# SEEDS2 EVALUATION

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## Executive Summary

*Context and Approach*
The SEEDS2 programme is a training and development initiative developed by the Probation Service's Learning Design Faculty. It builds upon earlier iterations of SEEDS and SEEDS2 training delivered since 2009, and aims to embed a culture of relational, person-centred, and reflective practice within probation services. Delivered to frontline staff, Senior Probation Officers (SPOs), and Senior Managers and Leaders (SMSLs), SEEDS2 emphasises how practitioners and managers should work focusing on engagement, procedural justice, emotional labour, and reflective supervision.

The evaluation sought to understand staff and people on probation's experiences of SEEDS2 training and its implementation. It took place in a context of ongoing organisational challenges including high workloads, sickness absence, and the complex consequences of the 2021 probation unification.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative data were gathered via a national staff survey sent to probation practitioners, SPOs, and SMSLs in both SEEDS2 'treatment' and 'control' areas. Despite extensive recruitment efforts, survey uptake was lower than hoped, preventing meaningful comparison between groups.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 staff members and 32 people on probation across six Probation Delivery Units (PDUs). Staff were recruited through the survey, while people on probation were recruited via in-office engagement during their supervision appointments. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify key themes in interview data, ensuring participant voices remained central to interpretation.

*Findings*
Most staff respondents had some awareness of the SEEDS2 training beforehand, and the majority felt that the training met its aims. Staff appreciated the focus on professional development, reflective practice, emotional labour, and engagement. However, many participants, especially those with more experience, felt that SEEDS2 reinforced skills they already used rather than introducing new ones. While the content was generally well-received, online delivery was a barrier for some, particularly those with specific learning needs.

Practitioners reported using person-centred communication, the push-pull model, and procedural justice concepts in their work. However, implementation was hampered by systemic issues, particularly high caseloads, time constraints, and competing organisational demands. A tension emerged between SEEDS2's relational ethos and the bureaucratic, performance-driven structure of probation work. Some saw SEEDS2 as aligned with good practice, while others perceived it as adding to an already overburdened role.

Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS), a core component of SEEDS2, were inconsistently implemented. Where embedded, they were viewed positively - especially by less experienced staff who were used to being observed - but time and competing priorities limited their effectiveness. SPOs and SMSLs acknowledged the value of reflective supervision but described the model as burdensome or impractical under current conditions. Some suggested that reflection occurred more organically outside formal sessions, through peer support or post-appointment debriefing.

Interviews with people on probation underscored the importance of SEEDS2's core principles. Participants valued probation officers who were empathetic, good listeners, and consistent. The relational dimension of probation was repeatedly cited as central to positive experiences. Participants appreciated involvement in their supervision and sentence planning, but also voiced frustration with frequent staff changes and an overly procedural approach. Some expressed empathy for overworked staff and suggested that workloads limited relationship-building and meaningful engagement.

*Conclusion*

SEEDS2 was generally well-received by staff and aligns with principles that practitioners and people on probation value: empathy, engagement, and person-centred practice. However, the extent to which SEEDS2 has changed practice remains limited. This is primarily due to systemic constraints, including unmanageable workloads, role complexity, and misalignment between SEEDS2's relational ethos and the service's managerial priorities.

While the training appears most beneficial for less experienced staff, it also functions as a helpful refresher for experienced practitioners. Embedding SEEDS2 more deeply may require clearer communication about its cultural ambitions, in-person or hybrid delivery options, and ongoing opportunities for reflection post-training.

Finally, while people on probation did not articulate direct awareness of SEEDS2, their preferences and feedback validate its core principles. For SEEDS2 to drive meaningful cultural change, it must be supported by structural investment in workforce wellbeing, manageable caseloads, and consistent supervision frameworks.

## Introduction

The SEEDS2 evaluation seeks to understand probation practitioners' experiences of the rollout of SEEDS2, a programme of change learning designed and delivered by the Probation Learning Design Faculty and Learning Services in the Probation Service. SEEDS2 entails a suite of learning products that have and are being delivered to front-line practitioners, senior probation officers, senior managers and senior leaders (SMSL) since 2022. The current suite builds on a prior version of SEEDS2 which was delivered to senior probation officers in 2019 and 2020 in the National Probation Service. This aimed to reintroduce the centrality of service-user engagement and staff development by focusing on how SPOs approached staff supervision (Westaby et al., 2021).

The current iteration of SEEDS2 builds on both SEEDS which was delivered in some probation areas across 2009-2010 (Rex & Hosking, 2013) and the 2019-2020 version of SEEDS2. Drawing on principles from desistance research and the wider correctional rehabilitation evidence-base, the programme focuses on ways to effectively engage people on probation as well as staff through line management supervision. A key aspect of the programme is the focus on *how* things should be done rather than *what* should be done. In this sense, SEEDS2 can be understood as an attempt to implement cultural change to make the service more engaging and responsive to the needs of supervisees (be they people on probation or staff). SEEDS2 asks practitioners and managers to think about how they engage with the people they supervise through techniques such as person-centred practice, effective supervisory relationships, procedural justice and reflective practice. Indeed, a key part of SEEDS2 is the reflective practice supervision standards (RPSS), originally implemented in the National Probation Service across 2019-2020 (Ainslie et al., 2022). These standards aim to support managers to approach staff supervision in a way which is reflective and developmental as opposed to purely managerial. Regular case discussions and two practice observations per year are mandated within the supervisory framework with the aim of building autonomy, professional judgment and independent decision-making amongst practitioners

Given the rollout of SEEDS2 has been delivered primarily via training, this evaluation focuses on the experiences of staff in relation to the training and their efforts to implement aspects of SEEDS2. There is, in the future, the potential to explore the extent to which the programme has effected cultural change but that is beyond the remit of this study. In any case we would argue that it would be too soon in the process to ascertain any meaningful cultural change especially given some of the wider contexts which SEEDS2 is being delivered in, primarily one of high workloads, high sickness absence levels and the tumult of the relatively recent unification of probation which occurred in June 2021(CJJI, 2024; Millings et al., 2023).

SEEDS2 has been implemented in a quasi-experimental way so that a number of Probation Delivery Units (PDU) were not included in the rollout and are considered 'control' areas for the purposes of the evaluation. This should – in theory – have enabled us to compare the extent to which areas that have been part of the rollout ('treatment areas') differ from PDUs which did not. This was not a perfect design as there is always the likelihood that staff (and people on probation) may have moved between PDUs. As

such, some staff based in a control PDU may well have completed the training when previously located in a PDU that was part of the roll out. Likewise, people on probation may, in the course of their probation involvement, have been supervised by practitioners who had completed the original SEEDS training back in 2009-2010, practitioners who had completed the current training, or no SEEDS2 training at all. Moreover, as noted below, recruitment challenges experienced as part of the survey mean that meaningful comparisons cannot be made between the control and treatment groups.

**Methods**

This evaluation has used two primary methods of data collection: a survey that was sent to all staff and interviews with staff and people on probation. A quasi-experimental design was adopted in the survey and interviews with people on probation so that differences between regions that had and had not implemented SEEDS2 could be identified. The survey focused primarily on peoples' experiences of the training, implementing SEEDS2 in practice, staff supervision and engaging people on probation. Additional modules focused on staff well-being and emotional labour but they are not part of this report. Interviews with staff, again, focused on experiences of the SEEDS2 training, knowledge of SEEDS2 and experiences of trying to work in a SEEDS2-way. Interviews with people on probation meanwhile focused on their experiences of being on probation. We focused on what people got from their supervision and took an appreciative inquiry approach by asking people what was good about probation, what a good probation officer looks like as well as what they would change about probation.

*Recruitment and data collection*

Survey respondents were recruited via an email that was sent on our behalf to eligible staff including practitioners, senior probation officers and senior managers and senior leaders. Regular reminders were sent by regional probation learning leads and research leads. We were also able to send emails via relevant trade unions and the survey was advertised on social media by the research team. The survey itself comprised a number of sections as applicable to the respondent group. Despite having support from leaders in the Probation Service, recruitment proved very challenging.

Staff interview participants were recruited via the survey: respondents to the survey were asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Once the survey closed, they were emailed asking them if they were still happy to be interviewed. Interviews took place online using MS Teams. People on probation were recruited for interview by the research team who spent two days in each PDU office so that people coming in for their appointments could be interviewed. We recruited people by sharing details of the evaluation with PDU managerial teams and talking to staff in the office each day, asking them to speak to people who were in for appointments about whether they would be willing to be interviewed. Interviews took place in a private room in the probation office and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants for later transcription. It was made clear to participants that the interview was voluntary and had no bearing on their supervision. They were also provided with a debrief sheet that provided contact details for the lead researcher and details of ongoing support if needed. This method proved successful in that we interviewed 32 people although it is

likely that our sample was heavily skewed towards people who were relatively compliant (in that non-compliant people would not have turned up for their appointment) and predominantly had something positive to share about their experience of probation supervision.

