

‘I don’t like this job in my front room’: practising probation in the COVID-19 pandemic

PHILLIPS, Jake <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7606-6423>>, WESTABY, Chalen <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6459-4675>>, AINSLIE, Samantha <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2908-9910>> and FOWLER, Andrew <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0164-9915>>

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'I don't like this job in my front room': Practising probation in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Jake Phillips , Chalen Westaby ,
Sam Ainslie , and
Andrew Fowler 
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

The Exceptional Delivery Model for probation practice in England and Wales meant that probation practitioners predominantly worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, engaging and supervising service-users remotely. This article explores the impact of the Exceptional Delivery Model on staff and their practice. We begin by considering how probation practice changed because of the implementation of the Exceptional Delivery Model and the impact that this has had on probation staff. The reality of probation work is brought into perspective when there are children in the home and the demarcation of work and home life is easily blurred, especially when considered through the lens of 'emotional dirty work'. We then present analysis of interviews with 61 practitioners and managers in the National Probation Service. The interviews were primarily focused on staff wellbeing and emotional labour as opposed to the impact of the pandemic, but participants regularly raised the pandemic in discussions. We focus on three key themes: the challenges of working from home and remote communication, experiences of managing risk through door-step visits and the spill over of probation work into personal lives. The article concludes by considering what the findings tell us about probation work and potential future implications.

Corresponding Author:

Jake Phillips, Department of Law and Criminology, Sheffield Hallam University, Heart of the Campus, Sheffield, S10 2BQ, UK.

Email: Jake.phillips@shu.ac.uk

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Probation practice, emotions, dirty work, pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

On 23 March 2020, England and Wales entered a period of lockdown to bring the COVID-19 pandemic under control. The message was simple 'Stay at home!'. The National Probation Service (NPS) responded by implementing an Exceptional Delivery Model (EDM) for England and Wales reducing face-to-face contact between people on probation and their supervising officer (HMPPS, n.d.). This required most probation staff to work from home, halted unpaid work, the delivery of accredited programmes and most court-related activities (Phillips, 2020). Face-to-face contact was prioritised for service-users who posed a very high risk of harm, prison leavers and those without access to a phone who were seen face-to-face in the office and through doorstep visits (HMI Probation, 2020: 23). This accounted for around 14% of service-users (Russell, 2020) and so most supervision was conducted remotely by telephone or video calls (HMPPS, n.d.). This resulted in a fundamental change to how probation is practiced and impacted upon probation staff already working in a challenging environment. The aim of this article is to elucidate how staff in the NPS experienced these changes.

How did probation work change and how did it impact on staff?

In giving evidence to the Justice Select Committee, senior probation leaders recognised that probation work significantly changed during this period although there was reticence around acknowledging a substantive increase in workload (A Rees, 2020). Despite this, others suggest practitioners' work inevitably increased because of the need to conduct additional risk assessments and cover for absent colleagues due to COVID-related sickness (Lomas, 2020). Moreover, while remote service-user supervision was necessary, concerns around the effectiveness of telephone supervision resulted in a direction to double the frequency of supervision appointments at the beginning of the lockdown (HMPPS, n.d.). With no workload compensation granted to practitioners, this created additional pressures for probation staff:

The workload has actually increased as a result of the exceptional delivery model, because it requires a higher frequency of contact with clients – albeit not all face-to-face contact, but a higher frequency of contact all the same. (Lomas, 2020)

Having to do complex and challenging probation work from home resulted in considerable burdens to practitioners. Whilst some practitioners who felt able to work successfully at home welcomed this, demarcating their work and home life and enjoying spending more time with their family, others struggled with this new way of working (HMI Probation, 2020). For some, home working resulted

in difficulties putting work aside at the end of a day and switching 'off mentally' (J Rees, 2020).

Probation practice includes discussions with service-users of a sensitive and/or challenging nature which are incompatible with home working. This 'dirty work' (McNeill, 2020; Worrall and Mawby, 2013) includes discussions about offences and offending, responding to mental ill-health and displays of negative emotions (HMIP, 2020: 15). Discussions with service-users convicted of sexual offences present a particular challenge that can feel emotionally intrusive and difficult to manage (J Rees, 2020). This discomfort may be further exacerbated in situations where a child is in the next room; a pertinent consideration given the increasingly feminised makeup of the probation workforce (Annison, 2007; McNeill, 2020).

