



**effective practice**

Where we see our standards delivered well, in practice.



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation



Library image

# Practitioner: professional curiosity insights guide

Based on:

HM Inspectorate of Probation's findings from SFO reviews, adult core and thematic inspections

**October 2022**

# Acknowledgements

This insights guide is based on information sourced from HM Inspectorate of Probation's core programme, thematic inspections carried out between 2020 and 2022, serious further offence (SFO) reviews and independent case reviews. Tammie Burroughs, effective practice lead, has drawn out the learning in relation to professional curiosity, with contributions from SFO inspectors Hannah Williams and Lizzie Wright, assistant inspectors Katy Davies, Kieran Gildea, Karen Grinney and Jodie Lewinson, senior research officer Kevin Ball, and our senior management team. The results are presented in this guide to support the continuous development of practitioners and managers. The manager responsible for this workstream is Linda Neimantas.

We would like to thank all those who participated in any way in this guide, including those probation areas who sent current guidance and video clips (North West, East of England and Kent, Surrey, and Sussex). Without their help and cooperation, the inspections and effective practice guide would not have been possible.

With special thanks to the East of England and Kent, Surrey, and Sussex Performance and Quality teams, and representatives from the Effective Practice and Service Improvement group and Public Protection team, who provided feedback on the guides before full publication.

Please note that, throughout the pack, the names in the practice examples have been changed, and certain identifying details have been altered and/or merged with other cases to protect the individual's identity.

© Crown copyright 2022

You may re-use this information (excluding logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence) or email [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk).

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

ISBN: 978-1-915468-36-9

This publication is available for download at:

[www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprobation](http://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprobation)

Published by:

HM Inspectorate of Probation  
1st Floor Civil Justice Centre  
1 Bridge Street West  
Manchester  
M3 3FX

Follow us on Twitter [@hmiprobation](https://twitter.com/hmiprobation)

# Contents

<b>How to use this insights guide</b> .....	6
<b>Professional curiosity: What does it mean?</b> .....	8
‘What does professional curiosity mean to you?’: an exploration of professional curiosity in probation – journal article .....	10
What does professional curiosity mean to people working in probation? .....	11
HM Inspectorate of Probation reflection on the meaning of professional curiosity in probation...	12
<b>How does professional curiosity link with HM Inspectorate of Probation’s standards?</b> .....	14
<b>How professionally curious are you?</b> .....	15
<b>Why is professional curiosity important?</b> .....	16
Safeguarding: 10 common pitfalls during the initial assessment process.....	16
Findings from HM Inspectorate of Probation: Independent case reviews, SFO reviews, and thematic and core inspections.....	17
<b>Independent case reviews</b> .....	17
<b>Serious Further Offences (SFOs)</b> .....	18
<b>Thematic inspections</b> .....	20
<b>Core inspections</b> .....	20
<b>In practice</b> .....	22
<b>Example of effectiveness:</b> professional curiosity in Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) .....	22
<b>Example of effectiveness:</b> using professional curiosity to blend risk and desistance	22
<b>Example of effectiveness:</b> professional curiosity and holistic case management.....	23
<b>Example of effectiveness:</b> professional curiosity supporting resettlement.....	24
<b>Example of effectiveness:</b> professional curiosity to support enforcement decisions .	25
The impact when we get it right .....	26
<b>The core skills that underpin professional curiosity in probation practice</b> .....	27
<b>Professional curiosity in practice</b> .....	38
<b>Errors, bias and barriers to professional curiosity</b> .....	41
<b>Mitigating the errors, bias and barriers</b> .....	46
Recognise the demands of your workload .....	46
Recognise the emotional labour of practice.....	47
Plan your diary .....	48
Structure sessions and record effectively.....	48
Use the assessment tools available effectively.....	49

Use frameworks to support decision-making .....	51
Tune into information gaps and seek to fill them.....	53
Deal with discrepancies .....	53
Take a multi-agency approach .....	54
Practice, practice, practice.....	55
Adopt a growth mindset .....	56
Practice self-awareness/scrutiny .....	56
Be aware of the power dynamics of your role.....	57
Take opportunities to reflect on your practice with others .....	57
Seek opportunities for continuous professional development .....	59
<b>Professional curiosity and continuous professional development.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Research in practice .....	60
Research in practice: a personalised and individual approach – Johari’s window .....	61
Research in practice: a personalised and individual approach – the cultural iceberg .....	62
Research in practice: a personalised and individual approach- ecological framework model.....	63
Research in practice: Blending risk and desistance .....	65
<b>Next steps .....</b>	<b>67</b>

# Introduction

## About this guide

HM Inspectorate of Probation has a duty to identify and disseminate effective practice.<sup>1</sup>

We assure the quality of youth offending and probation provision and test its effectiveness. Critically, we make recommendations designed to highlight and disseminate effective practice, challenge poor performance and encourage providers to improve.

This insights guide explores what professional curiosity is, why it is important, barriers that impede its use and how you can mitigate these. In addition, the pack highlights themes where a lack of professional curiosity has impacted on the quality of case supervision, and we share case illustrations where professional curiosity has improved the quality of supervision.

I hope this will be of interest to everyone working in probation services and seeking to develop their practice. We welcome feedback on this and our other guides, to ensure that they are as useful as possible to future readers.



### Justin Russell

HM Chief Inspector of Probation



## Contact us



We would love to hear what you think of this guide. Please find current contact details via the [HM Inspectorate of Probation Effective Practice page](#).

<sup>1</sup> **For adult services** – Section 7 of the *Criminal Justice and Court Services Act (2000)*, as amended by the *Offender Management Act (2007)*, section 12(3)(a). **For youth services** – inspection and reporting on youth offending teams is established under section 39 of the *Crime and Disorder Act (1998)*.

# How to use this insights guide

This guide has been developed using the learning from HM Inspectorate of Probation's core and thematic inspection programmes. In addition, we have drawn from learning arising from our SFO and independent case reviews.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the examples are grounded in case supervision; however, it is important to note that professional curiosity is relevant to all staff across the probation service.

The guide has been designed to provide a comprehensive insight into 'professional curiosity', to stimulate thinking and to expand knowledge; therefore, there are numerous opportunities to reflect, discuss, share experiences and generate ideas. We recognise that practitioners<sup>3</sup> are busy; therefore, this is not designed to be read as a report. Instead, we encourage you to dip in and out of the guide and use the sections that feel the most beneficial for you. The guide on the next page has links to help you navigate to specific sections. We have also used different approaches to appeal to different readers; for example, in some sections we reiterate the messages in the videos for those who would prefer to read content and have a discussion rather than watch a video. Please use it as a tool for continuous professional development, for example as part of an individual learning plan, action learning sets, supervision or within your team meetings.

As the reader, you are encouraged to reflect on HM Inspectorate of Probation's standards and the examples and perspectives offered, and to analyse and critically evaluate these based on your own experiences, area/s of practice and protected characteristics, and apply the learning in practice.

As you read, we encourage you to have some key questions in mind so that you can critically analyse the content:

- What impact did/does professional curiosity have on the quality of case supervision?
- How do you overcome barriers to professional curiosity?
- What do you as an individual, and as a colleague, do to recognise and encourage professional curiosity?

## Finding your way: icon key



Denotes a task to undertake, alone or within a group



Denotes a video from HM Inspectorate of Probation



Denotes reflection questions



Denotes a tool for practitioners, for example: poster, prompts



Denotes an external public video



Denotes a link to further reading

<sup>2</sup> The names in the practice examples have been changed, and certain identifying details have been altered and/or merged with other cases to protect the individual's identity.

<sup>3</sup> We use the term practitioner for inclusive purposes to refer to probation officers, probation service officers, interventions staff, unpaid work, approved premises and all others who deliver services to people on probation.

**Different definitions available across different disciplines**

**Pages 8 – 9**



**An academic exploration of the definition of PC**

**Pages 10 – 11**



## **An overview of the practitioner's professional curiosity (PC) insights guide**

Jump into the section(s) which are relevant and of interest to you

**What does PC mean to people working in probation?**

**Pages 11 – 12**



**Probation and HM Inspectorate of Probation's reflections and the link to our standards**

**Pages 12 – 14**



**How professionally curious are you?**

**Page 15**



**Why is PC important from a safeguarding and case management perspective?**

**Pages 16 – 21**



**Examples of PC in case illustrations and the impact of getting it right.**

**Pages 22 – 26**



**Core skills which underpin professional curiosity**

**Pages 27 – 37**



**PC in practice: practical exercises with a set of previous convictions and an offence analysis**

**Pages 38 – 40**



**Errors, bias and barriers to professional curiosity**

**Pages 41 – 45**



**Mitigating the errors, bias and barriers to professional curiosity**

**Pages 46 – 59**



**Professional curiosity and continuous professional development**

**Pages 60 – 66**



# Professional curiosity: What does it mean?

It is difficult to identify the first use of the phrase professional curiosity, although it originates in the area of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. It is commonly associated with serious case reviews,<sup>4</sup> in relation to accepting information at face value and failing to seek further information. Thus, it is often solely associated with risk assessment and management. However, being professionally curious can also improve engagement and promote desistance, by giving practitioners a more thorough understanding of an individual's identity, which is critical to effective work within probation. Unfortunately, there is limited academic research or social commentary on the use of this skill specifically within a probation setting.

It is important that practitioners, managers and senior leaders have a common understanding of exactly what the term 'professional curiosity' means, especially if we are encouraging people to use this skill. A shared understanding will help people to discuss the skill and use it effectively. Indeed, a recent Academic Insights paper prepared by Phillips et al (2022)<sup>5</sup> highlighted the need for a clearer definition in a probation context.

Therefore, in this section we explore the current definitions and descriptions of professional curiosity, and what it means to people across the Inspectorate and HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). We encourage you to consider what professional curiosity means to you, before you work through the guide, and we would encourage you to revisit this at the end.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word curious is:

*"having a strong desire to know about something."*

The word 'professional' sets this in the context of using curiosity as a skill in a professional/vocational setting; definitions within this context are as follows:

## The Manchester Safeguarding Partnership definition:

*'the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening within a family rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value.'*

*This has been described as the need for practitioners to practice 'respectful uncertainty' – applying critical evaluation to any information they receive and maintaining an open mind. In safeguarding the term 'safe uncertainty' is used to describe an approach which is focused on*

<sup>4</sup> Thacker H, Anka A and Penhale B. (2019). 'Could curiosity save lives? An exploration into the value of employing professional curiosity and partnership work in safeguarding adults under the Care Act 2014'. *Journal of Adult Protection* 21, 5, pp 252-267.

<sup>5</sup> Phillips J, Ainslie s, Fowler A, Westaby C. (2022). *Putting professional curiosity into practice*. HM Inspectorate of Probation.

*safety but that takes into account changing information, different perspectives and acknowledges that certainty may not be achievable.’<sup>6</sup>*

## Healthcare professional, Dr Kirkley definition:

*‘you need to shine a light to find what is hidden, curiosity directs our light.’<sup>7</sup>*

## Academics, Williams and Chisholm definition:

*‘asking questions that give and solicit information without being intrusive or making the client feel threatened. These should be open-ended and allow for additional probing.’<sup>8</sup>*

## HMPPS definition:

*‘Being professionally curious is a process of always questioning and seeking verification for the information you are given rather than making assumptions or accepting things at face value. By doing this you can avoid some common pitfalls in practice: being ‘professionally optimistic’ by focusing on positive and not identifying where things are not improving, or risk is increasing; making a judgement about new information without verifying it with other agencies involved; accepting an offender’s level of compliance and not exploring if this could be ‘disguised compliance’; allowing crisis/chaotic behaviour to distract you from risk management work and accepting this as normal.’*

\* Please note, this definition dates back to 2020. However, Sonia Flynn, Chief Probation Officer, refers to a broader definition of professional curiosity. She describes it as the “*cornerstone of probation practice*” and highlights how it can be used to effectively assess, protect and change.

---

<sup>6</sup> [Professional curiosity & challenge – resources for practitioners: Manchester Safeguarding Boards \(manchestersafeguardingpartnership.co.uk\)](https://manchestersafeguardingpartnership.co.uk)

<sup>7</sup> Kirkley, P. (2013). ‘If you shine a light you will probably find it. Report of a grass roots survey of health professionals with regard to their experiences of dealing with child sexual exploitation’. NWG Network. Available from [nwgnetwork.org](http://nwgnetwork.org) (Accessed 25/07/22).

<sup>8</sup> Williams and Chisholm. (2018). Cited in Thacker, H., Anka, A. and Penhale, B. (2019). ‘Could curiosity save lives? An exploration into the value of employing professional curiosity and partnership work in safeguarding adults under the Care Act 2014.’ *The Journal of Adult Protection*. Vol. 21 (5) pp 252-267.

## 'What does professional curiosity mean to you?': an exploration of professional curiosity in probation – journal article<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on the probation context, Phillips et al (2022) carried out a survey of 1,580 probation professionals (inclusive of probation officers (POs), probation service officers (PSOs) and trainee probation officers) in early 2020. They asked, "What does professional curiosity mean to you?" and received 445 responses. This was 3.6 per cent of the probation workforce at that time, so the findings are not generalisable, but provide a useful insight for consideration.

The open-ended responses were coded into four broad types of professional curiosity:

- risk-focused
- therapeutic
- knowledge building (improving the practitioner's own knowledge)
- neutral (being generally questioning, 'nosiness'),



**Figure 1: Professional curiosity types**

By far the most common understanding of professional curiosity is that it is associated with risk assessment and risk management. This is in line with the guidance provided by Ministry of Justice.

There was some evidence that PSOs were more likely to think of professional curiosity in risk terms (62 per cent), and those who followed the PQiP route to qualification were also more likely to understand it that way (63 per cent).

<sup>9</sup> Jake Phillips, Sam Ainslie, Andrew Fowler, Chalen Westaby. (2022). "What does professional curiosity mean to you?": an exploration of professional curiosity in probation'. *The British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 52, Issue 1, January 2022, pp 554–572 <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab019>

The authors conclude that, while professional curiosity in probation is mostly conceived of in terms of risk, there are other understandings among professionals. In other fields (for example, social work or nursing), professional curiosity has a broader meaning than risk alone, and probation would benefit from conceiving of it in a more therapeutic and relationship-building way: of being curious about the lives of people on probation.



[Watch this 21:20 minute video where 'Jake Philips, Reader in Criminology at Sheffield Hallam University, discusses his research';](#) including the history of the term professional curiosity, what it means to probation practitioners, barriers and the implications for probation practice.

### What does professional curiosity mean to people working in probation?

Different people will have a different understanding of professional curiosity depending on the type of lens they are looking through, for example focused on risk, engagement and/or desistance, and depending on the role an individual has. It is important to be aware of all of the different perspectives so that you can develop a comprehensive understanding.