*Sampling and sample*

The uptake for the survey was slow and the subsequent response rate for the survey was low, despite many attempts by the research team, contacts within HMPPS such as the Probation Learning Design Faculty, Regional Probation Directors and Probation Learning Leads and emails sent via the unions. Power calculations were carried out to ascertain the number of people needed to generate generalisable results with a confidence level of 95% but this target sample was not reached for any of the practitioner groups. The reasons for this low uptake are – more than likely – closely linked to the challenges facing probation noted above. It may also be that practitioners are experiencing survey fatigue partly because our survey coincided with the probation service's internal staff survey but also because of the sheer amount of research ongoing in the service at the moment (indeed one respondent hinted at that in their comments on the survey itself). Therefore, we cannot make generalisable claims from the analysis presented below. What we can say is that, from those people who responded these are their general experiences. All survey data has been analysed using descriptive statistics. There is the potential to undertake inferential statistics but given the low response rate, it is unlikely that any results will be statistically significant.

In total, 438 people responded to the survey. The final sample size for each participant group is below:

*Table 1: Survey sample size*

| | **Control PDUs** | **Treatment PDUs** | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Practitioners** | 67 | 226 | 293 |
| **Senior Probation Officers** | 21 | 82 | 103 |
| **Senior Managers and Senior Leaders** | 9 | 33 | 42 |
| | 97 | 341 | 438 |

Respondents were drawn from all regions of England, but London was heavily under-represented, with just one person responding as a member of staff from London. This may be indicative of the high workloads which tend to affect London to a greater extent than other regions.

*Table 2: Survey sample by PDU*

| | North West | Greater Manchester | Yorkshire and the Humber | Kent, Surrey and Sussex | North East | South West | East of England | East Midlands | West Midlands | London | South Central |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PO/PSO Treatment** | 12 | 12 | 45 | 4 | 20 | 28 | 18 | 11 | 37 | 0 | 4 |
| **PO/PSO Control** | 4 | 11 | 0 | 1 | 9 | 18 | 6 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SPO Treatment** | 6 | 5 | 19 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 14 | 11 | 0 | 1 |
| **SPO Control** | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| **SMSL Treatment** | 3 | 9 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| **SMSL Control** | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total** | 27 | 43 | 27 | 11 | 40 | 61 | 31 | 26 | 59 | 1 | 6 |

Figure 1 shows that people tended to either be inexperienced (around 2-3 years' experience) or very experienced (around 20-22 years of experience in probation). The mean average length of time for people working in probation was 10.8 years with a minimum of 0 and maximum of 36.

*Figure 1: Survey respondents' level of experience*

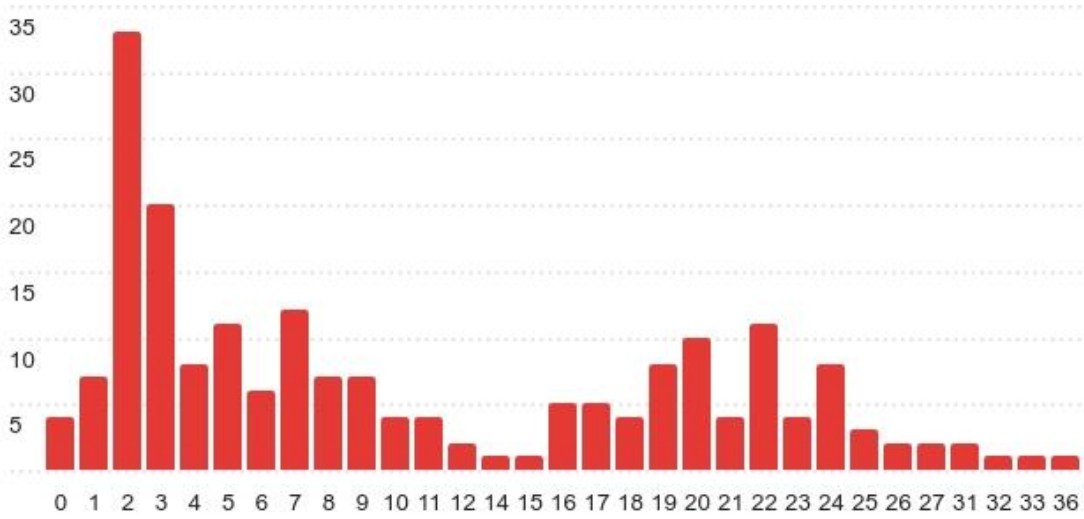
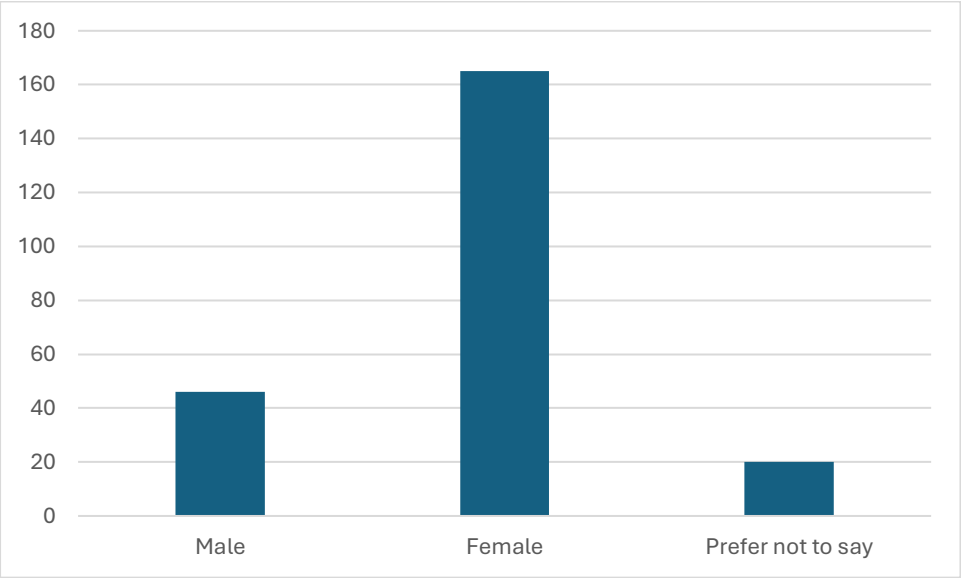



Figure 2 shows that the survey sample was weighted towards women with around 71% of respondents being female. This roughly reflects the makeup of the probation service workforce.

*Figure 2: Survey sample by gender*




We interviewed 32 people on probation, 31 of whom were male. 30 participants described themselves as white, one as black and two as mixed ethnicity. Although we did not ask directly about offence, many participants did talk about their offending and index offence and it seemed to us that a high proportion of participants were on probation following a sexual offence conviction. This may be relevant because such clients tend to be more compliant in terms of attendance at appointments. We interviewed people subject to community orders, suspended sentence orders, post-sentence supervision and licence.

In terms of staff, we interviewed 17 front-line practitioners, 9 senior probation officers and 4 senior managers and senior leaders. Again, these numbers were lower than anticipated but a total sample of 30 participants is a relatively large sample in qualitative research. Moreover, we heard similar stories from across participants suggesting a degree of uniformity in experience and saturation in terms of generating themes and findings.

*Analysis*

Descriptive statistics have been produced to provide insight into the quantitative survey responses relating to experiences of the SEEDS2 training and implementation of training in practice. Findings are presented in tables and figures to bring the data to life and where relevant, presented in accordance with the different participant groups. Additionally, responses to open-ended questions are presented thematically.

Interviews with staff and people on probation were transcribed and analysed in accordance with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). This approach provides flexibility and rigour through an iterative process of coding and theme development where meaning and meaningfulness are more important than code

frequency. The research team have engaged in both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) analyses. Findings are presented with significant emphasis on direct quotations to ensure that participants' voices are represented alongside researcher interpretation.

*Ethics*

The evaluation received ethical approval from Sheffield Hallam University and was approved by the HMPPS National Research Committee. The survey required all participants to consent to taking part before they could access the questions. Moreover, all questions were voluntary so respondents could choose not to answer any questions which may have caused harm.

Interview participants were provided with an information sheet and given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview commenced. They were informed that they could choose not to answer specific questions and that they could terminate the interview at any point. A debrief sheet was provided to participants with details of sources of support post-interview, if need.

**Survey Findings**

*SEEDS2 training*

Those who had done the training reported that they did – on the whole – have some knowledge of the aims of the training in advance.

*Table 3: Staff knowledge of the training in advance.*

| | Yes | Had some knowledge | No | Do not know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Practitioners** | 48% | 42% | 10% | 0% |
| **SPOs** | 62% | 0% | 35% | 3% |
| **SMSLs** | 71% | 23% | 6% | 0% |

Moreover, participants were generally positive about whether the training met these aims with around 80% of practitioners, SPOs and SMSLs saying that the training met at least some of the aims.

