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# An Evaluation of the Implementation of Reflective Practice Supervision Standards in the National Probation Service



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## Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from a study which explores the implementation of the Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) in the National Probation Service. The RPSS is a new approach to supervising staff which asks Senior Probation Officers (SPO) to provide reflective supervisions and practice observations to front-line practitioners. Utilising a mixed methods research design combining a survey with SPOs and front-line practitioners the study sheds light on probation staff experiences of supervision (under the new model as well as prior to its implementation) and SPOs' experiences of the training and implementing the model.

Overall, we find that probation staff are supportive of the ethos and underpinning principles of the RPSS. Staff who have been able to implement the model said that supervising in this way can support front-line practitioner's well-being, improve practice and that having a framework to stipulate the amount and type of supervision was a positive move. The training was seen very positively by SPOs who valued the opportunity to learn new techniques and meet other SPOs – something that they often struggle with in their day to day working lives. Observations of practice were experienced positively by SPOs and practitioners.

However, participants raised some important barriers to implementation, the most notable being a lack of time. Other barriers to implementation include a perceived tension between the managerial role of the SPO and the developmental approach adopted as part of the RPSS. SPOs also reported that because front-line staff had not had the training it was difficult to conduct reflective supervisions with them in some cases. The pandemic has impacted on the ability of staff to fully implement the model but these barriers are relevant nevertheless.

The findings from the study give rise to a number of recommendations:

- Addressing SPO workload and ensuring the time is available to attend the training and implement the framework consistently is paramount.
- Increased understanding of the emotional labour of SPOs – the research shows that SPOs have to perform high levels of emotional labour which takes its toll emotionally.
- SPOs need more effective support through connection with peers, supportive line management supervision as well as wider wellbeing initiatives – this is important in terms of avoiding the burnout of SPOs.
- Addressing ongoing pressures relating to bureaucratic and mechanistic tasks perceived to offer protection in the face of SFOs or other serious incidents
- The lack of a whole organisation approach – whole systems approach – which was one of the cornerstones of the evaluation of the Reflective Supervision Model and SEEDS1 needs addressing through both the practitioner element of the SEEDS2 roll out but also by providing those who manage to SPOs to supervise in accordance with the standards.

- Communication and relevant training provided to all staff at the point of induction about the process alongside continuous availability of training and refresher events at regular periods to support staff changing roles. This is particularly relevant given unification. Refresher training and ongoing roll-out is important. This should be prioritised for new staff and those joining the Service from CRCs following unification. This will also address the barriers to implementation which have resulted from the pandemic. Refresher training needs provide a review of content but also act as an opportunity to share good practice and create communities of practice amongst SPOs.
- There is a need for consideration about how RPSS 'fits' with different working contexts/specialisms such as courts, APs and programmes.
- The SPO role – which is under-researched – is vast and there is a need for some clarification around what the Service wants from SPOs. There is scope for thinking about introducing a 'senior practitioner role' which has a more developmental focus than the current SPO role which leaves SPOs trying to fulfil multiple roles simultaneously. This would help with ameliorating tensions which exists within the role.
- If implemented fully the RPSS has the potential to reduce the amount of direct support that staff need from SPOs: this needs to be communicated more clearly to both SPOs and practitioners. However, it also needs to occur alongside a cultural shift away from back covering and blaming to professionalism, autonomy and empowerment. SEEDS2 can provide the framework for this but a whole systems approach is needed to embed it.

*[Staff supervision is] a craft and you have to be given the space and the opportunity and the time to learn your craft (Eugene, SPO)*

## **1. Introduction**

This report presents the findings from a mixed methods study which explored the implementation of a new model for supervision in the National Probation Service. The supervision model (originally called the Supervision and Line Management Framework but changed to Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) in 2021) forms part of a broader policy programme in the National Probation Service called SEEDS2. SEEDS2 is an attempt to build on the learning from the original Skills for Effective Engagement and Development and Staff Supervision (SEEDS) programme which, in turn, was part of the Offender Engagement Programme. Although the SEEDS programme was never fully evaluated or implemented (in part due to the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms) it was received positively by staff, especially because of the focus on skills (Rex and Hosking, 2013; Sorsby et al., 2013, 2017).

Although the evidence on the emotional impact of working in probation is still emerging, we have found – in previous research – that probation workers find the work relentless in terms of the pressures it places on them (Phillips et al., 2016). We also found that there is a considerable risk of work-family conflict and work-life spillover (Westaby et al., 2016) and that probation staff have to perform a high level of surface acting as part of their job (Westaby et al., 2019). Surface acting – a concept taken from the literature on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) – has been linked to higher levels of burnout amongst workers in other criminal justice institutions (such as the prison (Nylander et al., 2011) and the police (Adams and Mastracci, 2020; Black and Lumsden, 2020; Schaible and Six, 2016) and other jurisdictions (e.g. the US). Staff, therefore, need the support to deal with the consequences of having to perform a high degree of emotional labour to achieve the goals of their job. Moreover, Ramsden et al. (2016) have argued that probation work can leave probation staff feeling unable to reflect on their practice and suggest that the emotional needs of staff should be actively supported in order to help staff work effectively with their clients. Good quality supervision can help to ameliorate many of these work pressures and it is in this context that SEEDS2 was developed by the Effective Practice Team in the National Probation Service (NPS).

Although staff have long been supervised in probation, very little research has sought to understand what ‘good’ staff supervision looks like and how it can support people. Again, in previous research, we found a high level of support for the provision of clinical supervision by staff working on the Offender Personality Disorder Programme. The OPD Pathway makes use of reflective practice sessions whereby staff meet – voluntarily – ‘to discuss team or individual issues; consider their emotional reactions, thoughts and ways in which they could adapt; and develop their clinical practice’ (Webster et al., 2020). Importantly, Webster et al (2020: 290) suggest that reflective practice is a useful endeavour for people working in probation:



the findings of the current study suggest that it is both useful and within the capacity of reflective practice sessions to provide a forum to offload, share and develop practice, process individual emotions relating to working with offenders, relieve pressures associated with work and support staff development and well-being.

Here, Webster et al (2020) are describing action learning sets used in the Offender Personality Disordered (OPD) Pathway which were part of the original SEEDS programme in 2010. SEEDS2, which began in 2018, was developed by the Effective Probation Practice team in the National Probation Service and is intended to reintroduce the centrality of service-user engagement and upskilling probation staff. Whereas the initial SEEDS framework was aimed predominantly at practitioners working within community teams, the revised programme has been expanded to include all areas of operations including court work, victim work, approved premises, prisons and sexual offending programme delivery.

In particular, there is a focus on staff supervision and support with the RPSS having an explicit aim to support staff with the emotional toll that working in probation can take. As part of this programme Senior Probation Officers (SPO) were offered training on a new way of supervising staff which is more structured, reflective and developmental than previous approaches to staff supervision within the NPS. The new framework asks SPOs to provide 6 reflective practice sessions per year, 2 SPDR sessions and undertake observations of practice followed by a reflective discussion and provision of developmental feedback. There is an explicit focus on supervision sessions which explore a smaller number of cases in depth – to discuss the overall management of the case as well as an opportunity for reflection – rather than looking at every case from a more managerial perspective. The training for SPOs took place over three days (with around three weeks between each day) and focused on the supervision framework as well as a series of techniques that they could use to support their staff.<sup>1</sup> This represents a significant shift in practice and so in order to understand how this new supervision programme has been implemented and received we were asked to conduct a piece of research to explore this in depth. The aims of this research, then, are:

- To understand how SPOs experienced the training and what the impact of this was on their supervisory practice;
- To understand how practitioners have experienced the new model of supervision;
- To understand whether the new model has had an impact on staff well-being and their ability to work with people on probation effectively and safely.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Research design and recruitment**

We adopted a mixed methods approach to the research in order to obtain a breadth of views as well as data which sheds light on peoples' individual experiences. A mixed methods

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<sup>1</sup> It is not necessary to go into depth on the training but a copy of the training manual can be requested from staff in EPSIG if required.

design allows for multiple experiences to be captured and represented (Heap and Waters, 2018). We began the study with a survey which asked SPOs and practitioners (probation officer, probation services officers and trainees) about their experiences of supervision, the new framework and, for SPOs, the training they had undertaken. We also included questions around emotional labour, burnout/staff well-being and professional curiosity: these data are not included in this report but will be published elsewhere. After receiving ethical approval and Her Majesty Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Council (NRC) permission, the survey was administered through Qualtrics with an email being sent to all staff by the research team inviting people to respond. The survey was open for four weeks in March 2020 with one reminder sent after the first week at which point the coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic led to data collection being paused and so no further reminders were sent.

The survey asked respondents if they would be willing to be interviewed as part of the research and we invited a random selection of volunteers to interview in order to explore their experiences in greater depth. The interviews were conducted remotely using telephone or videoconferencing technology and took place in early 2021. The interviews focused on people's experiences of supervision prior to and after the implementation of the RPSS as well as broader questions about emotional labour and professional curiosity.

## 2.2. Sample

We received a response from 1509 practitioners and 218 SPOs. A breakdown of the sample for each group is provided in Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1: Breakdown of practitioner survey respondents by gender, role and time in service*

<b>Total</b>		<b>1509</b>
<b>Role</b>	PO	40.2% (n=557)
	PSO	26.6% (n=360)
	PQIP	17.7% (n=246)
	Other	16.1% (n=224)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	25% (n=285)
	Female	72.3% (n=836)
	Prefer not to say/other	2.7% (n=31)
<b>Time in service (mean, years)</b>		10.74 (SD = 9.19)

*Table 2: Breakdown of SPO survey respondents by gender, role, time in service, time as SPO and number of staff supervising*

<b>Total</b>		<b>218</b>
<b>Role</b>	Generic	39.2% (n=82)
	Specialist	60.8% (n=127)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	27% (n=38)
	Female	67% (n=93)
<b>Time in service (mean, years)</b>		19.5 (SD = 6.45)
<b>Time as SPO (mean, years)</b>		6.77 (SD = 6.38)
<b>Number of staff supervising (mean)</b>		10.72 (SD = 4.22)

The survey sample for both SPOs and practitioners broadly reflects the demographics of NPS staff in terms of gender and ethnicity. There is an over-representation of trainees (PQIP) as well as SPOs who worked in specialist roles: this should be borne in mind interpreting the findings from the practitioner survey. We interviewed 61 people. 33 of those were front-line practitioners and 28 were SPOs or managers. Again, the gender breakdown of the interview sample reflected the gender makeup of the workforce more broadly.

### **2.3. Analysis**

The survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics with a focus on experiences of the training and supervision. More detailed statistical analysis will be conducted in due course for publication in academic journals. Interview data were conducted thematically using four sensitising concepts: perceptions and experiences of supervision; experiences of the SPO training; experiences of implementing the RPSS and perceptions of SEEDS2 and RPSS. This resulted in the identification of four themes which are discussed in depth, below.

Before proceeding to the findings it is worth providing a note about the implications of the coronavirus pandemic on this study. The survey was sent to participants in the first week of March 2020, just two weeks before the UK went into lockdown and the NPS implemented an Exceptional Delivery Model. This meant we were asked to pause data collection. Thus, the interviews – which were supposed to take place shortly after the survey had closed – were undertaken in January – March 2021. There is, then a gap between the survey data and the interview data which may explain any discrepancies. More fundamentally, the pandemic had a severe impact on the rollout of the RPSS as it interrupted training that was already underway, meant new SPOs could not access the training and delayed the implementation of the next phase of training which was targeted at front-line practitioners.

