Article

Putting a face to a name: Telephone contact as part of a blended approach to probation supervision

Jane Dominey (iD)
University of Cambridge, UK

David Coley*, Kerry Ellis Devitt*, and Jess Lawrence* (iD)
Kent Surrey and Sussex Community Rehabilitation Company, UK

Abstract

This article is about the experience of telephone supervision from the perspective of practitioners. It is set in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which changed and challenged the nature of probation supervision and required service users and supervisors to communicate remotely, using the telephone, rather than by meeting face-to-face. The article explores some of the impacts and consequences of telephone contact and examines the extent to which this approach has a part to play in future, post-pandemic, ways of working.

The article draws on findings from a research project examining remote supervision practice during the pandemic. Fieldwork (comprising an online survey and a series of semi-structured interviews) was conducted between July and September 2020 in three divisions within an English community rehabilitation company. The article reinforces the importance of face-to-face work in probation practice but suggests that there is scope to retain some use of telephone supervision as part of a future blended practice model. Further thinking about telephone supervision might consider

*These authors worked for the KSS CRC at the time this article was written. As a result of probation reunification in 2021, CRCs no longer exist.

Corresponding Author:
Dr Jane Dominey, University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology, Sidgwick Avenue Cambridge, CB3 9DA, United Kingdom.
Email: jad78@cam.ac.uk

these three themes identified in the research: remote working limits the sensory dimension of supervision, relationships remain at the heart of practice, and good practice requires professional discretion.

Keywords

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed and challenged the nature of probation supervision. In particular, the public health emergency brought an abrupt end to the traditional routine of face-to-face appointments in offices. Service users and supervisors found themselves communicating remotely using the telephone, or meeting on doorsteps or in the open air. This article is about the experience of telephone supervision and is based on the perspective of practitioners. It explores some of the impacts and consequences of telephone contact and examines the extent to which this approach has a part to play in future, post-pandemic, ways of working.

The article draws on findings from a research project examining remote supervision practice during the pandemic. Fieldwork (comprising an online survey and a series of semi-structured interviews) was conducted between July and September 2020 in three divisions within an English community rehabilitation company (CRC). The article reinforces the importance of face-to-face work in probation practice; supervisors spoke about the contribution that this made to the quality of their work. However, the article also suggests that there is scope to retain some use of telephone supervision as part of a future blended practice model. Using the telephone, for some tasks and in some situations, can aid and enrich the supervision experience for both practitioner and service user. Further thinking about telephone supervision might consider these three themes identified in the research: remote working limits the sensory dimension of supervision, relationships remain at the heart of practice, and good practice requires professional discretion.

Background

Probation supervision depends on relationships. Relational aspects of practice emerge as a key issue whenever people are invited to talk about their experiences of supervision. This has been the case throughout the history of probation work (examples include Davies [1979]; Ditton and Ford [1994]; Willis [1986]). People on both sides of the supervisory interaction identify a relationship based on trust, rapport and respect as an indicator of quality (Dominey, 2019; Robinson et al., 2014; Shapland et al., 2012). Arguments stressing the importance of supervisory relationships survived moves to more managerial and bureaucratic ways of working because, as well as making sense to practitioners, they were supported by a growing body of evidence linking good-quality relationships to outcomes

such as reduced reoffending (Dowden and Andrews, 2004), encouraging desistance (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Hart and Healy, 2018), improving compliance (Ugwudike, 2016) and maintaining the legitimacy of community orders (McNeill and Robinson, 2013).

The centrality of the supervisory relationship is stressed in frameworks intended to guide probation practice. The first principle of the *Council of Europe Probation Rules* states '*Probation agencies shall aim to reduce reoffending by establishing positive relationships with offenders in order to supervise (including control where necessary), guide and assist them and to promote their successful social inclusion*' (Council of Europe, 2010:3). In England and Wales, the Target Operating Model for the most recent reorganisation of probation services explains that its design (among other things) prioritises '*Facilitating relationship building through offering continuity of Probation Practitioners supervising an individual throughout their order, helping them to achieve better outcomes*' (HMPPS, 2021a: 52). The importance of the supervisory relationship is consistently acknowledged even if, in practice, issues of resourcing and restructuring leave practitioners with large workloads that threaten good-quality practice (HMIP, 2020a).

Face-to-face work is at the heart of the supervisory relationship. Probation supervision, for the most part, takes place in probation offices. There is practice and academic debate about the way that the design of the office communicates the purpose of supervision (Phillips, 2014) and the extent to which probation buildings are fit for purpose (McDermott, 2016); there are also arguments, developed empirically and theoretically, that probation work is better and more effectively undertaken away from the office and in service users' homes and communities (Bottoms, 2008; Coley and Ellis Devitt, 2020; Phillips et al., 2020b). There is much less discussion about the extent to which supervision must rely on face-to-face interaction.