**As a group or on your own** – to help you reflect on the different perspectives, you may wish to consider what professional curiosity would mean as a:

- person on probation
- current victim of an offence
- previous victim of an offence
- member of the general public.



Even within the criminal justice sector, people would describe professional curiosity in different ways. Therefore, to help you consider it holistically, we recorded a range of people across the Inspectorate and HMPPS responding to the question:

### “What does professional curiosity mean to you?”

**Sonia Flynn, Chief Probation Officer, starts the video by explaining:**

*“Professional curiosity features as a cornerstone of all probation practice ... it should be front and centre of our core purpose to assess, protect and change.*

*We can only conduct good assessments if we have all the available information, and have collated that into a good, robust evidence-based assessment. We can only protect if we're professionally curious, so that we are checking and validating the information that we have about the individual. We can only support them to change if we see the whole person and really understand what's important to them and what's going to drive their change journey, their move away from crime to develop a different sense of purpose and identity.”*



All the people we spoke to referred to the importance of *"verifying information"* and *"not taking things at face value"*. While many acknowledged that this is a complex skill, incorporating things like evaluating evidence, being culturally aware, and showing empathy and understanding while still challenging people, all identified it as a useful skill for practitioners and leaders.

Some broadened their definitions, highlighting links with continuous professional development and effective leadership.



[Watch this 17:02 minute video 'Learning from stakeholders: What does professional curiosity mean to you?'](#) – Can you spot anyone you know?

## HM Inspectorate of Probation reflection on the meaning of professional curiosity in probation.

Professional curiosity encompasses all aspects of work in probation practice, including the quality of assessments, planning, implementation and delivery and reviews; therefore, it cuts across every department. It also relates to how people remain curious about their practice and pursue continuous professional development.

Our management oversight guidance provides some useful questions to explore this, as follows:



- Has the case manager or responsible officer exercised sufficient professional curiosity?
- Has the line manager exercised sufficient professional curiosity?
- Has the presence/absence of professional curiosity impacted on the quality of work undertaken in the case?

Professional curiosity is a combination of looking, listening, asking direct questions, and clarifying and reflecting on information received to analyse what it means in context for that individual. It is vital we do not use a single source of information but instead seek multiple sources. This is so we can triangulate information from a range of sources, analyse behaviour and make informed decisions.

These skills, implemented in an empathic manner, allow the practitioner and manager to understand more about the individual, including their identity, motivations, capacity, resources, strengths and risks.

A better understanding of the individual's identity, and what motivates them, will strengthen engagement (bearing in mind that people on probation do not choose to attend) and ensure that practitioners implement the most effective strategies to manage said risks and/or change behaviour, thus promoting desistance.



## Reflection questions

- Reflecting on what you have read, heard and discussed as a result of this section:
- How pertinent do you feel the definitions/descriptions cited from different sectors are to your practice?
- Which of these chimed with your thinking?
- With reference to the healthcare professional quote, how do you think you can shine a light on your practice? Which skills help you to do this?
- If you were asked to explain 'professional curiosity' to a new member of staff, what would you say?
- Has your explanation changed from your initial thoughts on the subject? How?
- How does professional curiosity support the quality of case supervision?
- What do you believe is the purpose of professional curiosity?

# How does professional curiosity link with HM Inspectorate of Probation's standards?

## As a group or on your own:

Scan the [Probation inspection standards](#) and consider which standards professional curiosity is relevant to in case supervision.



[In this 4:00 minute video](#) [Helen Mercer, Head of Policy and Standards](#), discusses what professional curiosity means to her:

*"being interested and curious about the job that you do ... being motivated and driven and seeing that level of understanding, interest, curiosity getting to the detail of whichever piece of work you are doing, with whomever you are doing it, to make sure you are doing it to the best of your ability."*



She also describes how it links to the HM Inspectorate of Probation case supervision standards, advising:

*"the whole of the standards framework is relevant to professional curiosity; on the basis of the definition [above] it's pivotal to everything a practitioner would do".*

# How professionally curious are you?

Being professionally curious is an important part of probation practice; have you ever stopped to consider:

- How professionally curious you are?
- Does it change throughout your day? What do you think influences this?
- Does it change with different cases? What do you think influences this?
- Does it change with the different roles you take on throughout the day or throughout your career?

It may be beneficial for you to hold these questions in your mind when considering your practice. Below is an exercise to help you start thinking:

**As a group or on your own** – reflect on the following scenarios and consider what steps you may take as a result of what you hear:



**Scenario A:** you are covering the duty officer role; this was not your originally allocated day, but due to staff shortages you have agreed to support your team. You receive a phone call from the police to indicate one of your colleagues' people on probation has been arrested for assaulting their brother. The police indicate that there is strong evidence he has done this, but he has been released pending further enquiries.

- What would your next steps be?

**Scenario B:** you have been supervising a young male for six months, and he has a further 12 months to go. While he does have some difficulty engaging with you, he has consistently attended on time.

However, he has not attended for his 2pm appointment today. He comes into the office at 3pm. You have another person due in, although they have not arrived yet. You ask for him to be informed that you are unable to see him. You receive a message from reception to say he was rude and aggressive when he was informed you were busy and was ranting about the police and stormed out.

- What would your next steps be?

**Once you have discussed or reflected on the above scenarios, please [click the 'how professionally curious are you' document](#). \***

- Did you consider any of these?
- Did you have any alternative considerations?
- How would these considerations influence your next steps?
- What does this illustrate about the importance of professional curiosity?

*\*It is important to note that this is not a list of correct answers but an exploration of possible routes of enquiry, which may follow as a result of how the information received is processed.*

## Why is professional curiosity important?

Ultimately, using professional curiosity in probation practice will ensure that any judgements and decisions made are based on the evidence available at the time. It will ensure that this evidence has been verified, and critically evaluated, to ascertain its validity. This critical evaluation considers individual characteristics, power dynamics, motives, risks and strengths to ensure the most effective outcome.

This section focuses on why professional curiosity is important in a probation context. It explores the lessons from safeguarding, HM Inspectorate of Probation independent case reviews, SFO reviews, thematic and core inspections. Finally, we share some examples from practice where professional curiosity has made a positive difference to quality.

### Safeguarding: 10 common pitfalls during the initial assessment process

As noted above, the term professional curiosity is commonly used in safeguarding practice; in research for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Broadhurst<sup>10</sup> et al (2010) identified 10 common pitfalls during the initial assessment process, and explained how these can be avoided using professional curiosity.

The 10 pitfalls are listed below. They are relevant to probation practice, especially since the learning from SFOs, reviews and inspection shows the importance of getting the assessment right. Often, if the information in the initial assessment is incorrect, this is rarely rectified and can affect the quality of case management.

#### Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them: What research tells us Children living at home: the initial assessment process

1. An initial hypothesis is formulated on the basis of incomplete information, and is assessed and accepted too quickly. Practitioners become committed to this hypothesis and do not seek out information that may disconfirm or refute it.
2. Information taken at the first enquiry is not adequately recorded, facts are not checked and there is a failure to feedback the outcome to the referrer.
3. Attention is focused on the most visible or pressing problems; case history and less "obvious" details are insufficiently explored.
4. Insufficient weight is given to information from family, friends and neighbours.
5. Insufficient attention is paid to what children say, how they look and how they behave.
6. There is insufficient full engagement with parents (mothers/fathers/other family carers) to assess risk.

<sup>10</sup> Broadhurst, K., White, S., Fish, S., Munro, E., Fletcher, K., & Lincoln, H. (2010). *Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them: What research tells us*. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

7. Initial decisions that are overly focused on age categories of children can result in older children being left in situations of unacceptable risk.
8. There is insufficient support/supervision to enable practitioners to work effectively with service users who are uncooperative, ambivalent, confrontational, avoidant or aggressive.
9. Throughout the initial assessment process, professionals do not clearly check that others have understood their communication. There is an assumption that information shared is information understood.
10. Case responsibility is diluted in the context of multi-agency working, impacting both on referrals and response. The local authority may inappropriately signpost families to other agencies, with no follow up.



You can read the full report here: [Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them: What research tells us \(manchester.ac.uk\)](#) – it includes some useful questions for practitioners and managers about safeguarding against these pitfalls. While this focuses on safeguarding, many of the tips are equally useful for probation practice.

## Findings from HM Inspectorate of Probation:

### Independent case reviews, SFO reviews, and thematic and core inspections

#### Independent case reviews

HM Inspectorate of Probation sometimes receives requests from ministers to carry out independent case reviews.



You can access the [full reports on our webpage Inquiries and reviews.](#)

Simi Badachha, head of probation inspection programme, who also has oversight of independent case reviews and SFO reviews, explains:

*“As an inspectorate we approach our independent reviews with a level of hindsight, after the event has taken place; however, there are common themes that are emerging. In doing these reviews, what we are trying to do is highlight areas for improvement to support practitioners’ learning, and the approach to both sentence and risk management.*

*“We are not suggesting that a serious further offence can be completely avoided, but there are things that practitioners and managers can do to ensure that the harm posed is effectively managed to keep people safe”.*



[Watch this 11:58 minute video where Simi Badachha discusses what professional curiosity means to her:](#)

*“to search beyond what is being presented, whether that is self-reported information, evidence provided by partner agencies, or any other source, and applying that to the individual being supervised, and providing an analytical approach, asking yourself what does this mean?”*



Simi then highlights the main themes around professional curiosity that have arisen from these case reviews.

### Serious Further Offences (SFOs)

Since April 2021, HM Inspectorate of Probation has taken on a new quality assurance role, which involves examining and rating a sample of SFO reviews (approximately 20 per cent of all submitted reviews), and seeking to drive improvement and increase public confidence in the quality of the reviews.

Central to the SFO review process is the aim that the learning identified in SFO reviews supports improvement of the management and supervision of people on probation.

Reviews commonly highlight professional curiosity as a practice deficit, or say that it could have been used more readily. This has been identified at both a practitioner and a managerial level.

Common sub-themes relating to professional curiosity include:



Failing to take an inquisitive approach to risk, especially when relationships have been built between practitioners and those serving long-term sentences, such as lifers and IPPs (indefinite sentence for public protection), or if the person on probation is well known. This has also been evident in lifer panels, where representatives accept information as presented, rather than take a more analytical approach.



Prioritising engagement in order to encourage attendance, which can be at the expense of meaningful interventions/supervision and enforcement.



Being overly optimistic about a person on probation’s compliance levels, which is not necessarily indicative of active engagement with the change process.



Working in isolation and not making use of all the resources at the practitioner’s disposal, such as information and interventions from partner agencies (For example, drug and alcohol services, education, training and employment providers, mental health practitioners) and colleagues (such as unpaid work, approved premises, accredited programmes and structured interventions).



Not harnessing the power of informal conversations with people on probation, colleagues and partners, to test and explore hypotheses about their behaviour.



Undertaking a minimal role in case management, allowing, or encouraging other partnership agencies to take the lead on case supervision/risk management, despite other agencies having different roles, responsibilities and insight. This can be due to a lack of confidence, training, or knowledge of practice.



Linking the risk to one aspect of the person on probation, rather than taking a holistic approach. An example might be focusing on substance misuse, but not considering what triggered this, or any underlying mental health needs or adverse childhood experiences that may have contributed to current behaviours and risk.



Taking a generic approach to case supervision and failing to acknowledge the need for a personalised approach to engagement, risk and desistance. Examples of a personalised approach include adapting to accommodate people's different learning styles and offering different methods of undertaking supervision.



Inadequate management oversight that fails to act on relevant information presented by the practitioner and does not support/build the practitioner's confidence and help them to develop their skills.



Workloads, including the impact of the amount and pace of change, that are too high to allow sufficient time for reflective practice. In addition, this is impeding practitioners' sense of competency and professional confidence as they feel unable to keep pace with the amount of change and communications.



Human factors: the challenges faced both inside and outside the workplace can have an impact on practitioners' and managers' confidence to undertake their roles effectively. This means they may require additional support.



[In this 13:15min YouTube video Hannah Williams and Lizzie Wright, SFO inspectors](#), discuss their understanding of professional curiosity. They also share some of their insights about these themes, and the learning that can be taken from them to continuously improve service delivery.

This includes the importance of *"being inquisitive,"* bringing information together from multiple sources and *"reflecting on the information you receive"*. They talk about the importance of not *"missing opportunities to be more professionally curious and find out more"*, viewing a person *"holistically, look at new or emerging risk factors"* and *"actively review the case, discuss with the line manager, review the sentence plan and risk management and sense check whether it is as robust as it can be"*.



In order to safeguard against some of the themes the inspectors have shared:

*"Plan appointments so you are really considering what you are doing, and what you are delivering. Link back to the sentence plan and reduce the time that you spend perhaps on crisis management, or reacting to how the person on probation presents during that appointment. We know that's incredibly difficult, because often a crisis is a regular occurrence, but using the time in advance of appointments to really think about what you want to deliver, how you want*

*to focus your sessions, what interventions you want to work on with that person, can help shape the appointment. Allocate time for crisis management but you also allocate time for delivering meaningful interventions."*

*"Engage well with partners who have crucial information."*

*"If they do engage better with another agency, try and join in with that, and learn from that, and get as much as you can from that to inform your own judgements and risk assessments and decision making for that case."*

Think about the *"power of informal conversations ... critique your own practice ... and seek out learning to develop your own practice."*

## Thematic inspections

HM Inspectorate of Probation undertakes thematic inspection work, alone or jointly with other inspectorates. The topics are selected according to specific criteria, including the level of risk posed to the public, ministerial interest and the potential impact of our findings.

Each thematic inspection involves a detailed examination of practice, and of the strategic leadership and partnership arrangements that support such work. Our aim is to highlight good practice and make recommendations for improvement.



[In this 4:50 YouTube video Helen Davies, head of thematic and joint inspections](#), shares her views on some of the main themes from the accommodation, substance misuse and mental health inspections, as these show the breadth of the themes in relation to professional curiosity, including:

*"A reliance on self-disclosure."*

*"[the importance of recognising] the underlying causes of the person's behaviour and how that helps to shape the service delivery. And it's only by knowing what lies underneath the behaviour that the right services can be put in place, and that's so important when you're talking about a roof over your head, substance misuse treatment and mental health service provision."*

*"Not exploring the individual's ethnicity, the culture and religion, and how that experience, sometimes of discrimination and of trauma, affects the person's progress through the criminal justice system."*



Building on this, we have extracted the [main learning points linked to professional curiosity from the thematic inspections](#) conducted since 2020.

## Core inspections

As part of HM Inspectorate of Probation's core inspection programme, we inspect a cohort of cases using specific criteria. We assess the quality of practice across assessments, planning, implementation and delivery and reviews. We do so through the lenses of engagement, desistance and keeping people safe.