*Table 4: staff perception of whether the training met expected aims*

| | Fully met the aims | Met the majority of the aims | Met some of the aims | Met a limited amount of the aims | Met none of the aims | Unsure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Practitioners** | 31% | 36% | 16% | 8% | 1% | 8% |
| **SPOs** | 23% | 48% | 18% | 10% | 0% | 3% |
| **SMSLs** | 33% | 43% | 14% | 5% | 5% | 0% |

We asked participants to provide a list of topics which they remembered covering in the training. The following word cloud suggests that practitioners were more likely to remember topics that were focused on person-centred approaches, reflective work and communication:

*Figure 3: Word cloud representation of topics practitioners recall from training.*

Senior probation officers, meanwhile, provided a more focused set of topics that reflect the importance and prominence of reflective practice supervision in the SEEDS2 model:

*Figure 4: Word cloud representation of topics SPOs recall from the training.*

*Implementing SEEDS2*

In order to get a sense of how useful the concepts delivered in the training are to practitioners on a day-to-day basis, participants were asked to rank the topics covered in training in order of usefulness. Table 5 shows that practitioners found the emphasis on well-being and professional development to be the most useful elements of the training.

*Table 5: Practitioner rankings of training topics by level of usefulness.*

| Practitioners | Mean | Standard Deviation[1] |
|---|---|---|
| **Sources of support and developing a self-care plan** | 11.33 | 3.34 |
| **My professional development** | 11.18 | 3.70 |
| **Reflecting on my emotions - fluctuating personal resilience and experience curves** | 9.39 | 3.28 |
| **Three-legged stool** | 9.29 | 3.94 |
| **Reflective Practice- reflecting on your own reflective practice and Kolb's model** | 8.91 | 3.13 |
| **Emotional labour** | 8.32 | 4.23 |
| **Procedural justice** | 8.29 | 3.18 |
| **Engagement Skills** | 6.98 | 3.16 |
| **Communication style – push pull model** | 6.45 | 3.12 |
| **Boundary setting - Hamilton's Boundary see saw model** | 6.42 | 2.89 |
| **People working with people - Values** | 5.85 | 2.80 |
| **Effective supervisory relationships** | 5.53 | 3.10 |
| **Growing a person-centred practice** | 3.85 | 2.52 |
| **Exploring Person – centred practice v process centred** | 3.20 | 2.71 |

Senior Probation Officers were equally focused on personal development and again reflecting the centrality of supervision in the SEEDS2 model, practice observation. The Push-Pull model features highly, perhaps reflecting a recognition amongst SPOs that practitioners do need to be supported with making decisions by and for themselves rather than solely relying on the expertise of managers.

*Table 6: SPO rankings of training topics by level of usefulness.*

| SPOs | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| **Personal Development Planning** | 10.27 | 2.40 |
| **Reviewing your practice observation** | 9.82 | 2.08 |
| **Push-Pull model** | 8.00 | 2.47 |

[1] The standard deviation indicates the amount of variation of the values of a variable about its mean. A low standard deviation indicates that the values tend to be close to the mean; a high standard deviation indicates that the values are spread out over a wider range.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Exploring resilience – experience curves and developing a self-care plan** | 7.27 | 2.70 |
| **Quick fix vs developmental responses** | 6.27 | 3.56 |
| **Tailoring your approach to supervision** | 6.09 | 3.48 |
| **Effective supervisory relationships with your team** | 5.68 | 3.02 |
| **Characteristics of effective supervision** | 5.64 | 2.71 |
| **Reflecting upon our own reflective practice** | 5.55 | 2.79 |
| **Supervision in the context of your role – 4 functions of supervision** | 4.95 | 2.85 |
| **Applying SEEDS2 in your role** | 4.91 | 3.98 |
| **Exploring Person-centred approaches – person and process centred practice** | 3.55 | 1.53 |

Senior managers and senior leaders reported that the learning around a self-care plan and reflecting on practice was most useful to them:

*Table 7: Senior manager and senior leader rankings of training topics by level of usefulness.*

| SMSLs | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| **Wellbeing and Developing a self-care plan** | 9.18 | 2.59 |
| **Reflecting on your practice – Kolb's model** | 8.82 | 1.64 |
| **Reflecting on our emotions at work – fluctuating personal resilience, experience curves** | 8.64 | 2.57 |
| **Leading and Developing a Reflective Workforce – Rose, Thorns, Buds tool** | 7.09 | 1.78 |
| **Skills and approaches to effective communication – quick fix and developmental and push pull model** | 6.73 | 2.56 |
| **Defining Reflective Practice** | 6.27 | 2.63 |
| **Person-centred practice** | 4.91 | 1.93 |
| **SEEDS2 leadership in practice – applying SEEDS2 in your role** | 4.55 | 2.81 |
| **Leading Cultural Change** | 4.45 | 2.46 |
| **Lead with purpose – finding your why** | 3.27 | 1.76 |
| **SEEDS2 value-based leadership** | 2.09 | 1.16 |

When we asked respondents which elements of SEEDS2 training they had used in practice, we found that engagement skills and the push-pull model featured most prominently amongst practitioner responses with the 'three-legged stool' concept least used:

*Table 8: Practitioner use of training in practice*

| | n |
|---|---|
| **Engagement Skills** | 57 |
| **Communication style – push pull model** | 50 |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Effective supervisory relationships** | 46 |
| **Boundary setting - Hamilton's Boundary see saw model** | 45 |
| **Exploring Person – centred practice v process centred** | 43 |
| **Reflective Practice- reflecting on your own reflective practice and Kolb's model** | 43 |
| **Growing a person-centred practice** | 39 |
| **People working with people - Values** | 38 |
| **Reflecting on my emotions - fluctuating personal resilience and experience curves** | 35 |
| **Procedural justice** | 33 |
| **My professional development** | 29 |
| **Emotional labour** | 24 |
| **Sources of support and developing a self-care plan** | 17 |
| **Three-legged stool** | 12 |

We asked participants to provide an example of how they had used the skills delivered as part of the training in their practice. 66 practitioners provided an example with analysis of these responses highlighting the importance and relevance of four key concepts:

- Person-centred practice
- Procedural justice
- Boundary setting
- Communication skills

In open ended responses to barriers and enablers to implementing SEEDS2 the most common concern was time and workloads as seen in the responses below:

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*Topics such as emotional labour, reflection, sources of support and self-care are hard to implement when constantly working overcapacity with little relief.*
*With high caseloads and instructions not to engage in targeted sessions it is difficult to implement*

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People were however positive about the general, person-centred approach that SEEDS2 seeks to emphasise:

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*SEEDS2 is quite a natural process to implement when you naturally work with a person-centred attitude, and I have had many caring jobs which required similar processes, so I have found it very useful, and helpful. The main barriers are actually the clients we work with, as they*

*often have some resistance to working with probation, and also may have very chaotic lives with drug/alcohol misuse issues, and this can put barriers in the way, however there often comes a point where you can have a break through with the person, and work together effectively.*

*SEEDS2 is brilliant and gives great skills to help us in our jobs. In group work we have a fantastic opportunity to work in depth with PoP's over a long period of time, which is definitely an enabler. Time pressures related to actual groups is however a barrier.*

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On the other hand, some participants described SEEDS2 as 'process heavy' and 'increasing bureaucracy'. Some participants shared concerns about the online delivery of the training with a desire for training to be delivered in-person. That said, others commented on the benefits of being able to engage in discussions with people from across the service which would be more difficult if the training was delivered in-person within geographic areas. There was also a real sense that SEEDS2 is asking practitioners to work in a way which already feels natural to them and therefore the need for the training was at times questioned.

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*I found that what we covered in the SEEDS training was what I (and many other practitioners) were already implementing. The barriers to this are organisational priorities and policies, which do not fit into the SEEDS principles. I found I was doing a lot of what was done so the training felt superfluous.*

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SPOs reported applying learning from the training around building effective supervisory relationships and exploring person-centred approaches:

*Table 9: SPO use of SEEDS2 in practice*

| | SPOs |
|---|---|
| **Effective supervisory relationships with your team** | 22 |
| **Exploring Person-centred approaches – person and process centred practice** | 21 |
| **Reflecting upon our own reflective practice** | 19 |
| **Tailoring your approach to supervision** | 17 |
| **Supervision in the context of your role – 4 functions of supervision** | 15 |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Exploring resilience – experience curves and developing a self-care plan** | 13 |
| **Characteristics of effective supervision** | 13 |
| **Reviewing your practice observation** | 9 |
| **Applying SEEDS2 in your role** | 8 |
| **Quick fix vs developmental responses** | 8 |
| **Personal Development Planning** | 7 |
| **Push pull model** | 6 |

*Table 10: Senior manager and senior leader use of SEEDS2 in practice*

Senior manager and senior leader responses emphasised the usefulness of using SEEDS2 as a value base for leadership and leading cultural change:

| | **SMSL** |
|---|---|
| **SEEDS2 value based leadership** | 15 |
| **Leading Cultural Change** | 13 |
| **Lead with purpose – finding your why** | 12 |
| **SEEDS2 leadership in practice – applying SEEDS2 in your role** | 11 |
| **Skills and approaches to effective communication – quick fix and developmental and push pull model** | 10 |
| **Leading and Developing a Reflective Workforce – Rose, Thorns, Buds tool** | 9 |
| **Reflecting on your practice – Kolb's model** | 9 |
| **Person-centred practice** | 8 |
| **Reflecting on our emotions at work – fluctuating personal resilience, experience curves** | 8 |
| **Wellbeing and Developing a self-care plan** | 7 |
| **Defining Reflective Practice** | 6 |

Overall, survey respondents noted a number of challenges and areas for development in respect of the content and implementation of the SEEDS2 training which will be explored further in the findings from the analysis of interviews. Moreover, a number of respondents said that they had already developed these skills before doing the training and so whilst the importance of ongoing training, supervision, and self-awareness was emphasized throughout, the responses it should be remembered that – in many ways – the skills that are developed as part of SEEDS2 are models and approaches that practitioners likely use already dependent on their level of professional qualification and length of experience. This is potentially important in terms of how HMPPS choose to frame SEEDS2 in future communications with staff.