Some forms of remote criminal justice supervision seek to replace person-to-person interaction partly or entirely with approaches that rely on technology, for example the use of reporting kiosks and forms of electronic monitoring (HMIP 2019a; Nellis, 2014). Telephone conversations between staff and service users, while not face-to-face, are a different sort of remote supervision retaining the contact between people. However, while the telephone is used in areas such as psychotherapy and primary health care (Irvine et al., 2020; McFarland et al., 2021), it is infrequently employed as part of probation supervision and often linked with approaches intended to save money rather than enhance service provision. The argument that telephone supervision was inherently inadequate was made as part of the wider criticism of the practice approaches of some CRCs (see for example: HMIP, 2019b; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018). However, there has been little discussion about the part that the telephone may be able to play in probation supervision and there is almost no empirical evidence about its use by staff and service users.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought sudden and radical changes to all aspects of probation practice. Its impact was felt across the world requiring probation organisations to draw up emergency delivery models in haste (CEP, 2021; HMPPS, 2020). In England and Wales, the move away from face-to-face meeting to much greater use of supervision by telephone was only one aspect of the exceptional approaches

adopted across probation; the pandemic also brought significant change to probation work in courts, in prisons, and in staff supervision and training.

There is, as yet, limited literature about the impact of the pandemic on service users, staff or probation organisations. The health, social and economic consequences of Covid-19 and its associated restrictions were seen as likely to fall more heavily on those who are already disadvantaged and vulnerable (Musimbe-Rix, 2020; Revolving Doors Agency, 2020). Service users reported a reduction in contact not just with probation, but also with the community agencies providing help in areas such as substance misuse and mental health (HMIP, 2020b; UserVoice, 2020). McNeill (2020) identified that the experience of telephone supervision would likely depend on the nature of the pre-existing relationship between the two individuals and argued that the new ways of working required by the pandemic could make the legitimacy of probation work harder to maintain and sustain.

Methodology

The focus of this article is specifically on the use of the telephone as a tool for probation work and the learning that follows from the shift of telephone supervision from a minority to a majority approach. It draws on findings from a research project examining supervision practice during the pandemic. This was a collaborative project, with CRC in-house research staff and a university-based academic working together. Approval to undertake the research was obtained from the university research ethics committee and the project observed the ethical principles set out by the CRC research unit. These principles ensure that the rights of research participants are respected, that informed consent is obtained and that confidentiality and anonymity are guaranteed.[1]

The research (fieldwork was undertaken between July and September 2020) gathered data from CRC practitioners. An on-line survey was circulated to all case managers and completed by 79 respondents. The survey asked questions about the way that practitioners were using technology to enable remote supervision and sought their perspectives on the strengths and limitations of working in this way. Following the survey, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted (either by telephone or video-conference) with staff who had volunteered to participate in this way. The interviews provided the opportunity to explore the survey themes in more depth and to gather a range of practice examples. The group of interviewees included ten women and two men, seven probation service officers and five probation officers, and with professional experience ranging from <1 year to >20 years.

The survey and interview data were analysed to identify key themes and concepts. All the interviews were analysed by at least two researchers. The research team sought to ensure the quality of data analysis by working together to share ideas and test the reliability of emerging findings.

Given that the survey respondents and interviewees volunteered to participate in the study they may not be representative of the population of CRC case managers. It is possible that practitioners chose to participate in the research to express

particularly positive or negative views about remote supervision and probation practice. As the study was conducted in CRCs its findings reflect the work done in CRCs (for example, with a focus on issues such as domestic violence rather than sex offending) although a couple of the research participants had previously worked with individuals assessed as posing a high risk of harm and drew on this experience in the interview. The findings are also shaped by the technology available to the CRC practitioners (who before the pandemic had generally not had work-issued mobile phones or laptop computers).

Findings

This article is about the suitability of telephone calls for probation supervision rather than the impact on practitioners of working at home, remotely from colleagues and while coping with the needs of family members. During the fieldwork period, most practitioners were home-based and, as a result, the experiences of working from home and supervising by telephone are blurred. Additionally, space does not allow for substantive discussion of other findings from the study (for example, about the use of text messages, email and mobile phone apps, or the use of video-conferencing for inter-agency work). The article occasionally refers to these other aspects of the research where they serve to illuminate an aspect of telephone supervision.

