

Penal SUPERVISION *in Comparative Context*

Presented by Dr Hannah Graham, University of Stirling,
on behalf of the wider research team.

2026



OUR TEAM

Research team/co-authors:

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Dr Sarah Doxat-Pratt,
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Nottingham.

Dr Claire Lightowler [new!],
University of Strathclyde.

+ **Prof Fergus McNeill** [consultant].



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Penal Supervision in Comparative Context

Discover how penal supervision shapes lives

Our research explores penal supervision across five nations: England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland.

The scale, diversity and intensity of penal supervision (people subject to community sanctions and measures such as probation) has greatly increased in recent years, leading to suggestions that we have entered an era of 'mass supervision'. Three times as many people are supervised in the community

Website: <https://comparingpenalsupervision.com/>



WHY?



- This comparative study is among the first of its kind in Europe. It is intentional in centring probation and JSW, and de-centring prisons.
- 5 nations share the same founding legislation: *Probation of Offenders Act 1907*.
- With 1999 as our study's starting point, it affords opportunities to analyse cultures and devolution.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

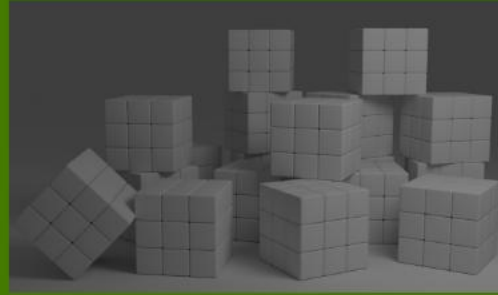
[Q1] What is the scale and range of forms of supervision in each of the five nations, who is supervised, who are the supervisors, and how are services structured and organised?

[Q2] How is supervision governed, practiced and experienced by those involved in each of the five nations, and how does this help us understand differences and similarities in 'supervisory regimes'?

[Q3] How, why and with what consequences does penal supervision vary across nations and how have these developments in supervisory regimes been legitimated?

[Q4] What can such analyses of supervisory regimes contribute to an understanding of comparative criminal justice and of governance in other fields?

HOW?



METHODS

Nicola Carr leads the whole project.

Our team work together across methods, groups, places, and coding.

A few anonymous sites in each nation.

Profiling supervision: statistical analysis

Stats and graphs on community sentences and licences, and probation/JSW workforces.

Sarah Doxat-Pratt and Jake Phillips lead on this part.

People with lived experience

Interviews, digital ethnography (indeemo: text, image, video)

Beth Weaver, Fern Gillon, and Jan Flaherty lead on this part.

Probation and JSW practitioners

Interviews, digital ethnography (indeemo: text, image, video)

Beth Weaver, Fern Gillon, and Jan Flaherty lead on this part.

Elite interviews

Justice leaders, policymakers, politicians, and scrutiny bodies.

Hannah Graham leads on this part.

Comparative policy & documentary analysis

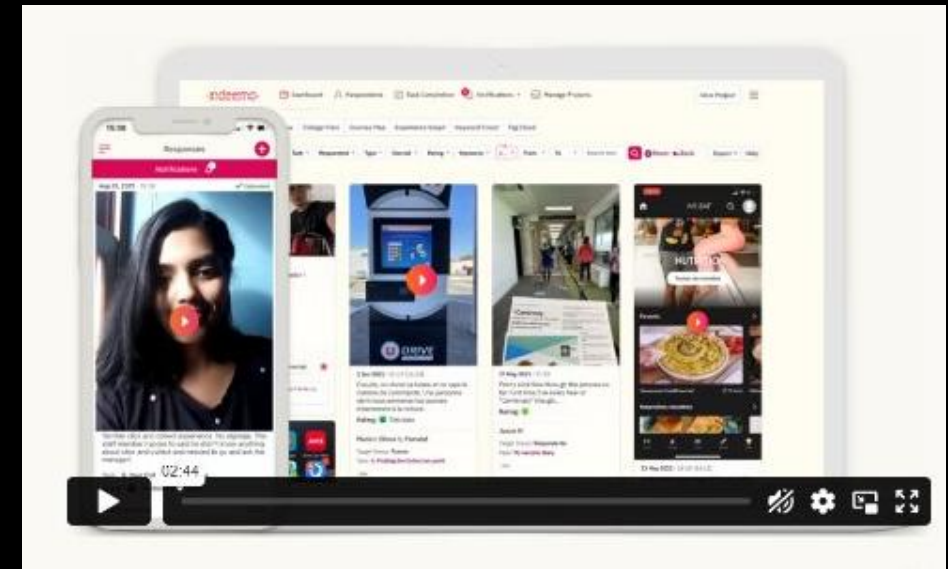
Policies, laws, Parliamentary transcripts, reports, speeches.

Hannah Graham and Claire Lightowler lead on this part.

