

Key findings

Background

This study was one of a number of independent research studies commissioned as part of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Offender Engagement Programme (OEP). By establishing what supports effective engagement with the supervision process and better understanding how to overcome the barriers which hinder these processes, the aim of the OEP was to better enable practitioners to reduce reoffending and change probationers' lives through their one-to-one engagement with them.

As part of the OEP, seven probation trusts piloted Sentence Planning Approaches (SPA) aimed at maximising offender involvement and engagement in the supervision process, following a period of training and guidance on their appropriate use. The pilots involved four approaches:

- the Web (Trusts 1 and 2);
- Stepping Stones (Trusts 3, 4 and 5);
- Treatment Effectiveness Initiative (Trust 6); and
- other discrete locally developed approaches (in Trust 7).

It is the Web and Stepping Stones (in Trusts 3 and 4 only) which served as the focus for this independent research study undertaken by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR) at Birkbeck, University of London, and the School of Law at the University of Greenwich.

A key element of the current research involved the administration of a revised version of the previously developed 18-item Offender Management Feedback Questionnaire (the OMFQr) to a sample of offenders in four probation trust areas piloting the Stepping Stones and Web SPAs. Offender Managers (OMs) for those probationers were also asked to complete a practitioner version of the questionnaire – the OMFQ-OM.

Replicating the approach used during earlier work on the OMFQr undertaken in Trusts 4 and 8 by ICPR and the University of Leicester, this particular study had three key aims:

- to identify any differences in the demographic, criminogenic and need profile of those exposed to the pilot SPAs;
- to assess rates of uptake and completion of accredited programmes, requirements and orders; and
- to establish any relationships between OMFQr scores, sentence planning approaches and intermediate supervision outcomes.

Methods

The study sought to link and analyse a range of primary and secondary (administrative) datasets relating to individuals being supervised during the study period by the four trusts piloting SPA, and an assembled comparison group ($N=1,020$). This included data derived from:

- scores relating to completed OMFQrs ($N=292$) administered by ICPR between March 2011 and February 2012, together with corresponding OMFQ-OM ($N=164$) questionnaires;
- the Offender Assessment System (OASys) ($N=779$);
- Integrated Accredited Programmes Software (IAPS) data ($N=195$); and
- Form 20 commencement and terminations data ($N=943$).

A mixed historical and contemporary comparison group was also assembled for the study using these data sources ($N=240$).

ICPR also facilitated individual and focus group interviews with probationers who had had experience of the Web or Stepping Stones ($N=16$).

A comparative profile of the SPA and comparison groups

There were no significant differences observed between the SPA and comparison group probationers in relation to: age, sex, number of prior court convictions, general and violent offending scores, Offender Group Reconviction Scale (OGRS) scores and the total number of 'core' criminogenic need areas identified via OASys. In terms of ethnicity (as measured via OASys), the Web a had lower proportion of white probationers (59%) when compared to Stepping Stones (84%) and the comparison group (88%) ($p<0.05$).

Intermediate rates of uptake and completion

The average (mean) time a probationer had been subject to supervision was one year, with no significant differences between the three assembled groups. By the end of August 2012, 45 per cent of those using the Web and 43 per cent of probationers supervised both in the Stepping Stones pilots and comparison groups had completed an **overall order** successfully (either expiring normally or early for good progress). The Web had a higher proportion of orders terminating for a breach-related matter (i.e. having expired while a breach was still listed, for a further offence, or in response to a failure to comply) (17%) relative to those probationers exposed to Stepping Stones (13%) and those belonging to the comparison group (10%) (but only the latter difference was significant $p<0.05$). Those exposed to the Web had their orders terminated sooner (median of 181 days) than those using Stepping Stones (255 days) or forming part of the comparison group (250 days), but these differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Across all orders, supervision, unpaid work, and accredited programmes were the most frequently commenced **requirements**, with a significantly higher start rate observed amongst participants from Stepping Stones and the comparison group, when compared to the Web ($p<0.05$). Available terminations data indicated that there were no differences between the groups in the rate in which commenced requirements had been successfully completed. As was the case with overall orders, the Web had the highest proportion of probationers breaching a requirement (22%), in contrast to those using Stepping Stones (16%) and probationers belonging to the comparison group (13%) (latterly $p<0.05$).

Both Stepping Stones (24%) and the Web (9%) SPAs were less likely to have had **accredited programmes** planned when compared to the comparison group (32%) ($p<0.01$). Examining completion rates for the two most commonly commenced accredited programmes - the Thinking Skills Programme (TSP) and Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP), completion rates for Stepping Stones were 46 per cent and 50 per cent respectively. For the Web the corresponding programme completion rates were 55 and 40 per cent respectively. This was not significantly different from the completion rates observed for the comparison group (55 and 50 per cent respectively).

Factors related to the probability of termination for breach-related matters

In order to test the hypothesis of no impact for a number of covariates (demographics, main offence, prior criminal history, having a drug misuse need, number of scored needs, number of requirements served and sentence planning approach) on the likelihood of a Community

Order (CO)¹ being terminated for a breach-related matter within 183 days of commencement, a Cox proportional hazards regression model was developed using OASys, Form 20 and IAPS data. Using Form 20 data, around one in eight (12.4%, $n=52$) of all CO cases supervised across the assembled sample ($N=419$) were found to have terminated for a breach-related matter within six months of sentencing. This figure will not be equivalent to the proportion of probationers taken to court for a breach-related matter during this period, however.