The research suggests that further thinking about telephone supervision should consider these three ideas: remote working limits the sensory dimension of supervision, relationships remain at the heart of practice, and good practice requires professional discretion.

Sense and supervision

Criminological enquiry is increasingly investigating the significance of the senses in spaces of punishment and control (Herrity et al., 2021). People understand and experience their environment through sight, sound, touch, sense and smell. Penal settings (for example courts, prisons and detention centres) are shaped by noises, odours and architectures with the contradictory potential to be both overwhelming and under-stimulating (Schmidt and Jefferson, 2021). The auditory environment of a prison gives clues to the state of emotions, security and safety to the people within (Herrity, 2020).

One striking feature of this research was the way that the research participants used the language of sensing to describe the process of probation supervision. Interacting remotely meant interacting without the usual sensory feedback. This was a shared experience for supervisor and service user.

> I'm not getting a good feel for them as I haven't been able to sit in a room and see them and I appreciate they probably feel the same about me. (Gemma)

One of the obvious and strong disadvantages of telephone calls is that people cannot see each other. Practitioners were clear that this made supervision more difficult. Communication is about spoken words, but also about body language; managing without body language meant that communication was harder and important messages were often missed. When practitioners work face-to-face, they pick up on visual clues and on discrepancies between what someone is saying and how they are looking.

> *Conversation isn't just about what's being said, it's about how it's being said, your body language. Are you being threatening? Are you being open? You use gestures a lot to get your point across, so having a visual contact is preferable. (Paul)*

Gemma, speaking specifically about work with people with substance use issues, said:

> *You need to be able to see them often to verify what they are telling you, whether they're using or not - because over the telephone you can't see if there has been a dramatic weight loss or if their personal care standards have significantly dropped… being able to see them definitely helps with your assessment of how they are doing. How's their welfare? Have they neglected themselves? Have they relapsed? Are they drinking more? Are they under the influence? They could say "Oh I sound like this because I'm tired" but it could actually be because they have taken something.*

Almost no study participant had the experience of using video calls as part of supervision. Work-issued mobile phones were not smart (i.e. with a camera and connected to the internet) and CRC policy did not support the use of applications like WhatsApp and Zoom to contact service users. However, some practitioners were interested in the potential for video calls on the basis that it would be possible to see a service user and get a clearer idea of how, where and with whom they were. That said, as Paul explained, seeing someone online would still be a poor substitute for face-to-face work; even if the quality of the video call was good, he imagined that the screen would still be a barrier, obscuring the detail of body language.

When describing the sensory deprivation associated with telephone supervision, practitioners gave examples that went beyond the lack of opportunity for seeing, reflecting also on the consequences of remote supervision for hearing and smelling. They explained that using the telephone required very careful listening, which was demanding and tiring. Poor connections and background noise meant that people could be hard to hear. Reciprocally, service users with poor hearing were not well served by telephone contact.

Practitioners also valued their sense of smell as a means of gathering important information about the well-being of service users and as a warning sign of increased problems with alcohol and drug use.

> *On the telephone they can present as sober, you can't smell their breath, you can't see their eyes. (Andrew)*

You might be able to tell over the phone if they are under the influence, slurring their words and things like that, but some people are really good at hiding it. If they actually come into the office I can see, I can smell, so things like that really help. (Rebecca)

Practitioners were particularly concerned that the loss of sensory feedback reduced their ability to make accurate judgements about risk. They attached considerable weight to the importance of sight in ascertaining whether someone was telling the truth, perhaps more weight than is supported by the studies in psychology that suggest that both lay people and experts overestimate their ability to detect deception (Hartwig and Granhag, 2015).

Andrew was uncertain about the authenticity of telephone supervision:

I hate it…I don't like it at all…you feel like you could be being lied to… without face-to-face contact, there's no way to know if what you are being told is the truth. You kind of get the feeling when you are talking to some people, they are just spinning you a bit of a yarn really

They are not in front of you so you can't gauge their body language… you can pick up a lot with their body language, in front of you, to gauge whether what they are saying is quite true or not - and on the phone that is quite difficult. It's easy for them to say on the phone, "oh yeah everything's good, everything's fine, nothing is happening" whereas face-to-face you might pick up some other things that you're not too sure if that's actually the case. (Nicola)

Over the telephone, it was not possible to be sure that someone was where they claimed to be, or to know whether other people (friends, family members or children) were listening into the call. It was harder for practitioners to take a curious and investigative approach. Sara talked about having a '*probation radar*' which enabled her to identify when someone was contemplating change or falling into trouble. Communicating remotely deprived her of the ability to read body language and to '*sniff out*' shifts in motivation. Her probation radar did not work as well over the phone.