*Practice observations*

As noted, practice observations are central to the SEEDS2 model and reflective practice supervision standards. 49 practitioners reported having been observed under the SEEDS2 framework. They tended to agree with the statement that the aims of the observation were clear, and that they had been involved in the process. They were also

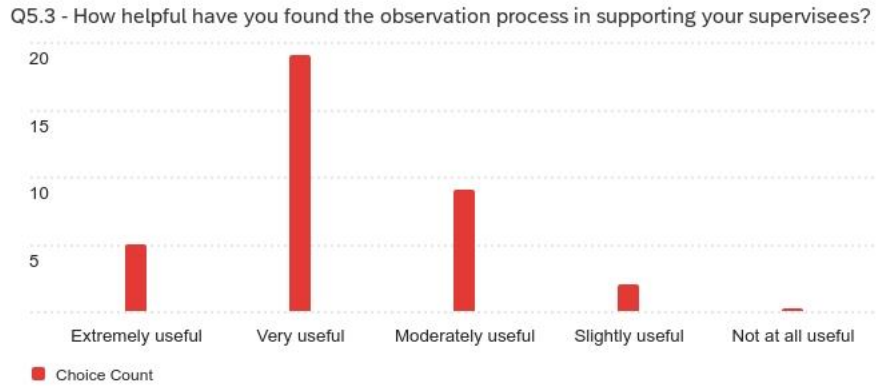
confident that being observed did not change the way they interacted with their client. However, there was only weak support for the idea that observations have helped with the emotional side of their work, or that it has improved their practice.

*Table 11: Practitioner perceptions of practice observations.*

| | Mean (scale of 1-7) | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| **The aims of the observation were made to clear to me before it took place.** | 5.29 | 1.44 |
| **I was involved in the decision about what would be observed and when.** | 5.44 | 1.57 |
| **Having my line manager in the room changed the way I interacted with my client in the moment.** | 3.65 | 1.77 |
| **The post-observation review session was useful.** | 5.13 | 1.28 |
| **The observation helped me deal with the emotional element of my work.** | 3.83 | 1.65 |
| **Overall, being observed has improved my practice.** | 3.98 | 1.61 |

Moreover, SPOs were generally positive about observing staff and that it is – on the whole – a useful experience:

*Figure 5: SPO perceptions of the usefulness of practice observations*




*Experiencing staff supervision*

A significant part of SEEDS2 relates to staff supervision and the introduction of reflective practitioner supervision standards are intended to improve the way staff are supervised. The RPSS are intended to shift the focus of supervision to be more developmental and supportive with less emphasis being placed on performance

management. This should make staff feel more supported (a protective factor against burnout (see Phillips et al., 2024)) and be more confident in their decision making. As such, respondents were asked a number of questions about their experiences of staff supervision. Table 12 shows the mean score for each group of staff within the treatment and control groups. Response options for these survey questions were presented as a scale with seven possible options ranging from strongly agree (scored as 7) to strongly disagree (scored as 0).

*Table 12: Survey respondents experience of staff supervision by participant group*

| | Practitioners | | SPOs | | SMSLs | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Control | Treatment | Treatment | Control | Treatment | Control |
| I have sufficient time to build a working relationship with my line manager. | 5.19 | 5.28 | 4.75 | 5.08 | 5 | 5.5 |
| My line manager understands and supports me as an individual. | 5.4 | 5.78 | 5.45 | 5.58 | 5.4 | 6 |
| My line manager helps me to think through complex and challenging issues. | 5.29 | 5.61 | 5.2 | 5.5 | 5.2 | 6.5 |
| My line manager gives me feedback on how I am doing. | 5.26 | 5.78 | 5.25 | 5.17 | 5.35 | 5.75 |
| I have noticed a difference in my supervision and line management in recent months. | 4.24 | N/A | 3.68 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| My supervision is structured and purposeful. | 4.87 | 5.59 | 4.64 | 5.42 | N/A | N/A |
| Supervisions with my line manager provide me with | 4.99 | 5.52 | 4.8 | 5.31 | 5.1 | 6 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| the opportunity to reflect on my practice. | | | | | | |
| Supervision with my line manager provides me with sufficient opportunity to discuss the emotional demands of my work. | 4.8 | 5.47 | 5.23 | 5.42 | 5.15 | 5.25 |
| I seek support around dealing with and managing the emotional demands of my work from people other than my line manager. | 5.62 | 5.59 | 5.57 | 5.75 | 4.8 | 5.25 |

We would suggest that it is not possible to make meaningful comparisons between the control and treatment groups due to the small sample sizes and the challenges noted earlier in the report in respect of the potential for staff to move between PDUs. There are some notable differences between the groups but none of them are statistically significant. Rather, these data may be used to highlight areas that are in need of further work and exploration. For example, practitioners seem to need more structured purposeful supervision when compared to the other questions in relation to supervision whilst data from SPOs suggests they may need more time for building relationships with their line manager.

Line managers are an important source of support for practitioners, but they are not the only source. We thus asked practitioners who they get support from in addition to their line manager and how often they access such support:

*Table 13: Sources of support as reported by practitioners*

| | **Daily** | **Weekly** | **Monthly** | **3-4 times a year** | **Annually** | **Never** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Colleagues** | 47 | 46 | 15 | 8 | - | 8 |
| **Family members** | 28 | 36 | 13 | 12 | 2 | 26 |
| **Friends** | 11 | 29 | 33 | 14 | - | 31 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Other managers** | 5 | 7 | 31 | 17 | 8 | 47 |
| **Professional counselling external to work (NHS or private)** | 1 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 13 | 87 |
| **PAM Assist** | - | 1 | - | 6 | 18 | 89 |
| **Napo/union** | - | 2 | 1 | 7 | 18 | 85 |

We can see here that practitioners are more likely to seek support from colleagues and family members than other sources, probably reflecting the importance of communities of coping which can be valuable ways of protecting against the difficult aspects of the job (Phillips et al., 2024). It is worth pointing out the relative lack of use of institutional sources of support such as PAM Assist and Napo, the probation officer's union and professional body.

*Delivering staff supervision*

Table 14 presents the mean score for manager responses to the survey questions relating to their experience of delivering staff supervision. Again, we cannot make meaningful comparisons between the control and treatment groups. However, it is notable that SPOs who had completed the training did not feel like it had had much impact on their approach to supervision, reflecting data from practitioners who tended to report that they had not witnessed a change to supervision in recent months:

*Table 14: Manager experiences of delivering staff supervision by participant group*

| | **SPOs Treatment** | **SPOs Control** | **SMSL Treatment** | **SMSL Control** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **I have sufficient time to build relationships with supervisees.** | 4.70 | 5.25 | 5.68 | 5.50 |
| **I feel able to understand and support my supervisees as individuals.** | 5.39 | 5.50 | 6.00 | 6.00 |
| **I feel able to facilitate my supervisees to think through their complex and challenging issues.** | 5.43 | 5.83 | 6.00 | 5.75 |
| **I feel able to give feedback to supervisees on how they are doing.** | 5.59 | 5.54 | 6.26 | 6.00 |
| **SEEDS2 has changed my approach to supervision.** | 3.93 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **I feel equipped to have structured and purposeful supervision.** | 4.84 | 5.42 | 6.05 | 5.75 |
| **I feel able to facilitate a community of practice with my staff.** | 4.93 | 5.25 | 5.26 | 6.25 |

*Table 15: Manager response to the question 'SEEDS2 has changed my approach to supervision'*

| | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| **SPOs** | 17 | 15 |
| **SMSLs** | 14 | 6 |

As Table 15 shows, there was a general sense that SEEDS had improved supervision from the supervisors' perspectives. These are very low numbers and so care must be taken in terms of how we interpret them. The 4 respondents who provided a comment on how SEEDS2 had improved their staff supervision said they had used development planning and had adopted a more 'reflective and person-centred approach'. One other respondent said it had given them 'confidence in my observations'.

