



Where we see our standards delivered well, in practice.



HM Inspectorate
of Probation



Effective practice guide: **Unpaid work**

Based on a thematic inspection of the delivery of unpaid work

February 2025

Acknowledgements

This effective practice guide is based on information sourced while undertaking the thematic inspection [A thematic inspection of the delivery of unpaid work](#) and work arising from key lines of enquiry. The inspection was led by HM inspector David Miners, supported by a team of inspectors and operations, research, communications, and corporate staff. User Voice, the ex-offender-led charity, interviewed people on probation who had experience of being supervised by the Probation Service. The manager responsible for this inspection programme is Helen Davies.

In collaboration with Helen Amor, effective practice lead, David Miners has drawn out examples of effective practice across leadership and governance, placements, and engagement with people on probation undertaking unpaid work. These are presented in this guide to support regions in their monitoring, management, and continuous development of community payback.

We would like to thank all those who participated in any way in this inspection, and especially those who have contributed to this guide. Without their help and cooperation, the inspection and effective practice guide would not have been possible.

Please note that, throughout the report, the names in examples have been changed, to protect the individual's identity.

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The guide is aimed at a range of audiences; it is intended to support [practitioners](#), [middle managers](#), and [strategic leaders](#) to reflect on their own experiences and consider how they may apply the learning points in their own contexts. Therefore, please use the contents page to navigate directly to the sections pertinent to you.

Introduction

About this guide

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation has a duty to identify and disseminate effective practice.¹

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

This guide highlights where we have seen our standards delivered well for unpaid work requirements in the Probation Service. It is designed to help commissioners and providers improve this area of their work with people on probation.

I am grateful to all the areas that participated in this review, and for their additional help in producing this guide. We publish these guides to complement our reports and the standards against which we inspect youth justice services and probation.

I hope this guide will be of interest to everyone working in the Probation Service and seeking to improve their practice. We welcome feedback on this and our other guides to ensure that they are as useful as possible to future readers.



Martin Jones CBE

HM Chief Inspector of Probation



Contact us



We would love to hear what you think of this guide. Please send your comments and feedback on this guide, including its impact and any suggested improvements, to Helen.amor@hmiprobation.gov.uk

Finding your way



Tools for practitioners



Video produced by HM Inspectorate of Probation



Useful links



External video

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

Background



Unpaid work (UPW) was initially introduced as community service in the Criminal Justice Act 1972 (CJA) and has subsequently, undergone various legislative changes. Nationally rolled out in 1975 as a community service order, it has since been known as community punishment, UPW, and community payback. Currently, 'community payback' (CP) and 'UPW' are the terms used, though they are often conflated. Community payback refers to any work done as part of an UPW requirement on a community order or suspended sentence order (SSO), as well as the organisational structures needed to deliver these requirements. For ease, this guide uses 'UPW' to refer to both the court-imposed sentence and its delivery structures.

Until the CJA 2003, UPW could be part of either a community punishment order or a community punishment and rehabilitation order. Post-2003, UPW became one of 12 possible requirements under a community order, implemented in 2005. This act introduced both the new community order and the SSO, allowing UPW to be part of either. The work must be completed within 12 months, with courts setting between 40 and 300 hours for completion. The Probation Service must ensure UPW is visible and makes a positive contribution to local communities. To enhance public confidence in the sentence, from 2005, individuals undertaking UPW were required to wear branded high-visibility tabards.

Sentencers, UPW staff, and the people on probation were clear that UPW was primarily a punishment. However, they also recognised that UPW provided an opportunity to reduce an individual's reoffending. To enhance UPW's rehabilitative effect, several factors played a key role:

- **engaging in useful and rewarding work**
- opportunities to **develop employment-related skills**
- supervisors **demonstrating procedural justice principles** and **pro-social behaviours**
- **fair and consistent delivery** with clear expectations
- **prompt commencement** and regular work schedules (Bennett and Bowen, 2022).