AN IMPORTANT CAVEAT



* Presenting selected emerging themes from *some* of the Scotland data, with some reflections involving Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland data.



'Community Supervision: Seen & Supervised' exhibition [Scot/NI/ROI], led by Dr Fern Gillon.

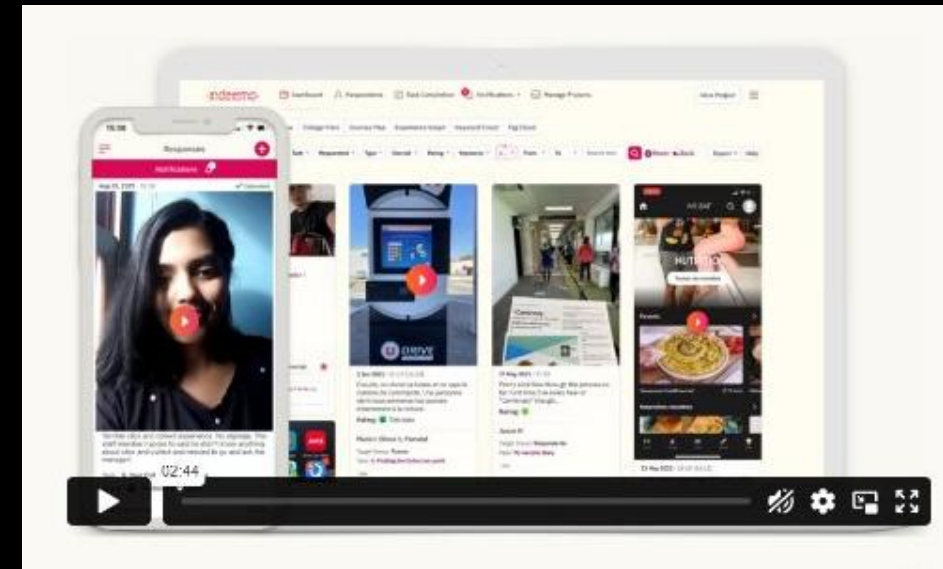
VISUALISING SUPERVISION



This person uploaded an image of a path cleared as part of their unpaid work: “the picture I’ve included was taken yesterday of part of a downhill path which a group of us doing unpaid work cleared...We got rid of bushes, tree branches, general unwanted foliage and rubbish to provide easier access... And a year on, I’m happy to see that the path is still clear for other walkers and cyclists. A job well done!”



Community Supervision:
Seen and Supervised



‘Community Supervision: Seen & Supervised’
exhibition [Scot/Ni/ROI], led by Dr Fern Gillon.

VISUALISING SUPERVISION



SOCIAL WORK AS FOUNDATIONAL

Training, skills, values, occupational professionalism and identity...

PERSON-CENTRED



Trauma-informed
Recovery-oriented
Risk-managed
Strengths-based
Change-focused

Numerous stories by practitioners that are testament to the quality of the relationship, trust and communication with service users, showing pragmatism, humanity, and problem-solving amid complexity.



**EVERYTHING
EVERYWHERE
ALL AT ONCE?**

Q: What are the purposes of supervision? Of community justice?

‘Everyone thinks social workers are like a one fit all for every service. It's almost like the courts. Because I've even heard a lot of my guys saying, "och, my lawyer just said, like, you could, like, if I had an order, you could help me with my mental health", and stuff like that.’
– Justice Social Worker, [SCOT_PRAC_01A].

‘I do feel there's a requirement, even, for instance, at that Justice [event/meeting], it was about you know, the challenges in Justice Social Work? What do you think we can do? And it's like there is the expectation on social workers to have the answers, do you know what I mean? Whereas that should be a management and policy issue, away with the up high heid yins, but there is that expectation...’
– Justice Social Worker, [SCOT_PRAC_04A].

‘I think the purpose, going by my short experience, is get people into a place where everything round about them, like whatever they need, is there. If it's housing, if it's addictions, whatever, that they're absolutely wrapped with that support network.’ – Justice Social Worker, [SCOT_PRAC_07B].

‘Probably because of my experience... people feel I'm a kind of safe pair of hands in that they know that they come in here, and very rarely would I turn anybody away at any point.’ – Justice Social Worker, [SCOT_PRAC_02B].

‘We really don't have a minute, most of the time.’ – Justice Social Worker, [SCOT_PRAC_02B].

I Meaning of “community justice” – Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016

(1) In this Act, “community justice” means—

- (a) giving effect to bail conditions, community disposals and post-release control requirements,
- (b) managing and supporting persons falling within subsection (3), (6) or (7) with a view to them not offending in future or, if that is not realistic, reducing future offending by them,
- (c) arranging relevant general services in ways which facilitate persons falling within subsection (3), (6) or (7) accessing and using them,
- (d) preparing persons who have been convicted of offences and sentenced to imprisonment or detention in penal institutions for release,
- (e) facilitating the provision of relevant general services which persons mentioned in paragraph (d) are likely to need immediately following their release.

