

WHAT SUPERVISION IN THE COMMUNITY SHOULD LOOK LIKE

By Mike Guilfoyle

It was with considerable sadness that I read of the recent passing of one of probation's most trenchant public defenders, Professor Paul Senior.

I not only had the keen pleasure of being in the audience listening to him deliver one of the most memorable Bill McWilliam Memorial lectures - in 2015, but was earlier invited to contribute a reflective piece on the seminal Transforming Rehabilitation reforms to probation in a 2013 special edition of the *British Journal of Community Justice*.

Unusual experience

It was with this in mind, that I recalled an unusual supervisory experience, in the sense that I was tasked with overseeing the statutory supervision of a married couple who had appeared in the Crown Court as co-defendants on multiple offences of dishonesty. They were sentenced to a short period on probation with a specific expectation that I prepare an end of supervision report for the Crown Court judge. His diligent zeal for judicial reviews of community orders imposed at his court, meant that he was a powerful advocate for rehabilitation, but also a fair but stern enforcer of orders that resulted in breach action.

I recall querying the decision to undertake joint supervision, as good practice would dictate that those related by family or marriage would, in other circumstances, be supervised separately. But an expedient management decision, due to staffing shortages at the time at the probation office, was that I would be responsible for the joint orders.

At my first meeting with Irma and Nabil (not their real names), I was measurably impressed by their evident level of engagement and cooperation in wanting to avoid 'going to prison'. Their expressions of apprehension at appearing again before His Honour Judge ***, who had, they said, 'let us know that being on probation was not a soft option...but we would be kept on track by an experienced probation officer who would inform the court if

any breach action was necessary’.

I began to explore some of the background factors that had influenced the commission of their index offences, which highlighted a ‘moderate level of sophistication’, and financial worries that resulted in the couple losing their property (at the time they had no children).

Unravelling strands

I did however, find it a considerable challenge to unravel many of the strands of duplicity and apparent lack of empathy that would surface in supervision, with them saying, ‘it really was not all that costly’ (to the victims), and ‘sometimes accountants can’t always add up’! Although the pre-sentence report offered some helpful insights, there remained an opaqueness as to proper levels of accountability throughout the duration of the order.

At the midway point I received a telephone call from Irma who said that, ‘Nabil was unable to make his reporting as he was unwell’. I requested some verification and at the third missed appointment, mindful of the added judicial oversight, I contacted the senior probation officer at the Crown Court to alert him to possible breach action.

A while later, I received a reply. ‘Judge *** noted the concern of the probation officer, as there has been no reoffending, he would defer any action, confident that the order was on track’ (Irma continued to report over this period).

I arranged to home visit as was good practice, having delayed such an option due to their adverse circumstances living on a temporary basis in a local hostel which clearly, they felt uncomfortable about sharing. It was at the address of another family member and I sensed that although the broad facts of the couple’s offending were known, cultural sensitivities might dictate that the visit was more social than professional.

In the event, I was made to feel welcome and I politely declined the invitation to share in a Hookah. ‘We would like you to come back at the end of the sentence and then we can offer you some traditional hospitality?’

Familiar practice dilemmas

Nabil was unusually morose during my visit, and I was unsure how much he fully recognised the prospect of a return visit to appear in front of the judge. The familiar practice dilemmas of enabling change to happen, offering hope and ensuring compliance, against a background of housing instability,

financial insecurity and couple disharmony, meant that at times, lurking just beneath the veneer of supervisory cooperation, was an unsettling resentment that others had ‘got away’ with it. These powerfully present emotional components of supervision proved more taxing than I had ever first imagined.

I forwarded my end-of-supervision report for the attention of the court and the judge subsequently expressed his appreciation for the success of the order and noted that ‘hard work is needed in the community by the probation service if people are not to be sentenced to occupy a costly prison space. I know Mr Guilfoyle will take note of my remarks and hope that he will continue his good work’.

Enthused by such an encomium, I followed up on the invitation the wider family had offered to me when the order had expired. I was more than a little overwhelmed by my reception, as the family had also invited a number of other professionals along, who at various stages had assisted them over the years.

Marital mirth

I mused this is what ‘supervision in the community looks like’! The house was overflowing and a hearty repast was then eagerly consumed. As I quietly retired from the celebration a small chorus of ‘Shukran, Mr Mike’ ... caught my ear, and looking back I saw Irma and Nabil locking arms in marital mirth, amidst the bustle of people present, as I left to make my way to the nearby underground station.

Mike Guilfoyle is a retired probation officer - this article first appeared on the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies website:

<https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/resources/what-supervision-community-should-look-like>.