In the following sections we present the findings from the research. These findings are split into the following themes: training, implementing the RPSS, experiences of observations, and experiences of supervision. In March 2021 we provided an interim report of the findings

which focused primarily on the survey data. In this report we have deliberately chosen to incorporate a substantial amount of interview data to give our participants a clear voice.

### **3. Experiences of the SPO training**

The SEEDS2 training for SPOs was rolled out in April 2019. The training is a three-day course that is mandatory for all SPOs and covers material to assist SPOs in supervising probation staff under the RPSS. The three days are spread out over nine weeks with around a three-week gap in between each day. This was purposefully incorporated into the training to allow SPOs to try out some of the learning from the training and feedback at the following session.

Each day of training has a particular focus. Day 1 covers the foundations of reflective supervision. Day 2 focuses on facilitating observations and review sessions and Day 3 looks at the stages of development and working with feelings. The training is delivered by two trainers, a Learning and Development Trainer who works centrally, and an SPO trainer who were recruited from various divisions around England and Wales. This balance of SPO and staff with a learning and development role was seen positively by SPOs:

[It] was good where you did have somebody from the training department and then somebody that was operational manager...because people managers are asking questions about the particulars and operations and stuff like that. So, you need to be not just confident in what you're delivering, SEEDS2 delivery, it's more being the wider experience of the job. (Rhonda SPO Generic)<sup>2</sup>

As suggested by Rhonda above, the aim of having two trainers with different experience was to ensure that a fully qualified trainer would deliver the sessions, as well as an SPO with personal insight into the supervision of probation staff in the field. However, one national trainer did comment on the dynamic between both themselves and the SPO trainer and also with the other SPOs in a training session, which they found challenging:

We had a senior probation officer and myself co-delivering. I found the whole dynamic of it so interesting because, you know, I would try to put forward some points from a probation officer perspective so that they would be thinking about that as part of their learning and I was surprised at how cynical and harsh I think a lot of SPOs were in terms of, well, you know, we've got a job to do and we have to do it, you've just got to get on with it type thing. Even my co, the person that I was co-delivering with who I got on really well with, she's a lovely lady, even she was like, well, yeah, we know that's not going to happen don't we and I'm like, really? Are you supposed to be saying that?! (Thea PO Trainer)

Therefore, in this case having personal experience of being an SPO seems to have been problematic in some situations. Nevertheless, the SPO trainers had a strong belief in the value of the training:

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<sup>2</sup> All names used in the report are pseudonyms to protect the identity of our participants.

No, the range of materials and the way it was presented were really good and I think that people would value the fact that there was all those kinds of big manuals that were produced as well. We don't often get given anything, any kind of tools, so we had a physical manual to refer back to with all the worksheets. It was great. Everything was there, it was like a full package, like you would expect to get if you were doing intervention work with a service user, so that was great. (Ursula SPO Generic)

Here we see Ursula commenting positively on a variety of aspects of the training and doing so from the perspective of a current SPO. During the interviews, both trainers and SPOs, often raised the fact that SPOs were being provided with the training before ACOS and POs/PSOs.

The other thing I would say is why they delivered - I know why they delivered SEEDS to managers first and they did talk about the top-down approach, but I think when they did that they massively missed - I don't know if they deliberately did it or what but why did they not deliver it to ACOs? (Toby SPO Generic)

I remember there being questions in the training like why are we getting this first? The people we're going to be doing this to have got no concept of whether we're doing this to them and the people above us don't do this to us, so it felt like a - I mean you have to start somewhere but it felt like a peculiar place to start I think but the SPO job is a peculiar job! (Eugene SPO generic)

There was some concern about the fact that front-line staff may not have the necessary knowledge or understanding of the RPSS and the SPOs role within that (this is discussed in more detail, below). Therefore, not only are SPOs expected to manage according to the RPSS but also introduce that change to staff who have either no or limited prior knowledge or understanding of either the RPSS itself, the management techniques they are required to introduce or the underpinning ethos of the SEEDS2 programme.

### **3.1. Implementing the training**

Those implementing the training were positive about the training and felt that the rollout went well. As Grace states:

I feel the rollout went well...I do think that the rollout of SEEDS and the course content and what it was promoting was received really well. (Grace SPO Approved Premises)

In terms of SPO attitudes towards the training, the survey data suggest that they were generally positive about the training with over two thirds of the respondents believing that the training either fully met its aims or met the majority of its aims (Figure 1).

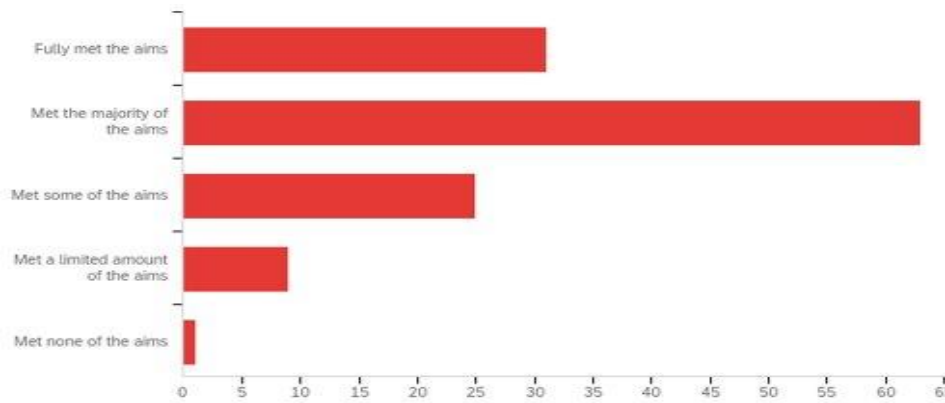


Figure 1: Did the training meet its aims?

As Kian, one of the trainers, comments, 'you can see nearly all of the SPOs wanted to do it. They wanted it to be person centred. They wanted their supervision with people to be person centred.' The trainers also described the optimism shown by SPOs undertaking the training:

The newer SPOs were quite hungry for guidance and, yeah, this is great, brilliant, I've got something to work towards now and I think that was the difference. (Thea PO Trainer)

Here we see reference made to newer SPOs and the benefits they gained from undertaking the training. This is echoed by a new SPO, Sutton:

After I'd been appointed in April I almost immediately went on to the SEEDS training so I felt quite lucky that before I even had any probation officers to manage I was able to go through the SEEDS training. (Sutton SPO Generic)

There were also SPOs who recalled the first SEEDS training and were positive about the roll out of SEEDS2 given how they felt about their initial experiences of the roll out of the original SEEDS and the accompanying training.

Well, I thought SEEDS was great...it is really different. You never tell your group what to do, you ask questions, and you get them to do the work which was fantastic and actually a much easier way to work. (Paige SPO Generic)

In [location]...we've all had quite a lot of SEEDS training before and we even got to the point where we were doing reflective supervision with offender managers when I was a probation officer so a lot of it wasn't really new for me. That doesn't mean I didn't learn anything because I did. (Amber SPO Generic)

There was a feeling that the SEEDS2 training was relevant and timely even where supervision of probation staff was already being conducted in the manner expected by the RPSS.

While SPOs were generally positive about being required to undertake the training, there were a few who had undertaken the first SEEDS training and were sceptical in terms of the topics covered by the new SEEDS2 training.

I remember being sat in a room with a load of other people and that's - I think as with a lot of initiatives it felt like it (SEEDS) was well intentioned but poorly delivered. (Eugene SPO Generic)

This attitude towards the training could also be due the fact that not long after the roll out of the first iteration of SEEDS, Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) reforms were put in place resulting in the putting to one side of the SEEDS initiative. As a trainer, Janice, states:

So when it comes to their SEEDS2 I think there was many - some of the more older, let's say jaded SPOs were like, yeah, don't matter, it will go in a couple of months, what's the point?... a lot of them were like I'll have a go, but it won't work, and it doesn't matter, it will die out anyways because things always do...Yeah. To be fair that belief it will all go away, that was a smaller percentage. Smaller percentage. I would say maybe 30%. (Janice PO Trainer)

Furthermore, given the enormous changes brought about by TR, and more recently the plans and implementation for reunification this year, probation staff may also be suffering even more from 'initiative confusion' and 'change fatigue' (Robinson and Burnett, 2007: 318). It also seemed that the organisational culture within different divisions and SPO experiences through training and whilst in practice very much determined how SPOs reacted to the training.

It was different in different places. So culturally very different. Certain areas of the [region] were particularly I found quite dismissive of the model going, 'oh, we've done this before, it will get ignored, we've got so much to do, this isn't how probation is meant to work, we just tell people what to do.' Whereas in other parts of the country, in the [other region] for example a lot of them had just had a really serious SFO, it was very different. It was trying to embrace it, wanting to embrace it but then there was a lot of age difference between the SPOs, more social work orientated trained people and more people that were trained kind of like me but at the back end of it if that makes sense, so culturally very different. Some places, depending on the culture of the area, some places were really up for it, other places were quite dismissive. (Ursula SPO Generic)

On the whole both those delivering and receiving the training were very positive about it and how it was delivered. The trainers were keen to work in pairs with a Learning and Development Trainer and a SPO and understood why this had been decided. They also had a very strong belief in the content of the training and the benefits it could bring SPOs and the staff they supervised. Newly appointed SPOs valued being given training, and while more experienced SPOs were also in the main positive, there was some scepticism given previous experiences of SEEDS1 and more general changes to the service. Furthermore, there

seemed to be a slight lack of buy-in from staff pointing to the need to consider how training might be received and being prepared for different responses from SPOs.

### **3.1. The structure of the training**

One clear theme in the interviews was SPOs discussing – positively – the opportunity to get together with other middle managers to discuss their practice that arose as a result of the training and it seemed that spreading the training over three days supported the creation of a community of practice, although this did not always persist once the training was complete:

The three days were full of opportunities to sit down and reflect upon actual practice in a kind of safe environment. We don't get that many opportunities as a kind of cross group of SPOs to really entertain and knock those ideas around, so I really enjoyed the days training. (Frank SPO Sex Offender Unit)

I thought the plus side was that we had a mix of SPOs in the room so it wasn't just the office and the SPOs that you work with so you came with a mix of experience, range of experience of people coming, particularly people who had been around when SEEDS was originally out and different areas of work as well, so it wasn't just SPOs in operations, it was like SPOs from APs and stuff, so different people bringing different scenarios and queries really I suppose about how they were going to apply that. That was good. (Maia SPO Generic)

SPOs had a lot to say about the fact that the training was spread over three days. There were some limited positive remarks about the length of the training such as the comment made by Sutton, a Generic SPO, who states, 'I liked it. Even though it was a three-day training, I thought it did really well to look at what the ideal way of working is and break down what SEEDS was about.' However, several observations were made about the fact that the training was too long:

So my experience of the training itself was it didn't need to be three days. I felt it could have got the point across much quicker and three days is a lot of time for a manager. So I just think that was unhelpful and actually put a lot of people off. (Orla SPO PD Pathways)

The trainer was very laid back and sometimes there wasn't enough material for the whole day which, you know, most people, most SPOs and stuff they're thinking oh well, it's an extra hour, I can do this, I can do that sort of thing so, yeah. You could have probably done it in two days I think. (Marlene SPO Generic)

In both examples the challenges of having to complete all their work as an SPO is playing on the participant's minds. There is a clear sense that while they appreciate being invested in and time given to provide them with training, they find it difficult to take time out of their normal work role to undertake the training.