[In this 16:38min video Linda Neimantas, head of probation inspection programme](#), shares her understanding of professional curiosity:

*“The legitimate right to be nosy, to be inquisitive, to be questioning, to be investigative, ... it’s about having courageous conversations ... both as a practitioner but also as a manager, and a leader”.*



She also shares her insights into some of the themes linked to professional curiosity from the core programme.

Building on from this, a group of assistant inspectors reviewed the learning from the adult core inspections to identify some common practice issues, whereby a lack of professional curiosity has had a negative impact on case supervision. They have also shared some top tips to address each of these themes, categorised across assessments, planning, implementation and delivery and reviews and evaluation (the ASPIRE model).



You can access the [ASPIRE and professional curiosity document here](#).



### Reflection questions

Reflecting on what you have read, heard and discussed as a result of this section:

- Do any of the themes surprise you? Why?
- How can you apply the learning from previous inspection activities?
- Are there any barriers to addressing these themes in your practice?
- What actions can you put in place to mitigate these barriers?

## In practice

The impact of professional curiosity in practice can be seen in the case illustrations below.

### Example of effectiveness: professional curiosity in Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA)

Inspectors commented:

*"The practitioner demonstrated a good level of curiosity in this case, seeking to understand Jeff's behaviours. They considered the influence of the relationships he had and made good use of the sources of information open to them, including of polygraph testing, to continue to question the motives behind Jeff's actions."*



#### Case illustration

Jeff received a 36-month custodial sentence with an extended licence for attempting to arrange or facilitate the commission of a child for sexual offences and the making and possession of indecent images of children. The practitioner identified the need to gather further information about potential risks linked to his partner, who was potentially vulnerable, and referred the case to MAPPA Level 2. Jeff has a learning disability, and the practitioner also considered the effect this may have on his engagement with his licence.

There were concerns about whether Jeff's motivation to change was genuine or if there were other reasons for perceived changes in his behaviour. There were a lot of inconsistencies in the accounts of his life, explanations of his sexual offending and how he could use interventions delivered so far to change his behaviour. The MAPPA meeting discussed a polygraph testing licence condition, which was subsequently approved and added to his licence. Two tests completed after his release were inconclusive, but these outcomes were discussed with Jeff and led him to disclose aspects of his behaviour that he had previously withheld. The new information enabled the practitioner to put further risk monitoring and control measures in place and to complete meaningful work with Jeff on his offending. Furthermore, when he disclosed his use of adult pornography, but an investigation of his device found no evidence of this, it prompted the probation practitioner and the police to pursue this further to determine what else he may be trying to hide.

### Example of effectiveness: using professional curiosity to blend risk and desistance

Inspectors commented:

*"There was some truly outstanding practice in this case. Although Elaine was assessed as low risk of harm, she was vulnerable, and the practitioner understood the need to intervene and provide support in order to safeguard her and prevent her from becoming involved in further offending. The extent of multi-agency liaison was incredibly impressive and the practitioner's perseverance in galvanising other agencies to help Elaine and coordinating the work of various agencies, to both reduce the risk and promote change, has ultimately helped Elaine to achieve a level of stability [ceased*

*using drugs and has aspirations for a drug-free life] that she has not experienced for many years."*



## Case illustration

Elaine was subject to a community order with a 10-day rehabilitation activity requirement for an offence of theft; and had an extensive history of acquisitive crime. While substance use was a feature of her behaviour, the underlying causes were linked to her vulnerabilities from a history of, and ongoing trauma from, brain injury and mental health needs.

While working with Elaine, the practitioner noted that she would attend with visible cuts and bruises on her person. Although the practitioner asked how they had occurred, Elaine was vague about this. The practitioner was not satisfied with her explanation, and undertook a home visit. This revealed that the property was in a state of severe disrepair. Elaine admitted she felt unsafe. The door was broken and known associates were using her property for criminal activity.

The practitioner liaised with the police about the concerns for Elaine's safety (from associates and intimate partners), made arrangements to have her front door repaired so that she was safer at home, provided access to a mobile telephone, arranged food parcels during the pandemic and exchanged information with the local multi-agency response to cuckooing,<sup>11</sup> so that they could take action against those exploiting Elaine and using her address.

When adult social care planned to end their involvement with Elaine, the practitioner intervened and challenged the decision, using the recorded evidence about Elaine's ongoing vulnerability and risks.

Furthermore, the practitioner identified family connections as a potential strength and something to aim for. Elaine wanted to be a part of her adult children's lives and to see her grandchild. The practitioner recognised this, and it provided an incentive for Elaine to reduce her drug use and achieve a greater degree of stability in her life. The practitioner made a referral to Adfam<sup>12</sup> for Elaine and her children to help support their relationship. However, she was also open in explaining that contact with her grandchild would have to be agreed by children's social care, and a referral was made.

## Example of effectiveness: professional curiosity and holistic case management

Inspectors commented:

*"The practitioner used all of the information available to consider the most appropriate licence conditions to manage risk and support change. They integrated the information from the trail monitoring into supervision and used it proactively to have exploratory discussions with the person on probation about his lifestyle and associates."*

<sup>11</sup> Cuckooing is a practice where individuals take over a person's home and use the property to facilitate exploitation.

<sup>12</sup> Adfam provides information and support for the families of drug and alcohol users.



## Case illustration

Ben was subject to an IPP following his conviction for offences including robbery and grievous bodily harm. He was on licence when he committed these offences, following a previous conviction for robbery involving a knife. He has a lengthy history of violence and drug-related offences, and was previously recalled following domestic abuse allegations, including false imprisonment.

On his release, Ben was subject to a range of additional licence conditions, including trail monitoring for three months. The use of electronic monitoring has been an integral part of the overall case management. The parole report drew on police information, as well as Probation Service risk assessments. The proposal for a trail monitoring licence condition was then linked to these risks and a clear rationale was provided, including how location data would offer an enhanced level of monitoring and control, as well as provide an indication of any current lifestyle concerns associated with his whereabouts.

The sentence plan referenced trail monitoring as a tool to explore Ben's lifestyle/activities and to identify problem/risky areas.

Throughout the requirement period the GPS data was reviewed on a monthly basis. This data, in the form of maps, was also discussed and shown to Ben in supervision, which helped him to engage and encouraged open discussions about his lifestyle and associates.

## Example of effectiveness: professional curiosity supporting resettlement

Inspectors commented:

*"The probation officer maintained contact with the individual whilst he was in prison and used this knowledge in combination with liaison with the professional involved to develop a good understanding of the individual's specific needs. This case clearly illustrates the use of a focused and personalised plan, which was well coordinated to ensure some continuity of support."*



## Case illustration

Karim was coming to the end of his custodial sentence. While in prison, his probation officer had maintained regular contact through video conferencing, letters and a face-to-face visit. The communication between the probation officer and resettlement and other custodial staff was regular and effective.

Karim had struggled emotionally in prison due to the loss of his father while serving his sentence. This had resulted in him accessing support from a prison chaplain and the mental health team. It became apparent that Karim's mental health needs were far greater than had initially been identified, and there was a risk of further offending and self-harm.

Having been notified that Karim would be placed on a waiting list for counselling, his probation officer contacted the local mosque, at Karim's request, to secure some continuity in his mental health care.

On release, Karim was met by a worshipper from the mosque and offered a hot meal. His probation officer joined the meeting to ensure that Karim was happy with the support that

was being offered. In the meantime, Karim was provided with information about online mental health support. These two measures were used creatively to improve his mental health.

## Example of effectiveness: professional curiosity to support enforcement decisions

Inspectors commented:

*“The practitioner in this case was persistent in their attempts to engage Don and create some stability in his basic needs, such as accommodation. When Don failed to comply, the practitioner liaised with all of the agencies working with him to try and locate him, and when this did not come to fruition, and information was received regarding suspected further offending, recall was instigated.”*



### Case illustration

Don was sentenced to seven months' imprisonment for shoplifting following a fourth conviction for shoplifting over a 10-month period. He had a history of short prison sentences for similar offences. His history of cooperation with practitioners was poor, and on previous sentences he had been recalled several times. Don's offending was primarily motivated by his addiction to class A drugs, although he had also previously received medication for mental health issues.

While Don was being supervised on licence, his responsible officers had attempted to engage him in addressing his addiction. However, these attempts had met with failure and a swift return to further offences. Don's risk of serious harm was assessed as medium. The support and supervision plan put in place for Don's release from the seven-month sentence was comprehensive. It included supported accommodation; intervention from an addiction agency, including provision for a methadone prescription; and mental health support, including medication. The practitioner liaised effectively with the key agencies, including the police, both before and after Don's release from prison. Don's cooperation with the supervision plan was sporadic. The practitioner worked hard to encourage him to attend appointments, both with probation and the key agencies. Although Don missed appointments, there was no evidence that the risk of serious harm had increased so the focus was on re-engagement rather than enforcement. Recall was considered, but two licence warnings were issued instead, along with directions that Don should comply with the release plan.

Don's ill health associated with drug use resulted in his admission to hospital. The practitioner worked well with the medical services, and accommodation was arranged for his discharge. Following discharge to the accommodation, Don failed to keep appointments with the practitioner and moved out of the accommodation. The practitioner contacted all the key agencies and Don's relatives but was unable to contact him.

Following information from the police that Don was suspected of further shoplifting offences, the practitioner discussed the case with the manager and instigated a fixed-term recall. Don's whereabouts were unknown, and he had breached his licence by failing to keep in contact with the practitioner. The recall was instigated to prevent further offences.

## The impact when we get it right

When practitioners are professionally curious, they are more likely to deliver a personalised and individually tailored service, which research indicates has more impact. Below are some quotes from people on probation, collected over the last year from our thematic inspection programme, which illustrate the impact when services are delivered effectively:

***“It has definitely worked for me. I’ve got a job now. I’ve got my own place to live again, and it’s just helped me to get my life back in order.”***

***“She doesn’t tell me what to do, she just guides me down the right path, but I always have a say in what services I think will be best for me.”***

***“She has referred me to certain services that could help me in the future with, like, voluntary work and employment and stuff but ‘cos of lockdown it’s been very difficult to access most of these ... My officer has been very encouraging to help me better myself and stay out of prison and her support has been 100 per cent.”***

***“I’ve had nothing but help from these services and I’m in a much better place these days and trying to get my life back on track. And that’s because of all the help and support I’ve received through my probation officer and drug workers and other people they have signposted me to, which is helping my recovery big time.”***

***“I’m going places now, before I had no real future.”***

***“Probation knew my struggles with drink and have played a key part in helping me stay sober and finding a healthier way to deal with my mental health.”***

# The core skills that underpin professional curiosity in probation practice

**As a group or on your own** – Think about an occasion when you were talking to someone and you shared more than you anticipated, or perhaps you have observed someone interviewing an individual, and were surprised by the amount of information revealed.



**Consider:**

- What skills did the interviewer use/demonstrate?
- Why do you think this enable you/the individual to open up?

In the exercise above, it is likely that you listed a number of the interviewer’s interpersonal skills that enabled you, or the person you were thinking about, to open up and, therefore, these skills supported engagement. We know that professional curiosity in probation focuses on engagement, but also on risk assessment skills, an understanding of the desistance principles and how an individual’s identity impacts on the change process. Consequently, professional curiosity depends on a whole host of skills, some of which you may have identified above, but also some that support assessments.

In this section, we describe the core skills that underpin professional curiosity in probation practice.

## Professional curiosity skill – Growth mindset



***‘Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts).’***

~Carol Dweck

People with a growth mindset have a desire to explore, learn and understand – they are curious. As such, they are flexible in their thinking. They will reflect on and review their thinking (including hypotheses of risks and needs), can see beyond the obvious, persist in the face of setbacks and obstacles, recognise the need to make consistent efforts to continuously develop, and are more likely to embrace challenges, learn from constructive criticism and find lessons and inspiration in others’ success. They also recognise that there may be different ways of doing things from what they have always done, so are willing to explore different options.

### For example:

This is exemplified in a quote from a practitioner we interviewed for the substance misuse thematic inspection. She had felt ‘stuck’ with a case and so convened a professionals meeting, which she had never done before. This allowed other agencies to respond with additional resources and support.

*"I know I am not the expert in all things. I have a good level of information, but others are the specialists. I think it is important to ask, so I can learn. I ask people to talk to me as though I don't know. I said in one meeting, "sorry, I have no idea what you mean, can you explain it to me?" Yes, I was a little uncomfortable, but I also thought I would not be able to help the person on probation if I did not understand. I knew I needed to understand it so I could help him to understand."*

### Professional curiosity skill – Self-awareness



***'Being self-aware is not the absence of mistakes, but the ability to learn and correct them.'***

*~Daniel Chidiac*

Self-awareness is about being able to critically evaluate ourselves, without judging whether we are right or wrong, in order to make appropriate changes. Such awareness allows us to interpret our feelings, thoughts, actions and decisions objectively, recognising the influence of our own identities, personal values and morals. This allows us to identify assumptions and biases and mitigate them, improving perspective-taking and decision-making.

An important facet of this is 'professional humility', whereby you remain open to both positive feedback and constructive criticism. You also recognise that other practitioners/professionals have a role to play in your work and may have a better way of doing things than you, and you actively try and incorporate this learning into your practice.

#### For example:

On the substance misuse thematic inspection, we interviewed one practitioner who had been working with a person on probation for four years on various different community orders. On the current sentence they noticed a significant deterioration in the individual's behaviour and an increase in risk factors. The practitioner recognised she was not equipped to manage the increased risk. She spoke to her manager and the case was reallocated to a probation officer. She continued to co-work the case, recognising the relationship they had built up.

### Professional curiosity skill – Tenacity



***'The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity'***

*~Amelia Earhart*

Tenacity is about having the determination to keep going. In a probation context, it is important to be tenacious in pursuing and exploring information, and verifying it to ascertain its validity. When you are willing to probe, even when faced with opposition and/or resistance, it can help to understand the underlying causes of behaviours and rationale for attitudes. This relates to both the person on probation and other agencies.

### For example:

In the core inspection, there was an example of a practitioner who was tenacious in their efforts to understand the risks presented by a person on probation. He disclosed that he had committed offences whilst living at previous addresses in Europe. International previous convictions were requested and pursued consistently when they were not forthcoming. This information revealed that he had previous custodial sentences for sexual offences against children.

This triggered a number of actions to manage the previously unknown risk, including updating the risk assessment, reallocation of his probation officer and unpaid work project, safeguarding checks, referral to a management of sexual or violent offences (MOSOVO) officer and contact with his housing provider, as he was in shared accommodation.

