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Looking under the bonnet; probation officers' practice with child protection cases.

Abstract

This research examined 31 Probation Service cases in England and Wales that required some child protection work. It examined three areas: key characteristics of the case, inter-agency communication, and evidence for a 'think family' approach. Key findings were that domestic violence and substance misuse were widespread. The majority of the cases were assessed as low or medium risk of harm, and so after the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' restructuring will be supervised by a Community Rehabilitation Company, rather than the National Probation Service. The majority of cases featured effective inter-agency communication, and were characterised by the 'think family' principle. Where this was not achieved, two types of cases stood out. The first was where the Probation Officer was distracted from offenders¹ children because of public protection issues. The second was where Probation Officers made efforts to be included in multi-agency work, but were shut out.

Keywords

Probation, child protection, safeguarding children, think family, multi-agency work, Transforming Rehabilitation

Introduction

In England and Wales, the principle of multi agency work runs through child protection, just as it does across all of social care, health and criminal justice. For instance in criminal justice there are the Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements to protect the public from dangerous offenders, Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences to protect possible victims of domestic violence, teams of mixed professionals that make up the Youth Offending Service, and in mental health the Care Plan Approach. Although not identical in structure, they are all frameworks for multi-disciplinary collaboration, articulating responsibilities for lead agencies, and

¹ the term offender is deliberately used throughout this article. Although it does define an individual primarily by their offending, it is the term generally used by workers in the Criminal Justice System - the term 'client' was effectively banned during the height of correctionalism, and the term 'service user' has only the smallest foothold in the field.

for other agencies that have a duty to contribute.

The Probation Service's core business is working with individuals who have offended, to reduce the probability of their future offending. The principle that Probation staff also have a role to play in protecting children is long established, yet the extent to which this role sits easily has varied over the decades, according to the prevailing political and practice climate.

There was a period when Probation Officers qualified for their role by undertaking Social Work training in Higher Education, albeit at those Universities that ran approved Probation options. Through the 1970s this became the norm, as specialist Home Office training was run down. By 1981 it was deemed a requirement to hold a Certificate of Qualification in Social Work to work as a Probation Officer. This arrangement came to an end in 1998, when a dedicated Probation Officer training route, the 'Diploma in Probation Studies' was set up. The separation sent a clear message - that Probation Officers were not a particular type of Social Worker, they were qualitatively different, and that their job was to focus exclusively on crime.

The separation of training arrangements were but one aspect of the shift in Probation Service identity over the last three decades. Other changes need a brief examination in order to understand the relationship between Probation practice and child protection. A largely welfare driven perspective had reigned in the Probation Service until the early 1980s; the logic underpinning practice was that if the emotional and material welfare of offenders was attended to, then their offending would probably abate. However a number of factors then changed the climate. Crime became more politically salient, particularly in the aftermath of the 1993 murder of James Bulger. Public attitudes hardened in what has been called the 'new punitiveness' (Pratt et al 2005). The public sector now had to demonstrate its effectiveness, and for Probation Officers that meant concentrating interventions on those who might pose a risk of harm to others, and conversely investing less effort in cases where risk was low, even though their need for support might be undeniable. Cognitive behavioural treatment programmes for offending behaviour became the mainstay of practice, partly as a result of the emerging emphasis on 'evidence-based practice. Work with offenders prioritised 'cognitive deficits', such as a poor sense of responsibility, gaps in consequential thinking, or a lack of victim empathy (Mair 2004). All of these themes conspired to train the focus of Probation work firmly on the offence and factors directly linked to the offending, rather than on the offender as a member of a family and a community. The editorial of a 2010 edition of Probation Journal endorsed this view;

'This correctional drift has been particularly pernicious not only because it has absorbed and in turn reflected the emphasis on punishment and control but because it has encouraged probation withdrawal, on a day-to-day basis from offenders' families, their communities and until recently those partnership arrangements in communities at the local level.' (Burke and Collet 2010, p243)

Somewhat surprisingly though, the last few years has seen yet another change of climate. The dogmatic grip of cognitive behaviourism has loosened, making some space for desistance theory (e.g. Farrall & Calverley 2006) and a healthier balance with strengths based approaches, for instance the 'Good Lives Model' that is used with sexual offenders (Ward & Maruna 2007). A preoccupation with offenders' cognitive deficits and risks has been counter-balanced by a renewed interest in their relationships, both with their own family and friends, and with their supervisor in the Probation Service (Burnett and McNeill 2005, Ansbro 2008).

