



## A CONVERSATION ON VALUES AND PRINCIPLES IN PROBATION

## Introduction

The following conversation took place as part of the work of the Probation Development Group at the Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice (Deering et al., 2023). We reflect on the impact of policy and organisational changes on staff in probation, focusing on their values and principles regarding probation work. In particular, changes within probation following the Transforming Rehabilitation policy (see Deering & Feilzer, 2015) are considered. Su and Ella both left probation as a result of this policy. Su later rejoined and Ella has moved into academia. Traditional values and principles in probation based on its originating ethos of 'advise, assist, and befriend' are thought to have come under significant pressures over the past few decades as part of numerous reforms to probation structures, changes in its overarching purpose, departures from its traditional social work training, and a dramatic staff turnover and change in staff composition.

## Reflecting on values and principles

**Martina:** [Transforming Rehabilitation - TR] was quite tragic for the service, because a lot of people who'd been in probation for a long time, just left. That loss of experience was really quite marked.

**Su:** I still feel it now. There's lots of young people [in the service now], very few old lifers like me. That loss of experience was huge and the oral history of the service before TR is fading fast.

**Ella:** I was just thinking about people joining the previous probation service and thinking of those people that are now joining into the Civil Service...I wonder if there's a difference between the values and principles of these groups regarding joining probation. Are civil service probation values something different?



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**Su:** I think they're different. Previously I think people joined with the same loose set of values that I had in 1986, although without thinking it through very much: 'do good, mend people'. I worked in community service when I started, and the chief administrator of the service I worked for criticised me and my lot. He said I can't tell you apart from your clientele, you all look the same. You all drive dodgy cars, and you dress badly, and we took this as an absolute badge of honour: that we were so on side with our clientele. I sense an 'us and them' now, a much stronger sense of there being a staff group who do something to another person.

The new mantra of 'assess, protect and change' are all things that you do to people. So we assess, 'we're going to do this to you. We are going to protect everyone else from you because we're deeply worried and scared of you and perceive you as a threat. And we're going to change you.' I think that's sort of absorbed somehow into the way people approach the work.

**John:** The new mantra was at least a change from the previous 20 years which was not about even imagining that you could change people, and that assessment was purely a narrow assessment of risk. We're 'just going to manage you.'

This is not just a job. You've got to enjoy it in some basic ways that are about how you view the world and how you treat people. I asked the trainees in 2010 - the government is telling you that probation is about punishing people and protecting the public. So why did you join? Nobody said I'm here to punish people. And that remained consistent throughout their training (Deering, 2010). But it's interesting to hear you say now that since it's become a civil service that maybe it's different?

**Martina:** It would be interesting, but I wonder whether it makes a difference? Listening to our students who express an interest in probation, they are saying 'I'm doing this because I care about people, I care about the community I live in'. [But they] have no idea what they're walking into as a profession, and people should be quite open about that. They've got certain ideas about the job, but then join and people tell you what to do, and that influences what you think about the job and how you do it. I still think we underestimate the amount of time that is spent in front of the computer trying to fill in a form and fighting with that and how all that can influence your practice?

**Su:** We keep using the word profession. One of the definitions of a profession is the thing that you do for life, if you're a lawyer, or a surgeon, or whatever that's something you do for your working life, and that is not the case anymore in probation. You get your long service medal at 5 years these days, and a huge round of applause. So that is a challenge in itself.

**Ella:** Often professions will have some sort of values framework. In probation ethics, principles and values have been quite changeable and wishy-washy over the years without a clear framework. I know that Napo had clear views on this and the Probation Institute has produced a list of values for practice and of course lots has been done in Europe. How important is it to have these things? I don't think people look at organisational buzzwords and fundamentally change [their values]. They might change elements of practice due to different strategies and policies, but do they change their deep rooted values? I know we've tried to state some of these things within our publication. Do you think it is important to put a marker in the sand? Say, well, this is the sort of probation that we want with these sorts of values.

**John:** I suppose it's about what you think probation is about. In my view, if it's not about trying to help people change and improve their lives, then there's no point to it. You could just fine all the people who don't go to prison or give them hours of unpaid work. But if you believe that things can change for people, then you have to think that you can work with people, that you can be empathic and believe in their ability to change.