### Professional curiosity skill – Active listening



***'The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply.'***

*~Stephen Covey*

***'The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.'***

*~Dr Ralph G. Nichols*

Active listening involves paying attention and really concentrating on what the person is trying to communicate. It is listening for the meaning in what the speaker is saying, and providing appropriate non-verbal and verbal feedback that confirms you are listening and have understood what has been said.

In a probation context, active listening will help you understand the person on probation's identity and how you can personalise assessments, plans, interventions and reviews. Furthermore, listening to understand and highlight any issues will support the effectiveness of your interventions.

### For example:

Active listening can help you to identify cognitive dissonance, whereby you are able to recognise and highlight inconsistencies between thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour expressed by the person on probation and something else they have said or done.

For instance, the person on probation may recognise the negative impact of their drinking in discussions with their practitioner but continue to drink to excess.

### Professional curiosity skill – Questioning/being investigative



***'Ask the right questions if you're to find the right answers.'***

*~ Vanessa Redgrave*

***'The answers you get depend on the questions you ask.'***

*~ Thomas Kuhn*

It is important to be inquisitive about people on probation. Questioning techniques help with this, especially when applied at the right time and with tenacity. You also need to consider how you investigate and show interest. Questions are received better when they come from a place of empathy: genuine and sensitive, but courageous in challenging.

The power of effective questioning is significant, given that the quality of your questions will determine the quality of the answers you receive. Consequently, it stands to reason that the better we become at asking questions, the better the responses will be. This helps us to become more informed, which supports more effective decision-making. Part of this is about knowing the right time to ask the right question, and knowing when to allow silences.

Questions help to show interest in a person and thus help to build relationships. It is a good way to obtain information, explore someone's identity, attitudes and behaviour, encourage thoughts, emphasise a point, or highlight discrepancies or cognitive dissonance.

Questions can be open or closed; they can probe assumptions and/or rationale, clarify, explore different perspectives, and probe implications and consequences. Examples include:

- Tell me what happened when...
- What might be an alternative way to look at that?
- How does that link with what you said before?

#### For example:

In a case from the core inspection programme, the index offence was an assault against a police officer. The practitioner took an investigative approach to exploring the context of this offence, which revealed it was linked to domestic abuse.

While the person on probation had not been charged with offences against their partner, through the expert questioning of the practitioner, they did disclose these behaviours.

### Professional curiosity skill – Effective communication



*'Communication is too often taken for granted when it should be taken to pieces.'*

~Fiske

An effective communicator will think before speaking, ask questions, listen to understand, be transparent and provide clarity. They convey their messages in a comprehensive, clear and concise manner and are both receptive and responsive to the input of others. Furthermore, they are transparent about the purpose of information-gathering and any information communicated.

#### For example:

Ensuring that you remain in contact with people in prison and prior to their release ensuring that you inform them that they are subject to multi-agency public protection arrangements. In doing so being clear about exactly what this means and the implications but also how this will support them with safety planning.

Then following this up and clarifying the person's understanding through a conversation about the specific implications for their release plan and consequences of non compliance – not just by way of asking if they have understood.

## Professional curiosity skill – Cultural competence



*“Once you understand and appreciate other people's cultural backgrounds, then you can also connect with them more”*

*~Anonymous.*

*“Whether born from experience or inherent physiological or cultural differences, our gender and national origins may and will make a difference in our judging.”*

*~Sonia Sotomayor*

Cultural competence is the ability to understand and interact effectively with people from different cultures. This includes understanding your own culture, recognising and respecting individual and cultural differences; approaching learning about other worldviews with a growth mindset, seeking advice about diversity where required; being willing to ask questions to broaden your knowledge; having an awareness of your own biases and how these may influence your judgements.

Your cultural competence will affect how you engage with the person on probation, how you understand the underlying causes of their offending behaviour, and how you analyse these factors.

### For example:

In our thematic inspection about race, one person on probation told us how important it was that his probation officer respected his faith. This was evidenced by the fact that they ensured meetings did not clash with faith obligations. In addition, sessions were used to explore ethnicity and religion, and because of this, he gained an understanding of what it meant to him to be a Muslim of mixed heritage, and an awareness of faith expectations, and how these influenced his daily life and choices.

## Professional curiosity skill – Perspective-taking



*“We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are.”*

*~Anais Nin*

Perspective-taking is the ability to perceive a situation and/or understand a concept from an alternative point of view and understand the consequences of this different view.

Consideration of other people's views allows us to see the 'whole picture'; seeking other people's views on hypotheses of risk and needs helps us to develop a more comprehensive understanding; where appropriate, allowing the opinions of others to contribute to decision-making can ensure our decisions are more informed.

All inspection activity illustrates the benefits of multi-agency work and using multiple sources of information to support case supervision, as this enables you to triangulate the information available.

## For example:

A young male had been convicted of offences of possession with intent to supply linked to county lines, and had recently been released and transferred to adult probation services. There were significant differences in the assessments of risk made by the different agencies involved in his case.

The transferring youth offending service officer was acutely aware of the young man's vulnerabilities, which were linked to him being exploited and involved in offending behaviour. This included adverse childhood experiences, speech and language difficulties and a family with an entrenched history of pro-criminal behaviour.

Liaison with the police officers from the local serious group offending (SGO) team felt he was a significant risk because of his links with others in his area who were also known to the SGO team. Consequently, they recommended stringent licence conditions with limited flexibility.

The substance misuse worker felt he was highly motivated to address his needs and showed good insight into his use and triggers linked to his vulnerabilities. She explained he had disclosed historical involvement in SGO activities but now only had contact with these associates through chance meetings, as they resided in the same area.

The practitioner contacted the releasing prison establishment, which indicated that he had been in contact with a number of young males from his home area throughout his sentence. He had engaged well with his sentence plan, completing the thinking skills programme and educational courses. Although there was some security intelligence that he was on the periphery of SGO activity, there was no verified evidence of this.

The practitioner was able to bring together all of the information from these differing perspectives to provide a comprehensive assessment of risks and needs.

## Professional curiosity skill – Analytical



***'Hindsight and foresight are just different sides of the same coin: they share the same information. The difference is when that information is recognised or identified'***

~Jane Monkton Smith

***"Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider".***

~Francis Bacon

Being analytical involves identifying and defining a specific problem, gathering key information from a range of sources and from professional observations to develop a deeper understanding and identify solutions to said problems. These solutions can then be tested to verify the significance and resolve the problems identified.

In this context it is about analysing the underlying causes of the individual's offending behaviour, identifying the risks and how to reduce these, and identifying the protective factors and how to strengthen these. Basing this on all of the information available and analysing it allows practitioners to determine the most likely factors to protect the public and influence a positive change. This also means testing your analysis, and reviewing whether

new information received fits in with your assessment, or if it merits a review of the assessment.

It involves asking investigative and Socratic questions; it is about reflecting on the information you have, thinking “what if?” and ‘so what?’ It is about being willing to explore and seek further information, bringing the information together to test how it fits. This is often referred to as triangulation in HM Inspectorate of Probation, being reflective and providing solutions and using logic to draw conclusions.

### For example:

A male who received a custodial sentence for violent offences against a child was demonstrating some offence paralleling behaviours,<sup>13</sup> even after completing all of the relevant offending behaviour programmes. In addition, his own disclosures had made him vulnerable to other prisoners, as, despite being cautioned about the risks of discussing his offences, whenever he was asked why he was in prison he would say why. The practitioner also noted there were some entries on his file describing immature and childish behaviour.

This prompted the practitioner to assess the information available: a failure to embed the learning from the programme, not understanding the consequences of his disclosures, despite on occasions coming to harm from other prisoners and immature behaviour. His file showed he had a very low IQ. As a result, the practitioner advocated for a psychological assessment, which concluded the individual had suffered significant brain injury before the custodial sentence. He had failed to engage with treatment appointments in the community and as such the receiving establishment was not made aware.

## Professional curiosity skill – Critical thinking



***“Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.”***

*~Martin Luther King*

Critical thinking is a type of analytical thinking. The practitioner uses this skill to help them to interpret information and critically evaluate whether the analysis is correct or incorrect. Different sources of factual information, alongside opinions, views and clinical judgements, help the practitioner to form an opinion and determine if this reasoning fits the assessment. This also allows practitioners to assess how balanced and objective their assessments and decisions are.

As a critical thinker, it is important to ascertain how reliable and valid the information is that you have used in your assessment or decision-making, so that you can fit all of the pieces together. Therefore, a simple way to look at critical thinking is that this skill enables you to evaluate your analysis of the information.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Offence paralleling behaviours’ are any behaviours, including fantasies, that individuals engage in which satisfy them in a similar way to the offending behaviour.

### For example:

In a core inspection, we reviewed a case that had been transferred to a new practitioner. He reviewed the case file on receipt, to get an understanding of the person on probation before meeting him. The nDelius records indicated that a health visitor had raised some concerns about the person's property and a separate entry from the housing association said similar. The receiving practitioner critically evaluated the information that was available in order to inform his next steps. He then requested safeguarding checks and called a professionals meeting with the housing association and the health visitor.

### Professional curiosity skill – Professional courage



**"Courage starts with showing up & letting ourselves be seen."**

~Brene Brown

Practitioners need to show courage in their work with people on probation. Part of this is not taking things at face value, being prepared to think the unthinkable, and then exploring this with the individual.

In addition, on occasions, professionals will have different opinions on case management, such as conflicting views on risk levels and management, thresholds for MAPPA, child protection measures, or mental health interventions. Different agencies have different responsibilities and priorities, and this can lead to different approaches.

It is critical that practitioners feel comfortable in challenging decisions they disagree with. Using some of the other skills identified here, such as persistence, perspective-taking, and analytical and critical thinking, will enable practitioners to clearly communicate the rationale for their differing viewpoint/decision, with the supporting evidence.

Be confident in asking those investigative questions and exploring the differences in opinions at the table, and be sufficiently flexible in your thinking to test your evidence against your thinking. If you remain of the same view, be confident in your professional opinion. If a resolution is not reached, it is vital to understand and follow any escalation processes. Seek support from your manager when these situations occur.

This is also a useful skill to combat groupthink: thinking or making decisions as a group, which often go unchallenged due to the desire for harmony. This can be particularly pronounced when the people making the decisions share similar values and beliefs. Therefore, it is important to seek the views of others who may hold different opinions and challenge yourself to think about the merit in these differences and have the courage to change your view, as appropriate.

### For example:

In one case we inspected, the person on probation was unable to undertake any interventions as a result of mental health needs and neurodiversity, and the case was passed back to the practitioner. Based on their knowledge, the practitioner felt work could be completed on a one-to-one basis, if the content was adapted; consequently, they challenged the decision. They felt this was of particular importance as the person was assessed as a high risk of harm. The practitioner cited evidence from their own work with the individual and information from the person on probation's hostel, to no avail. Consequently, they escalated the decision through appropriate channels with their

manager. The decision was reviewed and the person on probation was able to undertake one-to-one work with the interventions team.

### Professional curiosity skill – Building professional relationships



***“There is authoritative research evidence to show that strong professional relationships are effective in bringing about change in offenders’ attitudes and behaviour. There is also evidence to suggest that relationships are more influential than any single specific method or technique.”***

~Council of Europe Probation Rules Commentary, 2010<sup>14</sup>

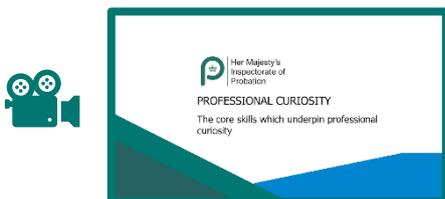
Creating a ‘working alliance’ is a major challenge for those working with involuntary clients.<sup>15</sup> It is possible to build a professional relationship, tackle ‘reactance’ (the feeling of being controlled) and build motivation, through demonstrating emotional literacy, displaying optimism, setting boundaries, and clarifying roles and expectations. A strong relationship will also support your work with the individual by helping them to understand it better.

#### For example:

Inspectors noted excellent engagement in a case seen during a core inspection. The person on probation had a history of poor compliance and, to combat this, the practitioner maintained contact with him during the custodial period, directly and through the prison offender manager, in an attempt to build a relationship.

On his release, the person maintained a high level of contact, through appointments, telephone contact and through his hostel. The practitioner increased the level of support around the anniversary of the person on probation’s separation with their partner, which had been one of the triggers to the index offence.

***NB: Just out of interest how many of the quotes and authors did you know? If you did not know them, were you curious about who they are and what they do? Were you so curious you looked them up?***



The above skills are summarised in this [12:04 minute YouTube video Effective Practice Lead, Tammie Burroughs, provides an overview of the skills that underpin professional curiosity.](#)

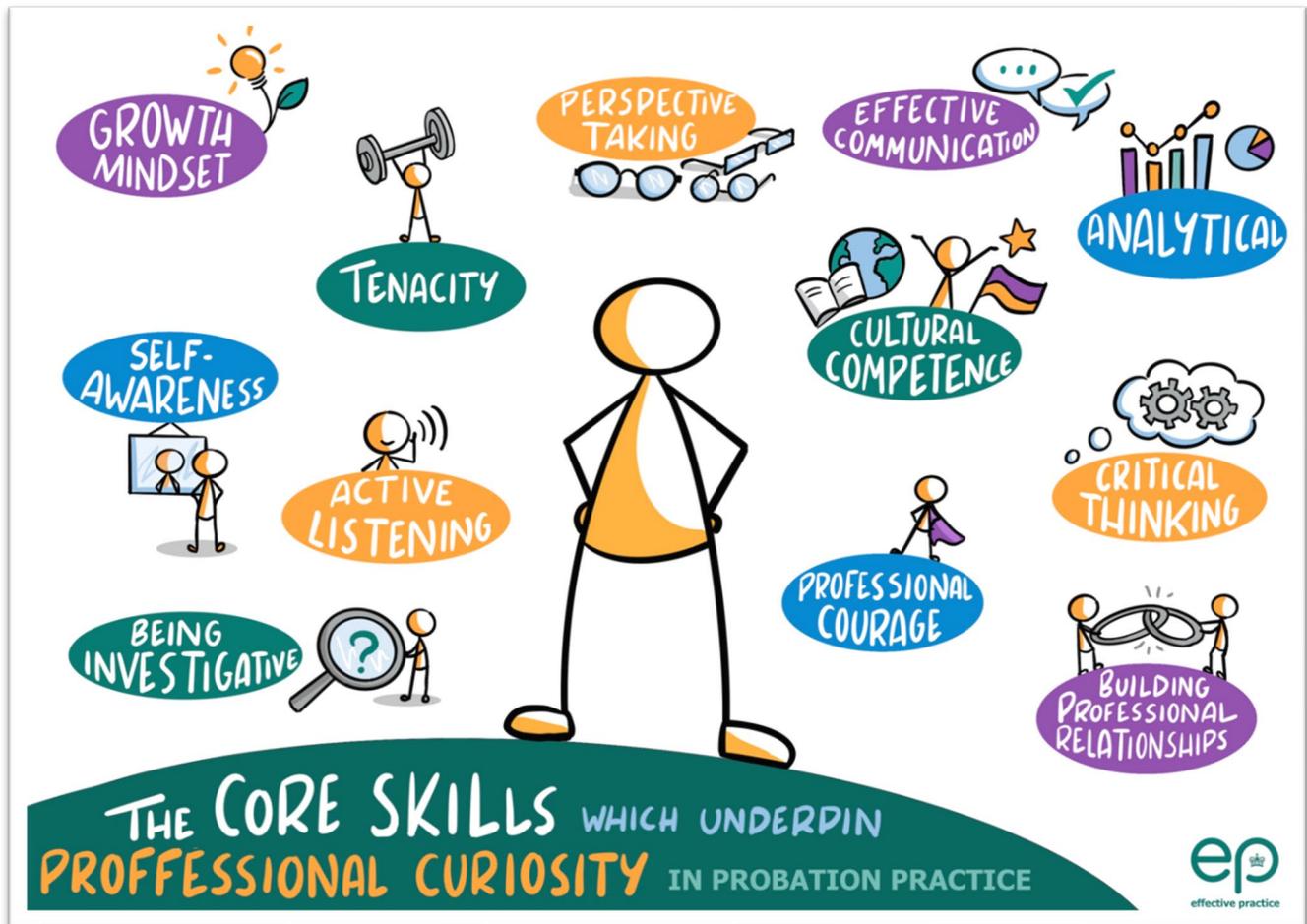
This is not an exhaustive list of the core probation skills, merely those that directly underpin professional curiosity. Other skills, such as empathy, motivational interviewing,