Childcare provision has resulted in additional home life tensions (HMI Probation, 2020) whilst for others this tension results from 'shielding' vulnerable family members, particularly earlier in lockdown (Norton, 2020: 184). As might be expected, these care commitments coupled with work pressures resulted in practitioners having to alter their work patterns (Norton, 2020). More broadly, women suffered most from having to balance caring responsibilities and the challenges resulting from the pandemic (European Parliament, 2020). So, we would expect this to disproportionately impact on the probation service.

Whilst the requirement to engage with service-users remains, homeworking has changed the way these interactions take place and subsequently the emotional burden felt by practitioners. Interactions via remote technology are often viewed differently from in-person communication because of a lack of physical co-presence (e.g. Giddens, 1986; Goffman, 1966) and due to differences inherent to each medium (Hutchby, 2014). In telephone communication participants do not share a visual context. When using video, the participant's visual context is often available but cues such as non-verbal language can be limited by technological issues and confidence in using a particular communication method. Interaction via telephone is said to possess its own 'interactional order' due to the lack of a shared physical space (Hopper, 1992), and similarly interactions via video-link have been found to be different from in-person interaction (Harper et al., 2017; Licoppe, 2017).

All of this is likely to change how relationships are built and nurtured and the emotional impact of probation work. Telephone communication does not require observable facial and bodily displays, but practitioners are still required to manage their tone of voice and their emotions (Townsend, 2007). For example, in Black and Lumsden's (2020), ethnographic study of police call handlers and dispatchers, a call handler is observed taking a 999-emergency call and cannot discern the caller's location. Although they became increasingly frustrated, call handlers were expected to display calmness. Doing surface acting – emotional displays which do not match internal feelings (Hochschild, 1983) – is hard work and has been linked to higher levels of burnout amongst criminal justice practitioners (Bogdan et al., 2010; Schaible and Six, 2016).

The consequences of doing such emotional work are a 'double edged sword' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 96). They can be positive, such as increased task effectiveness (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) or negative resulting in, for

example, stress (Mann and Cowburn, 2005), emotional exhaustion (Harris, 2002) and other serious physical health concerns (Mann, 1998). To ameliorate the potentially negative consequences of doing emotional work, workers use coping strategies such as self-care (Wray et al., 2007) and communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003). Indeed, previous research shows probation staff turn to colleagues for emotional support which forms a crucial part of dealing with the emotional toll of managing emotions (Burke et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2016).

Being isolated from colleagues, as has been the case during the pandemic, has deleterious effects on staff wellbeing in terms of feeling isolated, low mood and a lack of emotional and professional support (HMI Probation, 2020: 18). Here the benefits of communities of coping (Korczynski, 2003) for those expected to do jobs which take an emotional toll are apparent. Decreased emotional peer-based support is therefore problematic given its importance in alleviating the negative effects of performing emotional work, and one would expect to feel this acutely given the fundamental shift in working practice of frontline probation staff from face-to-face to remote communication.

Work-life spillover can occur in different ways and we would expect this to change with a move to home working. Work family conflict can be time-based (i.e. pressures at work means people have less time at home), strain-based (impacting on people's ability to fulfil activities outside of work) and behaviour-based (through behaviours which conflict with family life) (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Although relatively poorly understood in the context of probation, Westaby et al. (2016) have described how probation work spills over into practitioners' personal lives. They argue probation work can impact on practitioners' views of the world and levels of distrust and that doing probation work can impact on practitioners' parenting, especially in the context of supervising people convicted of sex offences.