Relationships and remote supervision

The CRC supervisors in this study were using the telephone for almost all supervisory appointments, making only occasional use of socially distanced face-to-face meetings. They were using the telephone for the full range of supervision activities (such as induction appointments for people new to supervision, structured sessions focused on sentence plan aims, and unscheduled responses to concerns about problems or crises); sometimes they were speaking to service users they knew well and other times to people that they had never met in person.

The survey asked respondents to rate the suitability of voice calls for a range of supervision tasks. Practitioners were reluctant to judge any task as never suitable to undertake remotely but expressed most caution about first appointments:

around 45% of respondents said that voice calls were rarely or never suitable for first appointments with people released from prison and about 35% of respondents said the same about first appointments for people beginning a community order. By contrast, only 1% rated voice calls as rarely or never suitable for scheduled supervision appointments and 5% said this about unscheduled welfare checks.

Supervisors were doing their best to establish a supervisory relationship without being able to meet in person, but found this unsatisfactory.

> What I found difficult is the new cases that you got, you've only ever spoken to them over the phone, you can't put a face to the name, you can't picture that person. I just think for getting to know someone, and building rapport those face-to-face meetings are quite crucial at the beginning. (Deborah)

Practitioners were more positive about the use of the telephone to communicate with service users with whom they had an established professional relationship. This was partly because it was simply easier to manage without visual clues when both people knew each other, but supervisors made more nuanced points too. They gave examples of service users who found it easier to speak about difficult or personal issues when they were not in a face-to-face setting.

> I don't know whether that's because they don't need to cover up any body language on the phone or maintain eye-contact. I don't know if they open up a bit more. I seem to have found out loads more about my service users than when they were in the office. (Linda)

For some service users a benefit of telephone supervision was that they were able to speak to their supervisor without coming into the probation office. This example (which makes the case for alternative venues for supervision at least as much as for telephone contact) came from a practitioner in response to a survey question:

> I have found telephone discussions to be more open and engaging with some service users than face-to-face - one has said that he so hates just coming into the office (everything it represents for him), that he is in a state of agitation before seeing me, and so the first period of supervision is spent supporting him to relax (and this service user has been on licence for some years now). We do not have to go through this on the phone and the difference in engagement is remarkable.

The experience of 'doing probation' at home generated mixed feelings among both service users and staff. Thinking about service users, supervisors had examples (like the one above) where service users were more relaxed speaking from their home but also knew that for other people home was not sufficiently safe, quiet, or private to enable them to speak openly. Reflecting on their own experience, some practitioners welcomed the opportunity to work from home and the associated reduction in time spent travelling or late evenings in the office. However, others explained that working at home added to the complexity of setting appropriate

boundaries for professional relationships; it was not always possible to separate work time from home time and practitioners felt that, on occasions, telephone calls (particularly about difficult or intimate topics) risked being overheard by household members in their home as well as that of the service user.

Practitioners spoke of the strategies that they were using to build rapport and develop a working relationship. They stressed that they used familiar processes but adapted them to the demands of the telephone; they were listening to people, being friendly and approachable, and being clear about the purposes, expectations and options of supervision.

> I've only just realised how much of it [the job] I do by looking pleasant, and you know I'm quite smiley, I'm quite friendly - and if people don't hear that on the phone, I think possibly I sound a bit sharper on the phone, as it were, I talk quite fast.. which probably makes a difference to people… I have had to work on talking more consciously slowly. I think possibly the way I come across if people haven't spoken to me before is just less approachable, maybe, on the phone, because I think I'm doing a lot of work with my body language. (Claire)

Linda explained the challenge of telephone contact with someone speaking of suicide:

> It's hard to change the tone of your voice enough to indicate that you're concerned or are caring.

These quotes illustrate the emotional labour intrinsic to probation work; practitioners work to manage the emotions of the situation, communicating in the way deemed appropriate for the circumstances. For practitioners some emotional display is a genuine reflection of feeling, at other times the display is on the surface and intended to trigger a specific response in the other (Knight et al., 2016). The work of emotional labour in probation is demanding, tests professional boundaries and, without support for practitioners, risks burnout (as found in a recent study exploring the experiences of women who supervise women on probation (Ellis Devitt, 2020). As Phillips et al. (2020a) correctly observe, moving from face-to-face to voice-to-voice interactions places different demands on workers.