Given these shifts in identities, it would be understandable if today's Probation Officers harboured some uncertainties about their role in child protection, and in particular the tension between tightly circumscribed offence focused work, and more broadly defined work where the whole ecology of the offender's life is relevant (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

It seems to the author that a similar tension is played out in the legislation and policy that guides practice in this area; on the one hand there is guidance that is procedural in tone, with the emphasis on information sharing, and on the other there is more aspirational guidance that wants to see Probation staff developing a deeper involvement with offenders' children and families.

The 2004 Children Act articulated in law for the first time what the Probation Service's duties were in relation to child protection. Section 10.4 of the Act listed the organisations that were 'relevant partners' to Children's Services (they include the various parts of the NHS, the Police, Probation, Youth Offending Teams, Prisons, and the various branches of the Learning and Skills Council). Section 11 then articulated the duties of those agencies, namely to ensure that;

'their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children'. (Children Act 2004, S.11 2(a))

It was short and unelaborated, and three years later some guidance arrived to help interpret the Act. In 2007 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published a document called *"Statutory Guidance on Making Arrangements to Safeguard and promote the welfare of Children under Section 11 of the Children Act 2004"*. It set out six ways that the Probation Service should make a contribution to safeguarding children. The first way was by working with offenders who were known to pose a direct risk to children. The second referred to work with adults who were also parents, and addressing problems (e.g. substance misuse) that might precipitate future offending. The third way was by participating in multi-agency collaborations, and the fourth was by seconding staff to youth offending teams. The fifth way was by providing *'a service to child victims of serious sexual or violent offences'* (p 58). To the lay person this might suggest a sort of support or counselling service, but it actually alluded to a group of Probation Service employees, Victim Liaison Officers, and their work under Section 69 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. This requires that in cases where an offender has been imprisoned for 12 months or more for a violent or sexual offence, their victim (and their parents, guardians or

carers if the victim is a child) receive information about sentence progression and release. Finally, the sixth way was by working with the victims of domestic violence offenders who were attending domestic abuse programmes, alluding to the work of Women's Safety Officers, who are also employed by the Probation Service. Overall, then, this guidance does put a little flesh on the bones, but does not elaborate on what constitutes best practice.

The various versions of Working Together to Safeguard Children (the most recent was published in 2013) makes the case for multi-agency work in child protection amply, but has just four paragraphs devoted to the Probation Service, essentially summarising the guidance given in DfES paper cited above.

However, in 2009 a qualitatively different message arrived. In that year the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) issued a policy that set out a much more ambitious role for the Probation Service in safeguarding children. *'Reducing reoffending, supporting families, creating better futures; A framework for improving the local delivery of support for the families of offenders'* (MoJ/DCSF 2009) set out how the families of offenders are disadvantaged economically, emotionally, educationally and socially. The guidance demanded that all agencies, inside and outside the Criminal Justice System, collaborate to fight the poor life outcomes of offenders' families'. It cited dismal statistics, for example that 63% of offenders' children will go on to become criminally convicted themselves. It then set the Probation Service the task of assessing the well-being of children in offenders' families, and moreover to make a difference to their welfare and life chances, by, for instance, working to improve parenting skills. It stressed in more detail than hitherto that the Probation Service's role was to encompass that large band of children who would fall under Section 17 of the 2004 Children Act as being 'in need' of help to ensure a reasonable standard of health and development.