There were also SPOs who spoke negatively about the length of the training and their belief that they already had experience of supervising probation staff in line with the RPSS.

It felt very much like this is what we do anyway and you're telling me all of this stuff again? I think...it was three days too many. It just didn't need to be as long as it was, frankly. (Eugene SPO Generic)

I think it was three days training. That felt too much for me but that may have been because I'd got such prior knowledge of it [being an implementor of initial SEEDS1 training]...Now, there were some managers who have been SPOs for absolutely years who have been trained and something that they'd already done 15 years ago and did three days training which as an SPO taking you out for three days felt massive, you know. It's a difficult balance because you can't assume that one someone did 15 years ago who've retained and remembered and everyone needs different kinds of levels, but three days felt too much to be fair. (Brianna SPO Generic)

Both Eugene and Brianna link the length of the training with the fact that they felt they already knew how to supervise in the ways advocated at the training. Other SPOs also commented on this:

I'm just going to speak for myself, it didn't give me anything that I hadn't had or hadn't used or hadn't utilised or hadn't thought of in my 30 years of being in the probation service. So there was nothing new coming at me so for me this whole shebang around SEEDs, and there are a lot of people in my age group and my experience of work thinking what's SEEDs? What's that? When they actually broke it down it what we were already doing anyway. So for me there was a sort of disconnect. It seemed to be aimed at really new officers but didn't really take account seasoned officers. (Kiara SPO Victims Unit)

Having said that a couple of SPOs did point out that although they felt they already were experienced at undertaking supervision in a similar way to RPSS, they still learnt something:

I do remember it quite well because it was a good event for reinforcing stuff that I think - validating the way that I think I work anyway and giving space in theory to do that work. (Demi SPO Prison)

A further positive for both trainers and some SPOs was the gap between the training days:

the idea was is there was reflection between them which is much the way that they set out the SEEDs training and I really enjoyed that. I went into it completely sceptical, probably with those views that a lot of people do that it's not going to be doable but actually was pretty much converted after day one in terms of the ethos and the sort of message that SEEDs is trying to deliver. (Toby SPO Generic)

I liked the bit about having the time in between to take away and apply the learning after each session rather than having it three days solid for instance. I think most people would give it a bash because we had about a month, I think it

was about a month in between which one, I can't remember how long but it was a chunk of time where we were able to do that. (Maia SPO Generic)

SPOs appreciated being given the time to use some of the models and techniques taught during the training and then returning to the next training day and being able to feedback and reflect on their experience.

The trainers also talked about how SPOs doing the training were encouraged to form electronic groups to discuss techniques and reflect on practice in between training days. Given the isolation often felt by SPOs as a middle manager, these groups or as Maryam suggests, 'communities of practice have the potential to provide an informal network for SPOs to discuss their practice.

You could tell it was really well thought out and the kind of consideration of the time in between to give people time to go back and learn it and the little, what did they call them? Communities of practice and stuff. I know they set up some WhatsApp groups or little email groups. Yeah. More than most other courses it felt. I could see the thread all the way through it I would say. (Maryam PO Trainer)

However, once the training was complete SPOs went back to their usual work role leaving little time for these communities of practice to continue. As Nadia suggests:

Although you set off with great intent, you know, there was some group work and you make those little pods and you go and support each other but then the business, you know, you go back to work. (Nadia SPO PQIP/NQOs)

In spite of some of these negative comments, SPOs were positive about training and were pleased that they had been given the opportunity to get together to receive training and consider their practice with peers. There was the impression that SPOs are generally quite isolated and so savoured spending time with other SPOs. However, despite the appreciation that time was being invested in them, SPOs felt conflicted in terms of the amount of time they were required to spend on the training and thus not being available to supervise frontline probation staff. They therefore believed that the training was too long, and often this was felt to be the case because SPOs believed they were already supervising their staff in accordance with the RPSS. However, the importance of being reminded of techniques as well as providing validation where an SPO was already supervising staff that way. While there was criticism by some SPOs of the length of the training, there was agreement that the gap between training days was useful. However, it seemed in some cases that such communities of practice did not develop with the business of being a middle manager taking precedence once training was complete.

### **3.2. Implementing concepts from the training**

The survey revealed (Figure 2) that SPOs found the quick fix v developmental supervision topic most relevant in relation to their day-to-day practice, followed closely by observing practice engagement skills and the reflective learning cycle.

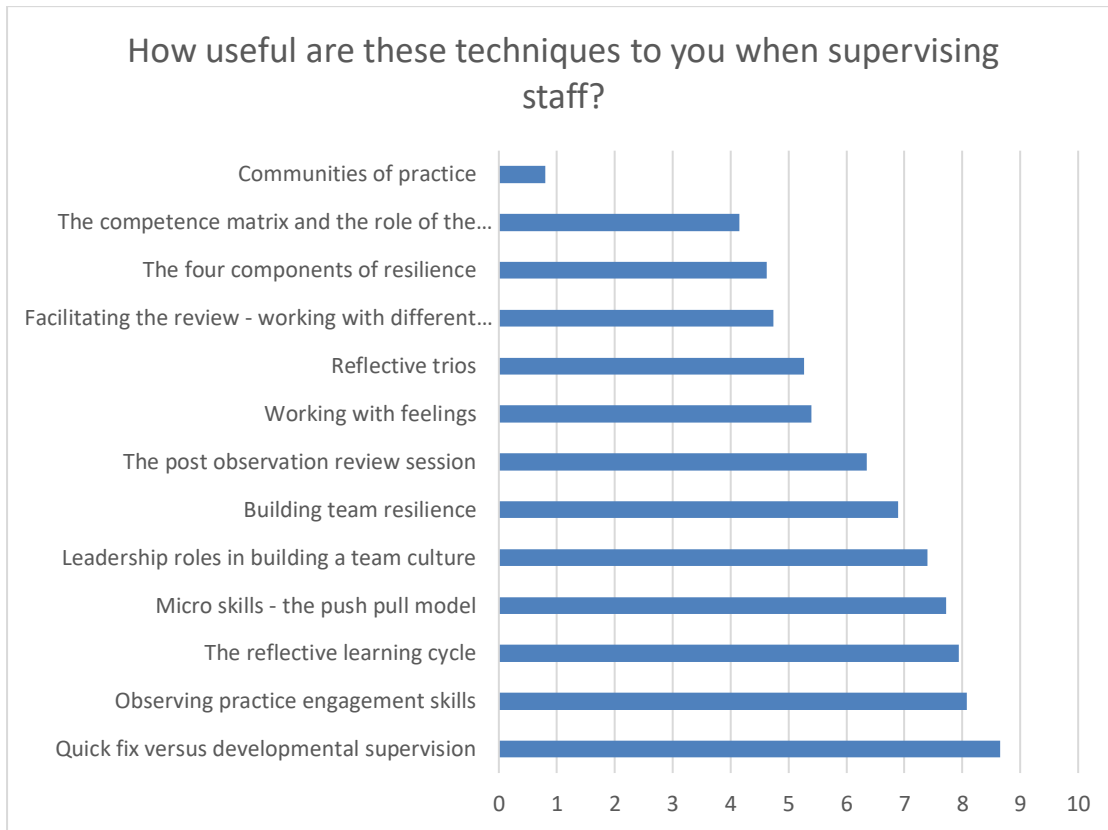


Figure 2: How useful are the techniques to you when supervising staff?

Our interview data supports the findings presented in Figure 1, with SPOs commenting positively about the top three scoring topics:

it's about, well, what do you think? What do you think you should do? What have you tried so far? What do you think you could tap in to? Who do you need to talk to? And putting it back to them and developing their skills and their confidence in their decision making as well...So I found that the reflective side of things was about empowerment and developing those skills of the practitioners...So there was that side then of how do we deal with all the other quick fixes that they want, because you haven't got all the time in the world to do this with every single case, but you have those conversations outside of supervision anyway. (Zara Senior Manager)

I enjoyed the training, I thought it was really relevant, I was excited about bringing it back to the prison and using it, particularly direct observation, I think that's fantastic. I think there wasn't enough of that previously and it was very much you tell me how you think you're doing, and I'll tell you that that's great. (Demi SPO Prison)

Zara talks about the quick fix v developmental supervision here and is clearly animated about the benefits that it will bring to her role as a supervisor. Similarly, Demi comments on how the training fits in with her understanding of good supervision and is pleased that she will be able to engage in direct observation under the RPSS.

A key theme which we identified in our interview data was the perception that there was a lack of follow up after the training. This may explain the low score given to communities of coping in the survey (Figure 2) as it suggests insufficient affordance given to methods of peer support which could have resulted from the training days.

I think it's scale and there's a lack of ability to repeat. So I know best by going off and doing something but then I need to come back and have refreshing training or reflective discussions with other people and whilst you're kind of like this is your group and you should be able to .... scattered from [location] where I am down to Devon, it's not going to happen. I'm sure it's the same everywhere but I think we suffer from introducing something and then not working out how to embed it into culture. So like this is what we're going to do, this is a great idea, here's your booklet, you've had three days in a classroom which was relatively pointless and didn't .... anyway, go off and do it and then nobody ever says, well, let's have a look at how that's been going. (Eugene SPO Generic)

The thing that bothered me, and this is one of the things to do probably not just with this business is, and sometimes any training is you go, and it's delivered, then you go away, and the busyness of the business doesn't give you the time to reflect and apply it and what really bothers me is nobody in senior management has really come back to say even as a group, a senior group or individually, you know, how are you getting on implementing that? How's it going? What are some of the problems? What are some of the barriers you can sort or not? Nobody has discussed SEEDS with me. (Nadia SPO PQIP/NQOs)

Both Eugene and Nadia are concerned that once the training has been completed there has been little follow up from either the trainers or senior management to see how they are finding implementation of the RPSS. This could be partly related to the fact that SPOs were the first to receive SEEDS2 training and it may also be a product of the pandemic. However, in order to consolidate what is regarded by the majority of SPOs to be a positive change in terms of the way in which they supervise frontline probation there is a need to continue the dialogue established during the training as SPOs return to their work role.

#### **4. Implementation of the RPSS**

Our survey suggested that SPOs had used a wide range of interventions that were delivered as part of the training (see Figure 3) with observations, the push-pull model, reflection and working with feelings being the most prominent. That communities of coping and reflective trios are the least used techniques suggests there is scope for more work with staff on developing such peer-led methods of support. In our interviews, SPOs were generally positive about the RPSS and most said they had sought to implement at least some of the

techniques developed in the training. In interviews they raised several key benefits to the model as well as barriers to implementation which are covered in this section.