Supervisors also observed that the move from office appointments to telephone calls shifted the boundaries of supervisory relationships in a variety of ways. Practitioners who had not previously had a work mobile phone found themselves accessible to service users in unfamiliar ways and had to make decisions about how to respond to service users who phoned often and outside of agreed appointment times. Some practitioners found it easier, or more acceptable and appropriate, than others to turn off the work mobile phone outside of office hours.

Work mobile phones make staff accessible to service users in new ways. Given mutual understanding about the boundaries of this contact, service users are enabled to communicate in more proactive and reciprocal ways with supervisors. This comment was made by a respondent to the survey:

> *Service users have the benefit of feeling like they are in a two-way relationship with their programme facilitators because they can easily contact them (with a message) on the phone, rather than simply being required to turn up to meetings with a group. This must encourage the impression that they are equal and responsible agents in their own rehabilitation, so improving their engagement and receptiveness.*

Telephone supervision was also identified as transferring responsibility for compliance from the service user to the supervisor; it usually involved the supervisor making the call whereas face-to-face supervision required the service user to attend an office appointment. More appointments were kept, and fewer warnings issued; service users were more likely to answer the telephone than to report to the office. A further consequence of easier communication was the prospect of repairing ruptures in supervisory relationships (Lewis, 2014) and dealing with difficulties without the need to move to formal warnings.

Nicola's experience was that there was less need for enforcement action as:

> *They just pick up their phone....At the end of the day, they've answered you and you've contacted them.*

> *Compliance has actually been quite a lot better during the pandemic as people don't tend to avoid a phone call in the same way they avoid coming to the office. (Emily)*

Other interviewees painted a more complex picture of the impact of telephone reporting on the formal nature of the supervision process. Sara voiced the concern that the informal nature of telephone reporting was '*over-familiar*' and risked service users becoming '*complacent*'. Blended supervision shifts the pattern of power, compliance and motivation in supervisory relationships in ways that merit further exploration and discussion.

Good practice and professional discretion

The importance of taking an individualised approach to supervision (and avoiding 'one-size-fits-all' responses) emerges strongly in the literature about quality in probation practice (Robinson et al., 2014); tailoring supervision to each service user's circumstances is a key component of desistance-focused approaches (McNeill et al., 2012).

The findings from this study support the idea that, for some service users on some occasions, telephone supervision has benefits and that decisions about when to use the telephone are best made in discussion between the two people involved. Practitioners generally wanted to use discretion, considering each service user on an individual basis. Demographic factors (including gender, ethnicity and age) did not have a big impact on supervisors' judgements about the use of telephone contact. One survey respondent wrote:

Remote contact is a very useful option with the right service user; hopefully one legacy of the pandemic will be an increased recognition of this and a corresponding extension of trust to individual officers to determine when and for whom this option is used.

Practitioners were not arguing that telephone supervision should be a routine approach but that using the telephone should be an available option in cases where this would improve the quality of their contact with a service user. For example, one interviewee gave the example of a service user in full-time work as a van driver who was now able to schedule lunchtime telephone appointments and speak from the privacy of his cab. Prior to the pandemic he had found it hard to attend appointments at the end of his working day, arriving in the office tired and stressed from the rush-hour traffic; now he was engaging with the planned exercises and activities. However, in other cases, such remote supervision would not be deemed appropriate and office appointments would be required to check that service users were complying with, for example, conditions about where-abouts and residence.

Domestic violence and sex offending were two areas where practitioners were cautious about telephone supervision. In both cases, face-to-face work enabled the supervisor to gauge the service user's response to the conversation and reduce the likelihood of harm to others.

[By discussing things] that might make him angry, and then he puts the phone down and it might have repercussions on the partner. If they come to the office, and they are on the bus, they might cool down by the time they get back home. (Lena)

However, stressing her wish to respond to each case on its merits, Lena also explained that, in another domestic violence case, telephone supervision had enabled her to keep in regular contact with an older service user who was in poor health and vulnerable to Covid-19.

Practitioners were aware that service users varied in their access to telephones and, specifically, to smartphones with internet access; digital exclusion was a problem for some people, restricting opportunities and reducing choice. Where supervisees were in unstable and rapidly changing circumstances and likely to lose, sell, or be robbed of their mobile phone, supervisors saw benefit in the routine and structure of office reporting. However, for service users who were com-fortable users of telephones (and specifically smartphones), accessing probation by voice call, or potentially video call, replicated their experience with other public services.