<sup>14</sup> Council of Europe. (2010). *Explanatory Memorandum on the Council of Europe Probation Rules*. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/76t7k3k>

<sup>15</sup> Involuntary clients is a term which was first used by Trotter to describe mandated clients, i.e. those who come to treatment under the coercion of a legal body or pressure from significant others, family members and institutions such as child protective services. Trotter, Chris. (2006). *Working with Involuntary Clients*. 2nd edition. SAGE Publications.

problem-solving and pro-social modelling, for example, will also indirectly support your curiosity

All of the skills highlighted are illustrated below:



Download a printable version [of the core skills that underpin professional curiosity here.](#)



### Reflection questions

Reflecting on what you have read and heard, and any discussions arising from the content in this section:

- What did you assume about the core skills that underpin professional curiosity before beginning this section? Have your assumptions changed?
- How far do you agree that the skills identified are the core ones that underpin professional curiosity?
- If you do not agree, which other skills do you think are central to professional curiosity? And how would these skills support curiosity?
- How much do you use each of these skills in your current role? How would it benefit you to use any of these more?
- How would you rate your proficiency in each of the skills identified? How do you know this?

- How can you develop these skills further in your practice?
- When you reflect on the most difficult parts of your work, could any of these skills help you to address these challenges? How?
- When you reflect on the most satisfying parts of your work, do any of these skills play a role? How?
- Of what you have read in this section, what is the most important for your practice?

## Professional curiosity in practice

In our inspection programmes, we frequently see cases where the practitioners have not made full use of the information available to them. Practitioners take information at face value, do not verify it, do not use a range of sources of information, and do not critically analyse the information to understand what it says, or, sometimes, what it does not say.



This section encourages you to consider how you can analyse the information you have available to you via two practical exercises.

### As a group or on your own:

Review the [previous convictions of Mr Bridges document](#) and consider what information they provide about his offending behaviour.



Study the contents, review the offences listed, the dates, and think about what points trigger your curiosity and would benefit from investigation.

### Consider:

- What does this information tell you?
- What would you want to know more about?
- What other sources of information would you consider?
- Which agencies/people would you want to speak to in order to clarify information?

An assistant inspector viewed the previous convictions and collated his [reflections in relation to the previous convictions document](#), and which key lines of enquiry this would raise for assessments, supervision and further investigations with significant others and partner agencies.

It is important to note that you may have considered different points or not identified all of the points in the document. The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate how studying a small piece of information can serve to drive your curiosity. Therefore, this is not a list of correct answers but an exploration of possible routes of inquiry that may emerge when a practitioner critically evaluates the information available.

Previous convictions documentation will provide information based on the convictions at court; however, this does not always provide details of an individual's behaviour, or indeed the original charges. Inspection work frequently illustrates this. For example, a conviction for an affray may have started as grievous bodily harm, criminal damage could have happened in the context of a domestic abuse offence, or a street robbery with a weapon could become a theft from the person. There are many reasons this may happen, for example plea bargaining<sup>16</sup> or because there is a lack of submittable evidence available to support the conviction.

Consequently, it is important to consider the behaviour within the conviction, as opposed to the conviction itself. Explore the underlying causes with the person on probation, look for patterns, and use other sources, such as contact with the police and previous case records, that could provide valuable information to support risk assessments. It is really important to approach this in an inquisitive manner, explaining why you are doing it, so as not to

<sup>16</sup> Plea bargaining is when the defendant pleads guilty to a lesser charge in exchange for a more lenient sentence or an agreement to drop other charges.

reinforce a pro-criminal identity. This can allow you to help the individual to understand themselves better, so they can become more aware of their triggers and manage themselves. This is akin to a working alliance and, ultimately, encouraging them to be curious about themselves.

Also look for gaps in offending behaviour; explore these with the person on probation. For example, if there appears to be a significant period when they were offence-free, enquire what was happening in their life over this period. How did they feel during this period? What triggered the offending behaviour again and how do they feel about that? This can be an important way of getting people to think about what their life looks like when they are not offending. It can then be used to propel them further through the cycle of motivation.

Understanding the trends and patterns will inform your assessment, planning, delivery and reviews in order to manage risk and promote desistance.

### **As a group or on your own:**

Imagine you are about to meet Mr Abidi for the first time, and you want to know a bit about him. Maybe the case has been transferred to you or perhaps he is due to begin unpaid work or an accredited programme with you.



Click the [link to the offence analysis section of his most recent OASys](#) and review the contents.

#### **Part 1:**

Now consider:

- What do you think the nature of the risk is?
- What do you think the imminence of risk is?
- Given your responses to the above questions, what do you think the level of risk of harm may be?
- What type of objectives do you think would be beneficial to be included in the sentence plan, from what you have read?
- How will these types of objectives address the risk factors?
- How will these types of objectives promote positive factors?

**Part 2:** Mr Abidi is transferred to a new practitioner and they review the OASys, [click the reviewed offence analysis section](#) and review the contents.

#### **Now consider:**

- What do you think the nature of the risk is?
- What do you think the imminence of risk is?
- Given your responses to the above questions, what do you think the level of risk of harm may be?
- How and why is this different to your answers in response to the first version?
- What type of objectives do you think would be beneficial to be included in the sentence plan, from what you have read?
- How and why is this different to your answer in response to the first version?
- What is different in the second version? What impact does that have for the individual, the victim, the public and the practitioner?
- What impact does the offence analysis have on the risk management and sentence plans?
- What impact did this analysis have on your thoughts and feelings towards Mr Abidi?

Assessments are an important area of practice, as they set the direction for the risk assessment and sentence plan. Therefore, it is important to get it right.

Assessments meet with our standards when they are:

***'well informed, analytical and personalised, actively involving the person on probation'***

The figure below illustrates the prompts for this standard, which also state that the most effective assessments focus on sufficiently engaging the person on probation, the factors linked to offending and desistance, and keeping people safe.



**Figure 2: The focus of an effective assessment**



[You can print off a version of figure 2 'The focus of an effective assessment' here.](#)



### Reflection questions

Reflecting on what you have read and heard in this section:

- What is the most important takeaway from this section that will benefit your practice?
- How can studying previous convictions support your assessments, judgements and decisions?
- How do you prepare for your initial appointment with a person on probation?
- How can you apply some of the learning from the above exercises to your practice?
- What do you suspect may prevent you taking an analytical approach? And how can you guard against this?

# Errors, bias and barriers to professional curiosity

Have you ever been rushing around the house in the morning, preoccupied with a list of things to do and absentmindedly put the cereal box back in the fridge and the milk in the cupboard? Maybe you haven't but the chances are you have done something similar, and it is understandable as humans are prone to making errors.

Senders and Moray (1991)<sup>17</sup> defined human error as something:

*“not intended by the actor; not desired by a set of rules or an external observer; or that led the task or system outside its acceptable limits”.*

Once you accept that errors occur, the next phase is to understand the different types of error. For instance, do they result from distractions, poor planning, a lack of knowledge, inadequate training or an incorrect allocation of resources? Errors can be categorised into personal, organisational, structural and/or cultural and, indeed, can sometimes sit across multiple categories.

When you reflect on previous errors and the potential for future errors, and consider bias and barriers that inhibit your work, you can use this understanding to develop strategies to try to mitigate these.

**As a group or on your own** – Practitioners frequently have to make judgements based on limited information and are required to provide the rationale for this judgement.



This in itself can lead to errors; this exercise demonstrates this.

Without undertaking a Google search, can you answer the following questions about a small German town frequently referred to as the **'town of bent necks'**:

- Why do you think the town is referred to in this manner?
- How do you think you could address the 'bent necks'?

Make a note of your original responses.

In practice we often receive and actively seek out new information to further inform our judgements and enable us to review what has been said.

With that in mind, [click on this clue](#), review the contents and consider if you would want to review your answers to the questions above.

**NB:** *If you know the narrative please don't reveal the answer until the group has discussed the options, if doing in a group.*

**Consider:**

- What was the rationale for your answers?
- Why did you think this?
- What would have assisted you to be more confident in your answer?

[Click the link to reveal the reason why 'the town of bent necks' earned its name.](#)

<sup>17</sup> Senders, J.W. and Moray, N.P. (1991). *Human Error: Cause, Prediction, and Reduction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 25.

In the exercise above, it is likely you may have made some assumptions based on the very limited information you had available, or you may have just deferred to a colleague to let them answer and opted out of the process. Some of you may have clicked on the link for a clue. If you did, how useful was this in isolation from other bits of information? Some of you may have just gone straight to Google.

This illustrates just one example of how difficult it is to make an assessment or analyse something with limited information available to you, and sometimes small clues will only make sense when we have the bigger picture.

To bring this back to professional curiosity: there are a number of errors that will affect professional curiosity, on an individual and organisational level, and multiple errors, bias and barriers can be identified in a single situation. We have identified a number of these, as follows:

Human factors	the challenges faced inside and outside the workplace that can influence a practitioner's and manager's behaviour at work.
Confidence in support	not feeling sufficiently supported to cope with the emotional labour of the work.
Confidence in managing tension	people on probation can use diversion and distraction techniques in the form of disruption and/or aggression to avoid the session planned or specific points. If practitioners do not feel able to manage this it can lead to sessions going off track, and a reluctance to be curious with the individual, for fear of repercussions.
Confidence in skill set	not feeling sufficiently equipped to either explore the information arising from investigative discussions and/or deal with it afterwards.
Disguised compliance	if an individual cooperates, this often results in reduced professional involvement. Therefore, it is important to understand the difference between compliance and meaningful engagement. Consider whether the individual's actions match their words, and whether all of the professionals involved have the same viewpoint.

<p>Time constraints and workload</p>	<p>these can have an impact on the time required to be curious.</p>
<p>Tactical lack of curiosity</p>	<p>avoiding making certain judgements about risk and/or behaviour or avoiding making enquiries out of concern that it will damage the working relationship.</p>
<p>The rule of optimism</p>	<p>professionals can minimise risks, such as personal crisis, and rationalise behaviours despite evidence of harmful behaviours and an increased risk. This can become more pronounced the longer you work with an individual, as the more you form a relationship with a person the harder it is to take an objective stance. In addition, optimism may be influenced by how you view your role on a scale between protecting the public within an enforcement agency and a focus solely on desistance.</p>
<p>Accumulating risk</p>	<p>risk is not viewed in context or as part of a pattern of behaviours.</p>
<p>Normalisation</p>	<p>behaviour is viewed as 'normal'; therefore, it is not recognised as a potential risk or assessed as such. This can become more pronounced as practitioners become desensitised to risks.</p>
<p>Professional deference</p>	<p>deferring to a perceived 'higher status' professional who views the risk as less significant, even if they do not have contact with the individual.</p>
<p>Confirmation bias</p>	<p>actively seeking or preferring evidence that supports a pre-held view, and not accepting evidence that supports the contrary viewpoint.</p>

Security of certainty	making premature judgements to promote a sense of certainty in practice (Buechler, 2004). <sup>18</sup>
Knowing but not knowing	the gut feeling that something is not right but not knowing quite what.
Dealing with uncertainty/ inadequate information:	if there is no evidence available to support or substantiate a hypothesis it can be discounted.
Drone mentality	not paying attention to what is happening, and instead just 'going through the motions' and following processes as opposed to critically evaluating the information available. This may stem from time constraints, uncertainty about how to address the situation, being preoccupied by other thoughts or a strong focus on process.



You can read more about [bias and error in risk assessment and management in the Academic Insights paper by Professor Hazel Kemshall](#).

This summarises the key learning for practitioners and organisations in relation to risk management. She identifies that practitioners are often required to make decisions in challenging situations with incomplete information, and it is thus important to pay attention to the potential influence of subjective biases and individual emotions and values. To minimise error and ensure that decisions are balanced, reasoned and well-evidenced, practitioners need to seek and critically appraise information, and adopt an open, honest and reflective approach. At the organisational level, senior managers need to ensure that risk policies, procedures and assessment tools are unbiased and fit for purpose, and that there is appropriate quality assurance, monitoring and training in place, and sufficient oversight of the whole system to maintain good practice.



## Reflection questions

Reflecting on what you have read and heard in this section:

- Think about what opportunities you had to learn something new today. Which of these did you feel were worthy of your attention, energy or best thinking? Did you make the most of these? If so how? And, if not what got in the way?
- Are there any additional errors, bias and/or barriers that you would identify that have not been listed above?
- Which of the above examples can you relate to?
- How aware are you of errors, bias and barriers that impact on your professional curiosity?
- In what ways do you intentionally identify these in your practice?
- How can you proactively plan in order to minimise errors, bias and barriers?
- How comfortable are you discussing errors in your practice? What would enable you to feel more comfortable?
- Reflect on some of the greatest lessons you have learned about your practice – have these stemmed from successes or errors?
- Reflect on an error you have made in your practice in the past:
  - What would you do differently next time?
  - What are the key takeaways from this situation?

# Mitigating the errors, bias and barriers

The first defence against errors, bias and barriers to professional curiosity is an awareness of them and the impact they have on your practice.

