEDS focuses on developing practitioner skills and practice in working with service-users, and at the core of SEEDS is the focus on the importance of the one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and supervisee (Ministry of Justice, 2012). SEEDS focuses on a number of themes but what is particularly important is the emphasis on structuring supervision sessions and enhancing the skills necessary to build meaningful supervisory relationships. Research suggests that offenders ‘on probation’ feel the
relationship with their supervising officer is one of the most significant aspects of their supervision, and this has been described as a powerful vehicle for changing behaviour and reducing reoffending (Barry, 2000; Rex, 1999; Ministry of Justice, 2012).

Many probation practitioners will have heard the expression that supervision is the “glue” that holds a Community Order or Licence together. In fact it is much more than this and is an opportunity to put a ‘package around the person’ inclusive of advice, support, intervention and risk management. Therefore the methods and techniques being offered by the SEEDS model and other innovations in probation are welcome additions to ‘best practice’. In this context, in 2010 I developed a programme of cognitive behavioural exercises for probation practitioners within Hertfordshire Probation Trust for use in supervision sessions with service-users. This was initially for use by new staff and those undertaking training to enhance their skills, some of which had requested additional guidance on approaches to supervision. I later developed this into Engage: A Structured Supervision Approach, a one-to-one structured supervision programme. After piloting the initial version of ‘Engage’ and taking feedback from both probation practitioners and service-users, and in addition after receiving valued input from probation colleagues and support from the management team, ‘Engage’ became widely used within Hertfordshire Probation Trust and a key part of its practice guidance framework.

**The one-to-one structured supervision programme**

Engage: A Structured Supervision Approach, is a one-to-one structured supervision programme for working with service users. It has been developed from an assembly of skills and experiences gained working within the field of probation and community rehabilitation, and includes 12 sessions of sequenced exercises which aim to engage service-users and form the basis of offence and life-focused discussion in areas including assessing needs, goal setting, changing behaviour, building support networks, life journeys, problem solving, victim empathy and relapse prevention (Hylton, 2011). The sessions are provided with instructions, theoretical underpinning and further independent tasks, and have been sequenced to correlate with the journey most service-users will go through. The programme is designed so that it can be individualised to suit the needs, motivations and circumstances of each service user, therefore avoiding the criticisms of the more rigid and sometimes impersonal and less confidential, general offending behaviour programme group settings (Hughes, 2012).

**The theory behind the programme**

In the development of the ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme, focus was placed on opportunities to analyse the relationships between thoughts, feelings and behaviour, as this can allow the factors and thinking patterns underpinning negative behaviour to be explored and challenged (Beck, 1991). Effective practice research has placed substantial emphasis on the value of cognitive behavioural approaches in working with individuals who offend (Maguire 1995; Chapman and Hough, 2001). ‘Engage’ provides opportunity to delve into the lives of service users, as it is important for probation practitioners to use methods and techniques which consider the experiences and backgrounds of the individuals they supervise, as this can promote change in a number of ways. Firstly, rather than focusing only on the offending aspects of a service-
user’s behaviour, it provides an opportunity to develop rapport through displaying an interest in the individual and their unique history and perspectives. Secondly, this can enable practitioners to develop insight and understanding of the factors underpinning the behaviours and to possibly consider further interventions. Thirdly, this can encourage service-users to reflect on the factors in their background which are relevant to their difficulties, to recognise previous successes and also to identify options for the future. Recent evidence has stressed the importance of establishing non-offending identities, and this is a method of encouraging service-users to recognise and build upon other, more positive aspects of their characters (Maruna, 2001).

Working with service-users requires that messages given are consistent and pro-social throughout the duration of contact and there needs to be continuity in the meaningful provision of supervision provided. Therefore, to a large extent the design and ethos of ‘Engage’ attempted to incorporate Holt’s 4c’s of case management, Consistency, Continuity, Consolidation and Commitment (Holt, 2000). In order to be effective, supervision sessions should enable service-users to construct new attitudes, thinking-patterns and life-skills which can be consolidated into a pro-social self-identity that seeks to achieve and maintain positive change, and the programme was structured with this in mind (Maruna, 2001). Research evidence suggests (Ministry of Justice, 2012) that the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is vital to the supervisory process and a powerful driver in reducing reoffending. The structured supervision sessions of ‘Engage’ were designed to be delivered on a one-to-one basis, and aimed to provide for practitioners a vessel of engagement with service-users. The one-to-one delivery in confidential supervision environments meant sessions could be individualised to the needs and circumstances of each service-user, while having the potential to be immensely engaging and responsive, therefore building a relationship of openness, trust and commitment between supervisor and supervisee (Barry, 2000; Rex, 1999).