Quite why doing probation work at home in particular could significantly impact staff wellbeing can be understood through the lens of 'dirty work' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Probation has been described by Worrall and Mawby (2013: 115) as dirty work because 'it is regarded by the media and the public more generally as a socially tainted occupation'. This emanates from the contact that probation staff have with stigmatized groups and is exacerbated because they help people who have caused harm. For the purposes of this article, there is potential in considering probation as being 'emotional dirty work': work done by people 'who manage the burdensome and disruptive emotions of others' (McMurray and Ward, 2014: 1140). Such work is outsourced by society despite its necessity for the smooth functioning of society, yet emotional dirty work results in people feeling emotionally tainted by the work they do. In the context of the pandemic, then, one might expect practitioners to feel like their work contaminates their home which, combined with difficulties in accessing support, could lead to significant issues for staff.

Methods

This article presents data we collected as part of a larger study examining the implementation of a new supervision and line management framework in the NPS, now called

Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS). This framework, introduced in April 2019 as part of SEEDS2 (Skills for Effective Engagement Development and Supervision), builds on and refreshes the original SEEDS framework derailed by Transforming Rehabilitation. The RPSS aim to improve the quality of supervision provided to staff (and, in turn, the supervision of service-users) by emphasising reflective practice discussions, structured practice observations with feedback and greater recognition of the role of emotions in probation work. The study also sought to understand the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) performed by probation practitioners as well as staff perceptions around professional curiosity, burnout and staff wellbeing.

We adopted a mixed methods design comprising a survey and interviews. The survey focused on the implementation of the supervision framework, emotional labour and wellbeing and was distributed immediately prior to the lockdown in March 2020, generating 1727 responses (1509 practitioners and 218 managers). At that point we were asked by HMPPS to pause data collection due to the pandemic and given permission to restart the research in late 2020. In this article, we focus on the semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2021 (participants were sampled randomly from survey respondents expressing a willingness to be interviewed).

Whilst the interviews were not originally designed to explore experiences of working in probation in the pandemic this came up regularly during our interviews. The interviews were focused on staff supervision, reflective practice, and emotional labour and so our data on the pandemic needs to be understood in this context. We did not ask specific questions about the pandemic unless it came up in conversation and so the data reflect the concerns of our participants, shaped by the overarching focus of the study.

In total, we interviewed 61 participants: 28 senior managers or senior probation officers, 30 front-line practitioners (probation officers, probation services officers and residential workers) and three learning and development probation officers involved in delivering the SEEDS2 supervision framework training. Participants were from a diverse range of NPS divisions and operations including case management, courts, victim liaison units, prisons and Approved Premises (APs). A total of 43 interviewees were female and 18 were male, roughly reflecting the gender makeup of the wider service. The research was approved by Sheffield Hallam University's Ethics Committee, as well as the HMPPS National Research Committee and NPS Senior Leadership Team to conduct the research across all divisions in the NPS. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were transcribed and analysed to identify key themes which emerged. One team member collated and coded all instances where the pandemic was discussed and this was then recoded by other team members to ensure accuracy of interpretation using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Working from home

It was clear from our participants that the pandemic had a significant impact on their ability to 'do the day job' and most were negative about its impact on their work.

In general, our participants did not like working from home, with the following quote being an apt characterisation of how most had found the process: 'I don't like this job in my front room' (Karen PSO VLO).¹ This quote suggests that Karen ordinarily likes her job but doing it from home has caused the problems. Some of these issues were practical and, perhaps, relatively generic whilst others were much more tightly knitted to probation. For example, participants described the lack of suitable equipment to support homeworking:

I began by sitting at the dining table because I thought maybe it's not going to last that long, maybe we can get on top of it, foolishly and then very quickly realised that this was going to go on possibly for years, which it probably will do now, so didn't have my work chair, so I'd get back problems if I didn't have my work chair. (Zachary PO Generic)

More pertinently for probation, practitioners talked about the practicalities of having to work from home whilst doing a job which, ordinarily, relies on face-to-face interaction with service-users and colleagues and on the availability of other services and providers in the community. This points to both the relational approach and brokerage function that is inherent to probation work (Senior et al., 2016). Staff thus talked about services being unavailable and the struggle to adapt their ways of working to account for the new situation:

It's been much more difficult because there's less resources there to help them. Less activities, more restrictions so it's been much more difficult. I think there's been much more focus on smaller goals around their emotional wellbeing, ... and it's just been difficult getting some of the emotional support that you might need longer term for them. (Abby PO Generic)