Taken in its broader context the paper was not a surprise, and reflected the broader 'think family' principle, an initiative that the DCSF had championed, drawing on evidence from the Social Exclusion Unit. The DCSF summarised the philosophy of think family as *"making sure that the support provided by children's, adults' and family services is co-ordinated and focused on problems affecting the whole family"* (DCSF 2009 p 2). Although the DCSF and the Social Exclusion Unit were summarily culled when the Coalition government took office in 2010, the think family mantra has survived, and lives on across health and social care policy (e.g. Social Care institute for Excellence, 2011). However, such an ethos could be said to be somewhat at odds with the offence focused probation training that predominated at the height of correctionalism. One caveat needs to be mentioned here; although the MoJ/DCSF (2009) paper currently features on many websites run by think tanks, Universities and charities (Institute of Education, Barnardo's) and is referred to in local procedures (see below) there is no trace of it on any governmental website (e.g. MoJ, Department of Health), and so it is difficult to know if it should be seen as a current piece of guidance at all.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) carries out regular inspections of all aspects of practice in the Probation Service, and has recently added the safeguarding of children to the areas under scrutiny. They are typically unimpressed with child protection aspects of case management, and yet their brief conclusions can lack the necessary detail to provide lessons for practice. For instance, HMIP recently published an inspection on London Probation's adult offending work (2014) and included a particular focus on work to protect children. 72 cases were inspected, of which 29 had child protection concerns. The conclusions were that more work needed to be done to a better standard - more checks with children's services at report writing stage, more inclusion of child protection work in sentence plans, more information on file about parental status, more home visits, more attention to the contact that offenders were having with children or young people. Instructive though such inspections are, child protection is just one of many aspects of offender management under scrutiny, and conclusions can be somewhat bald.

Hence the aims of this research were three-fold. The first was to build a picture of the type of child protection cases that Probation staff work with. As there seems to have been no recent research published on this, the collection of key demographic data was a first goal. Cases were examined to collate data on gender (whether cases involving female or male offenders were more likely to have child protection concerns), what type of offences had been committed, what problems might they be struggling with and what level of social work intervention might there be with the children in question.

Information on the type of offending and the assessment of risk of harm was of particular interest; this information has a particular salience at the moment, and requires further explanation. The National Probation Service in England and Wales was reconfigured on 1st June 2014 under the banner of "Transforming Rehabilitation" (MoJ 2013a), and made into two distinct bodies. There is now a smaller National Probation Service (NPS), which remains a public body. It will be employing a high proportion of qualified staff and working with offenders who pose a high risk of harm. The remainder, i.e. all low and medium risk offenders will be managed by 'Community Rehabilitation Companies' (CRCs), effectively a collection of private and voluntary organisations which will compete for work contracts.

It is yet to be seen whether CRCs will choose to employ staff that have qualifications such as the Diploma in Probation Studies, and what level of 'on the job' training they will provide. However, the logic that underpins the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda is that money can be saved by using CRCs for low and medium risk work, and those savings can then be used to provide support for a group of offenders who have not hitherto received any support, namely those who serve under 12 months in custody (MOJ 2013). Logically, it seems unlikely then that CRCs will employ qualified staff, or invest heavily in training, as that would make them uncompetitive. A report from the Justice Committee shortly before the changes recognised this uncertainty, and noted that *'Community Rehabilitation Companies will be managing considerable risk on a day to day basis, yet will not be required to have professionally qualified staff'* (Parliament 2014). At the time of writing there is no substantiated data on

recruitment. However, a Parliamentary debate secured by Kate Green (Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions) in January 2015 reported other concerns which would detract from the effective management of child protection cases, including the fragmentation of supervision that happened when cases were transferred from a CRC to NPS because risk was judged to have increased, and reports of insufficient CRC staff to run domestic violence programmes (TheyWorkForYou 2015). The risk levels of the sample will give some indication as to where the majority of cases with child protection concerns will be managed in the future.