However, a number of tips, strategies and tools that can help to mitigate these have been collated from the learning, which this section explores.

## Recognise the demands of your workload

Working for the Probation Service is a demanding, albeit rewarding, career. Workloads can fluctuate depending on staffing levels, caseload numbers, levels of experience within the team, and the risks, needs and current circumstances of the specific individuals on your caseload.

It is important to note that the level of stress is not just correlated with numbers. Cases are considered in terms of the person on probation's risks, needs and individual circumstances. There is no definitive number for what is deemed to be a *reasonable caseload*, as this is linked to the complexity of the various cases and the practitioner's knowledge, experience, skills, current capacity, and current circumstances. On occasions, the work can feel overwhelming. It can paralyse people into inaction, making them feel as if they are just scratching the surface. And it can make you feel as if you have no time to be curious.

At these times, it is helpful to be professionally curious about what is causing this feeling. For example, is it the number of cases, is it specific individuals who are being very demanding or is it the stress of not meeting targets? Reflect on this and speak to your manager to help you understand and explore strategies to address the underlying causes.

Below are some tips that may help you:

- At the end of each day, create a realistic list of things to do and allocate the space in your diary accordingly. The key is to be realistic, so do not list everything, just those things you want to complete the following day, and tick them off as you complete them. This works best at the end of the day, as it may prevent you from lying awake and thinking about what you have to do. If there really is no time before the end of the day, make sure you prioritise this as your first task of the day.
- Consider building focused time into your diary. For example is it possible to work from a quiet office while you complete an assessment or can you turn off your emails, put your phone on silent and let reception know you will be offline for an hour to allow you to complete a task?
- Set time limits for each task to help you remain focused. There are various ways of doing this; for example, set yourself a timer for 25 minutes and focus on your to do list, then take a short break and ideally move away from your desk, then return and repeat, taking a longer break after an hour; this is known as the pomodoro technique but there are many others, so be curious about what will work for you.
- Be curious about how you work best and at your most efficient and do your most important and challenging tasks during this period.
- While the role is a very reactive one, where you can, when planning your diary consider grouping together activities that are similar, to save time and capacity.

- It is really easy to be distracted by other tasks but, when possible, focus on one task at a time. You can lose track when switching from one task to another and it can make it feel like you are getting nothing done.
- Prioritise your work, be curious about your list of things to do and consider which are the most important to complete. There are numerous models that can assist you with this. A useful one is the 'Eisenhower matrix', which is divided into four quadrants, as shown below:

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<b>DO</b>	<b>DECIDE</b>
NOT IMPORTANT	<b>DELEGATE</b>	<b>POSTPONE/DELETE</b>

**Figure 3: Eisenhower matrix**

Quadrant	Categorisation	Action
1	Important and urgent	Do first
2	Important but not urgent	Decide when you are going to do it and plan in your diary
3	Urgent but not important	Ask yourself if you can delegate this
4	Not important, not urgent	Consider if this can be eliminated altogether or done at a later date

## Recognise the emotional labour of practice

Practitioners have to balance the concepts of care and control, and work with people who cause harm to others and themselves. Plus, people on probation are often also victims with vulnerabilities. Consequently, this can create tension or a state of cognitive dissonance by managing or holding different, conflicting perspectives (Burton and Revell, 2018).<sup>18</sup>

While we cannot totally eliminate risk, there is also a weight of personal, organisational and public expectation and opinion when risk is not managed effectively.

<sup>18</sup> Burton V and Revell L. (2018). 'Professional Curiosity in Child Protection: Thinking the Unthinkable in a Neo-Liberal World'. *The British Journal of Social Work* 48(6): 1508–1523. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcx123.

Therefore, it is important that practitioners recognise the emotional labour involved in this work and develop strategies to manage it. For example, debriefing after difficult sessions with colleagues and/or managers, proactively engaging with supervision, planning time in diaries for reflection and development, ensuring a healthy work/life balance and that annual leave entitlements are taken, with clear breaks from work.

## Plan your diary

Notwithstanding that core inspections have found that workloads are high in some areas, it is important that you are able to plan your diary in order to build in reflection time between seeing people on probation.



If you are seeing people back to back with no space to remind yourself of their current circumstances or reflect on what has been said in your sessions, it will be more difficult to identify the nuances in people's presentation and behaviours.

Undertaking proper reflection does take time; however, this is an investment in your continuous professional development and your own emotional wellbeing.

Conversely, it is important to recognise that the role also requires you to be reactive, as things do not always go to plan, and circumstances can change. Practitioners need to be skilled at consistently being able to reprioritise based on risks and needs.

## Structure sessions and record effectively

Devised as part of the first SEEDS roll-out, the **CRISSA** model (detailed below) is a useful structure to deliver a curious and meaningful session with a person on probation:

**C for check in** – be curious about their level of engagement and if anything noteworthy has happened since the last contact.

**Record:** an overview of the person's current presentation.

**R for review** – be curious about how they have done on different parts of their order. If they are undertaking an intervention, work through how they are taking any learning forward in their lives, and what implications this may have for their identity, relationships and roles.

**Record:** progress on the order and/or against set tasks, for example if you asked them to contact the benefits agency or practise the assertiveness skill you discussed in the previous session and progress on other requirements, such as unpaid work, electronic monitoring, interventions.

Using this investigative approach can help practitioners to assess how the work impacts on safety and desistance, and if any further actions are required. It will also act as a useful reminder when you look back at records.

**I is for intervention** – undertake the intervention, delivered in a manner that is mindful of the individual's protected characteristics and their personal circumstances, to promote active engagement.

**Record:** the detail of the work undertaken during the contact and an analysis of the impact this had on the individual.

**S is for summary** – be curious about what the person on probation is taking away from your contact. Ask them to summarise what they have done in the session.

**Record:** a critical analysis of the contact.

**S is for set tasks** – provide meaningful tasks for the person on probation to take away and complete before the next contact.

**Record:** tasks for the person on probation and practitioner, such as liaising with the hostel worker, pursuing police checks, or practising any new skills learned in the session.

As illustrated above, while the structure is first and foremost linked to delivering a meaningful session, the same structure can be used to record an overview of your contact. Practitioners can use the write-up to be professionally curious about how effective the session was, and to think about the focus of the next session.

Clear, contemporaneous record-keeping by all practitioners is the bedrock of responsible and accountable management of people on probation. Clear recording on case management systems is essential to ensure that any judgements are recorded and to explain why a particular course of action has been taken.

*'Recording should cover anything that contributes to a decision and should be recorded by the person making the decision. How much is recorded depends on the complexity of the situation'* (Nosowska and Series, 2013)<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, if you follow the principles of effective communication in your recording, i.e. you are clear, concise and complete, this is likely to encourage you to be curious, as it enables you to review what has been said previously and analyse it in context. This can help colleagues who are also working with the individual, or covering for duty, to understand the individual's current circumstances.

Some areas have added an **A** to the end of **CRISS** as a prompt to record the next appointment and rationale. This is a useful tool for allowing you to assess if you are seeing people at the right frequency, aligned with your assessment of their current circumstances.

In addition, there is a specific nDelius entry related to professional judgement, where practitioners can record professional judgements that have been informed by professional curiosity. In this entry, be clear about the information you have used, your analysis, and the actions you have taken/will take as a result. Good examples of the use of this entry include the level of reporting frequency and rationale, concerns about the individual (stated alongside what is giving cause for concern) or the strengths in their current circumstances. Next steps and rationale for specific enforcement action or an alternative course of action.

## Use the assessment tools available effectively

HM Inspectorate of Probation is clear that it does not dictate which assessment tools must be used in practice. However, it is important that, where actuarial tools are used, they are considered within the practitioner's assessments to help to inform judgements. Structured risk



<sup>19</sup> Nosowska, G. and Series, L. (2013). *Good decision-making: practitioners' handbook*. Totnes: Research in Practice for Adults.

assessment tools have been shown, in many studies in various professional fields, to perform much better than professional judgement alone.

It is important that practitioners use the actuarial risk assessment instruments to inform their judgements, as this will help to mitigate some of the errors, bias and barriers discussed. If these are overridden in terms of the risk levels, it is important to explain why.

## Actuarial risk assessments

HMPPS risk guidance states:

*An assessment based on statistical methods and comparison to a group of similar individuals, usually utilising known factors or scores. The scores produced by actuarial risk assessment instruments provide valid estimates of how likely each individual is to be reconvicted for relevant offences as defined by the tool.*

Examples include:

- **Risk of Serious Recidivism (RSR)** score of the probability of the offender committing a seriously harmful offence within 12 months. RSR is largely based on static factors, but dynamic evidence can be used where available.
- The **Offender Group Reconviction Scale (OGRS)** estimates the percentage probability of proven reoffending ('likelihood of reoffending') within one year and two years, based on static factors, such as age, gender and criminal history. The fourth iteration of OGRS includes predictors of general (OGRS4/G), violent (OGRS4/V) and contact sexual reoffending (OGRS4/S).
- The **Offender General Predictor (OGP)**, **Offender Violence Predictor (OVP)** and **Offender Sexual Predictor (OSP)** incorporate dynamic factors from the OASys assessment (if completed).
- The **Offender Violence Predictor (OVP)** delivers the percentage likelihood of committing any violent reconviction within two years (this includes minor violent offences such as common assault and criminal damage, as well as more serious violent offences). An OVP score of 30 per cent + is one of the criteria for suitability for a violence-specific accredited programme.
- The **Offender Sexual Predictor (OSP)** delivers the percentage likelihood of a contact sexual reconviction within two years (only available for offenders with a sexual index offence or previous conviction). Being able to differentiate between low and high risk of a sexual reconviction helps to prioritise resources according to where the risk is greatest.

The results for OGRS, OGP, OVP and OSP are banded into low, medium, high and very high likelihoods of reoffending.

## Structured professional risk assessments

HMPPS risk guidance states:

*Structured professional risk assessment uses the analysis of the lifestyle, behaviour and offending of an individual to make a judgement about the level of risk they present. Structured tools encourage consistency between practitioners. They ensure all sources of information are considered and the focus is on factors known to have an impact on the type of risk*

Examples include:

- **Offender Assessment System (OASys)**
- **Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA)** is a structured tool to help practitioners to understand and respond appropriately to domestic abuse. SARA is available in OASys or as a standalone tool.



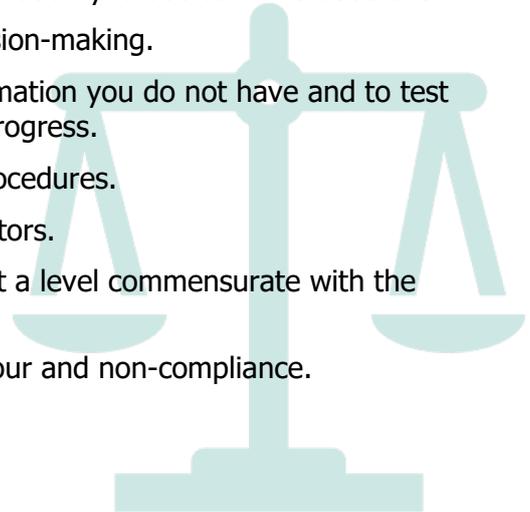
Explore the HMPPS Intranet for guidance on risk, and useful tools such as the [four-step process quick guide](#).

## Use frameworks to support decision-making

### Defensible decision-making

Probation staff across all areas of practice often face complex situations. Sometimes they have to make decisions when there is uncertainty or ambiguity. As such, it is important that decisions are defensible and, again, that drive for professional curiosity can support this. An effective strategy to help you identify and explain the rationale for your decisions is illustrated by the components of defensible decision-making from Kemshall et al (2011):<sup>20</sup>

- Ground your decisions in the evidence.
- Use reliable risk assessment tools and consider the outcomes of these when making decisions.
- Collect, verify and thoroughly evaluate the information you use to make decisions.
- Clearly record and include the rationale for decision-making.
- Communicate with relevant others to seek information you do not have and to test your hypothesis and garner information about progress.
- Align your decisions with agency policies and procedures.
- Match risk management interventions to risk factors.
- Maintain contact with the person on probation at a level commensurate with the level of risk of harm.
- Respond to escalating risk, deteriorating behaviour and non-compliance.
- Recognise and reinforce progress.
- Seek to strengthen positive factors.



With thanks to Professor Hazel Kemshall and De Montfort University for allowing us to include this [58:18min recording of the Insights Festival event: Risk: The Art of Decision Making with Hazel Kemshall](#).

<sup>20</sup> Kemshall, H., Mackenzie, G. and Wilkinson, B. (2011). *Risk of Harm 11 Guidance and Training Resources CD ROM*. Leicester: De Montfort University.

## How do you decide on the nature of enforcement action?

In making your decision, consider the information you have as a whole under the categories below and make an assessment of whether the risk is manageable in the community.

**Figure 4: Enforcement decisions**



## Tune into information gaps and seek to fill them

On occasions practitioners can feel unsure about how to progress with a case, as it feels like there is a great deal of uncertainty. In these cases, it is important to take stock of the current situation; sort the information you have available to you and evaluate whether you have sufficient information on which to base your assessments and decisions. The questions below can prove useful to do this:

What do I know?	What is uncertain or unclear?	What I think I know?	What is missing?
The information is proven; it is verified from a second or multiple sources; it is factual.	The information is not properly understood; it seems to be hearsay; it seems to be pulled through from a previous assessment and not verified; it has been hinted at by others but there is no evidence to support; it could be interpreted in multiple ways.	I have drawn conclusions from practice knowledge and experience, mindful that this is influenced by emotions, values and biases.	Gaps in information mean I don't have the full picture; what else is needed to inform the assessment/decision; what else needs to be explored.

## Deal with discrepancies

When analysing information from multiple sources, practitioners may become aware of numerous discrepancies. In this situation, it is important to critically evaluate the information to help inform decision-making.

There are five different types of discrepancies:

Informational:	contradictory information from different sources
Interpretative:	different conclusions drawn from different professionals
Interactive:	declared intentions that are contradicted by actions
Incongruence:	manner, behaviour or communication that is inconsistent, contradictory or incoherent
Instinctual:	worker's gut feeling tells them something is wrong

Wonnacott and Morrison (2009)<sup>21</sup> have developed a discrepancy matrix, which is a visual tool to help practitioners explore these different types of discrepancies. Practitioners can plot the information available on the matrix, physically or through reflections. This then allows them to assess the quality of the information and, importantly, identify what is missing,

<sup>21</sup> Morrison, T. and Wonnacott, J. (2009). *Training Materials*. Cited in Wonnacott J (2012) *Mastering Social Work Supervision*. Jessica Kingsley Publications

what requires clarification because it is ambiguous, what is based on assumptions and what evidence is strong. The matrix can be seen in figure 5 below.