Conclusion and implications

The findings from this study reinforce the importance of face-to-face work in proba-tion practice. Inter-personal interactions are at the heart of supervision. Required by the pandemic to move to remote supervision, the ability of staff to build and sustain relationships was hampered in several ways. The study highlighted the extent to

which supervision is a multi-sensory experience and the absence of sight (a key sense for most practitioners) raised the profile of other senses. Staff raised concern about their ability to work sensitively while relying only on tone of voice and choice of language and it may be that probation can usefully learn from organisations who have much skill and experience in running telephone helplines for people in difficulty.

Remote supervision has also tested and pushed professional boundaries. Staff and service users are accessible (and inaccessible) in new ways. The power to make contact, accept contact and avoid contact takes a different shape. Remote supervision also challenges the dominance of the office appointment. Once the pandemic restrictions are passed and individuals have more choice about travel and venue, service users and staff could choose to make and receive phone calls wherever they felt most productive and most secure (at home, in the office or somewhere else). Practitioners varied in the extent to which they welcomed a new way of working without the familiar structure of waiting rooms, reception areas and appointments. Staff made different and individual decisions about where to set new professional boundaries.

This research suggested that telephone supervision was most successful in circumstances which staff judged to be less complex and more routine. This judgement was partly about the extent to which supervisors perceived a service user to pose a risk of causing serious harm, but it was also about assessments of broader factors to do with well-being, engagement and communication. There was a hint in the interview data that supervisors who had more experience with complex cases (and more training in this area) were less happy with telephone supervision than their colleagues who worked primarily with a caseload of service users assessed as the lowest risk. However, only a small number of supervisors were interviewed as part of this study, and more research would be needed to ascertain whether practitioners' expectations about the nature and depth of the supervisory relationship were linked with their level of satisfaction about telephone supervision. Similarly, this research did not capture the experience of supervisors who (at the time of the study) were working with service users convicted of sex offences or subject to multiagency public protection arrangements, and further research could usefully explore the use of blended supervision approaches (combining face-to-face meeting, telephone contact and online communication) across the whole probation caseload.

The practitioners in this study wanted to be able to exercise professional discretion and use the telephone for the right interaction at the right time. This research suggests that this would be an occasional part of blended supervision, most likely to be chosen in cases where the individuals had a good existing relationship, where the supervisor was confident about the circumstances of the service user, and where the intended conversation did not require the service user to be in the office. This does not mean that telephone supervision would always be used for routine reporting and never for structured interventions; the practitioners were arguing for a more nuanced approach than this, one that took account of the circumstances and features of each case.

As well as rebuilding after the pandemic, the probation service in England and Wales is also managing the process of unification: the ending of the contracts with the CRCs and the bringing together of all supervision work in a newly configured Probation Service (Carr, 2021). The recently published Target Operating Model for the new organisation (HMPPS, 2021a) suggests that blended approaches will continue to be part of probation supervision, supports the creation of standards governing minimum levels of face-to-face contact, and acknowledges the need for improvement in the mobile devices and internet access provided for staff. The revised National Standards, written to take account of the unification process, anticipates the need for blended supervision model guidance (HMPPS, 2021b). The implications of this research for the new probation service are in the areas of use of and access to technology, supervisor training and support and the use of professional discretion.

The quality of blended supervision does depend, in part, on the technology available to staff and service users. For staff, smartphones offer more than talking and texting, including the possibility of video calls, the sharing of photographs and the use of a wide range of internet resources. These options (not available to research participants at the time of this study) if used creatively have the potential to enrich supervision. Some service users regularly use mobile devices for social and work communication but this is not the case for everyone, with the risk of exclusion for those who do not have the equipment, resources or skills needed to interact remotely with probation supervision. Supervisors in the study were concerned about widening digital inequality. Participating fully in society increasingly relies on being able to access online services and resources, compounding the disadvantage of those people without the necessary skills, equipment or access.

New ways of working bring the need for changes to training and support, for longstanding supervisors as well as for recently recruited staff (who may have been working remotely and from home since the start of their careers). Blended supervision requires staff to choose the best communication method for a particular task. Telephone supervision needs different thinking about how to interact and communicate, drawing on good examples from the existing and well-established world of telephone counselling and helplines. Feedback from service users about the experience of being on the 'receiving end' of telephone supervision (something that this study was not set up to gather) is important too. The reshaping of professional boundaries requires reflection and discussion, with peers and within teams.

The staff in this study wanted to be able to choose the balance of communication modes to suit the circumstances of each service user. They could see the benefit of specific guidelines for online and remote supervision (dealing, for example, with issues of security, risk management, accessibility, and boundaries) but argued for the opportunity to use professional discretion. In addition to benefits for the service user, flexible ways of working give supervisors more options for managing busy workloads. Moving to a good quality model of blended supervision requires practitioners who are well trained, well supported, accountable for their decisions but also permitted to use their discretion (Eadie and Canton, 2002). It also requires

the probation service to nurture an organisational culture that values staff learning, reflection and support.