Respondents who said that SEEDS2 had not improved their supervision practice said:

- There is a tension between having reflective discussions and covering the essential risk and performance issues
- Not enough time
- No still feels very prescribed.
- I think SEEDS is prescriptive and complex. My experience is people do not want multiple touchpoints with managers for multiple topics so I have to adapt what should be done to how it works in practice
- I don't feel I do anything different to what I would have ordinarily been undertaking in supervision with staff
- I don't feel as though I am doing anything new.
- I completed the original 3-day training for SEEDs and was a trainer in it, that alongside supervision skills training is how I improve the quality of my training, the recent SEEDs online event was very little training, more discussion and more focus on systems and what to do rather than HOW to do it
- Having completed SEEDs many times over the years, coming from programmes background, much of what is included in SEEDS comes naturally to me. SEEDS is not a solution to good engagement and supervision, it at times feels cumbersome.

*Analysis of open-ended comments*

At the end of the survey, we invited respondents to provide any additional comments about SEEDS2, staff wellbeing and emotional labour. We were able to identify three important and relevant themes within these comments which came from 58 different respondents. These will be elaborated in the final section of the report where we draw on interview data. However, the first prominent theme in the open-ended survey comments related to workloads: it was clear from a number of respondents that the perceived root cause of many issues in probation are down to the workload and related factors, such as the fact that the workload management tool is not fit for purpose:

*In my view, the workload and demands are too great to feel able to work as effectively as I'd like. I work out of hours on a regular basis (eg I am completing this on a non-working day) and it is difficult to reclaim this time back.*

Comments from SPOs focused primarily on the scope of the SPO role and how it asks SPOs to do too much. This may explain why SPOs' responses in the survey relating to supervision were more negative for those who had completed SEEDS2 training than SPOs in control PDUs. In interviews that SPOs told us that reflective practice supervision is being experienced as an extra task on top of everything else (compounded further by the introduction of the human factors approach in some regions):

*the SPO role in particular feels like an impossible task, there are too many competing demands to do an effective job. Although the service promotes wellbeing initiatives people feel like they don't have the time to reflect, there is a fear that they will miss something or do something wrong and will not be supported if they do. I have worked for the organisation for nearly 20 years and have never felt as stressed.*

Such comments are similar to the views expressed by SPOs in the NPS in a previous evaluation of the SEEDS2 training and Reflective Practice Supervision Standards conducted across 2020-2021 (Ainslie et al., 2022; Westaby et al., 2021). This suggests that, despite changes to the training and the significant change in context given the unification of probation services in 2021, SPOs continue to experience challenges in implementing the SEEDS2 framework given the span of their role (Westaby et al., 2025).

Additionally, across both SPOs and practitioner responses, there was concern that the Service does not provide adequate support around staff wellbeing. Our impression from these comments is that wellbeing support is patchy and highly dependent on individual SPOs and the relationship between staff and their line manager. There was a general consensus that PAM assist is not responsive enough to meet the needs of individual practitioners:

*I feel the organisation says a lot about staff welfare and wellbeing but my experience is that this is not borne out in their actions. Employee*

*Assistance is poor- I have tried it but the service did not offer what I needed. I was also told I was not going to be offered a face to face session for a reflective session/ clinical supervision - they would only do it remotely unless attending an office for a group of people. I am autistic and find Teams really hard to engage with people so I just ended up not bothering.*

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Ultimately, the comments to the open-ended question at the end of the survey are represented effectively by the following quote:

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*We are tired and as officers regardless of grade we just want some help with our emotional wellbeing and more support.*

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**Interviews with practitioners**
*Attitudes towards SEEDS2*

Amongst the practitioners we spoke to, attitudes towards the SEEDS2 training and the principles underpinning SEEDS2 were largely positive. People recognised that working in a more engaging and relational way was a positive way forward for the service:

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*It's got a wealth of information about, like, good habits to take. (Practitioner)*

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Moreover, participants suggested that the Service should be adopting such an approach because – in theory – it should improve engagement by people on probation. This is because people on probation are a marginalised group who, in many cases, have personal histories characterised by not being listened to:

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*Massively, I think potentially sometimes when me, we meet them, it might be the first time that the voice has actually been heard. (Practitioner)*

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A key theme in the interviews with participants was that SEEDS2 does not present anything particularly new. Rather, it covers ways of working which participants perceived as being good quality probation practice that should already be formed for

experienced practitioners. As such, people were of the view that the training is better suited to less experienced practitioners:

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*I think it wasn't a new approach. I think a lot of it was kind of understanding what we're doing and how we're doing it and why. I think that came across with a lot of the SEEDS2. It's that reflection of I think a lot of it kind of was reflecting really this is what we're doing and like how are we kind of using that in our work. So is that something that we're doing a lot of or is it something we're not doing a lot of and maybe need to kind of impact increase a little bit more. (Practitioner)*

*Very good training. Absolutely worth it. Maybe towards the beginning of people's career... I'm six years in here. You know, I've encountered most of this stuff. About boundaries and you know roles and I think it's very good for yeah for maybe practitioners at the beginning of their journey. (Practitioner)*

*Well for me, if it all felt a bit obvious, but I appreciate that might not feel obvious for everybody. (Senior Manager 2)*

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People we spoke to who had more than a few years' experience tended to say that SEEDS2 did not teach them anything new, but it was a useful refresher and made them more conscious of the way they were working.

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*Obviously everyone on the course is quite experienced. Some people have been in the service for like 20 years and I think the general feeling, which I also have is that, I think we were just sort of doing those things anyway ... I'm not quite sure what they think that we we do in our jobs, if it if it isn't, you know that kind of interaction that kind of person centred. (Practitioner)*

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That said, even those with more experience explained that the training made them both more mindful of certain ways of working and approaches. More generally, this allowed them to feel more confident about working relationally and in person-centred ways:

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*Everything but being confident to say I'm going to go and find that out for you and not be in, you know, put under under pressure to make a decision. Now, for example, and actually this is what seeds gives you, just that confidence to just say, OK, I know what I'm doing even though I don't know the answer to your question. Like I'm confident I'm know what I'm doing as a probation officer. (Practitioner)*

*It made me feel a bit more confident, I suppose, in how I do communicate with people, but I feel like, you know, it does seem to help to develop good relationships with people. You get lots of information out of people. You kind of get them to reflect a bit more on what they're doing. (Practitioner)*

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*Experiences of the Training*

Again, participants were generally positive about the training. The main benefits of the training were identified as being a refresher of principles which they already saw as being indicators of good quality practice. Participants also valued the introduction of new concepts and/or space to apply concepts to practice :

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*I think it reinforced a lot of what the principles we work with it give me some new things to think about as well, like the emotional labour idea (Practitioner)*

*It was quite interesting to kind of refresh my understanding of like. Procedural justice, you know, kind of looking at specific examples, I'd say that was probably the most interesting thing. (Practitioner)*

*I think a lot of it was kind of bring it reinforcing some of the skills around kind of reflective discussions with people. That kind of idea of imparting ownership to that, to the, to the individual officer, so kind of that, that open conversation trying not to step in with a solution, but to work, to together, to find a solution issues as they kind of arise. (SPO 9)*

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People also highlighted the fact that the training gave them the opportunity to have some time away from the office and reflect on their practice:

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*It was quite useful just to have that space to kind of reflect on our well-being and make those kind of, you know, make yourself kind of a bit of a plan of, you know, your kind of self-care and stuff. (Practitioner)*

*I found it enjoyable. I found it very nice to be able to reflect. I always find about training. I think just taking that, taking that time out to reflect on my own practise, to think. (SPO 12)*

*I suppose it was just listening to other people and also just having the time to think about it rather than just doing all of the time because in the day-to-day. You are, for the most part, making decisions and sending out instructions or there isn't a lot of time for sitting around thinking about things. So you see, they give you, give me an opportunity to do that. (Senior Manager 7)*

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Moreover, some participants from all grades of staff said it was helpful to be in touch with practitioners from around the country which provided them with opportunities to learn from others:

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*I suppose some of the things that were good are around sort of like engaging with different colleagues from sort of like in different locations. I think that's quite good because different offices tend to have different sort of ways of doing things sometimes. I know we're*

*constantly having different trials of different things in different areas as well. So hearing what other people are doing but also. (Practitioner)*

*And I also can remember benefiting from the smaller kind of the breakout rooms where you where you could really unpick a a specific scenario that you were dealing with all in the kind of confines of confidentiality. But those kind of you know, I've got this, I've got this staff member and this is the issue. Help me you know. And it was so it was a good shared experience that way. (SPO 10)*

*I found the training really good. I mean, it's going back a little while now, but it was, you know, it was well delivered. We kind of had the opportunity to kind of break out into smaller groups. So that was really good to be able to kind of have that experience of finding out a little bit about what, what other managers experiences were. (SPO 9)*

*I was looking forward to the idea that there would be other senior leaders, and I might be able to steal some of their brains and ideas, and they might not feel quite so isolating because it's quite being a head of a PDU is quite isolating really. (Senior Manager 7)*

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This was enabled by the online nature of the training which was, in general, received positively:

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*She was brilliant. I don't remember her name, but I can get it for you. She was brilliant. She was very much focused on our well-being. And she actually was. Insisting that we do something nice and the breaks so you know to actually step away from the computer and come back with something that we've done for us. (Practitioner)*

