



**THE LEGACY OF AN ADVOCATE OF
COMPASSIONATE FRONT-LINE
PROBATION PRACTICE**

We were delighted to read the recent announcement that the winner of the first-ever Mike Guilfoyle Prize, an essay competition celebrating the values of probation practice, was a colleague in our own probation region. Having encountered the late Mike Guilfoyle several times at criminal justice events – and having corresponded over email – it is fitting that his legacy as a contributor to the criminal justice field is celebrated in this way. As a former probation officer, Mike had written (proudly) about being described as ‘old school’ by those under his supervision. We feel that he was unquestionably an advocate of caring, compassionate and liberatory front-line probation practice.

Mike promoted professional accreditation – alongside a commitment to a ‘humanistic appreciation’ and open-mindedness about receiving ‘consent’ to supervise individuals convicted of crime – as a rite of passage to become a probation officer. He believed that probation practice should go beyond ‘office-bound arms-length offender management’ and the ‘churning out’ of risk assessments, which, in his words, evinced little real knowledge of the person or the challenge required to change behaviour. We feel he would have agreed with our view that constant changes of a person’s allocated officer should be avoided for the benefit of the therapeutic baseline, needed for cognitive behavioural work that steers clear of a problematic and discredited ‘one size fits all’ approach and responds to individual diversity needs, highlighted by the documented increase in adult diagnoses of neurodiversity.

His published work did not sugar-coat the Probation Service’s transition into an enforcement-led agency. Since the Probation of Offenders Act formally introduced the term



Elliot Tyler
Senior Administration Officer
HMPPS



Sarah Fitch
Probation Officer
HMPPS

‘on probation’ in 1907, practitioners have supervised – while looking at, in Mike Guilfoyle’s words, what the person has done, not what they necessarily have become – people serving community sentences or those released from prison into the community. Embracing positive probation practice involves stepping away from authoritative and punitive approaches and accepting that effective supervision is about more than enforcement.

These authors would question the organisation's offering to people on probation, given the government rhetoric of early releases, watered-down recalls, longer Home Detention Curfews, and the reduced length of community sentence supervision periods as per the Probation Reset policy. Mike did not hold back when he suggested, in a recorded interview, that the Service had turned into a soulless 'rump'. Many long-serving officers joined the service as a vocation and to help and support individuals in a humanistic manner – a style that appears to be lost in the present day, with a CBT-focused way of RAR delivery producing tick-boxes of completion, evidenced in a manner that rarely considers the person on probation's feedback and reflections.

The frequent change of terminology to describe individuals under supervision (referred to, at different times, as 'offenders', 'clients', 'service users', and 'people on probation') shows an inability on the part of the organisation to decide on a long-term direction. These authors question the service's use of agency workers and suggest instead investing resources internally to support staff in achieving what could become a decades-long career. This was particularly noticeable when the service was 'split' into the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Companies; it is suggested that during this period, service users (as people on probation were then called) lost a degree of faith and respect in the process. These authors argue that agency staff were not necessarily invested in their local community in the same way as directly employed probation practitioners.

We note with interest, as a current and former manager in the service, Mike Guilfoyle's comments on management in probation. There will be regional differences in management perspectives that can frustrate frontline staff who must contend with

addressing offending behaviour while navigating positions that overlook the significance of some protective factors in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. On the lack of consistency in staff development, it is felt that the yearly Competency Based Framework (CBF) routine often does not involve meaningful collaboration with managers, with staff often sent away to complete a form. Staff members should be able to feel that the organisation is invested in their personal development and future.

It is easier to state examples of unprofessionalism rather than its opposite. Such unprofessionalism in probation includes improper relationships with people under supervision, with tabloid headlines bringing disgrace upon its staff. We feel that social media has made it easier for the behaviour of probation practitioners to be criticised for such behaviour. Overlooked examples of unprofessionalism include failures to challenge problematic attitudes, collusion with people on probation, failures to enforce poor behaviour, and inadequate risk management and contingency planning. These authors feel that probation practice as a field is misunderstood, and that a survey of the public would not yield the desired answer about a professional organisation striving to manage risk and reduce reoffending.

To be a probation professional involves more than meeting a simple list of criteria, a sentiment that Mike Guilfoyle had expressed in his works. A probation professional will make a measurable and positive difference to the lives of those who find themselves under supervision. Such a professional will be critically minded and will objectively reflect on their style of work while maintaining belief in their ability, both individually and collectively. A probation professional will be capable of evolving into somebody who can be the difference between a person re-offending and turning over a new leaf.