Practitioners can then assess the strength of the evidence on which they have based their assessments/decisions and ascertain whether they need to take any follow-up action. For example, if a lot of the evidence is ambiguous, they may liaise further with partnerships.



**Figure 5: Discrepancy matrix**

### Take a multi-agency approach

People on probation who sustain change are frequently those who have been supported by multiple agencies, working in close partnership, with effective information-sharing agreements.

Collaborating with partners allows you to address a wide range of risk factors that contribute to offending behaviour, and bolster positive and protective factors for long-term change. Multi-agency work also provides a more comprehensive understanding of an individual and their circumstances, as multiple perspectives are feeding into the supervision process. Building this understanding also means your interventions and risk management strategies

will be more tailored to the individual. Consequently, this will also act as a safeguard to some of the barriers to professional curiosity previously discussed.

## Practice, practice, practice

An essential element of professional curiosity is the ability to ask open and probing questions to understand people on probation's specific circumstances, motivations for their behaviour, what social support they have, and whether these networks will undermine their journey or promote a pro-social identity.

To become proficient in any skill, it is important to practise it in order to help you grow and improve. Consciously think about repeating the core skills and behaviours that underpin professional curiosity and review your progress.

Practise using open questions in conversations, both on an informal basis and in more formal settings. These questions can fall into a number of categories. Some examples are highlighted below:

**Questions for clarification** to allow people to think more about the basis of their comments, such as:

- What makes you say that?
- You have said that a few times, what does that mean to you?

**Questions that probe assumptions** – to allow people to think about what their beliefs are based on, such as:

- Please explain that to me?
- Tell me more about how you arrived at that assumption?
- How might someone else explain that differently?

**Questions that probe reasons and evidence**, which allow you to explore the rationale for someone's argument. This enables you understand how rigid and entrenched someone's views are and also to highlight possible other explanations, such as:

- Can you give me an example of that?
- Help me to understand more...
- What evidence supports this?

**Questions about perspectives**, which allow the person to explore their viewpoint and show there are alternative perspectives. Such as:

- How else could you look at this?
- What are the positives and negatives of this viewpoint?
- How might someone else see this differently?

**Questions that probe the consequences**, which allow the person to identify the implications of their actions and think about their impact. For example:

- This sounds really important to you; can you say a bit more?
- How does X tie in with what you learned previously?
- What could happen as a result ... and how would that impact on you/X?

**Questions about questions** to allow an individual to think about what they have said, such as:

- Why do you think I asked you that?
- What might your grandmother say?

In addition, practise being asked questions about the people on probation you manage and/or have contact with. This will help you become familiar with talking about the judgements you make in cases, your decisions and importantly the rationale for these.

## Adopt a growth mindset

It is important that practitioners keep an open mind and are flexible in their approach to learning in general and about specific cases. You can achieve this by consistently questioning things within your practice and area of work. Some questions and considerations that may help you to remain open are:



### Questions

- Do the individual's actions match their words?
- Do all of the professionals involved have the same viewpoint?
- How objective am I being about the person or the situation?

### Considerations

- Insight into risky behaviour does not necessarily equate to stopping this behaviour.
- The existence of protective and positive factors will not automatically reduce offending behaviour.
- ... and neither does compliance.
- Using information from numerous sources will widen your view of a case.
- Risk is dynamic, so do not rigidly hold on to your first assessment: monitor it, test your hypotheses, reassess, review and reformulate, as appropriate.
- Keep the victims in your mind.
- Be clear on your boundaries – public protection is the priority and must ALWAYS come first.

Asking for feedback and being receptive to this is also part of having a growth mindset and will support your continuous professional development.



[Receiving feedback document](#) and [giving feedback document](#) provides some top tips.

## Practice self-awareness/scrutiny

It is important to reflect on your own practice so that you can recognise the bias you bring to the role, what is working well to reinforce it, and what is not working well that you need to address.

As part of this, it is important to have professional humility, so that you are receptive to constructive criticism and are aware of areas of development. It also allows you to recognise the roles and contributions of others involved with an individual.

Some tools to support self-awareness include:



- [Critical Thinking Cheat sheet](#) sourced from [Future Focused Learning Network](#)
- [HMPPS's Bias Recognition Checklist 2021](#)
- The [professional curiosity self-scrutiny list here](#) can be used to help you test your analysis of an individual's current circumstances.
- [Seven key questions to support risk assessment documents.](#)

## Be aware of the power dynamics of your role

Every individual has varying levels of privilege and power. Therefore, an awareness of the dynamics at play and power differential between practitioners and people on probation is beneficial.

Practitioners have power from their role, which may be further heightened by their personal characteristics, the responsibilities associated with this power, and the potential shame and vulnerabilities of the person on probation. How practitioners express this power will affect the sense of the 'working alliance' and levels of awareness and empathy, and will thus determine the quality of the relationship and the person on probation's response.

Consequently, this will have an impact on factors such as the level of disclosures, especially when shame is involved (which will also be influenced by personal factors such as culture), and if the person wants to create a good impression or has a desire to push back against an authoritarian response. Therefore, practitioners may want to consider the effect of power dynamics on their interactions.

## Take opportunities to reflect on your practice with others

Inspections have found that active reflection on practice can be neglected as operational pressures increase. However, it is a valuable tool for learning. It is the process of being reflective about your actions and taking a critical stance towards your practice, so that you remain conscious of what has influenced your decision-making and actions. This could include your beliefs, values, qualities, knowledge, strengths, limitations and experiences.

It enables you to take a systematic approach to evaluating your work so that you can identify changes to continually improve. Thus, it supports a growth mindset and self-awareness.

Furthermore, it allows you to take a step back and see the bigger picture. This can enable you to see escalating risk factors that you were not conscious of when you were focused on the details. Or it may help you to recognise progress that you had not been aware of.

There are numerous strategies you can use to reflect, such as informal conversations with colleagues, supervision, the specific reflective practice supervision and/or action learning sets.

HMPPS Reflective Practice Supervision (RPS) Standards (2022) state that:

RPS sessions have 3 functions: **professional development, support and mutual quality assurance** in relation to the cases under discussion

The Reflective Practice Supervision Standards are underpinned by **SEEDS** – Skills in Effective Engagement, (staff) Development and (staff) Supervision – and the associated principles:

- **'The engaging practitioner'** is one who has the skills and capacities to build effective relationships with service users, recognising that person-centred practice is a powerful vehicle for changing behaviour, managing risk and reducing reoffending
- This requires that practitioners regularly **reflect on their practice**, not as an optional extra but as a fundamental part of their ongoing professional development and in order to inform the judgements they make every day
- **'The enabling framework'** recognises that the behaviour and actions of managers, both at SPO and senior levels, has a significant impact on the extent of service user engagement by practitioners – they can enable or inhibit
- When **managers model person-centred practice** in their management style and use **facilitation skills** to support staff to think through complex issues, they are likely to become more engaging and authoritative in their professional roles

It is important that you are proactive in the process and bring cases for discussion, in addition to those highlighted by your manager, as you will know which cases are the most challenging for you personally. This may be because of how the person on probation is presenting, because of discrepancies, or because of different opinions across the different partners, or it may be there are concerns that are difficult to substantiate, so you want support to identify the next steps.

It is important to keep a growth mindset and be prepared to answer questions about the case you are discussing if reflecting with others, because this will enable you to analyse your practice.

The SEEDS2 documentation on EQuIP provides some additional tools to support your learning and development journey as part of RPS, such as the 'RPSS practice observation – the role of the practitioner and the RPSS practitioner post-observation self-evaluation template'. You can search for this using the keywords 'reflection' or 'RPSS'.



In addition, this [professional curiosity reflective log](#) may help you to review a specific situation

## Action learning sets

Action learning provides an opportunity for staff to support their own learning and development through insightful questioning and challenges on specific situations among colleagues.

We saw evidence of this on our mental health thematic inspection, and inspectors said that:

*action learning and reflective practice would be beneficial to all practitioners. It would help them to continuously improve their skills in working with a range of people on probation, including those with mental health issues.*

Mental health thematic inspection, 2022

As part of the mental health effective practice guide, we spoke to operational staff about the benefits of action learning sets; they share their insights in the videos below:



[The benefits of action learning sets: Danielle McKie, Peterlee, Durham Cluster](#)



[The benefits of action learning sets: Wendy Capes, Probation Learning Lead, North East Region](#)

## Seek opportunities for continuous professional development

Over their careers, probation practitioners will encounter a range of offences and situations and a myriad of needs. It is one of the only vocations where someone with one year's experience may have to deal with something a practitioner with 20 years' experience has not addressed. It is impossible to know everything about everything, so it is important you proactively seek out learning opportunities to develop your practice. Liaise with colleagues, use supervision, action learning sets and self-directed learning, as well as mandatory training.



Also take opportunities to share any knowledge you gain with your team to help to upskill colleagues.



### Reflection questions

Reflecting on what you have read and heard in this section:

- Reflecting on the conditions that influence your practice, consider:
  - which of these are within your control?
  - which of these can you do more of to support your practice?
  - for which of these do you need to develop strategies to mitigate any negative impact?
- How do you recognise when you are struggling to work effectively with a case?
- Have you used any of the strategies identified in your practice? How useful were/are they?
- Consider testing how helpful these strategies are in your practice, then evaluate what is most useful for you and why.
- What other strategies have you developed? How do they help?
- How do you and your colleagues share strategies that help you to improve your practice on a formal and informal basis?
- How do you celebrate achievements when strategies are effective?

## Professional curiosity and continuous professional development

A fundamental part of the Inspectorate's reflection on the meaning of professional curiosity is the desire to learn more about the latest research and ensure our practice remains current. When practitioners are curious about the latest evidence, this will undoubtedly support their practice in managing risk and promoting desistance. In the Munro review of child protection, 'Final report, a child centred system', Professor Eileen Munro<sup>22</sup> (2010) states:

*'good professional practice is driven by knowledge of the latest theory and research'*

When considering the academic literature, practitioners need to consider how they can implement the theory in their practice – what does the latest research actually mean for their work with people on probation? Some refer to this as 'research-mindedness' and Everitt (2002)<sup>23</sup> indicated that it is evidenced by practitioners who:

- Consistently define and make their objectives and hypotheses explicit.
- Understand that their explanations of the world are merely hypotheses, as they are tentative and open to be tested against evidence.
- Are aware of their expertise and knowledge and those of others.
- Consider theories that help to make sense of social need, disproportionality, and resources and assist in decision-making.
- Are thoughtful, and reflect on data (which includes actuarial data and clinical assessments) and theory, contributing to their development and refinement.
- Scrutinise and analyse data and information.
- Are mindful of how their own perspective, values and identity influences the way they see and understand the world.

All of the above has an impact on a practitioner's understanding of risk, desistance and engagement and will have implications for practice. Furthermore, they are underpinned by curiosity and the pursuit of further knowledge and understanding to influence the decisions made in practice.

## Research in practice

The impact of research in practice can be seen in practitioners' work on a daily basis. Recent examples of this include the 'toxic trio', a concept developed by Brandon et al (2009)<sup>24</sup> to recognise the heightened risk of individuals who perpetrate domestic abuse and have mental health and substance use needs. The phrase describes how the coexistence of these factors

---

<sup>22</sup> Munro, E. (2010). *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report - A child-centred system*. London: Department for Education.

<sup>23</sup> Everitt, A. (2002). 'Research and Development in Social Work' in *Social Work: themes, issues and critical debates* (2nd Edition). Adams, R., Dominelli, L. and Payne, M. (Eds). Basingstoke: Palgrave/ Open University, pp 109-16

<sup>24</sup> Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Gardner, R., Sidebotham, P., Dodsworth, J., Warren, C. and Black, J. (2009). *Understanding Serious Case Reviews and their Impact: A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2005-07*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF-RR129.

serves to compound the impact of each other. This is now a well-recognised concept in probation and safeguarding practice, and informs assessment and planning. Consequently, the research has informed practice.

In addition, we now know strangulation is a significant predictor of future violence, with the risk of homicide being significantly higher when strangulation has been a previous feature of abuse.<sup>25</sup> This is exacerbated by the fact that unconsciousness may occur within seconds, and death within minutes. The victim may have no visible injuries, but, because of underlying brain damage due to the lack of oxygen during the strangulation assault, they may have serious internal injuries or die days, even weeks, later. Historically this lack of external and visible injuries, plus a lack of understanding, lead to strangulation being somewhat overlooked. However, we now know about the significant risk, and this has influenced legislation, as a non-fatal strangulation offence came into force in June 2022, and practitioners understand that this is a heightened risk factor.

## Research in practice: a personalised and individual approach – Johari's window



Academic research is clear about the importance of a personalised and individualised service. To achieve this, practitioners would benefit from a comprehensive understanding of an individual's identity to determine what's going to work with the specific person on probation. It is important that practitioners are curious about an individual's identity: their unique qualities, beliefs, values and protected characteristics, and how these intersect with each other to influence the person.

There are a number of models that can help you to understand an individual. We have included a few of the main ones below, and would encourage you to explore these models, and others, to develop your curiosity about this subject area and as part of your continuous professional development.

The first model is **Johari's window**, as illustrated in figure 6 below. This model, created by Luft and Inghamis (1955),<sup>26</sup> was designed to help people understand their relationship with themselves and others. It also illustrates why it is important not to accept things at face value, as sometimes individuals themselves need help to understand and be aware of their own identity and behaviour.

The model was developed to be used as an exercise in which an individual would select a number of adjectives from a list provided, which they believe describe their personality. A peer would then be required to select the same number of adjectives from the list provided. These adjectives would be placed within the quadrants of the model shown below, so that the person can identify how aligned the views are and how open they are. This can then help the individual to develop self-awareness, for example increasing the 'open' quadrant of the window.

---

<sup>25</sup> Glass N, Laughon K, Campbell J, Block CR, Hanson G, Sharps PW, Taliaferro E. (2008). 'Non-fatal strangulation is an important risk factor for homicide of women'. *Journal of Emergency Medicine*. Oct; 35(3):329-35. doi: 10.1016/j.jemermed.2007.02.065. Epub 2007 Oct 25. PMID: 17961956; PMCID: PMC2573025.

<sup>26</sup> Luft, J. and Ingham, H. (1955). 'The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness', *Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development*. Los Angeles: UCLA.

As such, it is a useful reminder that our interactions with others are shaped by how we see ourselves, and how the person we are interacting with sees us. This awareness can also assist practitioners with purposeful engagement.

