

Making Probation a Hope- Focused Organisation



The researchers who undertook this research project (which was funded by Research England via the University of Nottingham) are a mix of people who have worked as probation staff, been supervised by Probation services, served time in prison, work or have worked for Criminal Justice policy ‘think tanks’, have worked in drug and alcohol or housing support roles, or who work in academia.

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Read more about the project and get in touch with us here!



TOP LINES

The research highlighted the importance of:

- Meaningful work
- A positive culture
- Meaningful professional relationships
- The importance of hope and how people cope when they lose it
- A values-based probation service, which focuses on rehabilitation and **balances** risk with rehabilitation

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This project is about the role of hope in probation supervision and the extent to which probation supervision, as currently delivered, is able to promote, respond to and develop the hopes of those sentenced to Probation by the courts or being supervised post-prison release.

What we did

We started by undertaking four walking groups to a small village in the Peak District National Park called Hope. During these walks, we asked those with lived experience of probation (personally and professionally) what hope meant to them and the best ways of talking about this concept.

We then undertook 44 interviews with people who had been supervised, worked (or had worked) in probation, drug and alcohol rehabilitation or worked directly or indirectly with probation (in housing, religious organisations, sentencers and outreach programmes), to gain insight into how probation supervision instilled and developed the hopes of those being supervised.

What we found

Probation was felt to have a lack of meaning: this was due to a lack of time for meaningful work (which was due to high caseloads, themselves the result of low levels of staffing, poor retention, absence from work).

“I just think the whole idea about risk management and it being all about risk has a huge impact on how you can nurture hope.”
A former-probation Officer

“I was increasingly being dictated to in terms of the parameters of how we could work. The ability to actually meaningfully do my job was going away. It was becoming much more risk management focused”.

A former-probation Officer

The culture of probation Practice is poor: Staff felt burnt out; there was ‘no energy’ to supervisions; staff had a lack of creativity, the license to act creatively was absent and there was little personal agency; the service was no longer ‘person-centric’ (having become ‘risk-centric’) and was highly risk averse. This meant hope and the promotion of hopefulness had to be rationed, meaning that staff had to ‘triage’ the people who they felt were most in need of hope.

There were poor staff-probationer relationships reported in some cases, with some probationers just wanting probation to 'leave them alone.' The root causes of the problems which individuals faced were therefore left unaddressed, which led to a lack of hope in staff.

Those on probation sought (and found) hopefulness outside of probation; they masked their concerns and the problems to avoid having their risk levels raised; similarly staff left probation to seek out more hopeful opportunities. In effect, hopefulness was sub-contracted to other agencies and social groups (such as families, kinship networks the 3rd sector). Probation has lost its identity as a caring organisation.

It was felt that overtime, and going back several years to the mid- to late-1990s, probation had seen an erosion of the underpinning values which it once held (and which were based in social work values) and which valued both individuals and the positive role which people can play in the future despite what they have done in the past.

Take Home Messages

Probation ought not simply to 'signpost' people to other services, but act as advocates for those on probation in dealings with those services (i.e. not simply telling people where local housing services could be accessed, but helping them to deal with those services too).

More time is needed for probation staff to undertake meaningful work with probationers in such a way that hopes are created, nurtured and developed.

“There has to be a **balance** but I think it's shifted so far towards risk management that we've forgotten what probation was initially about and actually it's about building up people's strengths. It's about developing their protective factors because those are the things that stop people reoffending. We're putting restrictions on people. You can only do that while they're on probation. If then they finish probation, they haven't got those strengths and they haven't got those protective factors...they are just going to reoffend. **So I think it's shifted too far to the risk management side of things and it should be coming back towards kind of really focusing on, building up people and the rehabilitation so I just feel like rehabilitation has been lost.**”

A former-probation Officer

To better facilitate meaningful supervision, the lived experience community ought to be more fully incorporated into the working practices and culture of probation (with more people with lived experience becoming probation staff, rather than solely being utilised as user councils).

In order to assist probation work which reflects local needs and priorities, nationally determined policies ought to be promoted and used sparingly.

Hope and the instillation of hopefulness ought become a Key Performance Indicator for probation work.

“I think there's too many tick boxes, if I'm being honest. And I think it should be more **person centred**. How that gets done? I don't know. Because I understand their safeguarding issues. And I do understand that we have to have some form of rules and regulations, but it's not person centred.”

NACRO Staff Member

A **relational and proactive approach** to risk and security needs to be adopted, whereby staff aim to get to know those they are working with so that they can spot changes in motivation to change, physical and mental health and altered social circumstances, and can respond appropriately (this may be more informal outreach activities being deployed, such as ‘drop-in’ branches).

Create a probation service in which needs and strengths are assessed rather than risks; see some risks as positive.

Efforts need to be made to build better communities of support for both staff (many of whom felt isolated from their colleagues) and those being supervised (e.g. local recovery forums, which bring people together with lived experience of drug and alcohol use, homelessness, care-leaving and justice-involvement).

“If I'm completely honest the whole risk thing, I think, and I don't blame probation. Practitioners themselves are blind to the system a little bit. I think they're scared of making any decisions. I think they're scared of following their gut. I think they're scared of following their intuitions because if anything goes wrong, they become accountable [...]. So, I **think there's kind of a culture of if you get something wrong and you make a mistake, you're kind of hung out to dry**. I don't know if that's everyone that's just the impression I get”.

A former-probationer