The second aim of the research was to examine the extent to which Probation Officers communicated effectively with Children's Services about safeguarding. Safeguarding procedures in the Probation Service are set down locally rather than nationally, and in the area where the research was done the 38 page guidance on safeguarding reflected practical steps regarding inter-agency communication, as well as more general exhortations to work towards supporting the offender's whole family. For the purposes of this research adherence to three central requirements were chosen, namely that Probation staff must seek information from Children's Services whenever they start work with an offender who is a parent or who has regular contact with children, that they must make a referral of concern if they believe a child might be being abused or neglected, and that they must attend Child Protection Conferences if a offender they are supervising is connected to the case.

The third aim was to explore the extent to which their practice was typified by a 'think family' approach. The research examined files to see if there was evidence that the Probation Officer took an interest in the offender in the context of their whole family, and worked towards partners' and children's welfare. Case records were scrutinised for the presence of information about family members, evidence that familial relationships were discussed, that work was undertaken on relationships and parenting, and that collaborative work was undertaken with other child protection workers that focused on children's welfare.

To pull these strands together, this research sought to investigate what sort of child protection cases were being worked with by Probation Officers, whether procedures were properly followed, and whether work was characterised by a 'think family' perspective.

Methodology

Ethical approval was granted by Bucks New University Research Ethics Committee, and permission was granted from the Probation Trust in question to use anonymised case file material. The sample was drawn from the cases of a large metropolitan Probation Trust.

Sample selection; a total of 31 cases were selected, with one case taken from each of the geographical units within the area. The cases were selected because they involved some work connected to safeguarding children, ranging from the simplest

to the most complex. The sample was found by opening up case files on a random basis (using a random number generator), and reading enough of the case to know whether it required some child protection work. If it did, the case was added to the sample, if it did not the researcher moved on to the next one. A total of 142 cases were sifted through in order to identify the 31 child protection cases. Some cases were in custody, and some were being supervised in the community.

Case files in the Probation Service are held on two software systems, the electronic case recording system 'Delius', (standing for 'delivering information to you') and the risk and needs assessment tool 'OASys', (standing for 'Offender Assessment System'). Delius and OaSys data were drawn on for each case.

Data analysis; each case file was examined to provide the following information.

1. Quantitative demographic information about the case;
 - gender
 - offence type and social/personal problems
 - the Probation Officer's assessment of the offender's risk of harm
 - the nature of the child protection concerns, and the level of social work intervention in the case
2. Quantitative data on inter-agency communication regarding safeguarding. Data on the following three key aspects was collected;
 - did the Probation Officer elicit information from Children's Services whenever work was started on a case where the offender had contact with children?
 - did the Probation Officer make a referral of concern when there was an indication that a child might be in need of support or at risk of harm?
 - did the Probation Officer attend Child Protection Conferences and submit a report to them (in cases where they were held)?
3. Data on the extent to which a 'think family' approach was adopted (this was essentially quantitative data, but qualitative notes were taken to elaborate the point);
 - was there clearly recorded information about family composition?
 - did supervision included discussion of familial relationships?
 - was work undertaken on the offender's role as a parent?
 - did Probation Officers undertake collaborative work on children's welfare with child protection social workers? (i.e. that extended beyond the procedural exchange of information outlined in section 2)

Limitations of the research design; the most serious limitation of this research was that the data was exclusively taken from case file records. As a result they might have been incomplete or inaccurate. The sample size was also too small to draw any definitive conclusions from.

Findings

1 Demographics of the sample

Gender

Out of the 31 cases 17 of the individuals being supervised were men (55% of the sample), and 14 were women (45% of the sample). As women occupy 23% of all those sentenced in the courts (figures for 2010 published by Ministry of Justice/National Offender Management Service 2012), this suggests that women offenders are more likely than men to require some level of safeguarding involvement from the Probation Service. The sample size does not however allow for any firm conclusions to be drawn.

Offence type and personal/social problems experienced

10 men had current convictions for offences involving domestic violence (Common Assault or Assault Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm) against their partners or ex partners, 6 men had current offences of sexual violence/violence outside the family, and 1 man had a current offence of honour based violence against his daughter. The women's offences were more variable, and included theft, assault (including one of domestic violence against their partner), deception, burglary and being drunk in charge of a child.