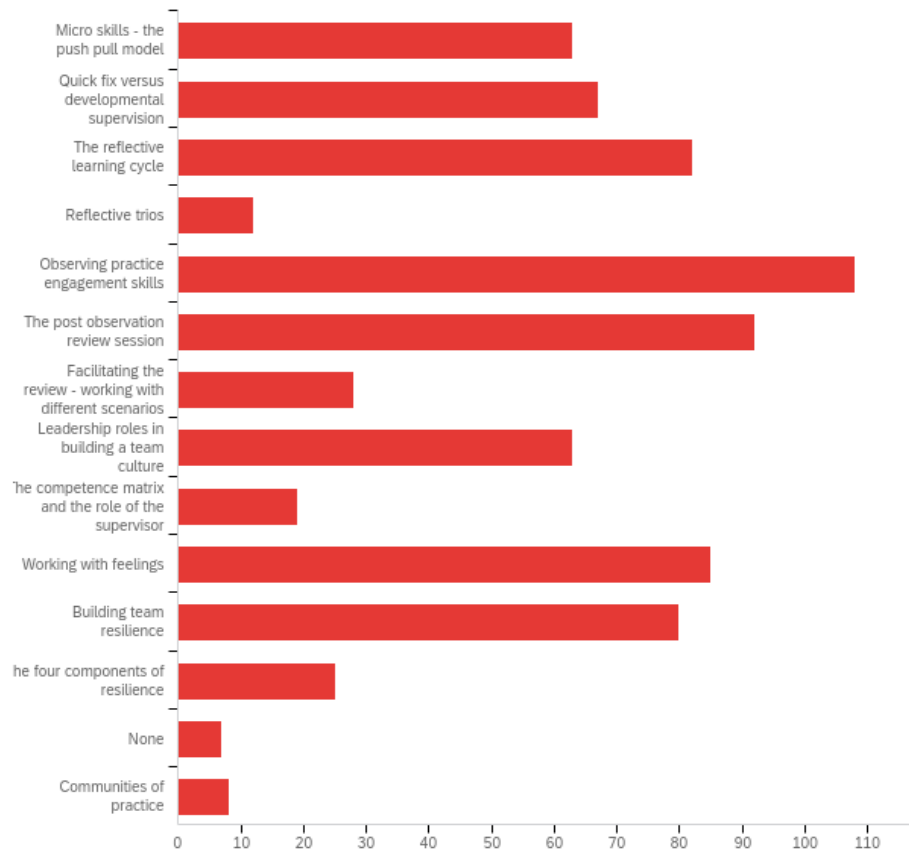


Figure 3: Which concepts from the training have you used in practice?

#### 4.1. Benefits of supervising using the RPSS

One theme to arise when looking at the perceived benefits of using the RPSS from the SPOs perspective is the fact that the key activities – reflective supervision, observations and SPDR meetings – are built into the model with specific frequencies and timescales. This appeared to encourage, if not force, participants to do what is required as part of their role. It seemed to have the effect of encouraging them to prioritise this important aspect of their role which is otherwise at risk of being side-lined due to other competing pressures:

I think what SEEDS has done for people who are using the annual log properly is almost forced those SPDR discussions to take place as well and I think that's been really beneficial because prior to that it wasn't as much of a priority as it should have been. That's not to say that SPOs haven't given it attention, it's just been something that's sat at the side because you'll just pick it up naturally but when it's actually set that you need to do it, it does give you that kind of platform.  
(Brianna SPO Generic)

So I can't say that I always did two with everybody every year, but it was something that I always tried to do. You just don't know what goes on in that room do you and people have got very different styles, also for me learning about what my team were about and how they do things may help some of the conversations that I have, maybe with their service users if they've had a difficult session, etc. So it was something that I always did. I can't say I always prioritised it because obviously we didn't have to do it but obviously when the framework came in and we were told that you need to do it I became I suppose easier because I generally did that with my team anyway. (Heather SPO OPD Pathway)

I like that they're mandated in because a lot of managers wouldn't do them if they weren't. (Toby SPO Generic)

The model was seen to make supervision a more responsive and flexible activity which, in turn, SPOs said gives people the skills to manage the pressures of the job:

Once upon a time supervision used to be pretty formulaic, you know, it used to be like, okay, let's look at your other two cases, da, da, da, da, da, da, da and it was all about case discussion. ... So supervision can become whatever it needs to be and hopefully usually, you know, the latest buzzword there, a reflective meeting...My favourite phrase with trainees is if you want a job where your till balances at the end of your shift then go and work in a shop, you know, because it doesn't happen. You have to learn how to manage that and that's the real skill of being a probation officer and having the longevity and it not burning you out and stuff, it's that sort of thing. (Colin SPO IOM)

In particular, the RPSS was seen to have the potential to support staff's emotional well-being by encouraging SPOs to have difficult but important conversations with their staff:

...if I hadn't had those structured supervisions wouldn't have realised how hard it is what we do and that she was feeling a bit overwhelmed when managing self-harmers and people that tried to commit suicide so that helped me understanding that it is important to check with them quite often to understand the challenges they're facing as well on a personal basis when managing the cases. (Yasmine SPO Prison)

...it allows people to be able to depersonalise those exchanges better, keep them on a professional footing which I think everybody does but without being overly distant as well because I mean you've got two versions, one is you take everything to heart or you're a brick wall and it just bounces off you. Neither of which are particularly healthy and it's getting that ability to have empathy, genuine connection with service users but without then, you know, they're not our children, we shouldn't take it personally when they fail, it's not a reflection on our parenting skills when a service user goes off and does something. (Winston SPO Generic)

Here, then, we see the potential for reflective supervision to support staff in coping with the consequences of the emotional toll that their roles take and the pressures of having to

perform emotional labour regularly as part of their day-to-day work. Reflecting the high proportion of SPO survey respondents who said they had used the push-pull model the most prominent theme here was the way the model is useful in developing the skills of staff, supporting - or pushing - them to make their own decisions and be more confident in doing so. Thus, the push-pull model was mentioned frequently amongst SPOs as a useful tool that they use in both formal supervision as well as in the more ad hoc corridor supervisions that take place on a regular basis:

[it has] helped me be a bit more mindful about, well, what do you think? Have you gone away and found it for yourself? I suppose SEEDS is very much encouraged to that pull rather than this is what you should do, the push stuff. So I suppose it was good for me to remind me that actually it is okay to try and pull. ... I suppose the SEEDS encouraged you to pull a bit more and encourage them to do the search first and then come to you rather than just straightaway coming to the manager because that's what you do and the managers know everything, which obviously we don't! So I think that was a useful reminder about I suppose SEEDS encourages that pull stuff rather than just knowing you've got a queue at the door and you just want to say do this where, you know, you think some of the time go, okay, what would you do? (Heather SPO PD Pathways)

So I guess the first thing was to try and be more reflective with people, so what we get a lot of, not at the moment but under normal conditions is people wanting an answer very quickly and so all of the thinking is done by me or my colleague or whoever whereas instead of people coming to us with a problem they either don't come at all or they come with a solution so they've done the thinking already but what tends to happen is somebody comes to me, I ask, I don't know, between three and six questions, then I give them a decision whereas the staff that I have vary in their tendency to do that so some hardly do it at all and some do it a lot more and so immediately what I thought I would try and do is those people who do that more who are a bigger demand on me as a resource, to try and get them to do more thinking for themselves by not doing it for them. (Amber SPO Generic)

These quotes all suggest that the push-pull approach to supervising staff can have multiple benefits. At the most pragmatic level it can work to reduce the workload of SPOs but, more fundamentally, it is seen to improve staff skills and confidence around decision making. It appears to be aligned with defensible decision making rather than defensive decision making. This was seen positively by SPOs because it aligns with their own decisions and motivations for being an SPO in the first place.

#### **4.2. Barriers to implementation**

The RPSS was, generally, seen positively by SPOs, but responses were often couched with a heavy 'but'. In the words of one SPO SEEDS2 is 'a really good tool. It just lacks soul for me. I don't know how to describe it other than it lacks soul' (Kiara SPO Victims Unit). Thus, we explored the data to identify some of the barriers to implementation and these are presented here. This lack of soul appeared to come from a perception that the model could

be seen as a tick-box exercise, that it was too prescriptive. One issue here was the perception that the different activities – reflective supervision, observations and SPDRs – are seen as different things by the model but this is not reflected in the way staff understand them:

That [SPDR] isn't supervision ... it's just to talk about your SPDR but staff then think it's supervision, so they bring all the emotional stuff when you're trying to just focus on the SPDR. So I think it's got very - Personally, I would prefer to have just straight supervision and you incorporate a practice discussion or so many years into supervision rather than it has to be so many supervisions. (Jemima SPO Court)

So my supervision is almost a blended approach of SEEDs, reflection, and those checks that we have to do. Now, that isn't the ethos that SEEDs wanted, it wanted very, very set specific reflective practice discussions maybe around a couple of cases. My officers have in excess of 30 cases, the vast majority are high risk offenders. They will come to supervision and want to discuss seven or eight of those. I cannot give those cases that in depth reflection that they would need for every single one of them and I never go in to say to an officer, 'well no, stop there, we'll just choose that one.' So I do think the idea of SEEDs and the reflection is right, it's how I had supervision when I was training, this blended approach, but I do think that's where it should fit with that blend. (Brianna, SPO, Generic)

I think if you tried to stick to it, it could be stifling but certainly it is, it's a framework and it should not be, you know, I'm going to bump, bump, bump, bump and regimented. (Winston, SPO, Generic)

There is clearly a balance to be struck between the RPSS being a framework to guide good supervisory practice, and being a list of tasks that need doing – it would appear that some staff have interpreted the framework as a list of mandatory tasks and so this is something which needs considering.

#### **4.2.1. Lack of time**

Without doubt, the most common theme in this section is the lack of time to implement the model properly. Of the 31 SPOs we interviewed, 18 explicitly said that time and the competing pressures of the role made it difficult to implement the model in the way it is intended:

The biggest challenge we got, and this isn't going to surprise you I know, was the time constraints, not only coming to do the training because it was three separate days two weeks apart, but also to actually implement what SEEDs asks you to implement when you're back in your workplace. So I feel that it was well received and in theory it was absolutely this is what we want to do, this is why we joined probation in the first place but the time constraints of actually rolling, doing this with staff. (Grace, SPO, Generic)



There was a willingness to do it but there was a realism about how can we fit this in really I think which is what I would hope for. I'd have been worried I think if the seniors all went away and said, yeah, this is fantastic, we can do this, no problem, because that's not particularly realistic whereas they actually engaged with it to the point of, yeah, I want to be doing this but I need to think about how that's going to impact upon the other areas of the work and how do I still ensure that I'm doing some of the core roles for my job which may compete with working in a SEEDS way. (Harvey, Senior Manager)

This was not just a matter of time, but related to the sheer range of tasks that SPOs are asked to do as part of their role:

You're looking at - you may be dealing with absence management, you may be working with people through performance management, there may be action plans in place that have resulted from things like serious further offences so there's lots of different elements that you're trying to manage, and you can't quite fit that all into reflective supervision. There was always a little bit of where do we fit in all the rest? Where do we fit in all the other elements of supervision? Wellbeing. Where do we talk about wellbeing in the framework? Where do we talk about the -? So it was about really thinking about how can we work through all those elements with the framework, and do we need to do additional things as well? (Zara, Senior Manager)

I just remember thinking you're asking us to do an awful lot and you're not removing any sense of responsibility or any other tasks from us, but you are adding to it. (Eugene SPO Generic)

Time is, of course, always going to be problematic for people working in a service such as probation where competing pressures and priorities will be up against each other. However, the message from SPOs was unequivocal here – if SPOs are to implement the RPSS properly (and, we should stress, they want to do this), they need the time to do it.