By participating in community payback, individuals on probation contributed positively to their local communities, helping repair harm, and fostering responsibility and accountability. Visible contributions by people on probation can enhance public and victim confidence in the justice system, improving perceptions of justice and fairness.



You can access more information regarding UPW at HM Inspectorate of Probation website, evidence research pages: [Unpaid work \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/unpaid-work/)

Our standards: what we looked for and our expectations



The examples in this guide are drawn from evidence of effective practice identified while undertaking fieldwork for the thematic inspection.

We define effective practice as:



“where we see our standards delivered well in practice, with our standards being based on established models and frameworks, which are grounded in evidence, learning, and experience.”

During our inspection, we identified effective practice against our standards listed below:

- leadership supports and promotes the delivery of a high-quality, personalised, and responsive approach to UPW
- UPW placements are personalised and responsive to diverse groups and bespoke needs
- the training and supervision of UPW staff support high-quality delivery and professional development.

[You can read our thematic inspection report here.](#)



Reflection questions

Reflecting on this section:

From a strategic perspective:

- How do your area's arrangements align with these standards? What could be improved?
- Are training and development programmes effective in preparing staff to work with people on probation with UPW requirements?

From an operational perspective:

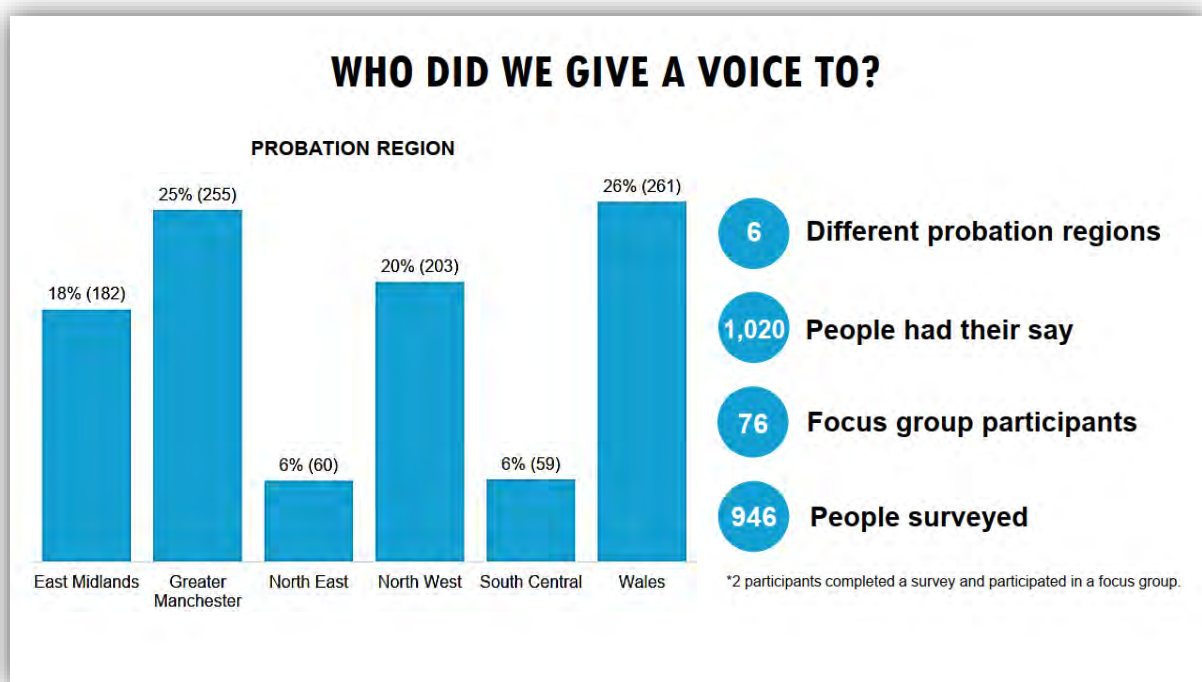
- What practices are effective in delivering UPW in your area? What could be improved?
- Are assessment and placement arrangements for UPW informed by all relevant information?