I'm struggling to work out how to do workbooks. I know it's a mental block that I haven't delivered a workbook over the phone, I'm used to having a bit of paper there between us and going through it and they've got a bit of paper ... So, yeah, I've kind of put it off. (Isabela PO Generic)²

For SPOs the pandemic meant doing tasks they had not done before, such as COVID risk assessments. This seemed to put SPOs in a difficult place, requiring them to balance social distancing, business need and staff concern:

It's all been governed as COVID compliant in line with Public Health England guidelines and guidelines within NPS, but staff are saying that in their view they don't think that there needs to be five people on site because that's what we've got at the moment to make sure we're managing the business need and response to the courts demands. Their view is that they can manage with two. (Jemima SPO Court)

I just feel as though sometimes the staff and the service-users do get a little bit side-lined and because of lockdown it all becomes procedure. Like I say, there is no getting away from that ... We've got these guidelines in place and we have to follow them, it's not like

we can go over and above, or we can excuse them or anything like that, I totally get that, but I do think that the service-users are missing out and not getting a good enough service because it is all over the telephone. (Violet PSO Generic)

More substantively the pandemic appeared to pose some serious obstacles to what are considered key elements of probation work. We heard many examples of how the pandemic and, particularly the need to avoid face-to-face contact, created considerable tensions between doing what was considered 'good work' and key tasks such as risk assessment and intervening at signs of negative change:

This guy I was constantly in touch with, weekly to fortnightly, everything was fine, nothing was suggested that there was any problems and when I saw him for the first time in three months it was like a shadow of a person, and I was like 'What has gone on? What is going on? You've lost so much weight', and then he had to admit 'Well actually, yeah, I'm back on drugs', but if I had maybe seen that, if he were coming in and I was seeing it, I would be able to have been able to nip it in the bud a lot quicker. (Violet PSO Generic)

This morning in the prison, and I actually said at one point I'm not sure, if you'd been out, if you'd been able to actually come in the office and had these discussions whether you would have ended up being recalled. (Gabrielle PO Generic)

This highlights the importance of understanding the impact on service-users and how their sentences were managed/enforced during the pandemic. Some of our participants did comment on service-user's experiences but staff are not best placed to provide insight into supervised individuals' perspectives and so we have not included them in this article. However, these quotes do point to the limits of remote supervision during the pandemic, particularly for people who rely on face-to-face communication and visual clues about how people are coping. This appears to be all the more important for a group of people more likely to experience mental ill-health, socioeconomic disadvantage and drug misuse.

In relation to remote supervision, participants reported issues around technological inequality, with service-users not having access to adequate internet provision or other technology:

I would like to do video calls more so but not all of the offenders have Wi-Fi, or that facility to be able to do that. So yeah, it's not ideal for that. And so it tends to be phone calls. (Violet PSO Generic)

Subsequently, communication for those individuals was restricted to telephone calls which were seen as problematic in several ways. Telephone calls prevented staff from being able to assess any changes to someone's physical demeanour which may, in turn, reflect a change in lifestyle and/or risk of re-offending:

Had it not been for Covid it wouldn't have escalated because I would have been able to see him face-to-face and there's a big difference between talking to somebody over the

phone and talking to somebody face-to-face. If somebody had been able to get up and leave the interview room, take a few minutes, take a few deep breaths, and come back and you can't do that on a phone call. You have to end the phone call and then you have to ring back, and you can't see somebody's body language and words are very easily misinterpreted, particularly over the phone. (Sally PO Generic)

Remote communication presented two other significant challenges. Firstly, staff said they found it harder to engage people on the caseload:

I don't think you get the same engagement out of them. You don't get the same information. You can't have the same conversations because they're sat at home in their living room with their partner and kids in the same room and you've got to talk about offence related things, and they don't want to have those conversations in front of their family. So, engagement is just not there. (Esther PQIP)

These engagement challenges can be seen to have implications for securing substantive compliance with probation supervision (Robinson and McNeill, 2008) with practitioners appearing to find interpreting motivational postures difficult (Braithwaite, 2003) over the phone. Practitioners also provided examples of how remote communication impeded the ability to build positive relationships with their service-users, particularly those with whom they did not already have an existing established working relationship:

