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THOUGHT PIECE

'Thought Pieces' are papers which draw on the author's personal knowledge and experience to offer stimulating and thought provoking ideas relevant to the aims of the Journal. The ideas are located in an academic, research, and/or practice context and all papers are peer reviewed. Responses to them should be submitted to the Journal in the normal way.

WHAT WILL PROBATION PRACTICE LOOK LIKE IN 2020?

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In this short comment piece the authors attempt to visualise what probation practice might look like in the year 2020 through an account of a typical working day in the life of a CRC and NPS worker respectively.

CRC Day in the Life

Monday 10th February 2020

7.30am: I begin the week by checking messages on my work tablet while eating breakfast. The messages bring the news that Joe was arrested on Saturday, charged with an assault on his partner and will be in court this morning. There is also an urgent appeal for someone to cover for sickness absence and staff the report centre this evening. I skim through the report detailing our team's performance against our January re-offending targets. Back in January my tablet was broken and I couldn't check messages from home – that was better.

8.30am: Arrive at the office. I phone the NPS court office. No answer. I spent some time on Sunday evening checking my email, but still have 37 messages that have arrived since Friday afternoon. These are mostly updates from partner agencies about people on my caseload: referrals acknowledged, appointments made, appointments kept and missed. My colleague working in the local prison has emailed to let me know that, following a re-calculation of her sentence dates, Ella will be released from her 4 month prison sentence on Thursday morning. Our local hostel is not able to accommodate her – they have no empty bed spaces for women and, anyway, they are reluctant to have her stay again after the problems she caused there at the end of last year. I phone the NPS court officer's mobile and leave a message asking to be called back.

10.30am: I spend two hours every other Monday morning at the community drugs team drop-in. This might be the best bit of my job. There are definite advantages in this 'agile' working as it gets me out and about in the local community although I do miss the fact that there is less opportunity to meet with my colleagues and discuss our cases, etc. It is also about the only time when I feel as though I'm building useful relationships with service users and I think that they benefit from having a range of services in one place. I miss a call back from the NPS court officer while I'm in a session with Steve who is just ready to think about getting back into work. I have heard that our owners are taking on casual staff in their cleaning division and have a target to provide employment for 5% of our service users. I tell Steve that I will make enquiries to confirm if this is true.

1.00pm: Back at the office eating a sandwich in front of the computer. I find out that I've missed a visit to the office from our CRC big boss. Apparently he brought a message congratulating us on the 5th birthday of the CRC but raised concern that our team's re-offending rates are higher than expected. No doubt there will be threats of further job losses but I'm not sure how they can cut us back any further. He had indicated that Version 7 of their operating plan, Desistance Interface Model, is nearly ready. There are also rumours that we will be taken over by another company if our performance does not improve but I've no idea whether this is true. I'm disappointed that I did not see him as I hoped to find out whether the CRC is going to fund any of us through professional training. I'm one of the longest standing officers here (I'd been working as a PSO for a couple of years before TR) and I'm increasingly pissed off by the lack of career development. I'm thinking of applying to train as a community psychiatric nurse, but I don't think I can afford to be a student.

2.00pm: Afternoons in the office are the worst part of my job. I split my time between updating records, answering email and seeing service users. Some service users just have to sign in at reception (apparently the automatic kiosks are finally coming later this year) but others ask to see an officer. I don't like the open plan environment, I don't like it that I don't recognise most of the people, even those who are notionally on my caseload and I don't like it that people are usually asking me for resources that I can't provide. I spend the afternoon disappointing service users and failing to persuade the hostel to magically find space for Ella. I am becoming more and more frustrated with the demands to reduce reoffending whilst making sure that we are delivering revenues above our operational costs. I notice that the owners have increased the payments for services again which will no doubt go down well with the NPS!

5.15pm: Phone call from NPS court officer. Joe has been remanded in custody. The assault on his partner is serious. The court officer expresses frustration at having had no detail about Joe's community order leaving him unable to answer questions from the magistrates and from Joe's solicitor. I am leaving the building when I am stopped by Ella's brother. He is on licence and has come to sign in. He may be able to have Ella stay with him, but his girlfriend will take some persuading.

7.00pm: At home. Write report about Joe's community order while eating dinner.

NPS Day in the Life

Monday 10th February 2020

7.30am: I arrive early at the office this morning to beat the traffic and in the hope that I will be able to get away promptly this evening as it's my best mate's birthday. The office is quiet but, and very frustratingly, there is some sort of IT problem and I can't log on to the client database. I was going to prepare for a videolink sentence planning meeting that is scheduled for 2pm. There's hardly anyone around that I can talk to in the office. I check the notice board in the admin pod and see that most of my colleagues are out working in the police stations across the area where we are all co-located for part of the week. The rest seem to be off sick and we have recently received a directive from NOMS about the number of staff days lost through sickness. They have given us access to a counsellor to support us if we are feeling stressed but she has to provide a service to staff across the whole area and has had her hours cut following the latest round of cut-backs. I spend some time talking to Gary, the court PSO. He's only been in post for a couple of months and is still learning the ropes. Email is working, so we have a list of people appearing in court this morning, including those arrested over the weekend. Our IT problem means that we can't check whether any of them are current NPS clients or are supervised by the CRC. Gary says that his job would be easier if he had more information about CRC cases. I spend the morning in the office. Happily the IT systems are back up soon after 9am so I am able to get underway with outstanding assessments and reports.