#### **4.2.2. SPO role conflict**

This ties into another barrier to implementation which is about a perceived tension between the managerial role of a SPO and the developmental approach that is built into the SEEDS2 model. SPOs talked about how they find it hard to hold people to account for all of their cases whilst, at the same time, doing reflective supervisions which only required them to look at one or two cases in depth:

But I think it's difficult from a manager's perspective to try and - on the one hand you might be telling someone off because they've not hit their targets and then on the other hand you're saying, well, are you okay? Are you managing all right? Do you see what I mean? There's a real dichotomy there. (Thea PO Trainer)

There's a real tension there and I think the difficulty as an SPO is you get both those messages. So we have to put management oversights on our offender managers and their cases when we've had those discussions, but the idea of

SEEDS is that you don't micromanage and actually staff get that feeling of empowerment to make their own decisions but then we're held to account if we haven't put that oversight on. We are sent checklists to ensure our staff are updating things on Delius. We're sent updates on OASys timeliness and performance and we are expected to be accountable for our team. Absolutely fine, I understand that, but I can't then be micromanaging my team's performance when the idea of SEEDS is that officers have their own accountability for their work and that is a real fine balance to achieve. That creates pressure for us, so we're promoting one thing but we're being told another. It's really quite - to be honest the SPO role itself is a really difficult one. You are smack bang in the centre, and you are being pulled in every direction. Yeah. It's difficult. (Brianna SPO Generic)

In response to this difficulty, some of our participants reported trying to implement a model which was a combination of the two:

we have tended recently to check on all the cases, you know, where are things up to, what are the priorities and that's partly been because of workloads. ... I'm hoping that going forwards we will be able to focus much more on the cases. I think that can depend on the person that I'm speaking to, so some of them are much more reflective anyway so the discussion tends to go down that road, you know, how they felt after the interview, what they're thinking is going on for that person, that is much more - they're quite a reflective team but one or two are much more reflective than others so we naturally end up in that place whereas I can think of one in particular where it's like, no, I've done that, you know, and she would happily have supervision over in half an hour and I have to say let's slow down, what happened here? What was that about? Yeah. So it's a bit of half rice, half chips. I'm doing a bit of the SEED stuff and a bit of practical oversight. (Demi SPO Prison)

The tension between the different responsibilities of a line manager is neither new nor unique to probation. However, the explicit focus on development built into SEEDS2 did seem to present a real juxtaposition with the more common managerial approach to supervision which has taken hold in probation in recent years. One option here is to consider the implementation of a senior practitioner role which takes a more developmental approach to staff supervision, which is considered more below.

#### **4.2.3. Practitioner understanding and capacity to engage**

A further barrier to implementation which revolves more around the skills and approach of the member of staff being supervised. One issue here is staff not having sufficient time to be supervised in this way:

I guess it is about time and having, yeah, not wanting to take too much time from the probation officers I think as much as my own time, you know, being aware of the difficulties that they have scheduling in supervision. (Demi SPO Prison)

They're juggling too much to be able to stop and reflect... I think there's not enough focus on the fact that people have got more to do than they can manage to do properly... if they had a lower number of cases because when you're reactive all the time it's hard to learn to be proactive because you haven't got the time, you never get time to catch up. It makes me want to swear when people think, yeah, but if you did this the work would be easier, yeah, but there'd still be too much of it and ultimately to bring about any change in practice you need a bit of down time. You need some time when you're not worrying all the time and not constantly on the back foot trying to catch up. (Amber SPO Generic)

it's the amount of work that goes into that and the preparation for the staff that you're supervising, for them to buy in to it. Not everybody's into it. (Rhonda SPO Generic)

This lack of time was also seen to be important because it meant staff were not used to being reflective in the first place. This was not helped by the fact that front-line staff had not received any training related to SEEDS2 and so lacked awareness of it – this should become a less pertinent issue once the practitioner training is rolled out. This made it difficult to 'sell' a new model of supervision which took up more time and required them to use skills which they had possibly not used before:

I think the training should have happened either simultaneously or quite close together because you lose the momentum if you don't have the buy in from both parties that were involved in that transaction, you lose the momentum of what the message was and now we're miles apart in terms of when SPOs were trained. (Ursula SPO Generic)

Some staff find it very hard to be reflective because they've never really had the time or the opportunity to do it. I know some of the staff in my team now that have come from busy field teams, it's like, you want us to think about it? You want us to talk about? You just need to decide what we're doing. It's becoming very alien because sometimes it feels like you're a machine, you've just got to make decision after decision because you've got to make the next one because there's another queue at the door. (Heather SPO PD Pathways)

There was also a recognition that offender managers do not have the time to reflect and engage in a push-pull approach to decision making as they just need the answer, perhaps due to a lack of time, perhaps because they see the SPO as the backstop or perhaps because they simply do not know the answer (reflecting the increased number of inexperienced staff in the service more broadly):

To some extent but I also know how irritating it is as a probation officer for a senior probation officer to ask you loads of Socratic questions when what you need them to do is say, yeah, I think you should record them right now! You know, so it's about knowing when to do that really. It is something I've done more of and I definitely - I've even done it today, somebody's been stood in the

doorway this morning and given me a lot of information and I've just gone, what do you think should happen? (Amber SPO Generic)

When you go in and you go 'I need an answer now' and then somebody wants to have a reflective discussion with you, I mean there's nothing more soul destroying. (Maia SPO Generic)

I've literally been a teacher for the last 12 months with that particular person, that's who I've been. She asked a question and I answered it this morning, she says I needed to go on the Chase because I'd beat the Chase! It's literally question, question, question, question so there's no time to reflect on that because she's got no grounds to - We're starting to, we are starting to, she's 12 months in now so – (Lillian SPO Victims Unit)

Although SPOs were, in the main, positive about the ethos and underpinning principles of SEEDS2, they raised a number of barriers that they face when seeking to implement it with their staff. The main barriers to implementation are: a perception that the framework is too prescriptive (notwithstanding the increased flexibility a more reflective approach affords), a lack of time and difficulties in prioritising reflective supervisions when faced with competing pressures of the role and a perceived tension between the managerial role of a SPO and the developmental approach that is built into the SEEDS2 model. Participants were also concerned about a lack of time and knowledge of SEEDS2 amongst practitioners as well as a lack of time and skills to be reflective on their part.

Finally, the pandemic has undoubtedly been a barrier to the full implementation of the model. This is alluded to in the introduction and summarised here when talking about how they had not received the frequency of supervision stipulated in the RPSS.

I'd say COVID probably has got a big part to play. Obviously I can't really talk much about what it was like before COVID. I only had ten weeks before COVID and I did have a meeting then. I think that's had a lot to do with it. I think as well the management structure's probably under an awful lot of stress at the moment, so I'd like to put it down to workload and that sort of thing and being able to do it. I hope that that's what it is and not just that it's being ignored. (Esther, PQiP)

Esther recognises the stress the management staff are under and is hopeful that they will have more frequent supervision in line with the new framework.

#### **4.3. Specialist roles and settings**

A key theme to come out of our interviews was the difficulty of implementing the model in the context of 'specialist' teams and roles such as court work, victim liaison units or the OPD pathways. At its highest level, there was concern that the RPSS is a one size fits all model which only really properly fits generic case management and so does not capture the nuances and particularities of working in specialist settings. In relation to court work, SPOs said that it did not reflect the fact that court work is highly dependent on what is going in

the court and the cases that are being heard on a particular day which are difficult to predict and plan for. This makes it difficult to plan the times needed for supervision because court work is often 'fire-fighting':

In court, things can change drastically. You could have 27, 30 prisoners appearing in the remand court today plus and there might only be four staff on site or in because of leave or whatever and then they're firefighting. I've arranged supervision and it's just not practical to do supervision because they need to respond to the demands of the court. I'm forever changing supervision. In court you just can't do that because you never know on any one day, it's so unpredictable, how things are going to be whereas you can map out your diary in a field team, it's much easier. I don't think it's really been factored in for court if I'm honest and this was raised when I did the SEEDs two. I sort of said this isn't going to work as effective for court officers as it will for field. (Jemima SPO Court)

In relation to settings such as programmes, Sex Offender Units or the OPD pathway staff complained that the framework does not take account of the accreditation process that structures much of their work and the frameworks that already exist in relation to supervision:

So I'll be honest with you, the views always been about SEEDS2 implementation has always been a bit like can't really do that because we're doing something that requires a bit more than that and the frequency's different..... I guess for me though all the way through the training and since I've had that dilemma of how do I make this fit my role? It wasn't answered on the training. It's one of those things, you know on the flipchart where they write down questions for takeaway- (Frank SPO Sex Offender Unit)

From the programme's perspective with my programmes head on it was clear that actually how does this fit the national expectations with regards to treatment management? And nobody had really sat the two together because the treatment management bit is the bit by which you actually look at that development support and everything else, so actually it shouldn't be there for them at all because they've got another route. (Tianna SPO Victims Unit)

Similar issues were raised in relation to victim work and AP work, especially around the relevance of observations in these contexts.

Saying that I didn't mind but actually - so myself and other PD leads, I think we did have a discussion with our manager to say well actually should we do it? Not because we didn't want to but because we didn't know if it was really appropriate and that's why I was saying at the beginning in terms of I'm not really sure if I'm the best person because we felt our role didn't really fit with what they were going to do. On my group I recall - So there was myself, there was some AP managers and I think there was a court manager, so what I'm getting at is there was a few of us that were in specialisms and then obviously there was others who was in the field and we did raise that it's kind of difficult to apply in

a specialism and the response was it doesn't really matter, it can still be applied. Again, not said in a kind of I don't care way, it was just that they felt it was applicable in whatever role you was in. I would say for example the observations, my team, my probation officers do not work with clients so what am I observing? What I choose to observe is them delivering training. It wasn't really geared towards that, but I can't observe them with a client because that's not what they do. (Orla SPO PD Pathways)

Well, there were two of us from victim liaison, there was someone from courts and someone from programmes and all of us said the model did not fit anything. If it's not offender management it doesn't really fit...I mean it talks about SEEDs being person centred, practitioner centred, it feels like from the court role and from the victim's role it should actually be more about in response to and responsive to the actual person and their needs. (Tianna SPO Victims Unit)

The participants above found it difficult to relate to their working context. That said, from a prison perspective, Yasmin and Demi described how SEEDS 2 is welcome and would be good for all prison staff, not just prison-based probation staff:

I think I like it. I think I quite like it because it gives that structure. You can adapt it to your own team and styles. I think it should be implemented in the prison as well for the prison and the staff to understand what supervision means because what I find is that in probation we're very used to having these reflective practices and discussions but the prison, it's always very reactive work and they don't really support their staff and by not supporting their staff they don't support the residents either, so I think there is a lack of understanding in the prison.(Yasmin SPO prison)

So, yeah, that element, those aspects of direct observation and feedback I think are great and we weren't doing enough of that before. (Demi SPO prison)

The role of the RPSS in relation to specialist roles is something which needs consideration as it is rolled out. There may be the need to adapt the framework to take account of the unique facets of some of these specialist roles and contexts.

## **5. Observations**

A key element to the RPSS is the renewed focus on practice observations and these received considerable attention in our interviews with SPOs and front-line practitioners.

### **5.1. SPO experiences of observations**

87% (n=131) of the SPO respondents to the survey said they had used observations and 64% (n= 89) said they found the observations either very useful or extremely useful (Figure 4).