It's really difficult I think, because you don't have that same connection as you do when you meet somebody and you go in to their home and they make you a cup of tea and you sit there and you chat ... and you get a much better sense of a person when you meet face-to-face and I think that our job is very much about building relationships as well and them feeling that they have that relationship with us and that trust with us and that is really hard to establish over the phone, I think. (Vicki PSO VLO)

There was consensus that supervising service-users remotely was inadequate because it impeded people's ability to undertake accurate risk assessments and deliver meaningful interventions. It also hindered the ability to build an effective working relationship which is an important part of the 'essence' of probation practice (Senior et al., 2016).

Empathy helps probation staff develop and maintain good working relationships with clients (Fowler et al., 2017). Empathy can be conveyed vocally, (Richardson and Howcroft, 2006) through a 'vocal smile', (Belt et al., 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999) where voice tone is used to connect with the other caller. However, communicating and thus relating to others in this way can be difficult to master, and where workers are perceived to be doing so in an insincere way, it can result in mistrust and the deterioration of the relationship (Deery and Kinnie, 2002). McNeill (2020) comments that all too often telephone meetings between probation staff and clients during the pandemic were 'stilted, perfunctory and unsatisfying'. While there is no reference here to service-users experiencing insincerity and mistrust, the dissatisfaction could be due to probation practitioners resorting to a neutral tone of voice

over the phone if they feel unable to convey certain emotions such as empathy sincerely through their voice.

Remote communication does, as Dominey et al. (2020) argue, present real challenges in terms of getting the balance right. It was necessary to limit face-to-face contact during the pandemic and it was clear staff rose to the challenge, working to the best of their ability. Yet, probation is predicated on the idea that good working relationships are key to effective practice (Burnett and McNeill, 2005) and practitioners have developed tools which they implement most effectively in a face-to-face environment. Working from home brings difficulties around the use or lack of technology or the physical environment within which supervision is undertaken. It also presents significant challenges in terms of how probation staff respond to a change in the already complex and demanding emotional management which forms part of their everyday work.

Doorstep checks

While telephone and video calls were used for most people on the caseload, those considered high risk were also visited by staff doing 'doorstep checks'. The focus here was, primarily, risk assessment and management rather than engagement or rehabilitation. Staff were generally negative about using doorstep checks as a risk management tool, viewing the strategy as time intensive (with two practitioners attending each visit) and ultimately ineffective:

We still have to see people at home, but we do these doorstep checks, you go and knock on the door, stand two meters back and say hello and how are you doing and, sorry, we can't talk about that on the street and that's it really. That's a doorstep check. Apparently that's meant to be a risk management tool. (Paul PO Generic)

Some of the measures that we employed were just nonsensical. They were basic doorstep contact where you'd go and knock on someone's door, then go and sit in your car and talk to them over the phone. I mean, you know, we just all scratched our heads and thought where does that make any sense? Two cars going in and out, so you'd have one person in one car, the other one in another car. The amount of work that that generated just organising that, it was phenomenal. No consideration given to the impact it had on staff. (Zachary PO Generic)

Concerns about the effectiveness of the doorstep checks, particularly in complex cases where domestic abuse featured, also led to practitioner anxiety about the consequences of a serious further offence. Practitioners were concerned they would be held accountable for failing to gather enough information for risk assessment purposes or a lack of meaningful intervention to reduce the risk of re-offending:

Basically, all they were doing was checking that the person was at the house at that point, but people have felt – it has been really difficult to get information to do formulations with, so they've kind of shied away a bit from having those conversations about some of the childhood trauma experiences and rightly so ... So, all of that, and

people have said it hasn't felt like doing what I should do. Which has been very difficult for officers ... then there was worries around 'Will I be hauled up for this?' (Dionne PO PD Pathway)