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That said, two participants felt strongly that online delivery was inappropriate for them, primarily because of specific learning needs. For these participants, they felt that they were unable to make the most of the training because it was online:

*not good. I don't. I just. I don't learn like that. Unfortunately, my brain just won't take it in. I'm not going to lie. I'm not a fan of training via teams at all. (Practitioner).*

*I'm someone that worked in the service pre computers so I know I'm a bit of a dinosaur, but I also know my learning style and my learning style is you need to give me a little bit of time to reflect on it, not shove me in a little pop out room and give me 5 minutes because what I ended up doing in that seeds training is not getting very much out of it … I thought I haven't actually learnt anything. I've been able to give my opinion. And I've been able to give some nuggets of this is what I do in my practise. (SPO 1)*

As a result of this, one participant indicated that they were unable to remember very much about the training and was clear that had it been delivered in person this would not have been the case:

*I don't think teams is really a great way to deliver something that is all about interaction… if I were to have it in person and to have gone to a classroom, I think I would have kept those sorts of those print outs.*

Another practitioner felt that face-to-face delivery would have been better in terms of being able to focus more clearly on the training and the ability to share more openly during the training:

*So I mean, like everything is online nowadays and it was online, I remember thinking it, it would have been better if it would be on in person because it is very much about you and how you're feeling and how this work impacts on you and what you can do to help yourself and how we help other people. And I remember thinking this would have so much more impact on us if it was online, you know, because people obviously turn the cameras off, people are looking at the furniture*

*distracted. If you're in a room, you tend to be a little bit more. (Practitioner)*

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As noted above, a general theme across the interviews was the sense that SEEDS2 does not deliver anything new:

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*Because a lot of it with things that I were already doing sort quite naturally that weren't really thinking about. (Practitioner)*

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SEEDS2 is intended to initiate a process of cultural change across the Service by reinforcing what it means to be an effective practitioner. It would be more concerning had participants said that the tools and techniques that form SEEDS2 are at odds with current ways of practising, although this does have some implications for how SEEDS2 is framed and badged for practitioners. However, with respect to cultural change one Senior Manager commented:

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*I think we've got a kind of bad habit in probation of introducing stuff which feels like it's a process when actually what we're trying to do is change a culture... You know if we can somehow bring in the ideas of SEEDS in a way that feels more cultural and develop some of the tools or the forms or whatever you want to call it... A lot of the kind of SEEDS stuff is about how you treat people, isn't it? And that's very much about relationships and culture, and I don't think probation is very good at describing how it wants to do those things. (Senior Manager 2)*

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More explicit reference to the link between SEEDS2 and cultural change in organisational communication might help to implement the required changes, but also being more explicit in terms of what this might look like, which the Senior Manager attempted to articulate:

*I think if it was expanded out into a wider cultural charter of how we treat people... I think it could be developed into something that would have a lot of meaning, you know, But you know it, it feels like it feels like somehow, we need to come back to some sort of core values of how we work with people in a respectful way. I feel like we've lost a tiny bit. So, I think I think there would be a role for SEEDS2 too in the middle of that sort of stuff. (Senior Manager 2)*

Participants were asked what they took from the training, beyond the sense that it covered things they already did. Several elements of the training were mentioned in our discussions. One concept which several participants identified was the work around the different roles that practitioners take on, particularly the idea of the practitioner as pacifier, negotiator and authoritarian. Participants felt that the training was useful in terms of encouraging them to think about the different hats they wear and allowed them to reflect on what role was most appropriate for a particular person on probation.

*You know as much as you want to actually be the negotiator the whole time. Or, you know, sometimes you have to be the authoritarian. Sometimes you have to be a pacifier, and it's just like we all agree there is a ideal way of doing this, and we all agreed that at times you just can't do it. So it is so individualistic. It's just all based on the person that you're working with. And I think that's OK as well. (Practitioner)*

Other common concepts and skills that arose in interviews were procedural justice, emotional labour and wellbeing and the importance of active listening. A final theme from our discussions about the training relate to the fact that participants felt that there could be scope for more follow up and reflection after the training and that a general lack of this meant that it was difficult for the learning in the training to become embedded:

*So they said that we should have like reflective practise sessions. They said we should discuss it with our managers and kind of go through the goals that we'd set ourselves and the reflection of how much I did. But yeah, there was never any kind of group sessions to reflect on what we'd learn and maybe how we'd adapted our practise because we don't have, I guess maybe if you had like a reflective practise group in*

*your area then it would fit quite nicely into those sessions. (Practitioner)*

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One of the positive elements we identified about the first round of SEEDS2 training delivered to SPOs in the NPS in 2020 and 2021 was that the time between training sessions allowed for this reflection to take place both between and within the sessions. This may be something worth considering moving forward (Westaby et al, 2021) as a way to promote a learning culture across the organisation

Reference was also made to the fact that it would be useful to have regular reminders of the content of the SEEDS2 training. As one practitioner told us:

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*But you know, it definitely helped in some ways to use these kind of techniques, but you know, again we need regular reminders. You do get stuck in your ways. (Practitioner)*

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*Implementing SEEDS2*

In our previous evaluation we found that there was general support for SEEDS2, but that implementing it was difficult for a number of reasons, most notably a lack of time and perceived tension between the managerial and developmental aspects of the supervisor role (Ainslie et al., 2022). In many ways, the findings from this follow-on evaluation mirror those from our previous work. When asked about efforts to implement the learning from SEEDS2 training the most common issue was – unsurprisingly – time and workloads:

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*I suppose at the moment I mean, it's starting to balance out a little bit more, but it is caseload. So it's not really having the time to kind of go into a supervision always prepared, it's quickly going up, right, OK, what have we discussed last time? What do I need to focus on this time rather than having that time to actually sort of prepare for that meeting and be like, OK, right, well this is what we said, this is how I consult, maybe challenge differently this time. (Practitioner)*

*Time time. If I had, yeah, another 12 hours in the day... We just don't have the time. If I have a recall in the morning that takes away half of my day. Everything else falls on the sidelines. Sometimes you have to send people to duty just because they need to be seen. (Practitioner)*

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In many ways, the Service is unable to respond to this endemic problem which has been identified elsewhere, but it is important to recognise when seeking to assess the extent to which practitioners are working in alignment with the SEEDS2 framework. More concerningly, several participants highlighted a disconnect between what they are supposed to do when working in a SEEDS2 way and the way the organisation is currently managed:

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*I think what SEEDS2 was kind of telling us about how we should be working is very at odds with what the organisation kind of expects and what the organisation is set out to do. Because a lot of it kind of isn't person-centered and the decision making isn't person centred. (Practitioner)*

*Here I am again at the end of the, you know, of a very difficult period of having back-to-back to back appointments and feeling like I'm not achieving anything. And then I'm told, you know, by higher management 'you're taking too long with your appointment, you're doing, you know, you're doing too much extra... That's why you're behind, because you're doing too much extra'. So then we get to SEEDS2 and SEEDS is telling me to do exactly what I'm wanting to do. And yeah, so that got me quite angry. Just in general, not at the SEEDS, but at the fact that, well, I'm told that this is the right way to do it, and here are the people and SEEDS actually shows. Actual people on probation talking about their interaction and what works, what didn't work and what came out was 'I just loved being listened to and actually the person taking the time to sit down with me' and I'm just, wow, I'm so frustrated. (Practitioner)*

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This misalignment between person centred approaches and managerial focus of the Probation Service suggests that more needs to be done to counteract this managerial shift in probation for SEEDS2 to fulfil the potential that many participants identified in the approach as discussed above:

*It is about the increase in bureaucracy, in prescription in micromanagement. (Practitioner)*

*Action something to in order to get the paperwork in within the time frame that it's needed. So you're always balancing kind of that. That performance metric stuff in terms of time frames because you've got like a 24 hour turn around in terms of paperwork for recalls, for example, versus the time to be able to kind of tease through what some of the issues are. (SPO 9)*

People also raised concerns about being person-centred at the same time as having to make decisions which people on probation do not like and how this is particularly difficult to manage in the context of the work they do with people on probation:

*Yeah, and I suppose we were going through examples in the training. Where you were, you were trying to make these enforcement decisions kind of person centred, but then ultimately it feels a bit tokenistic because the outcome is still the same. There was still going to be you know they were still saying you would have to enforce this way you know or this would be the outcome. But it's sort of like Oh well, so long as someone feels like they're included, then it's then it's fine and that's the. Yeah, I think that was the biggest issue for me that it feels kind of at odds with how the organisation actually works. (Practitioner)*

Relatedly, there was a sense amongst some participants that the service's responsibility for risk management can present a barrier to enacting aspects of the SEEDS2 approach, especially having the time to critically reflect on decision making as exemplified in the quote below:

*I think that the focus on risk, so sometimes there's a time pressure in terms of we need to take this action now. We should be in the mindset of thinking, let's build some reflection time after this, so that recall I was just dealing with this morning. You know, it was a case of we need to get the paperwork in. It's been agreed it's been approved. We need it through so that this guy doesn't leave court this morning. (SPO 10)*