Learning from the people on probation:



We commissioned User Voice, a charity run by people who have been in prison and on probation, to gather the views of people on probation, ensuring the research was peer-led at every stage.

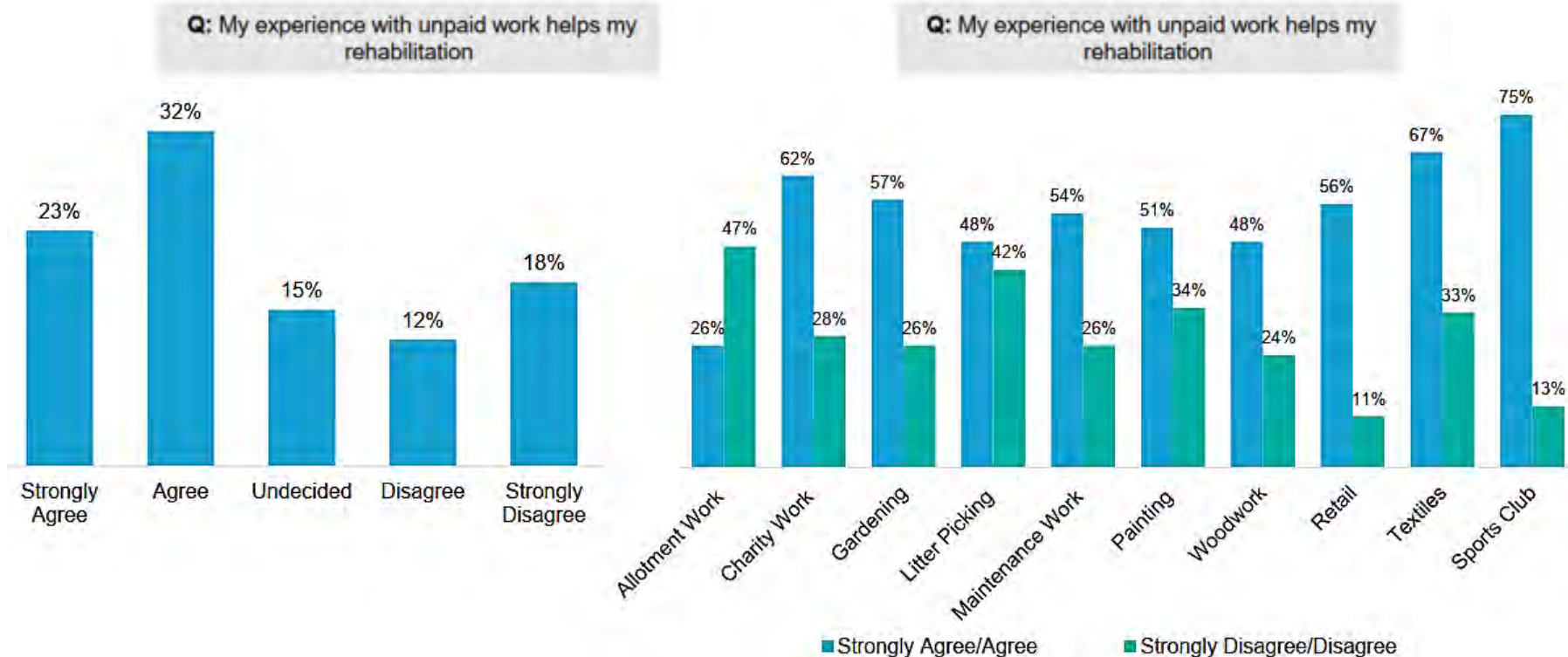
User Voice gathered the views of 1,020 people on probation to understand their experiences using methods including surveys and focus groups. We are grateful for the insights of those people on probation whose feedback we have used to inform the findings of the thematic inspection.



Participants unanimously felt that unpaid work staff were non-judgmental and fair. They found staff friendly, attentive, and more interested in them than their probation practitioners. Most felt comfortable speaking openly with their supervisors, enabling meaningful conversations.

"I've not had a bad experience here, everyone here is friendly and accommodating; if you give your respect, you get it back."