There seems to be evidence here that the restrictions on face-to-face contact have led to practitioners 'defaulting to welfare checks and basic forms of surveillance' (McNeill, 2020). An overriding theme in the context of these discussions was the sense that the organisation sought to cover its back at all costs. Thus, participants complained they were being asked to go into the office when they felt it was unsafe or being asked to do activities which were ineffective or counterproductive purely to protect the organisation should something go wrong:

There was a lot of pressure to carry on regardless but carry on doing more regardless as well. So that's taken its toll on everyone. (Zachary PO Generic)

So that makes me really cross because to me that's not about actually managing risk, that's a back covering exercise in case something goes wrong. Somebody kills somebody, god forbid, during lockdown and they want to cover themselves. (Charmaine PO Generic)

There was a real tension between the need to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and doing what participants considered to be effective or quality work. At times, restrictions meant people struggled with the day job because they had to remain physically distanced. Whilst at others they wanted to remain physically distant because the alternatives were ineffective and served only to put people at risk of either catching the virus or doing work which was perceived to be solely about back covering.

Work-life spill over

Working from home posed real challenges for our participants in terms of receiving support from the organisation, from peers and maintaining a manageable work-life balance. In previous research, practitioners described the need to access support from peers in informal ways and staff use these communities of coping to handle the emotional demands of the job (Knight et al., 2016). Whilst some participants told us that, with time, they were able to create ad-hoc and informal methods of online support, working from home largely had a detrimental impact on staff peer support:

My colleagues ... one's off pregnant and one's shielding so I'm on my own and you don't just Teams call somebody to say oh, I've just had a really difficult supervision session whereas in the past we will have probably gone and sat in someone's room, had a brew and a chat about it. So, yeah. It's difficult. (Toby SPO Generic)

The thing that I missed the most was the unquantifiable exchanges that you have with your colleagues all the time who've just heard you have a difficult phone call or a

difficult exchange and you can release the pressure of that ... it took me a long while to realise how important that was and how hard it was to work without it – that sort of glue or whatever it was that was helping us manage that has gone and it's made it much more important for us to acknowledge the emotional impact of the work. I think we're at a point where we all now can recognise the emotional impact more because we're not having it automatically ameliorated in any way by our colleagues around us. (Brianna SPO Generic)

So, whilst the emotional demands and 'emotional dirty work' of practice became more apparent to practitioners and managers due to the lack of informal support, participants described the difficulties of feeling unable to properly support staff during the pandemic:

I could have cried for her because you could see she was on the brink of collapse, the brink of burnout and she was so negative and she snapped back when you asked her a question and all I wanted to do was reach out the screen and give her a big hug because I thought I know exactly how you're feeling there, just completely overworked, completely burnt out. (Janice PO Trainer)

As discussed above, probation staff already experience work-life spill over and many of the issues raised in Westaby et al. (2016) appear to have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Notwithstanding the practical problems of not having the right equipment, participants said they found difficulty in drawing a line between work and home life with many working longer hours and having to juggle family commitments simultaneously. This time-based conflict was common amongst our participants:

You find yourself in this place that isn't attractive anymore ... So the whole thing rolls in to one. As much as you'd like to be able to separate – When you're in the office, you know, you go in at 9 o'clock in the morning, you come out at 5 or 6 o'clock, you get home, you take your clothes off, you shower and you're at home. That isn't the case now. (Kiara SPO Victims Unit)

So, I am now working longer. Whereas when I was in the office I wouldn't mind staying longer because there at least I know when it's done it's done and I'm not taking it back home with me. But now it's home with me, so I am now having to come up with even more rituals to separate work from home when I'm at home. There is nobody to tell me to turn off my computer, so I have to manage myself. That is the disadvantage. (Charmaine PO Generic)

The content of the work posed real challenges for people resulting in strain-based conflict. The difficulties of working with people convicted of certain offences were particularly acute in the home environment and for participants with children at home. Several participants talked about having to cope with aggressive service-users being abusive to them on the phone and how this was difficult to deal with when in one's private home:

Sitting in a dining room where the kids were in and out. I was trying to go into the conservatory to take phone calls, people ranting down the phone at me sometimes if it was offenders losing the plot. It was rather difficult. (Zachary PO Generic)