Deborah 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.*

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Jane Dominey https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5577-8643
Jess Lawrence https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3175-0018

Note

1. All the names used for practitioners in this article are pseudonyms.

References

Bottoms A (2008) The community dimension of community Penalties. *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 47 (2): 146–169.

Carr N (2021) Probation in a pandemic. *Probation Journal* 68 (1): 3–7.

CEP (2021) 'Covid19: measures and protocols in probation' [available online at https://www.cep-probation.org/covid-19-measures-and-protocols-in-probation/ accessed 22/2/21].

Coley D and Ellis Devitt K (2020) *The Family Involvement Project: Exploring the relationship between probation and service users' families* [available from https://interventionsalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/07/Family-Involvement-Project-June-2020.pdf].

Council of Europe (2010) *Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)1 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Council of Europe Probation Rules* [available online at https://www.cep-probation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CoE-probation-rules-recommendation.pdf accessed 12/2/21].

Davies M (1979) Through the eyes of the Probationer. *Probation Journal* 26 (3): 84–88.

Ditton J and Ford R (1994) *The Reality of Probation*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Dominey J (2019) Probation supervision as a network of relationships: Aiming to be thick not thin. *Probation Journal* 66 (3): 283–302.

Dowden C and Andrews D (2004) The importance of staff practice in delivering effective cor-
    rectional treatment: A meta-analytic review of core correctional Treatment. *International
    Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 48 (2): 203–214.

Eadie T and Canton R. (2002) 'Practising in a context of ambivalence: The challenge for youth
    justice workers', *Youth Justice*, 2(1), 14–26

Ellis Devitt K (2020) *Resilience, wellbeing and sustainability in women-led probation service
    delivery: Exploring the 'Women's Lead' role* [available from https://interventionsalliance.
    com/exploring-the-womens-lead-role/].

Farrall S and Calverley A (2006) *Understanding Desistance From Crime*. Maidenhead: OUP.

Hart W and Healy D (2018) "An inside job": An autobiographical account of desistance.
    European Journal of Probation 10 (2): 103–119.

Hartwig M and Granhag PA (2015) Exploring the nature and origin of beliefs about decep-
    tion: Implicit and explicit knowledge among Lay people and presumed Experts. In:
    Granhag PA, Vrij A and Verschuere B (eds) *Detecting Deception: Current Challenges
    and Cognitive Approaches*. Chichester: Wiley.

Herrity K (2020) ''Some people can't hear, so they have to feel…': Exploring sensory experi-
    ence and collapsing distance in prisons research' *Howard League for Penal Reform ECAN
    Bulletin* [Available online at https://howardleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/
    ECAN-Autumn-2019-final-draft-2.pdf accessed 22/2/21].

Herrity K, Schmidt B and Warr J (2021) *Sensory Penalties: Exploring the Senses in Spaces of
    Punishment and Social Control*. Emerald: Bingley.

HMIP (2019a) *A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the effectiveness of remote supervision and
    new technologies in managing probation service users* Research and Analysis Bulletin
    2019/02 [available online at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/
    wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2019/03/2019-02-Research-and-Analysis-Bulletin-REA-re
    mote-supervision.pdf accessed 18/2/21].

HMIP (2019b) *Report of the Chief Inspector of Probation: March* 2019 [available online
    at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/
    5/2019/03/HMI-Probation-Chief-Inspectors-Report.pdf accessed 18/2/21].

HMIP (2020a) 2019*/2020 Annual Report: inspections of probation services* [available
    on line at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads
    /sites/5/2020/12/2019-2020-Annual-Report-Inspection-of-probation-services-1.pdf
    accessed 12/2/21].

HMIP (2020b) *A thematic review of the Exceptional Delivery Model arrangements in proba-
    tion services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic*. [available online at https://www.
    justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/11/A-
    thematic-review-of-the-EDM-arrangements-in-probation-services-in-response-to-the-COVID-
    19-pandemic.pdf accessed 22/2/21].

HMPPS (2020) *Roadmap to Recovery* [available online at https://www.gov.uk/government/
    publications/covid-19-probation-roadmap-to-recovery accessed 22/2/21].

HMPPS (2021a) *The Target Operating Model for probation services in England and Wales*
    [available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/
    system/uploads/attachment_data/file/959745/HMPPS_-_The_Target_Operating_Mod
    el_for_the_Future_of_Probation_Services_in_England___Wales_-__English__-_09-02
    -2021.pdf accessed 12/2/21].