JUST OVER HALF TOLD US THAT THEIR UNPAID WORK HELPS THEIR REHABILITATION



User Voice's research found that over half of respondents believed unpaid work aided their rehabilitation, and most felt it should prioritise rehabilitation over punishment.

"I think it does rehabilitate you. Because if you do something bad you go straight back to prison. Over here you are working and busy, so it keeps you out of trouble. I think it's changed me a little bit."

Skill acquisition varied depending on the activity, with half of participants feeling they had developed new skills.

"For some people, it could help with social skills."

"Yeah, gardening skills. Also, the online courses which help to get some certificates."

"You know what, communication skills, I think they help."

Over half of participants preferred reparative work, finding it purposeful and boosting their self-esteem.

"If it's paying back to the community again it would be much more satisfying for us. It makes us feel like we've done something good."

Most participants felt unpaid work did not enhance their employability and suggested a more tailored approach with individuals from the induction stage. However, some did gain ideas and skills for future employment.

"They should ask individuals to go for a meeting with probation; they should ask you what you want to do ... then they can match this to your career choice or interest."

User Voice's research underscored the importance of supervisory relationships, engagement, and support in completing sentences and reducing reoffending. High-quality supervision benefited both individuals and society, applicable to all sentence requirements. UPW supervisors could ensure unpaid work was purposeful and rewarding by promoting pro-social behaviour, procedural justice, and showing genuine interest in individuals. Pro-social relationships provided emotional support, encouragement, and positive role models, helping to develop social and communication skills, foster a sense of belonging, and promote accountability. These factors collectively enhanced motivation, reduced isolation, and supported successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

"It is important that probation practitioners work alongside each individual, and there is clear value in identifying and building upon strengths and enhancing protective factors. A one size fits all approach is unlikely to be successful and work needs to be tailored to meet individual needs, and be personally meaningful to the person on probation." (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023)



[Access the User Voice report here](#) for more detail of its methodology and findings.



Click on the images to read more about core correctional practices, supervision skills, and the links between quality supervision and positive outcomes for people on probation at the HM Inspectorate of Probation research pages.

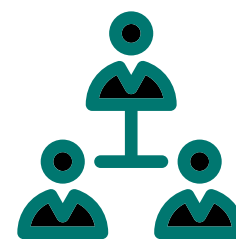


Reflection questions

Reflecting on this section:

- How do you ensure that you capture the voice of people on probation in your service delivery of UPW?
- Do UPW placements provide opportunities where appropriate for individuals to acquire skills to improve their employability?
- Consider the findings above, and think about how you demonstrate them within your practice?
- What could you do differently to strengthen your approach?

Leadership and governance



In recent years, UK governments have taken several steps to address UPW and strengthen community sentences. Community payback remains a central element, with people on probation contributing to local projects, and efforts have been made to increase the visibility and accountability of these contributions, including involving victims in deciding punishments. These initiatives have aimed to reduce reoffending, support victims, and ensure public safety through robust community penalties and effective rehabilitation.

The focus on UPW within the regions set the tone and expectations for delivery, fostering better integration and prioritisation within sentence management teams. This was supported by the community payback recovery board and the national team, which had introduced targeted performance criteria and data metrics.

During our inspection we identified regional approaches to drive improvements and support culture between sentence management and unpaid work teams, which are highlighted below.

Example of effectiveness: Disproportionality taskforce, Wales

In Wales, we heard about the focus on ensuring that UPW was a priority. The 'disproportionality taskforce' was established to make use of the equalities monitoring tool data available to the Probation Service in Wales. Chaired by the head of operations, the taskforce sat directly under the equalities board for Wales and examined any disproportionate outcomes for people on probation. Individual cases facing challenges were discussed collaboratively as part of the interface meetings between UPW and sentence management teams, and there was an escalation route to address issues, gaining reassurance from respective leaders about the results.