19 out of 31 cases (61%) featured drug/alcohol misuse, and 18 out of the 31 cases (58%) featured domestic violence (some instances had led to criminal convictions, some had not). 9 out of 31 (29%) had mental health problems. There were 5 cases that featured none of these three factors.

The term 'toxic trio' has been used (Cleaver 1999, Brandon et al 2010) to describe how these three factors frequently co-exist, and moreover interact to compound the effect of each other. The profile of this sample confirms this pattern up to a point. Certainly the level of substance misuse is very high compared to the general population, if 24% of the general population is classified as drinking to a hazardous level, and 3.4% of the general population are classified as drug dependent (NHS Information Centre 2008). Similarly levels of domestic violence are high, with a prevalence of 5.7% of the adult population reporting being victimised during the year 2013-4 (Office for National Statistics 2014). It could however be argued that the prevalence of parental mental illness in this sample is not a great deal higher than the estimated prevalence of 17.6% in the general UK population (NHS Information Centre 2008). There were no cases that involved issues such as trafficking, online grooming or child abuse linked to spirit possession. Clapton et al (2013) has questioned whether these type of cases represent a new type of moral panic that distract policy makers and practitioners from more ubiquitous cases. Clearly such cases do exist and when encountered require skilled practitioners to recognise signs and respond. However, this snapshot of these cases suggests that for the NPS and the CRCs at least, they are not commonly encountered cases, and that family violence, substance misuse and mental health problems need to be prioritised in training.

Assessment of offenders' risk of harm

Risk of harm is assessed on the basis of past and present offending, and the type of problems that the offender is encountering. Most cases in the sample (24) were either low or medium risk of harm (or both at different points), with 5 consistently high or very high and 2 that started low and moved up. This means that the majority (77%) would be managed by one of the CRCs that have come into existence since the data was gathered. Despite their low or medium risk tags, many of the cases in this sample featured families with chronic and longstanding problems. Frequent communication and collaborative work with other agencies was required on a complex range of issues, and a single minded focus on reduction of reoffending would not have allowed this.

The Ministry of Justice has a vision whereby a small NPS will work with high risk offenders, and CRCs will work with the rest on a payment by results basis - the results being annually measured by drops in reconviction (MoJ 2013b). The MoJ has stated that the contracts awarded to CRCs will require them to participate in 'a small number of key statutory working arrangements' (MoJ 2013c p39), citing child and adult safeguarding as examples. At a strategic level representatives from both the NPS and the CRC are involved with Local Safeguarding Boards. However it remains to be seen how actively or effectively practitioners in the CRCs can manage such cases.

Gilbert (2013) has expressed similar concerns about the effects of Transforming Rehabilitation on work with domestic violence perpetrators. The crux of the matter in her view is that risk assessment is largely judged by an individual's criminal convictions, and there is compelling evidence that much domestic violence is not reported, prosecuted or convicted (Hester & Westmarland 2006). Therefore, domestic violence perpetrators are often assessed as medium risk, when in fact the danger they pose to their partners and children is significant. She questions whether the CRCs will be equipped to manage such cases.

Nature of the child protection concerns and level of social work involvement

Cases were included in the sample whatever the complexity of the child protection work involved. Nine of the cases were found to have no involvement from Children's Service at all, but because of the presence of children in the family, a request for information had to be sent from the Probation Officer to Children's Service to find this out.

However the majority of the cases (22 out of 31) did feature current social work intervention. Out of these 22, 11 featured children who were subject to Child Protection Plans, and out of those 11 cases, 8 ended in eventual removal from the family, either to live with a grandparent, a foster parent, or were removed for adoption. Two cases had children permanently removed throughout supervision, 1 case had children on a child in need plan, and 1 case received social work support throughout a pregnancy.