The final model identified two of eight factors considered theoretically relevant as being significantly predictive of CO termination for a breach-related matter within six months. The factor with the largest effect on risk of termination for breach was the main offence which led to the supervision order being imposed. Compared to those supervised following a conviction for violence against the person offences, those convicted for theft and related offences were five times more likely to have had their order terminated for a breach-related matter within six months².

The SPA used was found to offer no protective effect against likelihood of CO termination for a breach related matter. The risk of this outcome within six months of sentencing was found to be four times greater among those using the Web, in contrast to those probationers belonging to the comparison group³. And while those using Stepping Stones were also found to be at heightened risk of their orders being terminated in this manner, the results failed to reach statistical significance⁴.

OMFQr and OMFQ-OM scores, SPA and intermediate supervision outcomes

From the offenders' perspective ($N=260$), the skills of the OM in engaging them in sentence planning appeared to be more important than which particular approach was used. The SPA, for instance, was not related to a probationer's:

¹ Because of uncertainties regarding the extent to which Form 20 accurately records information on breach, as this relates to Suspended Sentence Order and licence cases, 360 observations were excluded from the analysis (equivalent to 46 per cent of the 779 cases potentially available for this exercise). This resulted in a higher proportion of cases from both the Web (51.8%, $n=190$) and comparison groups (45.4%, $n=109$) being excluded from the analysis, in contrast to cases using the Stepping Stones SPA (35.5%, $n=61$).

² $\chi^2=15.7$; $p=0.000$; $HR = 5.06$; $CI = 2.23-11.3$

³ $\chi^2=11.5$; $p=0.001$; $HR = 4.11$; $CI = 1.82-9.31$

⁴ $\chi^2=1.02$; $p=0.313$; $HR = 1.65$; $CI = 0.62-4.36$

- perception of being consulted and involved in sentence planning;
- OMFQr score;
- views on the amount of help received to achieve change; and
- the perception of what had been achieved with their OM.

The quality of the supervisory relationship was also highlighted during the focus group discussion. Here again participants emphasised the importance of relational aspects in the supervision process – the significance of listening skills, empathy and a non-judgemental approach in attempts to engage them.

Overall OMFQr and OMFQ-OM scores were highly correlated for the Web ($r=.37$, $p=0.031$), suggesting considerable similarity in the views of offenders and their OMs about their experience of supervision. By contrast, there was little agreement in the case of Stepping Stones ($r=.05$, $p=0.660$).

Controlling for potentially confounding variables such as time on probation and sex, none of the scales of the OMFQr or OMFQ-OM were significantly associated with intermediate measures of supervision outputs and (where available) outcomes: i.e. completion of overall orders and/or accredited programmes (expiring normally or early for good progress), and termination for breach-related matters (having expired while a breach was still listed, for a further offence, or in response to a failure to comply).

Our inability to identify notable relationships between the scales of the OMFQr and OMFQ-OM, and intermediate measures of success is entirely consistent with earlier work involving the OMFQr in Trusts 4 and 8. While it is possible that there is no relationship between these measures and the intermediate outcomes examined (the only ones available at the time of writing), it was also possible that these outcome measures did not adequately capture the behaviour that we were interested in measuring (i.e. the degree of engagement with probation supervision).

Qualitative insights from group and individual interviews with probationers indicated a degree of implementation failure and perhaps raise cause for concern that the theory being examined (involving probationers in the sentence planning process would improve supervision outcomes) was not given a proper test in the SPA pilots examined.

Discussion

Neither SPA was found to offer any protective effect against the likelihood of termination of a CO for a breach-related matter within six-months. It is important to acknowledge a number of limitations associated with the analysis: some interactions were not examined (e.g. between OGRS⁵ and breach) and the model considered breach rates for different proportions of the assembled groups (e.g. 48% of the Web sample vs. 64% of those exposed to Stepping Stones). Insights from interviews with probationers, though limited in scope and scale, point towards the possibility of a degree of implementation failure in delivering SPA as intended.

An important finding from the research, as measured by probationer responses to the OMFQr and their accounts given during group and individual interviews, was that the skills of the OM in facilitating engagement in sentence planning appeared to be more important than which particular approach was used. These results point towards the need for a sharper focus on education, training and support in the implementation and delivery of sentence planning approaches.

Going forward, the findings also offered mixed evidence to support the validity of the OMFQr as a measure of experience with probation, with the high degree of consistency found between the accounts of supervision encounters offered by probationers and OMs using one approach (the Web) not being replicated in the other pilot (Stepping Stones).

None of the scales of the OMFQr or OMFQ-OM were found to be associated with the range of supervision outputs and outcomes measured. Because of uncertainties regarding the extent to which Form 20 accurately records information on breach, as this relates to Suspended Sentence Order and licence cases, the scope to explore any further adaptations to the OMFQr using these data may be limited.

While it is possible that there is in fact no relationship between the factors measured by the OMFQr and the outputs and outcomes examined as part of the research, we cannot rule out the possibility that these outputs and outcomes are not in fact synonymous with engagement with probation supervision (though the weight of research evidence suggests this is unlikely). This perhaps raises further questions about how we should be measuring the potential impact of offender involvement in sentence planning.

⁵ Though factors which contribute to the overall OGRS score – age, sex, main offence and number of prior convictions – were included in the model.