HMPPS (2021b) *National Standards 2021: Supporting transition to the Unified Model* [available online at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/998799/National_Standards_2021_-_Supporting_transition_to_the_Unified_Model_-_June_2021__in_English_.pdf accessed 28/7/21].

House of Commons Justice Committee (2018) *Transforming Rehabilitation: Ninth Report of Session 2017-19* [available online at https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmjust/482/482.pdf accessed 18/2/21].

Irvine A, Drew P, Bower P, et al. (2020) Are there interactional differences between telephone and face-to-face psychological therapy? A systematic review of comparative studies. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 265: 120–131.

Knight C, Phillips J and Chapman T (2016) Bringing the feelings back: Returning emotions to criminal justice Practice. *British Journal of Community Justice* 14 (1), [available online at https://www.mmuperu.co.uk/bjcj/articles/bringing-the-feelings-back-returning-emotions-to-criminal-justice-practice accessed 23/2/21].

Lewis S (2014) 'Building probation relationships that support change' 12 June *Discovering Desistance* [available online at https://discoveringdesistance.home.blog/2014/06/12/building-probation-relationships-that-support-change/ accessed 16/5/21].

McDermott S (2016) Probation without boundaries? "Agile working" in the community rehabilitation company "transformed" landscape. *Probation Journal* 63 (2): 193–201.

McFarland S, Coufopolous A and Lycett D (2021) The effect of telehealth versus usual care for home-care patients with long-term conditions: A systematic review, meta-analysis and qualitative synthesis. *Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare* 27(2): 69–87.

McNeill F and Robinson G (2013) Liquid legitimacy and community Sanctions. In: Crawford A and Hucklesby A (eds) *Legitimacy and Compliance in Criminal Justice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

McNeill F, Farrall S, Lightowler C, et al. (2012) *How and why people stop offending: Discovering desistance. Iriss Insight 15* [available online at https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/how-why-people-stop-offending-discovering-desistance accessed 23/2/21].

McNeill F (2020) *Penal supervision in a pandemic* [available online at https://sccjrblog.wordpress.com/2020/05/04/penal-supervision-in-a-pandemic/ accessed 22/2/21].

Musimbe-Rix S (2020) *Coronavirus and Crime: Fact File 1. Domestic abuse during Coronavirus* [Available online at https://interventionsalliance.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/07/DomesticAbuseDuringCoronavirus-Factfile1.pdf Accessed 22/2/21].

Nellis M (2014) Upgrading electronic monitoring, downgrading probation: Reconfiguring 'offender management' in england and Wales. *European Journal of Probation* 6(2): 169–191.

Phillips J (2014) The architecture of a probation office: A reflection of policy and an impact on practice. *Probation Journal* 61(2): 117–131.

Phillips J, Albertson K, Collinson B, et al. (2020b) Delivering desistance-focused probation in community hubs: Five key ingredients. *Probation Journal* 67(3): 264–282.

Phillips J, Westaby C and Fowler A (2020a) *Emotional Labour in Probation.* HMIP Academic Insights 2020/03 [available online at https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/04/Emotional-Labour-in-Probation.pdf accessed 23/3/21].

Revolving Doors Agency (2020) *Research Briefing: the impact of Covid-19 on people in the revolving door of crisis and crime* [Available online at https://revolving-doors.org.uk/file/2509/download?token=HlJuo8cb accessed 22/2/21].

Robinson G, Priede C, Farrall S, et al. (2014) Understanding 'quality' in probation practice: Frontline perspectives in england & Wales. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 14 (2): 123–142.

Schmidt B and Jefferson A (2021) Sensing transition: Exploring prison life in post-revolution Tunisia. In: Herrity K, Schmidt B and Warr J (eds) *Sensory Penalties: Exploring the Senses in Spaces of Punishment and Social Control.* Emerald: Bingley.

Shapland J, Bottoms A, Farrall S, et al. (2012) *The Quality of Probation Supervision: A Literature Review.* The University of Sheffield Centre for Criminological Research Occasional Paper 3.

Ugwudike P (2016) The dynamics of service user participation and compliance in community justice Settings. *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 55 (4): 455–477.

User Voice (2020) *The user voice of lockdown: People in prison and on probation tell us their experience of the Covid – 19 pandemic so far* [Available online at https://www.uservoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-user-voice-of-lockdown.pdf Accessed 22/2/21].

Willis A (1986) Help and control in probation: An empirical assessment of probation Practice. In: Pointing J (eds) *Alternatives to Custody.* Oxford: Blackwell.