In the majority of the cases (again, 22 out of 31) the children who there were concerns about resided with their mothers. 6 lived with both parents and 1 with their father (this reflects where they lived most of the time - some cases featured children who moved in and out of foster or kinship care, or who were eventually removed for adoption). In 17 cases fathers were viewed as the main risk to the child, and in 14 of the cases the mothers were. Previous research has suggested that social workers tend to perceive fathers as the source of the problem, rather than a potential source of good parenting, to the extent that a severing of contact between father and child can be seen as a solution (Featherstone 2003). This is despite evidence about the importance of fathers in children's development, and policy designed to include fathers (Lamb 2010). There was some support for this in the sample, as in 9 cases fathers were not allowed to see their children, were not informed of developments in their children's cases, or were not allowed into Child Protection Conferences. However, it is difficult to condemn the social workers' practice in this respect, as the data was gathered solely from Probation sources, and so their perspective is not known. Moreover, the sample of cases included situations where the safe inclusion of the father seemed impossible; for instance one where the offender had made his 15 year old girlfriend pregnant, and had shown such extreme violence that she was sent to a safe house to give birth when he was about to be released from custody. Equally, there were a small number of cases where the father clearly did pose some threat to the child, and yet efforts were made to create some safe way of allowing a relationship to grow between father and child.

2 Inter-agency communication

Eliciting information from Children's Services at the start of work on a case where the offender had contact with a child.

In 18 out of the 31 cases these checks were carried out at the start of the work, but in 12 cases it took some weeks or even months for the check to be sent off, with no clear reason discernible from the records. In just 1 case it seemed never to have been done. In 9 cases Probation Officers had to make repeated efforts before any response was received from Children's Services. It was noticeable that the checks were universally carried out by sending an email or making a telephone call, and that the interactive pro-formas that the Probation Trust had created for the purpose were not used - perhaps a message for organisations that devise somewhat cumbersome systems that are then disregarded by practitioners who favour quicker methods. There were a handful of cases where the Probation Officer had made enquiries with Children's Services in the area that the offender lived, and only later realised that children in the family were known to a neighbouring Children's Services department. It seemed possible that Probation Officers were not sufficiently aware that records in Children's Services are kept on a local rather than a national basis, perhaps because Probation Service and Police records are kept on a national database.

Making referrals of concern.

There were surprisingly few cases where the Probation Officer needed to make a referral of concern to Children's Services. This was because in those cases where there were concerns the family was usually already well known to Children's Services. However there were 2 cases where the Probation Officer learned of an offender's pregnancy, had well founded concerns because of their substance misuse or mental health problems, and then passed the information on to Children's Services with their knowledge and consent.

Attending Child Protection Conferences and submitting reports.

In 9 cases Probation Officers attended at least one Child Protection Conference, or other multi-agency meeting such as a Child in Need meeting, a core group meeting, a Looked After Child meeting or a Family Group Conference. In one Child Protection Conference the Chair referred to the Probation Officer as the fathers 'advocate' (which she clearly was not), and used her attendance as one reason to deny the father an invitation to the conference. There were 7 cases where it was probable that such meetings had been held, but the Probation Officer had not been included. This is discussed later. There were only two cases where a Probation Officer's report had clearly been submitted to the Child Protection Conference. 15 cases did not feature any multi-agency meetings.

3 Was practice characterised by a 'think family' approach?

The one unifying factor that the sample shared was that they all required some degree of child protection work; however over and above that they varied considerably as to the scope for adopting a 'think family' perspective. All of the cases were examined for evidence that information about family composition was recorded, and likewise that those relationships were discussed in supervision. However, it was not always appropriate to focus on the offender's role as a parent (for instance if their children had been permanently removed), and in some cases there was no multi-agency child protection work to collaborate with. Given these variations, 23 out of the 31 cases had evidence of a think family approach at the appropriate level.