The four quadrants are explained as follows:

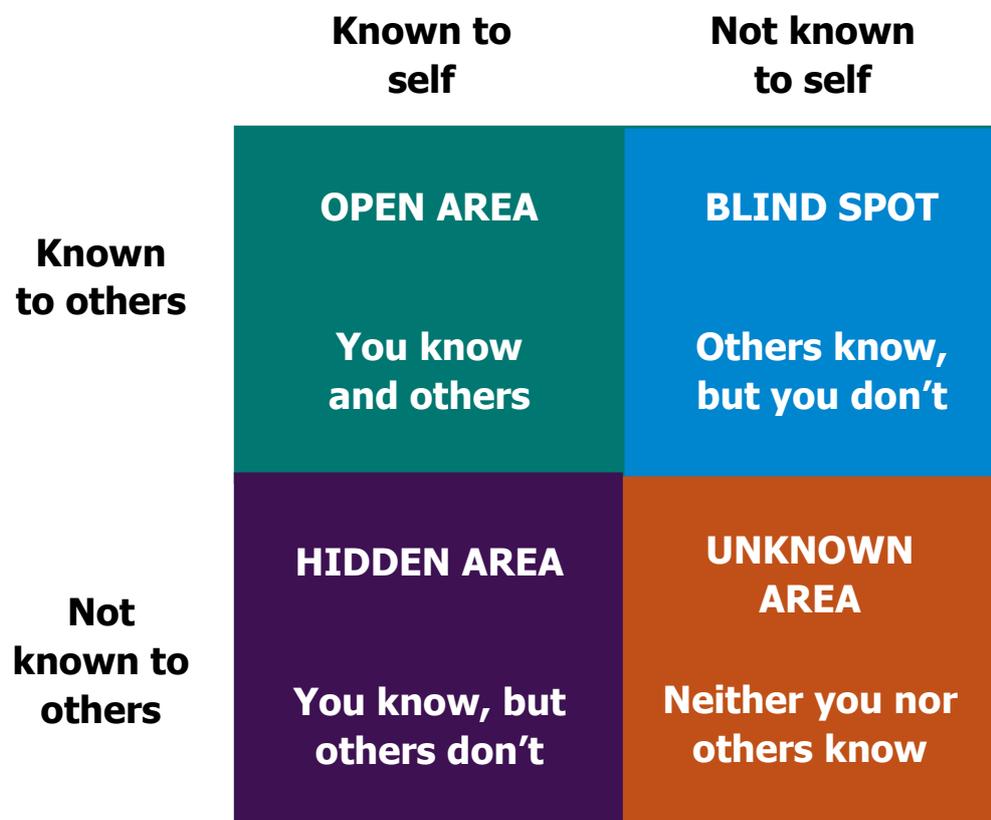
**Open** – Our conscious self, which we are aware of and is known to others. This includes our attitudes, behaviour, motivation, values, communication style and indeed our way of life.

**Hidden** – These are things others are unaware of, so based very much on our own view.

**Blind** – What others perceive about us but we do not recognise within ourselves.

**Unknown** – Adjectives that neither the individual nor others select, either because they do not apply or because of collective ignorance of these traits.

**Figure 6: Johari's window model**



### Research in practice: a personalised and individual approach – the cultural iceberg

An important part of any individual's identity is their culture. Some aspects of this are easily visible and very conscious. These are referred to as surface culture, such as food, music and language. Other aspects are subconscious, and include values, beliefs and thought patterns that underlie behaviour. They are referred to as deep culture, for example:

- **Communication styles and rules**
- **Notions of:** courtesy, friendship and leadership

- **Approaches to:** religion, relationships, raising children, decision-making and problem-solving
- **Attitudes towards:** those of different ages, authority, death and sin
- **Concepts of:** self, time, the past, future, justice and our roles

The analogy of the '**cultural iceberg model**' was developed by Hall (1976)<sup>27</sup> and is depicted in figure 7. Practitioners need to use professional curiosity to explore under the surface of the person on probation, and how the 'deep culture' factors influence a person's identity, values and behaviour. This can then help to inform assessments, planning, delivery and reviews to promote compliance, safety and change.



**Figure 7: Cultural iceberg**

## Research in practice: a personalised and individual approach-ecological framework model

Within probation practice it is also important to understand how an individual relates to their environment, as this will influence their identity and behaviour and, therefore, risk and desistance. This is explained in the '**ecological framework model**'. Introduced as a conceptual model by Bronfenbrenner,<sup>28</sup> and illustrated in figure 8, this focuses on how

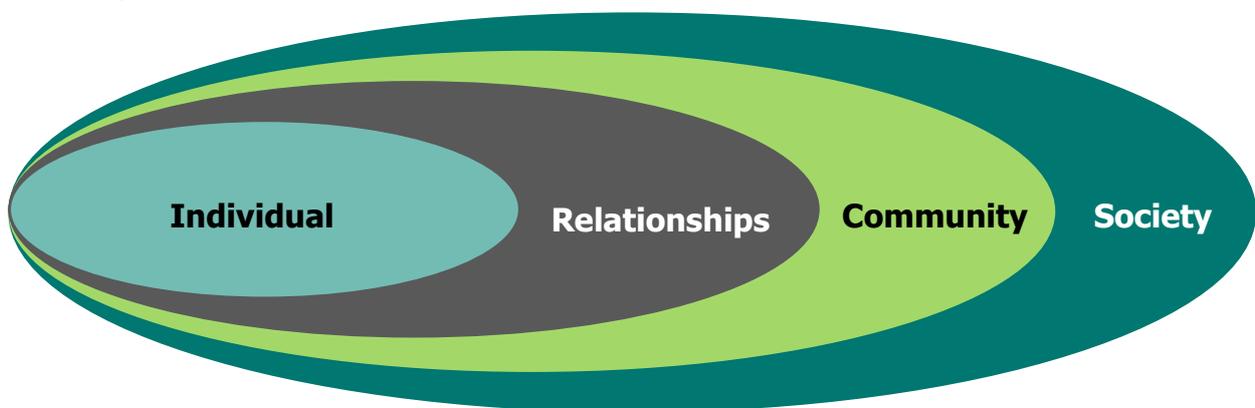
<sup>27</sup> Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Press/Double day.

<sup>28</sup> Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

different systems, and the interplay between them, have an impact on the individual, in their personal and biological development. It explores how individual, personal relationships, community and society all influence each other, to help practitioners to reflect on an:

- **Individual level** – how the person on probation’s personal history and any adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), adult trauma, attachments (how you relate to others), emotional wellbeing and substance use influence their behaviour.
- **Personal relationships** – the impact of the person’s relationships with family, peers, associates, and intimate partners on their offending behaviour and on their pro-social identity. Reflect on whether you can harness the power of these relationships in supervision or whether they are linked to risk factors.
- **Community contexts in which relationships occur** – such as school, college, work and neighbourhoods. Consider the impact of these on an individual’s motivation, capacity and willingness to change.
- **Societal factors** – consider economic and social policies that influence socioeconomic inequalities, and social and cultural norms. For example, youth violence is linked to norms around hypermasculinity and male dominance, as well as cultural norms that endorse violence as an acceptable response.

This approach recognises that everything is connected and, therefore, can affect everything else; we must recognise and be curious about people’s individual circumstances to support effective desistance. To do so, practitioners must be curious about the individual, the identity they are aware of, the identity that is perceived by others, the identity they would like to work towards, their relationships, and how they interact with their community and society.



**Figure 8: Ecological framework model**

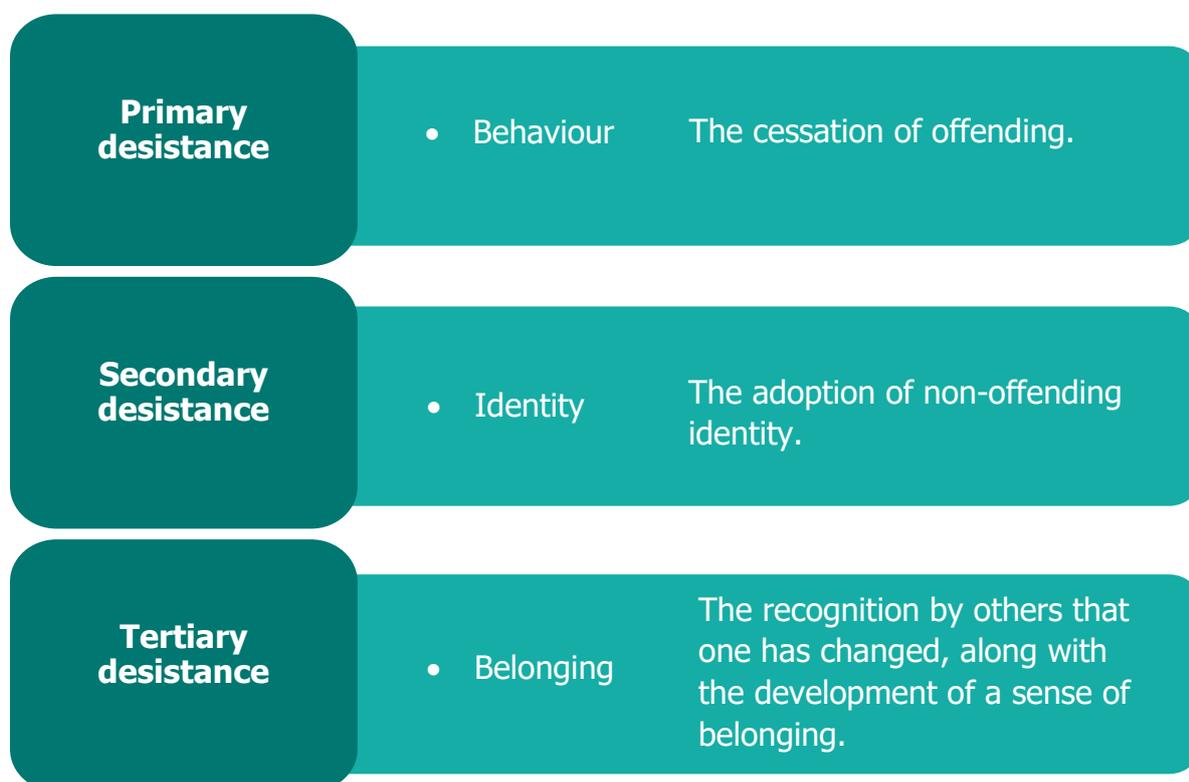
In conclusion, we have shared three models/theories here around a personalised and individual approach; each require the practitioner to work with a person on probation to help them gain a better understanding of themselves. This can be achieved by being curious about what has influenced their behaviour to this point, what could pull them back into offending and what could promote change. Theories such as those above can help you structure your discussions; for example, the cultural iceberg can help you to be more mindful about deep culture and to explore the impact of this on behaviour.

It is worth noting that there are numerous other models, which you may wish to explore and discuss with colleagues so that you can reflect on how these may be useful within your practice.

## Research in practice: Blending risk and desistance

Current research highlights the importance of blending practice that manages risks and promotes desistance. The aim of the probation service is to support the person on probation to move through the various stages of desistance, as illustrated in figure 9. To do so, it is vital that we engage people, and promote safety and desistance. Focusing exclusively on any one of these elements can be problematic. For example, if we simply impose controls to manage risk, when those controls are removed the likelihood of a lapse or relapse is high, as individuals will have no sense of agency.<sup>29</sup> If we encourage engagement to the detriment of other factors, we are less likely to have meaningful conversations linked to risk and protective factors, and if we focus solely on desistance we may not develop a full understanding of the underlying causes of the offending behaviour to work with the person to bring about positive changes. Consequently, effective case supervision relies on a sound knowledge of the individual. You need to be attuned to their circumstances, so that you know how to purposefully engage them, when to impose more controls and when to relax these, and which positive factors to reinforce and strengthen.

Desistance has been described as involving the following three stages:



**Figure 9: The three stages of desistance**



You can read more about [desistance – general practice principles via the Inspectorate’s ‘Research’ webpage](#), under the evidence base of probation services.



In the [Academic Insights paper Reconciling ‘Desistance’ and ‘What Works’ \(2019\)](#), [Professor Shadd Maruna and Dr Ruth Mann](#) summarise the development of the ‘desistance’ and ‘what works’ research literature. While there are differences

<sup>29</sup> Self-agency is the sense that actions are self-generated.

between the two areas of work, the continual development of 'evidence-based practice' will be best supported by recognising that both approaches are valuable and that they can be highly complementary.



The concept was explored further by [Professor Hazel Kemshall in the Academic Insights paper Risk and Desistance: A Blended Approach to Risk Management \(2022\)](#). She shares the aim to reintegrate people on probation safely into the community, with a dual focus on: (i) protecting the individual from further failure, isolation and stigma; and (ii) protecting the community from further harm. In essence, desistance and risk management operate in tandem to achieve both non-offending and public safety. The key task for practitioners is to act in transparent, defensible and evidential ways, seeking an appropriate balance in each individual case between risk and rights, protection and integration, and work to support desistance and control.



Kevin Wong and Rachel Horan explore this concept specifically in assessments in the [Academic Insights paper Needs assessment: risk, desistance and engagement \(2021\)](#). The paper focuses on the potential for improvements to assessment processes. The possibilities from integrating Risk-Needs-Responsivity and desistance principles are highlighted, while stressing that it is essential for such integration to provide additionality and avoid dilution (which should be subject to testing). Attention is then given to the role that assessment can play in facilitating effective engagement. Crucially, the assessment process itself can serve a purpose that goes beyond identifying the support an individual may require and what risks need to be considered. It offers opportunities for co-production, the demonstration of care, and the starting point for building a relationship.



### Reflection questions

Reflecting on what you have read and heard in this section:

- What theories, concepts and skills are you aware of that help you to understand an individual's identity?
- How do you apply these theories in your practice?
- Thinking specifically of the models shared here about understanding a person's identity, i.e. Johari's window, the cultural iceberg and ecological theory, how can an understanding of these help you in your practice?
- What do you understand by blending risk management with desistance approaches?
- How will this help you to manage risk effectively?
- How will/do you apply the blend in your practice?
- What barriers are there to this and how do you mitigate for these?
- How do you keep yourself up to date with the current research?
- How do you share your learning across your colleagues and team?

## Next steps

In summary, it is important to be professionally curious and proactive within your practice, to enquire on a deeper level, and to be tenacious in your efforts. Being professionally curious encompasses a range of skills that support effective engagement, assessment, planning, delivery and review. This can then be translated into improved risk management and support desistance.

Professional curiosity relies on the balance between the practitioner's skills, knowledge and insight into the skill, the drive to remain current and continuously develop, the support available and the policies, procedures and organisational factors to create the right environment. Therefore, we would encourage you to take every opportunity to be curious, and continue to practise this.

You may wish to explore the resources available nationally and in your region, via your Performance and Quality team, to support you with your development.



You may wish to use this [professional curiosity action pledge](#) to help you to formulate a plan of action.