With ministerial interest in reducing the backlog of UPW cases, the region recognised the need to understand individuals better to ensure successful commencement and completion of UPW. The principle 'start right, end right' guided this approach. Heads of function and UPW leads analysed equalities data, revealing that people on probation with disabilities were less likely to complete UPW than those without disabilities. This led to surveys of relevant individuals to determine necessary actions, following [the Lammy review](#) principles of explain or reform.

The probation equalities monitoring tool gave an indication of inequality or unequal outcomes for a particular group, and analysed a series of metrics by race, sex, age, disability, religion, and sexual orientation. For UPW, the focus of these metrics was on disproportionality in UPW commencements.



Here you can access the [Probation Equalities Monitoring Tool \(P-EMT\)](#). *Please note you will require a password to access this tool.*



The [Prison and Probation equalities monitoring tools \(EMTs\) guidance](#) and [Advancing Equality for Offenders and Children in Custody Policy Framework](#) were designed to support regions in understanding and analysing the equalities data from the equalities monitoring tool.

Example of effectiveness: Learning organisation, Wales

The Probation Service's approach to human factors has been heavily influenced by insights from HMPPS and other organisations, guided by human factors science, which examines the elements influencing workplace behaviour. In early 2022, HMPPS adopted a five-strand approach adapted from learning organisation principles to foster an open learning culture. In December 2023, a sixth strand was added that focused on serious further offences.

There are six strands in the HMPPS approach to human factors learning organisation.

1. **Developing a shared mental model:** colleagues understand their own role, responsibilities, and tasks, as well as those of others, to navigate the inter-dependencies effectively, enabling optimal performance.
2. **Culture enquiry:** establishing a cultural baseline to identify strengths and areas for improvement, recognising the importance of understanding and addressing organisational culture.
3. **Cultural narrative:** addressing communication issues and the rationale for change by illustrating how culture is evolving, and providing teams with a clear narrative.
4. **Leadership and development:** emphasising the role of leadership at all levels in driving cultural and behavioural change.
5. **Human factors:** utilising tools and approaches to mitigate biased decision-making and disproportionality, enhancing communication, and addressing critical success factors daily.
6. **Serious further offences (SFO):** this focuses on system investigation and addressing blame culture. It involves working with senior leaders and SFO reviewers to better inform early look reports, SFO reviews, and action plans. It seeks to ensure the region/country and wider organisation understand the systemic factors and root causes of SFOs.



This HMPPS insights event features Dr Sanjay Bhasin, who talks about how HMPPS can become a learning organisation: [Video \(YouTube, 58:18\): The Benefits of HMPPS Becoming a Learning Organisation \(HMPPS Insights\)](#)

Two strands of this learning organisation approach have been directly applied to UPW delivery in Wales:

1. Shared mental model (SMM)

SMM refers to a common understanding among team members about the tasks, roles, and processes involved in their work. It ensured that everyone was aligned and could anticipate each other's needs, leading to better coordination and performance.

As part of the learning organisation initiative, a human factors survey was conducted across UPW, sentence management, and court teams. This survey provided valuable insights into the concerns and issues faced by probation staff in Wales. The continuous improvement and change team (CICT) used the evidence from these surveys to identify barriers to building an SMM. The findings highlighted unclear roles, poor communication, and cultural issues following the reunification of the Probation Service. Ten recommendations were made to address these barriers and improve decision-making and outputs.

In the context of the UPW process, developing a SMM means:

- **clarity of roles:** everyone understands their responsibilities and how they fit into the overall process
- **improved communication:** teams can share information effectively, reducing misunderstandings and inefficiencies
- **enhanced collaboration:** teams work together more seamlessly, anticipating each other's needs and adjusting actions as necessary
- **cultural integration:** teams feel unified and part of a cohesive system, rather than separate entities.

Work has continued to enhance collaboration between sentence management and UPW teams in Wales, with noticeable improvements. By addressing the barriers to an SMM, the UPW process became more efficient, increasing the prospect of better outcomes for people on probation and the community.