There's been a lot more inappropriateness since COVID and I know that just from colleagues as well ... I think people (service-users) are struggling more and they've now got our numbers and even when they know we're not there will ring and leave messages, and some are inappropriate. I just had a week off and to be honest Monday morning it was like what's going to be on my phone? (Gabrielle PO Generic)

Moreover, participants talked about the difficulties of discussing sensitive and emotive issues from one's own home and it seemed to us those participants were describing the spill over of the 'emotional dirty work' they do:

People are doing this job – I keep going on about, you know, people are talking to high-risk sex offenders probably with the sound of their child playing in the room next door or some people in their child's bedroom or in their bedroom, you know. (Paige SPO Generic)

It's the appropriateness of it, isn't it? And I think that is one of the things that was missed at the beginning of this pandemic. If you can work from home then work from home, so we physically can work from home – but having a detailed MAPPA meeting when you're talking about somebody's sexual offending isn't appropriate when you've got children around. I think that is something that the service failed to acknowledge, that actually the nature of our work is not child friendly, is it. We don't have children coming to the office for a very good reason. And my kitchen is now my office, and on top of that my husband also works for the service, he works with offenders, so we are both working in the kitchen, and we have all that juggle going on as well. (Vicki PSO VLO)

I was trying to home school my little boy, but I couldn't have him in the house doing the work that I do. Sometimes you need to talk about that, you know. I'm sat in my house typing about, you know, and thinking about the work that I do and it's like, er, no, I can't, I can't do that. It's separating, getting your head out of somebody who's serially raped kids, let's say kids in their family home, intergenerationally and a ten-year old's running around. (Kian PO Trainer)

There is clearly a gendered dimension to this finding which is particularly pertinent in a service which has become increasingly feminised in recent years (Annison, 2007), where women are more likely to be probation officers but also more likely to be responsible for childcare responsibilities (European Parliament, 2020). We asked our participants about how they coped with some of these emotional pressures. Some staff said they checked in regularly with their manager, but this seemed heavily contingent on their perception of their SPO and the relationship they had with them:

I think what I find really beneficial is my manager's going through similar things as myself at the minute with everything with children so what I talk to her about, she's like, oh yeah, I get it, let's try this and try that and she's very flexible and I think the flexible working has really helped. So often for example we might not work in the morning but then we might both be on at seven or eight o'clock at night and then we might have a chat then about what's happened. (Brendan PO Prison)

Others described how they would try to demarcate the work from their personal lives by moving away from or changing their workspace or engaging in exercise.

When I'm working, I always put the big lights on in the room and have a light on over here, but when I'm finished work, I put the little side lights on and change the lighting in the room and I close my laptop and turn everything off, then that is my space then. Because I'm in my living room. (Violet PSO Generic)

I'm not someone who takes part in exercise, but you have to consciously do things outside of your work as well, to try and take time for yourself. It really helps to have a supportive family as well and you understand a little bit about what it's like. (Ursula SPO Generic)

I don't like this job in my front room, so I have to try and change things around as soon as I finish work. (Karen PSO VLO)

Overall, our conversations with participants highlighted the additional emotional burdens and intrusions into home life that remote working introduced to an already 'relentless' (Phillips et al., 2016) job. In particular, working from home brought to light the 'emotional dirty work' (McMurray and Ward, 2014) probation officers undertake as a matter of course but, normally, from the relative safety of a probation office or setting that is away from home.

Discussion and conclusion

This article contributes to our understanding of probation practice during the pandemic, paying particular attention to probation practitioner's wellbeing. The pressures associated with probation work appeared to intensify when conducted from the home perhaps because it threatens the preferred social orders (see McMurray and Ward, 2014). In the main, our participants were negative about the impact of the pandemic on their work, and this stemmed from the simple fact of having to work from home. This will have been experienced by many, regardless of their occupation. However, the nature of the job caused specific issues for our participants. The pandemic brought to the fore the emotional challenges of the job, with the pressures of working from home and restricted access to traditional coping methods – especially informal communities of coping – being particularly difficult. Probation work can be relentless, especially when working with a caseload of people who pose a high risk of harm (Phillips et al., 2016).