9.30am: I am interrupted for some advice by my colleague Jazmin. Jazmin has been in the team for about 15 months so she has nearly completed the probation officer qualification. (When I did the training it took longer than it does now, but I qualified back in 2014.) Jazmin has arrived at work to discover that someone she was supervising has gone off the rails over the weekend: he has been drinking and broken other rules at the hostel where he stays. He faces eviction from the hostel. He is on licence for a serious alcohol-related offence of GBH and this looks like a straightforward recall to me. I talk Jazmin through the procedure. She seems to genuinely appreciate this as there is little opportunity or time to discuss such issues with colleagues and we rarely see our regional manager.

10.30am: All five sex offenders due to report in this morning keep their appointments. There are the usual gripes about the GPS tags that all our service users are now required to wear and the level of police surveillance they encounter. Harry, one of the older men I supervise describes it as "worse than an open prison in the community". I see each of them for about 20 mins. Tom reports next. He is quite anxious about the forthcoming domestic abuse groupwork programme run by the CRC. He doesn't want to talk about his relationship with his girlfriend in a group of strangers. I try to simultaneously encourage him to attend and reassure him that the group will be well run. I'd like to introduce him to one of the group leaders, but one of them is off sick and the other is based at an office 50 miles away on Mondays. I have already had to make a strong case to the regional manager to finance Tom's place on the programme especially since we've heard that the CRC are putting their prices up again. It's hard to believe that we once worked together as one organisation!

1.00pm: I have a sandwich in front of the computer. I half-read the Deputy Director's email newsletter. Further budget cuts are anticipated. There are rumours that the NPS will be absorbed into other parts of the criminal justice system with some staff working for court services with the rest employed by the police. Gary pops across from court to make a cup of tea and complain that he can't get hold of anyone at the CRC. A CRC supervisee is at court this morning charged with a serious assault on his partner. The defendant's solicitor is arguing for bail and the CPS lawyer wants to know more about the home circumstances.

2.00pm: The videolink with the prison goes mostly OK. The prisoner is a lifer and her first parole hearing is approaching. She is hoping for a move to open conditions and a prison nearer her teenage daughter. She was a bit negative about probation, but, given that we've offered her no continuity of contact since she was sentenced back in 2009, that seems reasonable enough. I hope I'm still around at the time of the next contact.

3.00pm: The day takes a turn for the worse. Shaun comes to the office. He is a young man with learning difficulties, still only 19, released on licence having been sent to prison for three sexual assaults committed at the hostel where he was living back in 2008. He has been living with his aunt, but she has just asked him to leave because she found him smoking cannabis in his room. I make lots of phone calls: to Shaun's aunt (who is adamant that he's not welcome just now), to the local emergency housing options (even though I know they probably don't have space and, anyway, won't take Shaun because of his conviction), to the adult social care team (who can't suggest anything I've not already considered). Shaun calls his grandmother, who lives in London. She is prepared for Shaun to go there for a few days while something else is sorted out but I can't approve that without a proper risk assessment. I have almost decided to go ahead with an emergency recall when Shaun's aunt phones back to say that she supposes Shaun will have to return to her house for a couple more days.

7.00pm: At home. Worry about Shaun while trying to decide whether I have the energy to go out to my friend's birthday drink.

Commentary

Each of these fictional scenarios of a 'typical' day in the life of a worker in the NPS and CRCs in 2020 are presented to illustrate some possible directions for and risks to the future of probation practice. Each account has elements that will no doubt resonate with contemporary probation practitioners in terms of the long working hours, competing workload demands and the need to balance scarce resources. One could be forgiven for thinking therefore that not much has changed but in another sense the context within which the respective workers are operating raises a number of fundamental practice questions regarding the sustainability of a probation 'essence' that has provided the theoretical backdrop to this edition. Firstly, each of the workers appear to be operating within their own practice 'silos' with inadequate communication between them. On one level, this could be viewed as the inevitable consequence of the organisational bifurcation of probation that has occurred as a result of *Transforming Rehabilitation*. However, even if one accepts that communication systems and processes will have improved by 2020

(which is by no means certain) it would still seem to be the case that the way in which the two organisations relate to each other has fundamentally changed and this is likely to be even more pronounced as both the NPS and CRCs increasingly seek to establish their respective organisational identities and functional responsibilities. For the CRCs this may lead to further silos between different providers whilst within the NPS there might be operational silos between the courts, prison, approved premises and the community?

It is still the case that the two workers in our fictional scenarios appear committed to the individuals with whom they are working but their ability to undertake these tasks effectively is perhaps inevitably very much shaped and challenged by the environments within which they are located. The account of the NPS worker reflects the relentless pressures of working with those individuals who present the highest risks and the emotional toil involved. For the worker in the CRC there is perhaps the potential for more creative and innovative approaches but in our scenario these are undermined by an on-going lack of resources and the increasingly stringent demands of the contractual arrangements. In both accounts there remains an on-going uncertainty over the future organisational arrangements. What is clear though from our fictional accounts is that the demands faced by each of the workers in both the NPS and CRC will be no less than at present and so will the need for a skilled and suitably qualified workforce. The accounts paint a concerning picture of staff shortage and inexperience coupled with inadequate supervision and lack of training opportunities. Whether the application of technological advances will aid or continue to sometimes frustrate practice is not clear from our accounts but there is a danger that the relational aspects of probation work will be undermined if workers become increasingly distanced from each other and from those under their supervision.

Only time will tell how accurate our imagined accounts of probation practice in 2020 will be. We have no doubt that there will continue to be some continuities but there are also likely to be policy and technological turns that will influence and shape practice in ways that we have not envisaged. However, whatever practice models emerge over the intervening period our sincere hope is that the traditional 'essence' of probation will be retained, and hopefully developed, in some form.