Participants spoke highly of the emphasis within SEEDS2 on transparency, relationship building and that their focus when seeking to implement SEEDS2 was on being more conscious of the importance of this:

*So that that they don't feel like anything's kind of been sprung on them, I think. And that also really helps. I think when you're developing relationships with people. That there's always that transparency. So it's just kind of, yeah, reminded me of that and made me do that a lot more consciously. (Practitioner)*

*I think it makes them feel a lot more involved in the process. I mean, I wouldn't like to go somewhere and feel like I wasn't given all the information, you know? So I think it's just fair and what we should be doing as a service, but it also I think improves that relationship. They know that there's not going to be any surprises. You've been really transparent straight away. (Practitioner)*

*I think a lot of it was focused around sort of like our engagement with people on probation. And I know there was sort of like a big focus around that user voice. So the person on probation, how we engage with them, making sure their voice is heard because it's really important that you know, I mean that's a massive part of part of what we're doing isn't it is actually what do they want rather than us telling them what they got to do and I'm quite clear with that. (Practitioner)*

A final key theme to come out of interviews is that practitioners with different levels of experience will use and benefit SEEDS2 in quite different ways, and that people on probation need to be engaged with in different ways. This could be interpreted in different ways. One participant suggested that SEEDS2 is a 'one size fits all approach' which does not work in the context of probation practice due to the diverse needs of individuals subject to supervision. On the other hand, the frequent mentions of people with different levels of experience may suggest that people are actually able to deliver SEEDS2 in ways that are highly responsive as the following SPO noted:

*I think some of it's in the application of the SEEDS stuff and I guess how you how you know how you do it ... where somebody's in the journey of learning as well, just because somebody qualifies as an officer or has been an officer for so long doesn't necessarily mean that they're in that place to be reflective in the discussions that you have with people. They don't always, they don't always pick up on those nuances that you try to push somebody down a reflective route then then you know, you've kind of almost got to push them towards that a little bit. (SPO 9)*

*Reflective supervision*

A key part of SEEDS2 is the implementation of the Reflective Practice Supervision Standards (RPSS) which are intended to encourage a more relational and developmental approach to staff supervision, mirroring that of the emphasis on person-centred probation supervision. In general, there was support for this way of delivering staff supervision and participants were, on the whole, positive towards the use of practice observations to improve supervision and enable reflection and learning from experience. The quote below indicates that, for this SPO, they have embedded learning from the SEEDS2 training to the extent that using a model of reflective practice has become second nature to them and the practitioners they line manage:

*But very much now if I'm doing reflective supervision with my staff we have [learning cycles and Kolb] and I just have a blank piece of paper in the middle of the table with that cycle on it that we work through. (SPO 10)*

However, and again reflecting our previous findings (Westaby et al, 2021; Ainslie et al, 2022), participants identified the key barrier to reflective supervision and practice observations was time:

*Because of the time pressures I can find myself supervising staff as a kind of kind of shopping list basis. Have you done that? What are we up to with that? (SPO 10)*

*Well, it's just hard to find the time, but there isn't time to do any of that. There really isn't. Like, I don't know. I could if I put a real, put an effort into it. And I guess I put some other stuff to one side for a for a couple of weeks, then then I could. (SPO 11)*

*I expect there's been there's been, you know, maybe three or four observations in my office during the whole [time] in my 4 offices in the last 12 months because people just that's not what people have needed to do. So, it just sort of came in, relaunched it, at a bit of a difficult time. (Senior Management 2)*

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Aligned to this, we heard from some participants that the RPSS model is, in the words of one participant, 'overkill', which asks too much from SPOs and practitioners:

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*One was like normal supervision. You know, once a month sit down with the senior. Another one was once a year. You had to be observed. And there were two so-called reflective sessions a year... There was another one which involved peers. There were six in all. It was just like absolute overkill.*

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Of course, such concerns may be ameliorated as and when the service overcomes difficulties related to high workloads, but this is something worth bearing in mind in the meantime.

Some participants suggested that formal supervision sessions are not always the most appropriate place for reflection, suggesting instead that it needs (and indeed does) take place on a more ad hoc and continuous basis:

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*The reflection happens on a daily basis, and whether that's just sitting down with a colleague to actually talk about a difficult case. Or just, you know, just reflecting with a manager or just like, you know, just thinking to yourself after you've had that appointment of just what just happened, you know, let's just look at what just happened and what even when you're writing your contact up, that's still a way of just reflecting . (Practitioner)*

By way of contrast, in a different example of how a SPO had supported a practitioner to be reflective, they suggested that formal, planned supervision sessions are exactly the place for good reflection:

> *Well, I think I mean, you know for starters it was a planned supervision appointment. So you know so SEEDS is very much about planning things, being deliberate in some of the stuff that we that we do. I think it was it was an opportunity to kind of to look at the assessment jointly with the with the officer so that that for the officer it wasn't seen to be 'show me your work' it was 'let's jointly look at this work' … The officer was given an opportunity to kind of reflect on the assessment itself and give their view. I don't know that person, I've never met the the case that they're talking about. (SPO 9)*

The difference in perspective between the practitioner and SPO in our examples could suggest that there is variation in how the purpose of reflection, and how to best support reflective practice are understood by different staff groups.

On the whole, reflective supervision was seen to be an important way of developing skills, especially amongst less experienced colleagues because reflective supervision can help people move from being reliant on a colleague to make decisions to becoming responsible themselves:

> *One thing that it would vary on is terms of staff experience, so newer staff are in need of a reflective space but also at that stage in terms of that kind of development curve, kind of what it's called but they do need more direction, more answers because they don't it they're not experienced it yet. So it very much is OK we need to contact XYZ and we need to follow process ABC and they go right OK… But as people understand that they can do the XYZ ABC themselves, they've got that. Then I think supervision should develop into more of a reflection. So why did we do A and B but not C? (SPO 10)*

> *I've got a mixed bag in my team now because it's expanded quite a lot and I've got a mixed bag of very experienced probation officers and*

*probation service officers, some newly qualified probation officers and some very new probation service officers and. I would say that I have the ability for them to reflect and have the conversation about what presenting behaviours they see in front of them is very different. (SPO 1)*

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Additionally, SPOs said that they learnt from reflective supervision sessions:

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*What I found as I have done here whilst I'm rattling away that when I've been in those sessions, it is not about that practitioner. It is, it's about. It's a joint reflection, because I've come out and gone, even things like, gosh, I never knew that about you or does that explain your response to that other case when you know, if it's like an animal cruelty case, you know, they go. Yeah, I really struggle with that. Or I might think they might say something. Well, I've tried this with that case and I go. Well, I would never have thought to do that. It's a really good idea.*

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Despite the generally positive view of the value of observations, very few of our participants said they had been observed. They were however comfortable with the idea of being observed and could understand why practice observation had been introduced. There was a sense that less experienced practitioners would be both more comfortable with being observed (because newly qualified officers, for example, will have been observed during their training) and would have the most to learn from the process although this is very much perception rather than objective fact. More substantively, observations were seen as good ways of getting beneath the surface of practice:

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*This is just about me getting that soft skill set stuff that I can't see from a Delius record. It's about how you engage with someone, how you communicate, how you're aware of how you come across, how you pick up what someone says to you without them speaking all of that stuff. (SPO 1)*

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**Interviews with people on probation**

We interviewed people on probation across six PDUs, three in control areas and three in regions where SEEDS2 had been implemented. The intention here was to try and identify any differences between areas that did and did not have SEEDS2 trained staff.

However, upon analysing the interviews no real difference between the different groups could be discerned. This does not mean that SEEDS2 has not had an impact on practice, but that analysis of the interviews with the 32 people we spoke to did not uncover differences. As mentioned before, there is also the possibility that staff have moved PDUs since completing the SEEDS2 training and/or there may be staff working in control PDUs who completed the original SEEDS training in 2009-2010. In spite of this, the interviews were enlightening in terms of what people want to gain from probation and, in lots of ways, speaks to the aims of SEEDS2 especially in relation to probation becoming a more relational and engaging service.