**Martina:** In our survey (Deering & Feilzer, 2015), respondents referred to public sector values and a core belief that people can change. And that the role of the probation officer is to assist in that change. However, in research since I've noticed that there isn't a lot of 'profession for life' anymore, and in probation you seem to have a criminal justice professional, where people move between different services, from police to probation and back again, including to the private and charitable sectors. However, the ethos of these sectors are very different. You can see some similarities between the public and charitable sectors, but some people move between both the private and public sectors and I don't think we have a full grasp of those individuals yet in terms of their values.

**Su:** I think we're offering what we think, a view of what values and ethics of a probation service should be. People make individual decisions based on their own skills and understanding all the time with reference to their training and to a set of values and ethics. So you need to have a set of values and ethics to refer to, and the profession can resist calls to work in ways that conflict with its agreed values and ethics.

**Ella:** Agreed, but there is something about the interpretation of the words, isn't there? Earlier we talked about 'assess, protect and change', and it being potentially negative where we do the change to the people, we make them change - or

positive if we enable and support them to change. How does this relate to the training, the development, the support of practitioners? So they can discuss and consider what some of these things mean and how they can be interpreted.

**Martina:** The point Su was making is important. It's about the organisation as much as the individuals within it. However, the Civil Service has no history or culture as a probation organisation, and neither does being part of HMPPS promote a probation-specific ethos. When we say 'challenge the individual', we also need to say 'challenge the organisation' to support individuals to deliver some of this work.

**Ella:** It almost mirrors what we do with working with people on probation, isn't it? We challenge them as individuals. But we should be going back to the system that created the circumstances that put them in that place.

**John:** Ever since probation became a punishment, a sentence of the court in the 1991 Criminal Justice Act, governments have tried to change the ethics and values of the organisation. Government was saying probation was about punishment in the community. With the arrival of National Standards, the government set about trying to redefine the organisational culture: "We are an enforcement agency, it's who we are, it's what we do". They knew how important it was in order to change the organisation.

**Ella:** That's when I started. But because I was working with the old guard, I guess, who would be like 'forget about that'...This is how we do probation. There was a mixture of this conflicting policy, guidance and people, saying, this is what we are, and then other people go, 'no, this is what we are.

**John:** Until the last 30 years 'advise, assist and befriend' was a requirement for probation. It was all a bit vague, but it represented the values of the organisation that people within it were supposed to try and work towards, so in some sense you were able to hold them to account. I think we're quite right to argue that Probation needs to go back to an idea that it is working to engage people in a humanistic and empathic way, because we know what is potentially effective is based on those sorts of things. It's about having a proper relationship with somebody and professional work.

**Su:** When I first joined probation I used to laugh, if a week went by when I hadn't spent an hour discussing our values base in a meeting or other, it was a weird week. Sometimes it would go down a bit of a rabbit hole, but actually, values and ethics were talked about all the time. That social work reflective thing. It was just a naturally occurring feature in any staff meeting or conversation.

So, if we were to persuade a probation service in Wales to adopt our set of values and ethics, we should probably suggest these are discussed at team meetings, or that should be very much part of the training.

**Ella:** Yes indeed, Su. Probation spearheaded anti-discriminatory practice, probation officers would bring these important issues up, and I think you might get back to that place where probation officers can lead on these important issues around respecting people as people first. That would be great for the future.

**Martina:** I think the point is that values and principles are only worth something, if people know how to use them in their day to day work, and can buy into them. It needs to be something that is real, and whether people agree with all of the bits it doesn't matter. That's all part of the discussion. It must go both ways so that individuals don't feel that only they are monitored or held to account for their values, but also that they can hold the organisation to account. I've been mulling over how important it is that you have organisations that represent

different views in the criminal justice system. So that opposition to a law enforcement punishment narrative exists, and that probation should hold that line. Does it sound wrong to be on the side of the person who has committed a crime? But it used to be that position, didn't it? It's about regaining that ground because the argument is that you will protect communities in the long run if you do that.

**John:** I think we've got to emphasise that this is not just a theoretical debate. It's about something that you need to make this organisation work in a certain way. So, it's absolutely integral. We need to tie it in with the evidence about effectiveness in practice and say these things are intertwined.

**Su:** Once we finish this conversation, I'm off to have a very final session with a woman on the very last day of 2 consecutive, suspended sentence orders, and she's been absolutely brilliant. So, we're just going to have tea and cakes, and that'll be great. Keeps me going. The thing for me about the values and ethics is, it should make us very distinctly different from other organisations in the criminal justice system. We shouldn't be part of the prison system. Their job is to keep people in, and our absolute job is to keep them out.

## References

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