We can view our findings through the model posed by Senior et al. (2016) in their effort to capture the 'essence of probation'. Here, probation is seen to operate across and through a series of different worlds (social welfare, treatment, correctional and the community) all of which have been victims of the pandemic. Practitioners need to act as 'advocates' in order to support desistance (McNeill, 2009), but their ability to open doors to opportunities or provide bridges for people on probation has been seriously compromised over the past 15 months. Our participants clearly felt frustration and anxiety at bearing the responsibility for managing risk and providing meaningful intervention within a landscape devoid of the services and resources they normally draw upon.

It is interesting, although not surprising, to note that many of our participants focused on the impact of the pandemic on their ability to work relationally with people on probation. Practitioners bemoaned the almost sole focus on the management of risk alongside the absence of opportunity to engage in the supportive and transformational work from which they normally derive satisfaction. That participants continued to espouse a belief in the ability of people to change in spite of a global pandemic is telling in terms of the enduring underpinning belief that probation staff have in people's ability to change (Ainslie, 2021; Annison et al., 2008). It appears the pandemic has squeezed their ability to do what makes sense to them as a probation practitioner, what they are good at, and where they get support for the challenges of the role. Further to this it has made porous the boundary between work and home, a boundary which is important for wellbeing and managing the emotional dirty work they perform. The juxtaposition of children playing in the home whilst probation workers talk about serious offences makes visible the taint, additional stress, and practical difficulties of working in probation from one's living room.

We spoke to people from a range of settings (courts, APs, victim liaison officers), but these main themes were mainly identified in interviews with people who held generic caseloads. For example, participants in APs experienced different challenges (such as a lack of PPE, reduced capacity or limited access to activities and resources for residents) but we did not have a sufficiently large sample to draw out these themes – this is an area for future exploration and could be usefully compared to some experiences emerging from pandemic-related research in prisons. Another area which needs capturing and documenting is the experience of people under probation supervision. Our participants' comments here suggest that people on probation are likely to have experienced supervision in the pandemic positively or negatively (for example, one participant said that service-users had more control over their appointments as they could choose to answer the phone, but one could also point to the more surveillant nature of the EDM such as doorstep visits and video calls which intrude into people's homes). Finally, there is insufficient space to consider the gendered dimension to our findings, but this is certainly in need of deeper analysis especially because of the increasingly feminised nature of the service should a longer term shift to home working occur in probation.

The pandemic brought about sudden and unforeseen changes to probation practice, as it did for other workers in people-facing roles. There has been much talk

about whether the pandemic will create a 'new normal' with greater opportunities and, perhaps, pressure to work from home and work more flexibly. Such a way of working will be seen positively by some probation staff and there were some countervailing themes to those discussed above (for example, one participant liked working from home because she saw herself as unsociable whilst others enjoyed not having a lengthy commute). Yet, as stated above, the general sense was that the pandemic brought to the fore the already difficult nature of the job. As the country and the Probation Service recovers there is the risk that the conditions endured during the pandemic become a benchmark for how bad things can be, thus normalising the emotional pressures which probation work entails. The unification of probation is likely to lead to changes to the probation estate and further encouragement of 'agile working' (McDermott, 2016) and this needs to be considered as staff are relocated due to this process. Moreover, the findings demonstrate the need for good staff supervision, systems of formal and informal support and established boundaries between work and home. Ultimately then we need to remember that just because staff have shown that they *can* do probation work from their living rooms, it comes with a significant cost that needs to be acknowledged and the consequences explored further.

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ORCID iDs

Jake Phillips  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7606-6423>

Chalen Westaby  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6459-4675>

Sam Ainslie  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2908-9910>

Andrew Fowler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0164-9915>

Notes

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. PO denotes Probation Officer, PSO is Probation Services Officer, SPO is Senior Probation Officer and PQIP is a trainee. The third word here refers to the participant's main role or setting of work. Most of these are self-explanatory but 'generic' is someone who manages a caseload of people on probation in the community while VLO is a victim liaison officer and PD Pathway is someone who works primarily with people on the offender personality disorder pathway.
2. Workbooks are a tool that are used to structure and guide one-to-one interventions with service users.

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