The following two cases show the potential for productive collaborations between Probation Officers and Social Workers in protecting children. Case 1 is a clear demonstration of Probation practice with a think family focus, finishing with a positive outcome. Case 2 perhaps has an equally important message - that good Probation practice is not equivalent to advocacy, and the Probation Officers can make valuable contributions in situations where efforts to improve parenting are not succeeding;

Case example 1;

PP was a young woman who had been both a young carer (her mother was a heavy drinker), and a looked after child (she placed herself in Section 20 voluntary care). Now aged 24, she had gathered many convictions, and was being supervised on a Community Order for domestic violence against her male partner (although she had also been a victim of domestic violence). PP became pregnant whilst on the order,

and her Probation Officer informed Children's Services. The Probation Officer was then involved on a practical level, helping PP register with a GP, engage with ante-natal care, and abstain from drink. He also worked on emotional issues, discussing her own experiences of being parented, and how she and her partner might parent together. They examined her suspicions towards Social Workers, and the Probation Officer did a good job of convincing her that her best hope of being a good mother, and being allowed to keep her baby was to be open and co-operative with Children's Services. After the baby was born the Probation Officer visited jointly with the Social Worker, and the visit formed part of the assessment of PP and her partner's care of the baby. At the end of the order, both parents were living with the child, and Children's Services were intending to close the case.

Case example 2;

MM had a substance misuse habit, a violent partner, and a 2 year old daughter on a Child Protection Plan. She was placed on a Community Order with a drug treatment requirement, for theft and drug related offences. The Probation Officer and the Social Worker were clearly working towards the same aims - reducing her drug use and improving her ability to parent a child. The Probation Officer participated in five separate interagency meetings (Child Protection Review Conferences, Core Group Meetings and a Family Group Conference). The plan was not successful, and eventually the child went to live with her grandmother on a Special Guardianship Order. Shortly afterwards MM was sent to prison for violent offences, and some time later the Probation Officer struck up contact with Children's Services again (the case was by this time closed), and made sure that future contact with her daughter was planned for as her release approached.

This next case provides a cautionary tale of practice that falls short in several ways, and there is no sense that the family is being thought about;

Case example 3;

UU was about to be sentenced for obtaining state benefits by deception. When the Court report was being prepared before her sentencing, UU mentioned to the Probation Officer that she had a 6 year old child. She did not know what was happen to him if she went to prison. In the event she did go to prison. No contact was made with Children's Services in anticipation of custody, or after sentencing, and no enquiries were carried out as to the child's whereabouts. After release on licence, the child was scarcely mentioned. It was made clear to the offender that there were various things that the Probation Officer could not be expected to help with (accommodation, eviction, advice about court orders, debt).

Where a think family approach was not adopted, two types of cases stood out. Firstly, there were a small number of cases where the offending had been committed outside of the family, and managing the considerable risk to the public seemed to distract the Probation Officer's attention away from the offender's own family. Although there were only 3 cases of this type, they were of a serious nature, and as demonstrated by case example 4, public protection seemed to trump child

protection. Perhaps this is an understandable inclination given that this is the core business of the Probation Service, and that the prospect of a 'Serious Further Offence' investigation (which takes place when someone being supervised commits a serious offence) is a source of much anxiety for Probation staff (Fitzgibbon 2011).

Case example 4;

SS served a prison sentence for kidnapping and raping a woman while posing as a taxi driver. He was released on licence to live with his wife and children. However, it was several months before any contact was made with Children's Services, who, it emerged, were concerned about his young son's serious developmental delay. No home visit was ever done, and the issue of any risk he may have posed to his children and wife was never mentioned. There was a huge amount of work being done in other areas, which was recorded meticulously. As well as being a case that was worked with under the Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements, the Probation Officer was communicating with the Foreign Policy Group (although SS was not being deported, his indefinite leave to stay was being reviewed every 6 months), the Police, and the Community Safety Unit. The Probation Officer was also in contact with the Victim Liaison officer who was working with the victim of the rape, and a psychologist (who concluded that he fell short of a borderline personality disorder and recommended that he treat himself with some online resources, despite his English being poor!). SS's offence was not within the family, and so perhaps it is understandable that the Probation Officer's efforts were concentrated on the possibility that he may repeat a serious sexual offence against an adult woman. It is perhaps a tall order to expect the Probation Officer to 'think family', on top of all of the other concerns, but it is nevertheless essential - the small glimpses into his son's problems generated real concerns into his capacity to parent.