(2) In subsection (1)(b), “supporting” includes—

- (a) advising and guiding,
- (b) providing—
 - (i) opportunities to participate in activities designed to eliminate or reduce future offending,
 - (ii) emotional and practical support designed to eliminate or reduce future offending,
- (c) helping—
 - (i) to access things falling within paragraph (b)(i) or (ii),
 - (ii) to access and make use of relevant general services.

[...]

(5) Subsection (4) includes acts occurring anywhere in the world.

NOT A LACK OF CLEAR PROCEDURE IN MANAGING ORDERS. NEED OTHER HELP, BUT WHERE WOULD YOU REFER THEM TO?

‘I think Justice have got really strong processes in place, managers that are very clear on those processes and can help guide you through them. I have found in other services that that is not always the case, processes can be quite muddy and you get different answers from different people. I don’t feel like you get that in Justice.

Some of the weaknesses I suppose, it is going to be a Council wide weakness, it is about that availability for funds and support. Justice, I don’t think is an organisation where we go asking for funds for things often. I know [another team name] probably do, they have got those intensive support packages and stuff. I feel like it is not something that the rest of us tend to need often and then when you can't get it is even more frustrating.’ – Justice Social Worker, [SCOT_PRAC_11A].

TOO MUCH TO DO, YET NOT ENOUGH TO DO IT: TEMPORAL CONSTRAINTS MEET WORKFORCE AND FISCAL CONSTRAINTS

‘I think we all know that the Justice portfolio is enormously underfunded. That, yeah, in terms of criminal justice social work, I think there was government data or responses done where the social workers were saying “we cannot do the job, there's too much, we are massively overworked here.” [...] But the local authorities had come out in the last year or so and said, “we have a real problem getting social workers in because we can't pay them as much as they get when they get paid by the NHS.” So what are you going to do if you're a social worker? Who are you going to work for?... The whole system is massively underfunded and I don't think anyone doubts that and I actually think the Criminal Justice Committee is very well aware of that. However, bluntly, there are no votes in Justice.’ – Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP), [SCOT_ELITE_04].

IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

An emerging theme of expectations of ‘everything, everywhere, all at once’ and ‘being all things to all people’ and yet facing temporal constraints does have some resonance with Republic of Ireland and Northern Irish data, to some extent. However, they each have one national probation service, plus fairly clearly defined relationships with the third sector (CBOs: “Community based organisations” in ROI).

‘...probation has a limit of what they can do with the time they are given and with the problems they are dealing with. Because we are taking all the problems that a human being brings to us, and we try and help. For example, if you have a lifer, you are the lifer’s relative literally, because you are seeing them forever until you resign and somebody else is assigned to them.’ – Probation Practitioner [NI_PRAC_01].

IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

Without any prompting, a few elite interviews in the Republic of Ireland made the same comment about JSW and community justice structures in Scotland.

‘The classic problem is in Scotland, who do you call when you call in Scotland? Like, it's very hard to find a single representative voice who can speak for all 32 local authorities and 32 chiefs.’ – Justice Leader, [ROI_ELITE_03].

‘I think we would have felt a particular connection with Scotland. But it was particularly hard to make a connection with Scotland, because who was it? Was it Richard Nixon or somebody said about Europe, you know, as an entity, you know, “who do I pick up the phone to when I want to call Europe?” I sometimes felt similarly about Scotland. If I want to talk to somebody about probation, criminal justice social work in Scotland, who do I call now?’ – Justice Leader, [ROI_ELITE_01].



'ELITE' NARRATIVES

- Collegiality at high levels in a small place, even if a few are known to differ, resist, offer challenge.
- Different elites tend to know what the key structural issues are affecting community justice.
- Competing drivers of penal policy. Need for courage, political will, leadership, real progress.
- Positive recognition of JSW as supporting people with unmet needs, complex circumstances.
- Widespread support for localised delivery in Scotland, not one national service model. Whereas it's the opposite in ROI and NI.

EMERGING THEMES AND NEXT STEPS

- In Scotland, there is scope to further analyse the interplay between the strengths of person-centred approaches and the plurality and diversity of community justice, *and* the potential impacts that seemingly all-encompassing expectations of JSW and de-centred governance structures in community justice might be having.
- There are excellent insights to further explore which speak to penal cultures and national cultures, while foregrounding probation and community justice. In the 'elite interviews' across the 5 nations, people have spoken candidly and perceptively.
- Over summer and autumn, our team will be doing the full comparative analysis, bringing together the different methods and data and the different nations/places. There is *so much data*; we will be sharing findings in different formats and ways.

THANKS

For listening

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