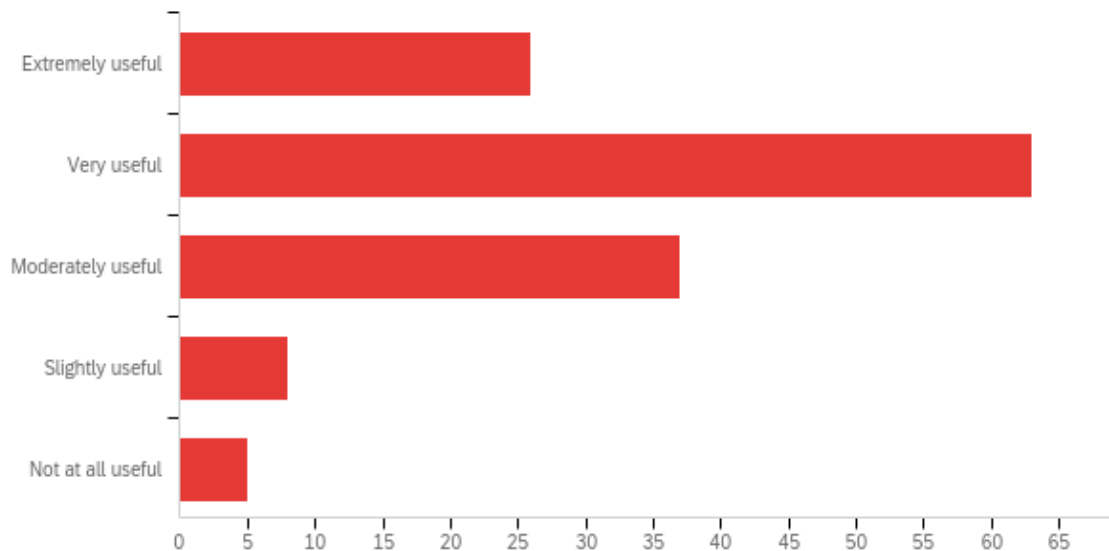


Figure 4: How helpful have you found the observation process in supporting your supervisees?

In interviews, SPOs said they valued the observations and valued the fact that the framework required them to be carried out:

I knew that I wasn't up to speed with, was doing the observations. (Sutton SPO Generic)

Observations were seen as a useful way of understanding how their staff worked and identifying developmental needs. Brianna and Toby explain how the observations challenged their assumptions about the quality of practice by members of their team. The observations had helped them identify both good and poor practice which would otherwise not have been identified:

...actually seeing them in an interview, I've seen some officers that I've thought have been really capable have an interview and it's been appalling and vice versa, I've seen some officers where their OASys assessments are really poor but when I've sat down with them and seen them interacting with someone it's been spot on. So the observations have been invaluable. (Brianna SPO Generic)

...it was a real eye opener because it did drop some bombshells. Some staff who I thought were going to be great, not so good and others that I thought - I had one member of staff who really struggled with dyslexia, the written stuff, bless her, she just couldn't interact with the tools, she couldn't understand how to interact with OASys well enough and don't get me wrong, she could do it, but she needed a lot of support. We worked a lot on that, and I was beginning to think that I might have to go down poor performance or some sort of supportive plan to get her back on track, but I did an observation with her and her work with service users was unbelievable. The investment, the time, the exploration of risk, it was all there and I just sort of thought to myself. I went away and spoke to my manager about it, and I said I want to give her more time because I think she can do it and the observation gave me that real evidence base to do that. I'm pleased

to say it went really well for her because we found a system that worked with her OASys and we have a better relationship for it, so I found the observations to be just so helpful. (Toby SPO Generic)

As suggested in the previous quote, observations are useful for developing someone's practice:

So I mean there's things that, you know, as a probation officer 101 that you take for granted and then you see like these arrows coming up, so like the offender referring to the partner as the Misses and you go, oh, you didn't pick him up or you didn't say what's your partners name? You know, you can do it in a gentle way can't you? So just things like that and then people have been swearing all the way through, you swear, you're kind of thinking are you going to reframe it so they kind of get the message that actually that's not acceptable to keep, you know. So there's been things like that. Another thing, because everyone is working so quickly what you notice is they'll go in and do supervision and they're like, okay then, so what do you think about this? Aha, aha, hmm, hmm, you know, and they're doing it really quick and they're not giving the person time to answer and it's like when I used to do DSO it should be 20/80, so 20% from you, 80% from the offender. Are you doing 20/80? They're like, no, we've got more of a, you know. You can see you do your supervision with them next time and they've tried to incorporate this and incorporate that so there's some really good ..practice. (Marlene SPO Generic)

Observations allow SPOs to have more detailed reflections and discussions about practice. The observations also served to reinforce the skills of experienced staff who they would not ordinarily have the opportunity to see in 'action':

it gives more opportunity to speak in detail about practice, especially for experienced members of staff where, yes, you'd have supervision with them but it brought a new dynamic to supervision in respect of observations and really - So I think one thing I found was that - Some of the feedback was that when SPOs observed experienced practitioners it reinforced the level of experience and skills that they've got because as SPOs you're used to sitting in with maybe new practitioners, you're used to sitting in with them and listening and supporting and helping them along but with the experienced probation officers you wouldn't tend to do that unless there were issues or there was a difficult situation. I think it was just really positive and rewarding to see the level of skill that some practitioners have got which we probably wouldn't see them in action I suppose if we weren't following this framework if we weren't actively planning to observe their practice. (Zara Senior Manager)

On the other hand, SPOs found observations very time consuming especially when the preparation is taken into account as well as when factoring in the number of cancellations (due to crises or people on probation not turning up):



The amount then when I organised formally like that were cancelled was unbelievable. That's very time consuming, especially when you do the bit before, you're spending 45 minutes before going through what they're trying to achieve, what they're going to do and using that format. (Winston SPO Generic)

The time needed to undertake all aspects of the observation process may partly explain the discrepancy between the number of practitioners in the survey saying that they had been observed and the number who said they had then received a post-observation review (See Table 3). Alternatively, given the gaps in practitioner understanding about the RPPS, practitioners may not have recognised the term 'post-observation review' as included in the survey.

### 5.2. Practitioner experiences of observation

Practitioner experiences of observation expressed in interviews were mixed in terms of whether they had occurred (even pre-pandemic), how cases were selected for observation and the undertaking of a post-observation reflective discussion. As such, the interview data aligns with the bimodal distribution within the practitioner survey responses (See Figures 5 and 6) and suggests some inconsistency in the way observations are being prepared, conducted and debriefed.

Table 3: Front-line practitioners' perceptions and experiences of the observation process

	Agree	Neither agree/disagree	Disagree
<b>The aims of the observation were made to clear to me before it took place</b>	45.60%	8.02%	46.38%
<b>I was involved in the decision about what would be observed and when</b>	45.17%	9.07%	45.76%
<b>Having my line manager in the room changed the way I interacted with my client in the moment</b>	29.51%	21.58%	48.90%
<b>The post-observation review session was useful</b>	41.56%	14.12%	44.34%
<b>The observation helped me deal with the emotional element of my work</b>	29.11%	30.50%	40.40%
<b>Overall, being observed has improved my practice</b>	32.27%	24.90%	42.83%

Table 3 presents a mixed picture, 46% of staff felt the aims of observation were clear; 45 % felt involved in the process and 42% of practitioners found the observations useful. In interview discussions, practitioners were aware that observations were an expectation but for some they had not materialised which they found disappointing. This is in contrast to the

SPO survey and interview findings where the majority of SPO respondents had indicated that they had observed staff. This perhaps suggests that the SPO respondents were individuals who have embraced the framework and made a conscious effort at undertaking observations, whereas our interview sample of practitioners may contain individuals whose SPOs have not yet been able to fully implement this aspect of the framework.

None at all. None of our office have had them. That's been a long-standing issue and something that I would find very helpful and that hasn't happened. I'm not sure how it can happen with the managers own workloads, but I still think that it could be done occasionally, yeah, but that hasn't happened. (Abby PO Generic)

No one's ever actually got round to doing an observation of me interviewing a prisoner, but I know it's supposed to happen and then you're supposed to talk to your line manager about how that went. (Nora PO Generic)

It should be noted that for some, the implementation of this aspect of the model was interrupted during the pandemic.

Generally, we have [*an observation*] once a month. Obviously, it's been a lot less since the pandemic. We have team meetings so we can check in. (Caitlyn, PO, Prison)

I think it was just as the pandemic came along that the observations were about to start and this type of work we were going to do but because now we have the pandemic none of that is happening. (Lori, PSO, Court)

Where observations had occurred, they were, in the main, viewed as a positive experience that aided professional development and provided an opportunity to gain meaningful feedback.

It doesn't bother me in the slightest, yeah, I remember my last manager used to come in and it was all good feedback. Constructive criticism. There wasn't anything that made me go 'Oh, I must be absolutely rubbish at my job'. And I kind of saw it as like a development opportunity so if there was something I was missing then you can learn from it, rather than see it as somebody just wanting to check up on you or change things. It's more of a development issue, and I think it's good as well, because people do get sloppy at times, so it's good that you are reminded of things and you are observed. (Violet PSO Generic)

It builds your confidence because you get feedback on your actual - it's tangible isn't it because they're actually giving you - in the same way that they give you feedback on your assessments, like when you get OASys feedback, you're getting tangible feedback that you can then work on but it's just that you're getting feedback on your physical, you know, what you're actually doing rather than just your written work which is, you know, they go hand in hand so it doesn't make sense to be getting feedback regularly on your written work and then not on the work that you're doing with the people on your caseload. (Rebecca PO Prison)

Some however would have preferred a more ad-hoc approach to observations in order to achieve a more authentic representation of their practice.

If my line manager was free those were the best observations because they were short and sweet and I'd be dealing with some very live issues that had cropped up as opposed to my thinking - my line manager said, right, we need to do an observation, can you do one next week and I would sort of look through and sort of think, yeah, he's okay and do those as opposed to those that might be wanting to give me a hard time because something wasn't happening that they thought I should be doing or someone had upset them somewhere else and I was going to get shouted at. So, yeah, very keen to use those because that was a view on to my practice and how I dealt with things that were just coming at me, you know, dealing with it on the cuff really and on the run. (Conor PO Generic)

Given that both SPOs and practitioners see the value in observations for developing practice and aiding reflection, it is important to ensure that adequate time and space is available to facilitate this aspect of the Standards moving forward. There is a further challenge to ensure that observations are consistent in terms quality and frequency across the Probation Service.

## **6. SPO and practitioner experiences of supervision**

We asked participants about their experiences of being supervised. Their responses included perceptions of before and after the introduction of the RPSS. The overwhelming response was that it was a 'mixed bag', often exacerbated by a high turn-over of managers in recent years:

So, I've had positive experiences. I've also had some bloody awful experiences. (Frank, SPO, Sex Offender Unit)

Yeah. I had one, she was awful and another guy who was kind of in the middle. So, I've kind of experienced good, bad, and indifferent. (Eugene, SPO, Generic)

Obviously when you've got that sort of turmoil going on, you've got three different managers, three different styles of managing, it can get a bit confusing so it's nice now for everybody to settle down. (Mitchell, PSO, Approved Premises)

We really welcomed the supervision and the really quite proactive approach of the manager previously. I just think when the other manager came back from a secondment, that individual wasn't happy to be back, that individual had expected to progress a lot further and it was quite a significant step back down for her and I think she struggled with that in all honesty and just did the bare minimum that she needed to do and the focus was on progressing again (Sally, PO, Generic)

This inconsistency can have negative consequences for practitioners:

Because it was such a stark difference from the experience I had had. I think it kind of left me thinking is it me that's the problem? Am I expecting too much that I'm not going to get at all or is it her that's the problem? (Rebecca, PO, Prison)

This can clearly adversely affect the supervisory relationship and also has ramifications for the confidence of the practitioner and their feeling of affiliation towards the organisation more generally.