Secondly there then a number of cases (8 out of the 31 cases) where the Probation Officer made concerted efforts to be included in the multi-agency work, but seemed to be shut out by Children's Services. In three cases Probation Officers were initially engaged in good, collaborative work but at a certain point were excluded.

Case example 5;

TT was convicted of being drunk in charge of a child. She had similar previous convictions over recent years. At report writing stage the Probation Officer asked for information from Children's Services. There was an allocated social worker for the case, and the two had a fruitful discussion about collaborative work that could be done if a Community Order were to be received. The Social Worker undertook to send an invitation to a forthcoming Child Protection Conference. Unfortunately, this was as good as the multi-agency work ever got, and over the next few months, there were meetings held, a core assessment undertaken, child protection orders made, and a son ultimately received into voluntary care. The Probation Officer learned about all of these events after they had happened, and mainly from the offender herself. Despite making regular attempts to contact the Social Worker, the Probation Officer was not allowed to have a role. The Probation Officer's work was excellent, supplemented by contributions from a clinic specialising in personality disorders, and

the local alcohol and drug agency. However, the social worker seemed to have no interest in the (largely positive) response to supervision and a drug treatment order.

This provides the most intriguing trend, and it is only possible to speculate what lay behind this. Existing research suggested that differences in status between professionals, or contrasts in theoretical approaches might act as barriers to effective multi-agency work in child protection (White and Featherstone 2005). Frost et al (2005) observed that when Social Workers and Probation Officers worked together in a Youth Offending team they both endorsed a similar social model, and yet the Social Workers tended to perceive the Probation Officers as resembling Police Officers rather than Social Workers, and thought that the Probation Officer's priority was to enforce requirements and breach offenders when required.

Further research in this area could explore other possible explanations. Perhaps it was the suspicion, alluded to above, that the Probation Officers would be biased towards their offender, and argue, for instance, in support of their parenting skills, or that they should remain living with their children. It could be speculated that once a Social Worker has moved towards the decision to take child protection steps, then voices that might question the decision need to be filtered out - something akin to a 'confirmation bias' in social psychology. Indeed there were a number of cases there was good communication between Probation Officer and Social Worker whilst the case was going well, but the Social Worker became wholly unavailable when steps started to be taken towards the removal of children. Alternatively, it could also be reasonably speculated that Probation Officers' exclusion is the unintended consequence of Children's Services that are overloaded, and Social Workers who sometimes do not have the time or energy to include every agency that is involved (BASW 2012).

Conclusion

The sample was dominated by families where the fathers/step fathers were violent within the family, or women were struggling to parent on their own. Substance misuse was present in nearly two thirds of the cases, and mental health problems in nearly one third. Cases tended to be assessed as low or medium risk, and so under Transforming Rehabilitation will be managed by CRCs. There are too many uncertainties at this point to predict the future here, but there must be some probability that CRCs will not have the budgets to allow for sufficient qualified staff, in-house training, or staff supervision required to manage cases of this complexity. Inter-agency communication was promptly carried out in the majority of cases, but Children's Services did not respond to initial requests for information in around a third of the cases. Much of the sample revealed practice characterised by a think family approach, and effective multi-agency work. In the minority that did not, two types of cases were identifiable. One was where the Probation Officer was so consumed by public protection work that there was little attention paid to the offender's own family, and this tendency needs addressing in practice. The other group was where the Probation Officer seemed to be excluded from child protection

work by the Social Worker, and this is of concern. Although there may be compelling reasons for this (the perception of the Probation Officer as either correctional, or conversely and an advocate for their offender, the need to single-mindedly pursue a case for removal of children, or the overwhelming demands of the job) there was convincing evidence that Probation Officers could be sources of support and collaboration when they were allowed to, even when cases were at difficult stages.

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