*Attributes of a good probation officer*

In our interviews we were interested in whether relational and engaging probation work is likely to be received as beneficial or positive to people on probation. We thus asked people on probation what they thought made a good probation officer to understand what they valued and considered to be good probation practice. The most common response here related to the need to be a good listener:

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*they've gotta be a good listener, it really helps with what has happened to me. Like it's a good relationship where you come in, she can give you advice, it's very good... she said 'your case is different to everyone else, we don't judge, if you need help, we're here to help' (PoP21)*

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We also heard about the importance of empathy, understanding and a desire amongst probation officers to help people on probation:

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*Empathy and sympathy. (PoP11)*

*Patience, understanding, friendly... um professional uh because [NAME] is like a consummate professional but has all those qualities with it... someone who isn't a dick. (PoP25)*

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Indeed, when we asked people what was good about probation, responses generally centred about the importance of feeling like they had been helped. For example, in a

discussion about how his PO had helped him with finding temporary accommodation the following person on probation made the following comment:

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*She was really supportive of everything I did, just the minor things. (PoP25)*

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Within this, there was a prominent thread about the importance of probation being focused on the individual with participants both expressing negative attitudes when they felt like probation was a tick box exercise and positive attitudes when people took time to understand, respond to their specific individual needs and be flexible:

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*someone who's very focused on their job... someone who's who good on like one to one, who asks the right questions and don't make you feel uncomfortable or, you know, things like that. Someone who doesn't go straight in and obviously do slowly step by step, things like that... they need to know your background and the reasons why you went from there to there. (PoP22)*

*We have built up a good rapport. I am given some latitude [flexibility] for example if I was late they give me the latitude. It is a governmental service but it's also a personal service. The probation officer does have to get know the client. (PoP18)*

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*Good probation practice*

We also heard about the importance of trust which participants said enabled them to be more open and honest with their practitioner. A key part of this was having a non-judgmental attitude, something which many participants said was critical to being a good probation officer:

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*Not to be judgmental – some of them can be like that. They don't always see stuff from your point of view. They see you haven't done something and that's the punishment so you should do it but it's not always black and white like that. (PoP15)*

*Organizational skills, time keeping, punctual, well dressed, respectable, um decent etiquette sort of stuff. Open mindedness, willingness to not instantly judge which is hard to do but … having an ability to be able to ignore that is quite valuable. (PoP18)*

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People said they needed to be able to trust their officer and that this made them more likely to be able to open up to them. One way in which trust can be built is being fair and being clear about decisions:

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*She knows everything that has happened and I trust her and she doesn't judge, she's just here to do her job so it's gone from -10 to 8 or 9 in terms of feeling anxious. (PoP5)*

*Interviewer: Does her knowing you make it easier for you to be more truthful?*

*PoP8: Yes*

*Interviewer: Why?*

*PoP8: Cos of trust. I could tell her anything. She is a major thing in my support network.*

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Related to this, people were positive when they had the opportunity to influence their sentence plan and there was a sense that being able to collaborate here is a good thing. The lack of a sense of collaboration was however perceived negatively. Others had no recollection of the sentence plan being discussed or shared.

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*You get to say what you want and set goals. I see it as a lot better. It keeps you on track. (PoP7)*

*I had to sign a bunch of documents, did not at all feel like was able to contribute to sentence plan. (PoP18)*

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Indeed, this person on probation said that when work was done 'on paper' it could feel like you were being judged:

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*It depends how they do the risk assessment if they do it in person I won't be bothered... I'm not really a lot paper assessment, because all you doing you're judging me, you ticking boxes that stuff. (PoP7)*

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People were keen to emphasise the importance of consistency in their probation officer, something which has beset probation for several years in light of high staff turnover. Whilst most participants had experienced a change in officer at some point, they were all of the view that change is undesirable (even when a change is understandable and/or unavoidable):

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*It's good 'aving the same person 'cos you know her and they know you... you know where you're at. When you've got the same person everything is all set and bang on. (PoP7)*

*If you keep changing you've got keep going everything over and over again. (PoP21)*

*[It's] difficult cos you get used to one person, opening up to them and then obviously you get transferred to someone else... so it feels like you're starting fresh again. (PoP22)*

*So you get used to one probation officer and prison, you move prisons. You then have to meet someone new, they have to get to know you, you have to get to know them. You have to build up that trust. But they're that overworked. (PoP11)*

Underpinning all of this was the sense that people on probation value the importance of the relationship in the same way that practitioners emphasise the centrality of good working relationships to probation work.

*PoP8: She knows me*

*Interviewer: Is that* important*?*

*PoP8: yeah. I need someone to support me, guide me so she has been a big help*

*It really helps with what has happened to me. Like it's a good relationship where you come in, she can give you advice, it's very good. (PoP21)*

*How could probation be improved*

When asked about how probation could be improved, many of our participants emphasised the need to reduce practitioner workloads. There was – perhaps surprisingly – a keen awareness amongst participants that probation staff are 'overworked and overstretched' and they made connections between that and difficulties in spending time with them to build rapport:

*I know they have a lot of heavy casework to do. They're overstretched, they're underpaid. That's the most important – take your time to sit with your client and listen to 'em. (PoP8)*

In the eyes of one participant, high workloads led to what he called 'check-in' appointments which were, for him, highly unsatisfactory:

*What I see is the weakness in probation is the um what I call the check-in appointments. Just ticking a box turning up to say hello, how is your week? You know, is there anything we can do? That's where I feel it kind of breaks down. (PoP28)*

Participants also emphasised the importance of nicer, more welcoming environments which, whilst not part of SEEDS2, is important because people felt that a more inclusive environment would make people more willing to attend and comply. This was raised by participants in general terms but also in terms of responding to specific needs such as anxiety. There was a recognition that probation practitioners cannot deal with these systemic issues but – in spite of this – a sense that these systemic issues are having a detrimental impact on the ability of probation to deliver a personalised, relational and engaging service:

*probation don't really have enough power, enough to leverage to help with things. My main issue at the moment is housing but probation don't have the power to help with that. (PoP15)*

*unless you've got all the other agencies to help and support, it's very hard for them to manage you effectively because you get a snapshot somebody, you get snapshot me just now as soon as I leave here, your opinion is on based on this, so what I tell you is based on this. But if I'm a drug addict, I'm back outside and trying to score and that's the hard aspect of probation. (PoP11)*

It may be then that SEEDS2 is a generally positive development but one that, nonetheless, is unable to deal with the material demands and needs of people under supervision.

**Conclusion**

Of those people who responded to the survey, the training did meet the aims that were set out and respondents were able to identify elements of the training that were of use. Moreover, respondents have used the skills delivered as part of the training in their practice. There seemed to be more enthusiasm for topics that were about personal planning and development, perhaps reflecting the difficulties that practitioners have experienced in recent years in relation to personal development because of regular

policy change. That said, there appears to be an ambivalence about the extent to which SEEDS2 has demonstrably improved practice (either staff supervision or engaging people on probation). We would put this down to two main issues: workloads, and a sense that whilst SEEDS2 is a good thing many people feel like they already work in accordance with the principles laid out in the training.

In interviews, participants were generally positive about the training and the underpinning principles of SEEDS2. Whilst our participants are keen to implement the learning from SEEDS2 they feel inhibited by both a lack of time, and a sense that the organisational priorities and ways of working are not fully aligned with what SEEDS2 asks them to do. There was a sense that whilst the training was received positively, people who had done the training a long time ago struggled to remember some of the content although the language did seem to 'stick'. This may point to the need for follow up sessions to really embed the model.

Our interviews with people on probation, meanwhile, can be used to underscore the importance of a programme such as SEEDS2. It was clear from these interviews that practitioners who are empathic, good at listening and responsive to individuals' needs are key to engaging people on probation.

There are a number of limitations to this research which must be borne in mind. Firstly, the data presented must be understood in the context of a small sample. Whilst efforts were made by the Probation Learning Design Faculty in HMPPS and the Research Team to encourage people to respond to the survey, this proved more difficult than anticipated. Moreover, our interview sample was smaller than planned, again despite our best efforts to recruit people who had originally expressed an interest in participating. We expect this is due to workload pressures and a need to prioritise day-to-day work over research. As noted above, our sample of people on probation will, in all likelihood, be skewed towards the more compliant and positive cohort of the probation caseload. That said, our appreciative inquiry approach means we have been able to cast light on what makes for a good probation officer.

This research set out to identify the extent to which SEEDS2 has shaped the delivery of probation. However, it has not been possible to identify clear differences between the control and the treatment regions. This is probably down to a lower than anticipated sample but also because there are a number of confounding and contextual factors which will be shaping the extent to which SEEDS2 is being implemented and having an impact such as workloads, staff turnover and other structural and systemic issues. However, participants were – on the whole – positive about SEEDS2 as an idea and we would suggest that, on balance, it is a programme that is worthwhile. There are some important lessons to be taken from this evaluation going forward. SEEDS2 should be badged as a programme which defines and underscores good quality probation practice as many people already understand it. Some people are familiar with this way of working and appreciate the fact that the training can be experienced as a refresher of key ideas and concepts. Many things get in the way – on a micro level – of successful implementation. The most obvious here is the workload pressures which inhibit the time needed to build relationships with people on probation, which underpins the

SEEDS2 way of working but practitioners (and people on probation to some degree) were also critical of the wider, managerial 'tick box' culture which seems to pervade the organisation.

SEEDS2 seeks to develop a culture and model which people want and value. We heard very similar stories across both control and treatment groups and so it is not possible to ascertain any causal link between SEEDS2 and practice. Our analysis would suggest that whilst SEEDS2 is unlikely to hurt we also cannot say that SEEDS2 definitively helps. It seems to us that most good probation practitioners are already working in a SEEDS2 way but there is a question about whether it is likely to change the work of the practitioners who are not already committed to relational and engaging practice, or who have workloads that are so unmanageable as to make it impossible to implement. Finally, people on probation value the same things that SEEDS2 seeks to implement and if sufficient resources can be found, and adequate cultural change can be implemented then SEEDS2 has the potential to serve practitioners and people on probation well.

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