### **6.1. The lasting impact of supervision**

For SPOs, previous experiences of supervision appear to have shaped how they perceive the aims of supervision and how they approach this aspect of their role. Good experiences are aspirational whereas negative experiences have been treated as learning opportunities in terms of what to avoid in their own supervisory practice:

So I have had varying experiences of my own line management, of being line managed as it were. Some good and some not so good and I guess what one tries to do is to pull from the positive experiences, it's like what did I enjoy about that? Why did that work well for me and how can I use that in my supervising of others? (Eugene, SPO, Generic)

So supervision's always been a mixed bag I think in terms of probation because it depends how long people have been in and what their personal beliefs are as to whether it's just purely management supervision or has some developmental side to it. My personal experience of supervision is that, you know, I'm not complaining about it because I guess the negative experiences I've received of supervision have just made me pay more attention to the supervision that I deliver. (Frank, SPO, Sex Offender Unit)

I think I have had some very positive experiences and those positive experiences is what I have modelled myself on, to aspire to be like if that makes sense. (Nadia, SPO, PQiPs/NQOs)

Analysis of the interview data provide a strong reminder that good supervision is powerful as it can support practitioners, but at its worst it can also result in emotional distress and even result in a desire to want to leave the profession. The quotes below from the same practitioner reflecting upon 2 different experiences of supervision highlight the stark difference in impact:

I genuinely thought, it got to a point in the December where I thought I'm not going to qualify in March, I'm not going to be able to do it but I 100% think that the quality of my supervision and the support that I had, it's what got me through.

I think it's probably useful to say as well, because to be honest it had an impact on me and I actually applied for another job, got another job, was going to leave the service to the point where I put my notice in and it was only over Christmas

that I thought to myself, do you know what? I'm not just giving up my job in this establishment, I'm giving up my job in probation and I've trained so hard and worked so hard that I changed my mind, and I am staying but, yeah, it was to the point where I was going to leave. (Rebecca PO Prison)

The quote below from Harsha, a PSO in a VLO, further highlights the detrimental impact poor supervision can have on practitioner emotional wellbeing:

I had a really, really difficult manager at the time and she worked by threatening staff and always saying things like, oh, I'm going to put you in front of the director, you can go and explain yourself, you know, threatening me with my job saying, you know, you've worked so hard, and it would be a shame to lose my job, so I lived in fear for a while and my depression kicked in again.

A very clear theme here is the variability of supervision across the organisation. The RPSS is intended to improve the quality and consistency of supervision – it was not possible to ascertain whether this has happened, but it is clear that it is needed.

### **6.2. Practitioner perceptions of supervision under RPSS**

Only 62% (n=500) of the practitioner survey respondents who had a SEEDS2 trained SPO said they knew that they were being supervised in accordance with the new Standards. There was also some confusion between SEEDS 1 and the new training when participants were asked about their experiences of the RPSS:

I don't even think it's been put into practice to be honest. (Gabrielle, PO, Generic)

...then SEEDS2 was talked about, but I think if you ask the vast majority of staff they'd be pushed to give you an account of what that actually looks like in daily life when we're working with managers and offenders. I mean I've not come across anyone that's really used that reflective practice approach with me (Zachry, PO, Generic)

However, often the participants described features of the RPSS, for example, being observed, case discussions, more structure and talking about their wellbeing in supervision:

I think my understanding of it is, is it's going to be like - it's almost more focussed on our practice and more looking at almost getting to observe our practice and see what's going on, having maybe a fixed case discussion or a fixed discussion about how we're developing and actually do more supervision around our skills as opposed to what targets have been met (Brendan PO Prison)

...so I think the SEEDS framework is about actually being effective with people, making effective decisions based on effective risk assessments and work that you've done (Caitlyn PO Prison)

Some practitioners felt there had been a substantial change in their supervision, others less so. Figures 5 and 6 show the results to questions posed to staff who were being supervised by SPOs who had received the RPSS training. Both Figures show a bimodal distribution with one group of staff which finds the supervisory process a positive, reflective experience and one group being less positive.

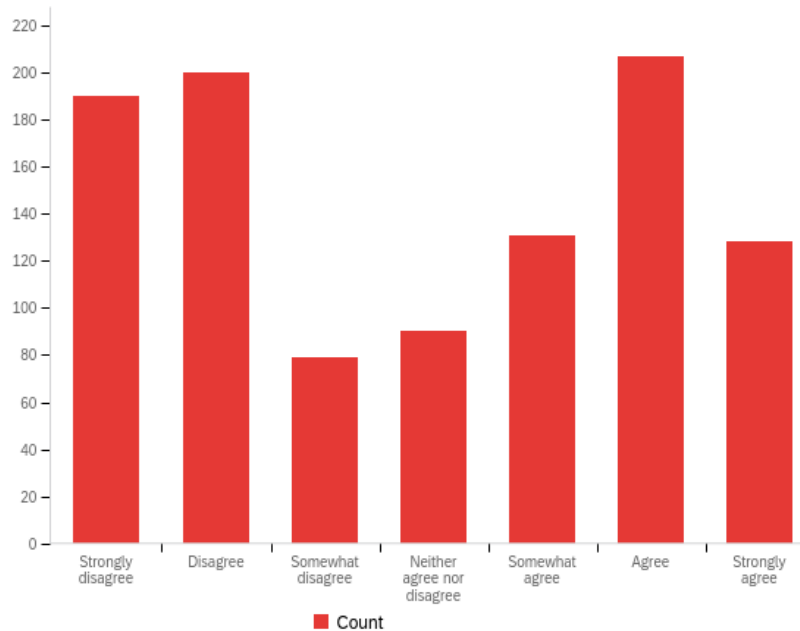


Figure 5: Supervisions with my line manager provide me with the opportunity to reflect on my practice

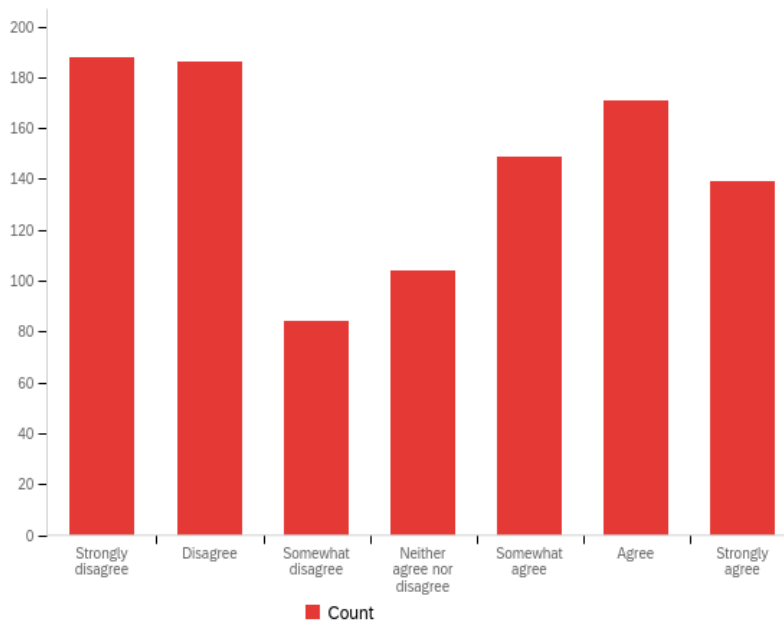


Figure 6: Supervision with my line manager provides me with sufficient opportunity to discuss the emotional demands of my work

Both our survey data and interview data suggest that practitioners sometimes found it hard to establish the impact of the RPSS. This could be a result of the delay in roll-out of the SEEDS2 practitioner training, or due to issues with communicating the revised approach. Alternatively, this could suggest that some line managers approached supervision in a manner aligned to the SEEDS2 principles already. The quotes below indicate that a change had been identified, but the practitioners were unsure if this was due to a change in manager or as a result of the framework:

So, yeah, it's difficult to say really because I don't know if any of that was part of what my PQiP manager was doing anyway in terms of that was just his style of management and supervision or whether he was doing that because of SEEDs, do you know what I mean? (Rebecca, PO, Prison)

I don't know whether it's my new managers style of working but we have had a lot of conversations about career progression and management career progression and stuff and what different avenues I could go (Brendan, PO, Prison)

For other interviewees, there was little discernible change to the feel of their supervision despite being aware of the new expectations.

So it doesn't feel like it's changed massively to what it was before to be honest. I think it still feels like it could be quite a generic framework and we can still use it the way that we had. It's just structured, I guess, slightly differently. (Vicki, PSO, VLO)

I'm not sure I noticed that much difference, other than I was given a piece of paper and this was the headings on it, but we had done that sort of thing without those headings. (Mitchell, PSO, AP)

For other practitioners, the change was not viewed favourably, either due to a perceived lack of focus or due to an increase in the time taken for supervision sessions.

I haven't seen that there's been any additional benefits to my supervision sessions, if anything I've seen it's less structured, more wishy washy and doesn't make me come out of the meeting feeling organised (Abby, PO, Generic)

There's also these management oversight meetings which are about specific cases, I think high risk cases within one month of sentence you have to have these management oversights which are pretty intensive forensic scrutiny of the case management and assessments, etc. Quite often they get rolled into the same supervision meeting so that's why they can go on literally all morning because supervision on its own may only take an hour but when you've got two MOs to do, that's probably another hour and a half so they could end up, you know, pack your sandwiches as my manager says! (Paul, PO, Generic)

For those in specialist roles outside of case management (prisons, courts and VLUs), SPO knowledge of the specialism was a factor in the perception of the supervisory process:

I think where supervision was poor was where in one case the senior probation officer wasn't very confident and she'd worked in a prison setting previously as a member of prison staff who then come in to probation and in the prison she'd concentrated on substances and alcohol so in that area of responsibility she was very good but had come in to probation very quickly and had been promoted to an SPO but to discuss cases that there was sexual elements, she was quite uncomfortable with that but actually from other staff I understood that that was because of her own experiences in her personal life and so that meant did I back off some of those things I ought to be talking about, which I did and actually found support and supervision within my own cohort of probation officers because to talk to her about some of the issues I was reading about, she wasn't able to do that. (Connor, PO Generic)

The manager now has been the manager of the victim unit in (location) for quite a few years, so she's done the job as well. So she knows exactly what we do and how it impacts on us, ....she knows the job, my new manager, so it's easier to talk to her about difficult cases or what to do next, etc. (Karen, PSO, VLO)

Practitioners also commented on the structured approach to staff supervision established by the RPSS.

So I think it gave the line managers more structure. I guess for those individuals who hadn't had much structure it might have made a difference, but I was working fairly structured anyway. (Conor PO Generic)

I think it's more structured. More focussed. I think the feedback element is better. I mean I remember having SPDRs years ago and it was more about me rather than my work, you know, it didn't really mean anything so I think knowing how I'm working and observing how I'm working is so much better than just not having that framework in place, so they can say, oh, you know, you're very warm, you opened up, answered lots of questions, asked loads of open questions, this, that and the other and that's more beneficial and affirming really so, you know, knowing that we're on the right track. (Caitlyn PO Prison)

For others, the structure was not perceived so favourably; instead, there was a preference for more flexibility within supervision sessions:

Yeah, being responsive to people's individual needs. Although a recognition that there needs to be structure in the same sense that we set people sentence plan objectives, that that's not rigid in the sense that it doesn't allow for changes in people's lives because although it's a job that we're doing and in terms of us focussing on that job we have personal lives and that affects how we all do the job that we're doing at different times and it, yeah. Allowing for that kind of flexibility I guess (Rebecca, PO, Prison)



So it's a bit more free flowing. It's quite a relaxed - I don't want to say relaxed management skill because that always makes you sound lazy but it's very comfortable. We're not afraid to talk to each other which I think is an ideal way of managing (Mitchell, PSO, Approved Premises)

The key message here, then, is that practitioners did not know about the new Standards for supervision or, where they did, that they had not been explained and justified sufficiently to them which made it difficult for them to fully engage. It would also appear that some SPOs are supervising using the RPSS but also conducting regular management oversight of all cases which will be adding to both their workloads and the workload of their staff.

