



# Remote Working

## Introduction

The purpose of this Position Paper is to identify and share key issues regarding the use of remote working arrangements in Probation and wider rehabilitation organisations. It is recognised that the period of the Covid19 Pandemic created a need to look for alternative ways of communicating with, supporting and supervising service users in these areas. Remote working is a recent development and naturally raises question about how to ensure that the needs of employers, service users and the wider public are sufficiently met, and that positive benefits can be built upon.

This Position Paper identifies key issues for practitioners and models of practice and sets out eight principles for practice. This is an evolving environment, and we will keep this paper under review.

## Definitions

Remote working is one of many phrases now used to describe alternatives to the model of traditional probation practice where the practitioner and the supervised individual meet together in a probation office. Other related phrases include home working, online working, smart working, agile working, blended supervision and hybrid supervision.

These approaches raise questions about the nature of the probation supervisory relationship, the use of technology, the need for amended practice guidelines, and the use of probation premises. They raise challenges for practitioners, managers, and supervised individuals. These challenges include (but are not limited to) concerns about support and supervision for staff, health and safety issues, the need to ensure good quality probation practice, the importance of ensuring that new ways of working are adopted in ways which are inclusive and avoid discriminatory outcomes.

The terms used in the context of probation practice post-pandemic in which we have seen the convergence of greater use of technology with a new operating model in probation which seeks to make more use of flexible working arrangements combined with a 'new normal' in which working from home has become much easier for many people there is a need to be clear about the language being used. Thus, for the sake of clarity this paper uses these definitions:

- Remote working: Work where the practitioner is working away from the office base and the company of colleagues.
- Smart working: Work where the practitioner makes use of IT tools (such as video-conferencing, MS Teams, mobile apps) for work with colleagues and administrative tasks.
- Agile working: Work where the practitioner is able to work from a number of locations.
- Blended supervision/hybrid supervision: Probation supervision where some interactions between the practitioner and the supervised individual are face-to-face and others happen remotely (using the telephone, video-conferencing or messaging).

## Principles

The Probation Institute supports the use of innovative ways of working. However, this needs to be done in response to what we know about practice from research with probation staff and those under supervision. Moreover, these new ways of working need to be directed towards a more effective and responsive service rather than simply a more efficient one. We therefore lay out our principles for the greater use of remote, hybrid and flexible supervision below.

## Models of probation practice

Blended supervision offers some benefits to practice but also potential drawbacks. Probation staff have said that accurate risk assessment can be hampered by remote communication (Phillips et al., 2021) whilst the flexibility that blended supervision provides can make for a more responsive service (Dominey et al., 2021). In turn this can make people on probation feel more valued and likely to engage. In the context of remote parole oral hearings Peplow and Phillips (2023) have argued that the move to more remote working benefits organisations but the costs to service users has not been fully explored. Prioritising the efficiency of the system over the effectiveness of the service poses a threat to the legitimacy of sentencing and effectiveness.

Providing people with a voice in their sentence can improve the legitimacy with which they view their Order (Tyler, 2010). Blended supervision can provide an opportunity for people on probation to have a voice in their supervision by discussing the options for hybrid supervision with them. This is more likely to enable people to comply both formally (by ensuring that modes of supervision respond to individual circumstances) and substantively by allowing practitioners to adhere to principles of procedural justice (Blasko & Taxman, 2018).

### **Principle 1**

Decisions about the mode of supervision (e.g. face-to-face, video-conference, telephone) should be made on an individual basis following an assessment of the risks, needs, strengths and circumstances of each case. The focus of these decisions should be on improved effectiveness rather than efficiency.

### **Principle 2**

Decisions about the mode of supervision should take account of the preferences of the service user. This should be done at induction and sentence planning, and then reviewed periodically throughout the sentence especially at key transitions such as release from prison or when frequency of contact is changed.

Probation has - traditionally - been a terrestrial service, based in the communities it serves. Although recent decades have witnessed a move away from community-based probation towards a more centralised and siloed service, this way of working is still new for many, especially more experienced staff.

Thus far data on the way in which blended supervision impacts on the supervisory process and effective practice is drawn from research which explored probation in the context of the pandemic. These findings are not necessarily translatable to a fully formed blended supervision model and an operating model which shifts focus towards more remote working.

There is some evidence to suggest that blended supervision delivered as it was delivered in the pandemic was received by some to be more pervasive (Casey et al., 2021). Such ways of working could be considered an intrusion on people's privacy. Some staff who expressed concern at the impact that supervising high risk people with - for example - sexual offence convictions from their homes especially where children may be present.

### **Principle 3**

Practitioners receive the training, supervision and support needed to use this discretion in a defensible and effective way.

### **Principle 4**

Thus, new models of practice need to draw on evidence of effective practice and be subject to research, evaluation and ongoing review. The mode of supervision should enhance and certainly should not diminish the supervisory relationship and the opportunities to reduce harm and strengthen rehabilitation.

### **Principle 5**

Therefore, the rights of supervised individuals and staff need to be respected. Arrangements for supervision should allow for privacy, confidentiality and safety for all involved.

## Practitioners and their working arrangements

Research has shown that when probation practitioners work remotely, they sometimes have to do so from bedrooms, kitchen tables and living rooms (Phillips et al., 2021). Working at workstations which are not ergonomically appropriate poses a risk to physical health. More broadly, working from home can mean that staff are not able to compartmentalise their working lives from their personal lives which can lead to work life spill over and work-family conflict. Both of these can lead to increased levels of burnout and high levels of stress.

Informal and formal peer support can be a critical source of support when it comes to coping with the emotional demands of the job. A significant area of concern for practitioners working remotely is a lack of access to peers and line managers.

Providing staff with some autonomy over where and how they work can make people feel more empowered and improve job satisfaction. Being mandated to work from home, or from the office undermine these processes.

Working from home can result in additional costs to practitioners. It can also create the conditions in which people feel more pressured to work long hours and unpaid overtime.

### **Principle 6**

Where practitioners are working away from the probation office (including both when the practitioner is working at home and when the practitioner is visiting the supervisee's home) sufficient health and safety assessments should be in place. Allowances should be made, and training should be provided to support practitioners with the difficulties presented by working from home.

### **Principle 7**

Practitioners working remotely from the office need to be able to access line management and case-related supervision and support. They should have opportunity to join team and peer group meetings and activities.

### **Principle 8**

There should be appropriate systems in place that ensure practitioners have appropriate choice about where they work, and these choices should be offered equally and fairly to all staff.

### **Principle 9**

IT tools and other equipment available to practitioners need to be fit for purpose and their use should be monitored and evaluated.

## References

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