Probation practitioners are in a somewhat unique position in coming into contact with individuals at a point where they can be helped to change problematic behaviour, rectify deteriorating circumstances and reverse downward life cycles. For this reason it is important that probation practitioners are provided with appropriate training and development in order to increase and optimise their skills on an ongoing basis. Service-users can have complex problems and circumstances, and changing behaviour is rarely (if ever) a straightforward development, where negative behaviours suddenly stop and positive behaviour instantaneously follow. Usually change is a process which takes place over a period of time and motivation can sometimes slowly develop and waver, and can often lapse into previous behaviour. Clearly no single skill, method, practice or service alone can automatically lead to success, and ultimately enacting and maintaining change is affected by the skills, efforts and commitment of the practitioner, while being wholly dependant on the choices, motivations and circumstances of the service user. Effective use of the supervisory relationship and setting to identify where particular behaviours, circumstances, relationships or support networks may be problematic, can be just as important as identifying where new opportunities, support networks or solutions may be identified from, as well as focusing on pro-social goals and ambitions (McNeil, 2006; Locke and Latham, 2002). Therefore, with appropriate engagement, skills and methods, supervision is an opportunity to consider and review the service-user’s wellbeing,
circumstances and progress, while having the format to plan, deliver and review the required support, interventions and risk management relevant to the service-user’s needs, risks and goals. It is within this domain that the passion and commitment of probation practitioners, alongside highly developed professional skills and initiatives, can be very successful in the engagement, rehabilitation and management of offenders.

The ‘Engage’ project: Methods, feedback and findings

In 2011 the ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme was piloted as a project in the 4 offices of Hertfordshire Probation Trust over a period of 6 months by 15 probation staff of varying grades. At the end of the period a consultation phase was commenced and feedback was received directly from the pilot staff members and from the service-users they had used ‘Engage’ with. There was a general consensus that ‘Engage’ was successful in facilitating use of the participatory sessions and exercises to assist service-users in moving away from offending behaviour and towards a lifestyle where offending has no place. The use of ‘Engage’ was described by practitioners as providing a vital structure to the supervision journey and that the exercises not only enabled service-users to engage by using visual, audio and kinaesthetic techniques, but as it was delivered on a one-to-one basis and could be individualised to each service-user, prompted valuable further discussion which delved into other areas of their lives which were not always easily accessible. The practitioners involved in the pilot stage and also many of the wider practitioner staff group that had gained access to ‘Engage’ reported that it assisted them in consistently promoting pro-social messages and engaging service users in positive collaborative engagement throughout the duration of the supervision. The exercises and sessions were found to encourage and support service-users to reflect on their behaviour, learning and progress, within a supportive environment which built a relationship of openness and commitment of both supervisor and supervisee. The feedback received from a number of service-users suggested they felt their supervision had become more meaningful with consistent and targeted focus on their needs, behaviour and goals, and each session tended to throw up different ideas, suggestions and solutions. A number of service-users had experiences of attending general offending behaviour programmes in group settings, but reported to find it easier to engage with the one-to-one programme in the supervision setting which they felt was more personal to them and helped them to get to know their supervising officer better.

Following the ‘Engage’ project pilot phase which lasted approximately 6 months, the sequencing of the sessions and exercises were amended based on user feedback with a needs assessment incorporated into the initial session. The ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme was also amended to include exercise instructions, theoretical underpinning, and a ‘supervision guide’ to assist the development of the supervisory relationship. A certificate of completion and a feedback questionnaire were also added. Additionally, based on the feedback received, independent tasks were attached to each session in order to help the intended learning and messages to be reinforced. A behaviour log and independent log were included to enable service-users to record risky incidents and complete independent tasks, which could then be discussed in supervision. Practitioner feedback was that the availability of these logs was a reminder to investigate potential or actual offending since the last contact, and encouraged service-
users to be more forthcoming in disclosing potential offending situations that had been experienced or avoided, and an important disclosure to be explored in supervision sessions.