### **6.3. Reflective practice and discussions relating to emotion and wellbeing**

As mentioned earlier, in the benefits of the RPSS, the reflective practice aspect was well received by SPOs and tended to be positively commented upon. The following interviewees talked about the importance of 'reflection' to the new SEEDS2 model in line management supervision with their staff. This was reflection in supervision sessions, to work through challenging cases; build professional autonomy; developing the supervisee's appreciation of the 'why' of practice and giving space to explore this:

I think the sense that one takes or that I certainly had from it was about that sort of supporting aspect to it and enabling staff to work through their knotty cases and to feel supported in doing that. (Eugene SPO Generic)

I think it was trying to allow us to step back a little bit and become more - or allow our staff to become more reflective of their own practice and we were becoming enablers rather than managers. I think that was being - getting your staff to build confidence for themselves and understand that they've got those skills already and getting them to make their own answers rather than come for you and you're just tick boxing and telling them what to do and being prescriptive. (Sutton SPO Generic)

...we work with some really dangerous complex people and actually people can feel very isolated, people can feel, you know, it's a lot of pressure, people have got their own emotional issues on top of it so for me it's about giving people space to think about what they're actually doing rather than just being machines and doing it because they think this is the way to do it but actually why are you doing it this way or why has it had an impact on you? So for me I suppose it's allowing that space to be more reflective about actually why we're doing what we're doing and what actions are we trying to get and are we achieving those? Whereas I think when, like your traditional supervision or how some people do supervision it's very kind of tick boxy, have you done this? Have you done that? Have you done this? Whereas they don't get space to actually think about, well, what are you doing? What impact does that have on you? (Heather SPO PD Pathways)

However, practitioners tended to focus more on the emotional and wellbeing aspect of RPSS:

Because the one thing that I do like about SEEDS2 is that it acknowledges my emotions. (Charmaine, PO, Generic)

Okay, there's a lot more focus, there's been a lot more time about you as a person, not about work, so about you, how are you, your health and wellbeing, all that kind of thing, there's a lot more of that, that's very noticeable in the past six months or so. (Paul PO Generic)

Yeah, I think that there is a difference. It tends to be focused on how you're coping, how are the caseloads. We have a lot of staff absence in our team, that is an issue, and we are always covering one another, and I think that my line manager is very much aware of that being an issue, so it's checking in how you're managing those things. Obviously the current situation working from home, the impact of having children home and everything else. Those are the sorts of things that she will be looking at and checking really, that don't necessarily get covered in a structured supervision where it's just about the casework. So there is more of a focus on those types of issues, I would say (Vicki, PSO, VLO)

It was a very paper based exercise, supervision, and tick boxy and she would ask the questions but only so she could write the answers in a box, not because she really cared so although there were other strengths to that kind of supervision I don't miss it being like that. I know I can go to my manager now and she'll really care if I'm having a hard time and we'll have a discussion that will help me find a solution (Isabela, PO, Generic)

Despite the framework facilitating discussions relating to emotions, practitioners indicated that they do want clinical supervision as well as what is on offer via the RPSS:

obviously those sessions that we get with our line managers, it's all very well asking those questions, but I think that there is a difference, isn't there, between being able to speak freely with an independent counsellor and being able to speak freely with your boss who is also monitoring have you talked about targets yet, have you met those targets,... audit standard for example. Actually you might want to get something off your chest that has been really bothering you, something emotionally difficult to manage but your line manager is concerned about does that meet audit standard and have you met the deadline on that. I think that there is a conflict of interests when your line manager is trying to provide that service (Vicki, PSO, VLO)

One aim of the RPSS was to acknowledge and support the emotional toll that working in probation can place on staff. It would appear that it can do this when done properly although there appears to be some inconsistency in how it is being implemented.

#### **6.4. SPOs want to be supervised according to the framework.**

Despite the fact that analysis of the interview data indicates that emotional support is a valued part of the supervision process by practitioners and SPOs alike, a number of SPOs

commented on the lack of supervision from their line managers or a level of dissatisfaction with the supervision they had received. This quote from Frank (SPO, Sex Offender Unit) highlights the functional nature of SPO supervision despite the pressures arising as a result of another period of significant change:

It's functional. We are in a process of transition, nobody knows really what side they're sitting or where they're going to end up, everybody's in temporary roles above me as far as I can see, you know, it's functional. It's not reflective and it's not developmental, it's not about me, it's just functional about what we've got to do.

Likewise, Demi (SPO, Prison) comments on feeling uncertain about whether it is 'safe' to use her supervision to explore her emotions:

I think I have supervision but the supervision I have I would say is less, I don't necessarily feel safe enough to offload in that way.

For other SPOs, supervision discussions were an important site of accountability and as such recording was seen as imperative:

I have only had in the last year two lots of supervision notes from my manager. You know. Where is it detailed what we've discussed? Plus it's evidence as well for performance management issues so, you know, that's been a bit of a bugbear of mine and frustration. I've had to ask recently for my supervision notes just for my own wellbeing really because things have been very difficult, and I needed things documented to say what we discussed because of lack of support in terms of stability in the team and the staffing issues (Jemima, SPO, Court)

A key finding in the evaluation of the Reflective Supervision Model (Rex and Hosking, 2013) and SEEDS1 (Sorsby et al, 2013) was the need for a whole organisational approach and it would appear that this is an ongoing theme here.

Analysis of the interview data alongside the survey responses suggests that the quality of supervision is wholly contingent on the relationship between practitioner and SPO and the skills/approach of the SPO, SEEDS training notwithstanding. This could well account for the bimodal survey results suggesting that the variation is less about perceptions and experiences of the new framework and more about the individuals involved in the supervisory process:

I think my experience of being supervised in probation has been hit and miss because some managers are better than others at doing supervision (Jemima, SPO, Court)

I trusted in the relationship so I trusted that whatever he told me was the case, so even when I was doubting myself I trusted that when he told me something was good or something was, you know, that's fine, you're doing well, I trusted that and I needed that but then also if he told me something that I needed to

work on, I trusted in that as well. I think it all comes back to that doesn't it, in that you respect and value what he was - I respected and valued what he was telling me (Rebecca, PO, Prison)

Again, I think my last manager, that was her style, she really knew all her officers really well and really got to know them and she was very, very caring so that was generally her style anyway. I think my current manager, I think that's his natural style as well (Abby, PO, Generic)

This overarching point is important. It is clearly not sufficient to simply ask staff to implement a new supervisory framework. Staff – both managers and those whom they supervise – need the skills, relationships and, above all, time with which to build a foundation for good supervision.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The overarching finding from this research is that people in the Probation Service are supportive of the underpinning principles and ethos of the RPSS but that implementing such a reflective model of supervision has proven difficult. The reasons for this are varied but several stand out as being relevant to all grades. The first and primary barrier to implementation is time. Whilst this is, perhaps, an unsurprising finding it was made so vocally by so many participants that it needs to be made very clearly. There is currently a significant drive to recruit and train 1000 probation officers over the next several years and this will alleviate some of these issues. But it will also create issues for SPOs as they become responsible for supervising more (inexperienced) probation officers. There is, then, a need to focus on promoting and supporting new SPOs so that the current middle management workforce does not become overloaded. If the SEEDS2 model is rolled out to practitioners and, perhaps, built into the PQIP training some of these issues can be mitigated against. The second most cited barrier to implementation centres more on the varied and competing priorities that comprise the SPO role. The third most significant barrier is the inconsistency in the quality of supervision, inconsistent approaches to allocating time to the process by SPOs and unconstructive relationships between managers and those they supervise.

If these issues can be resolved then the RPSS holds significant potential to improve the way practitioners are supervised. In turn, this should improve the quality of offender management (especially through structured observations), support staff with dealing with the emotional labour they have to perform and enable staff to become more autonomous and confident with defensible decision making.

There are some limitations to this study which need to be borne in mind. The interview sample and survey samples were self-selecting and so may be skewed towards people who had something in particular to say about the RPSS, emotional labour or staff well-being. Relatedly, the interviews started with a discussion of supervision and SEEDS2 but moved into staff well-being, emotional labour and burnout: this focus may have shaped further discussions that came later in an interview. Many members of staff were unable to take part

in an interview in spite of volunteering in the survey and so, again, the interview sample will be skewed towards people who had the time to take part – perhaps resulting in those who were truly burnt out or feeling unsupported being unheard. The impact of the pandemic has been discussed briefly in relation to the implementation of SEEDS2 but it also resulted in a considerable gap between the survey and the interviews meaning that it is difficult to truly combine these two datasets in the way that was originally planned in the research design stage.

In spite of these limitations, several recommendations arise directly from our findings:

- Addressing SPO workload and ensuring the time is available to attend the training and implement the framework consistently is paramount. As Eugene says in the epigraph to this report, being a good staff supervisor is an art which needs time to be developed and implemented fully. The message we received from our interviewees is that this is not currently available.
- Increased understanding of the emotional labour of SPOs – the research shows that SPOs have to perform high levels of emotional labour which takes its toll emotionally.
- SPOs need more effective support through connection with peers, supportive line management supervision as well as wider wellbeing initiatives – this is important in terms of avoiding the burnout of SPOs.
- Address ongoing pressures relating to bureaucratic and mechanistic tasks perceived to offer protection in the face of SFOs or other serious incidents
- The lack of a whole organisation approach – whole systems approach – which was one of the cornerstones of the evaluation of the Reflective Supervision Model and SEEDS1 needs addressing through both the practitioner element of the SEEDS2 roll out but also by providing those who manage to SPOs to supervise in accordance with the standards.
- Communication and relevant training provided to all staff at the point of induction about the process alongside continuous availability of training and refresher events at regular periods to support staff changing roles. This is particularly relevant given unification. Refresher training and ongoing roll-out is important. This should be prioritised for new staff and those joining the Service from CRCs following unification. This will also address the barriers to implementation which have resulted from the pandemic. Refresher training needs provide a review of content but also act as an opportunity to share good practice and create communities of practice amongst SPOs.
- There is a need for consideration about how RPSS ‘fits’ with different working contexts/specialisms.
- The SPO role – which is under-researched – is vast and there is a need for some clarification around what the Service wants from SPOs. There is scope for thinking about introducing a ‘senior practitioner role’ which has a more developmental focus than the current SPO role which leaves SPOs trying to be fulfil multiple roles simultaneously. This would help with ameliorating tensions which exists within the role.

- If implemented fully the RPSS has the potential to reduce the amount of direct support that staff need from SPOs: this needs to be communicated more clearly to both SPOs and practitioners. However, it also needs to occur alongside a cultural shift away from back covering and blaming to professionalism, autonomy and empowerment. SEEDS2 can provide the framework for this but a whole systems approach is needed to embed it.

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