In 2012 the ‘Engage’ project was completed, the finalised version of the structured supervision one-to-one programme was shared with all practitioners, and the pilot findings and delivery methods explained in practice workshops. Various themes were included, such as the existing research that criminal behaviour can be a result of individuals lacking the internal and external resources to change their behaviour and thereby meet their needs and achieve their goals in pro-social ways. Therefore assisting individuals to use non-offending methods to achieve their goals can reduce and eliminate the need for offending (Maruna and Ward, 2007), particularly if there is focus on the issues individuals are facing and they are supported to enact change and achieve clearly defined goals (Hughes, 2011). The ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme and the associated practice workshops also gave an opportunity to suggest the value-base to underpin supervision sessions, as that an individual may be an offender only at the point of committing the offending act, but that the gate of rehabilitation and change is open thereafter. There was a consensus that effective supervision sessions individualised to each service-user, including those that incorporate the techniques associated with ‘Engage’ and similar materials, should enable service-users to construct new attitudes, thinking-patterns and life-skills which can be consolidated into a pro-social self-identity that seeks to achieve and maintain positive change (Maruna, 2001). Therefore, it would be difficult to doubt that used efficiently, and with appropriate practitioner skills, methods and resources available, supervision is a key opportunity to support service-users to move away from offending behaviour and towards a lifestyle where offending has no place.

The ‘Engage’ project: Review, more feedback and conclusions

‘Engage’ progressed to become the published structured supervision programme for Hertfordshire Probation Trust, and became a core part of its practice guidance framework. In 2013 the use of ‘Engage’ was reviewed and feedback gathered from practitioners across Hertfordshire Probation Trust. The findings were that ‘Engage’ was successfully in use by practitioners across grade and with service-users of all risk thresholds. A popular view was that ‘Engage’ as a one-to-one structured supervision programme enabled practitioners to deliver a consistent approach in supervision, and was successful in its intention to provide intervention in the various areas it sought to reach. Of the service user feedback received via practitioners and through feedback questionnaires, the use of ‘Engage’ in facilitating structured supervision sessions provided added meaning to attending probation and assisted in prompting practitioner provision of help and support to service-users in their journeys to become offence free and improve their quality of life.

The findings from the ‘Engage’ project evidenced that it is important for practitioners to use skills and methods which service-users are able to respond to so that their risks and needs can be targeted within a wider package of support. This is in line with the research evidence that has shown that the success of rehabilitation interventions can be enhanced if delivered in ways that seek to engage active participation in enabling and assisting service-users in building a commitment to change (McNeil, 2006; Farrall, 2002). However,
in this context, the ‘Achilles' heel’ for practitioners in using the ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme was in the variation of skills within the staff group. Whereas many practitioners had a range of skills they had developed within probation or other forms of employment and were experienced in supervising and engaging service-users and working with vulnerable groups, some reported deficits in levels of training and others found it difficult to engage the more challenging service users or to address some of the more complex problems that were subsequently raised, particularly in relation to needs, life experiences, support networks and goal setting. It was apparent that some practitioners did not have access to the various forms of training available in relation to engaging, motivating and supporting service-users. Fortunately, the SEEDS programme is making headway into this area by developing practitioner skills and their use of cognitive behavioural techniques, and recommends the continuous professional development of staff. It is important to note that a recent study into ‘sentence planning and offender engagement’ recommended training and development of motivational interviewing skills and counselling skills, and to recognise the therapeutic elements of the probation workers role. To this could possibly be added various appropriate forms of training to enhance the professional skills of probation workers, including courses in family work, clinical assessment, advisory skills and the teaching of life skills to adults (Hughes, 2012).

Used correctly, the ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme has been an important initiative, which enabled practitioners to effectively use the supervision setting to enable service-users to understand and change their behaviour, therefore highlighting the importance of practitioner skills, training and development in motivating and engaging service-users (Wright et al., 2005). Given that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is a powerful driver in reducing reoffending, and greater engagement is a method to maximise this relationship, the effectiveness of ‘Engage’ was largely due to its design to be delivered on a one-to-one basis and individualised to the needs and circumstances of service-users, therefore having the potential to be immensely engaging and responsive (Barry, 2000; Rex, 1999). Additionally, with the support of probation managers and the focus of other existing initiatives such as SEEDS, probation practitioners were provided the time and skills to deliver ‘Engage’ effectively. Along with the passion and commitment of the practitioners and services-users involved, a key element to the success of ‘Engage’ was also due to probation managers and directors of services ensuring relevant resources were available, their pursuit of effective practice and quality of service, and recognising the importance of investment in and use of probation and practitioner led skills, methods and initiatives (Hughes, 2012).

‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ and the future of probation practice

Taking into account the findings of the ‘Engage’ one-to-one structured supervision programme and numerous other probation initiatives, the evidence is that the maintenance and development of practitioner skills and methods is paramount when working with offenders and vulnerable groups. ‘Engage’ is just one example of the methods and initiatives that exist because of the passion, commitment and expertise of probation practitioners. It is the motivation and efforts of probation trusts and practitioners in reducing reoffending, changing lives and protecting victims and the public that have influenced the creation and introduction of best practice skills, methods and
initiatives. Unfortunately, it is the opportunity for approaches and initiatives such as ‘Engage’, involving probation expertise and the support of probation trusts, and the input of probation practitioners and service-users alike, that are at risk of being undermined and lost in what is to be the new world of probation and community rehabilitation.

Although the Ministry of Justice has affirmed its appreciation for the hard work of the probation service and practitioners, there has been no guarantee that probation skills, initiatives and quality of service will be protected in taking forward the reform of rehabilitation. There has been some fear amongst probation workers that in the proposed new era of probation and community rehabilitation the existing terms and conditions of employment could be eroded, which could be the case whether transferred to a Community Rehabilitation Company or retained by the soon to be National Probation Service. If the status of the probation officer and the attraction of a career in probation is diminished, then it is reasonable to assume that the current level of skills, methods and service will also decrease. This is a highly contradictory prospect at a time when there has been increased focus on the training and development of probation practitioners and working with service-users, through avenues such as the Probation Qualifications Framework, the Offender Engagement Programme and SEEDS.

While the Ministry of Justice recognises there are a range of roles to be performed and services to be delivered in the rehabilitation and management of offenders, this is not fully reflected in the prospect of a scaled down National Probation Service solely reserved for public protection services. Likewise this is not reflected in the introduction of Community Rehabilitation Companies to manage the majority of offenders that may not necessarily be required to employ staff with a level of competence in accordance with existing probation qualifications, skills and methods. While probation is to remain central to public protection and enforcement at the high risk end of the scale, this is at the cost of engaging and supporting the wider range of offenders. If the Ministry of Justice is to reform rehabilitation for the better, an obvious alternative would be to invest in existing probation resources and in the training and development of probation workers. Given the success of the Probation Service in reducing reoffending, meeting performance targets and its quality of service, investing in its development would seek to further its accomplishments, including the continued interest in probation and practitioner led initiatives, new approaches and offender engagement and feedback. If this is not to be the case, it is therefore difficult to envisage a more effective justice system, or a more efficient system of community rehabilitation, if the current levels of probation qualification, occupational competence and quality of service, as a benchmark for supervising offenders, are not maintained and developed. If the Ministry of Justice does not get it ‘right first time’ then its reforms may fall incredibly short of its proposed intention to draw on the best services that can be offered by practitioners across the public, private and voluntary services, so that better support can be delivered to offenders. The risk is that if the current level of support, rehabilitation and risk management is not maintained, in conjunction with the necessary opportunities for the continuous training and development of practitioners within the field of probation and community rehabilitation, then it is not just probation workers that will affected, but to a larger extent service-users, victims and the public that may suffer, potentially with grave consequences.
The Ministry of Justice is not misguided in thinking there is more that can be done to reduce re-offending rates and make a marked impact on the level of recidivism, and it is right for the Ministry of Justice to seek to ensure best value for taxpayer’s money and supporting offenders to turn their back on offending. With the existing approaches to rehabilitation, many probation trusts are already working with the voluntary and community sector and the private sector, while drawing on and enhancing the considerable experience and expertise of probation practitioners. It would therefore make very good sense that rather than to reduce the scope of probation and practitioner expertise, to instead ensure that the current skills, methods and services of probation workers are not just maintained, but developed alongside further effective initiatives and interventions. The public sector probation service is set to continue to play a significant role in the reformed system of rehabilitation, however because of probation’s history, expertise and success, it is much better placed to remain a key arm of the Criminal Justice System and to continue working across all risk thresholds rather than just working with high risk offenders and with the scaled down remit of public protection. If the aim is to make a real impact in reducing reoffending, to ensure lower crime rates and fewer victims, then the investment in the probation service and in the ongoing training and development of its staff, while remaining the main provider of rehabilitation services, would keep the best of the public sector working with all offenders. It is in this context that the ‘rehabilitation revolution’ and the ongoing transformation of rehabilitation, that began at least 107 years ago with the birth of probation, will continue to live on.
References