[You can read more about the shared mental model in Wales here.](#)

2. An adapted human factors model for UPW

The HMPPS human factors approach (see [Annex one](#)) recognises that mistakes are inevitable and emphasises the importance of learning from them to minimise future risk. Achieving high reliability in organisations involves changing the approach to error reporting by accepting that mistakes will occur and encouraging their reporting to foster a culture of learning. Additionally, understanding why things go right most of the time helps build an accurate picture of actual work practices.

The human factors model in UPW was adapted prior to implementation following consultation with leaders, managers, and staff to ensure that the approach met the different operational complexities of UPW.

For UPW teams, managers conducted a morning team briefing using a checklist. In the afternoon, after returning from site, UPW supervisors, administrators, and placement coordinators held their own team briefing. During this time, they discussed the day's risks and observations, sharing information promptly with probation practitioners. This was followed by a period of management-protected time. Any concerns or issues raised could be addressed by managers in the next morning's briefing.

Staff feedback was positive, noting that this approach demonstrated investment in individuals, strengthened relationships with sentence management teams, and fostered a culture of risk awareness across all departments. Improved communication flow and enhanced role understanding were reported.

"It [human factors model] has had great feedback, especially if someone has had a difficult day; it is shared and not taken into the following day and we all rally round. We also use it for praise, and it gives everyone a lift."

UPW placement coordinators



Figure 1. Human factors model¹

"The human factors model is very good as we are able to offload about our day and plan for the following day. Very good for exchanging information - like any equipment issues, van issues. Gives better continuity going into the next day. Also, an opportunity to share successes too."

"We have all members of staff on it, because as a supervisor team we tend to be split across weekdays. Manager one-to-one is also built into [the] calendar, which is protected time. We know that after the human factors meeting, we always have a manager available to talk to if needed."

UPW supervisors

"From a senior administrative officer perspective, at first, [I] was sceptical having to attend every morning call, every afternoon call etc. But we do one in three for each area, and we are a support to the admin team. It is beneficial, has connected the team, particularly for those who work remotely."

UPW case administrators

This approach allowed UPW teams to self-manage risks and issues effectively, while operational managers developed their leadership skills and strengthened their connection with their teams.



You can read more about the human factors model in Wales in the [Effective Practice - Developing operational structures and the senior probation officer role](#) insights guide.



Reflection questions

Reflecting on this section:

- Where does UPW sit within the working culture of your organisation?
- Is there a shared understanding of the approach to the prioritisation and delivery of UPW requirements?
- How could the human factors approach to UPW be implemented in your region?

Unpaid work placements



Research has shown that for UPW to support desistance from crime effectively, it must be perceived as meaningful by those completing it. Offering diverse placements allows the Probation Service to tailor work to individual needs and projects that built skills, revitalised areas, and provided valuable community services that often characterised what people on probation viewed as purposeful activities (Bennett and Bowen, 2022).

During our inspection we visited some positive UPW placements, which are highlighted below.

Example of effectiveness: Social enterprise at Crest, North Wales



Working in partnership with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and the Probation Service for over 20 years, Crest has provided a supervised and fulfilling space for people on probation to complete their UPW. Its mission statement is:

"Unlocking people's potential through inclusion, innovation and enterprise, for the benefit of the community."²

We heard how in North Wales, Crest provided invaluable work experience, learning opportunities, and progression through volunteering and employment. In October 2022, Wales probation agreed a contract with Crest to supply 10,000 hours of supervised placements with social enterprise.

Placements were available seven days per week in a variety of tasks that were all community-focused, including food banks, eBay stores furniture restoration, recycling and testing white goods, a radio station, and sales of clothing and household goods and furniture. Crest also provided furniture starter packs for people who could not afford to pay for the goods. It assessed everyone before allocating tasks, and aimed to provide meaningful opportunities during their placements. The people on probation could try different tasks until they found something they liked doing.

There was effective communication between Crest and the UPW placement coordinators, who were aware of restrictions on who could be referred. Regular meetings discussed placements, and the UPW induction was completed on Crest premises, which supported compliance and helped overcome any barriers. A quarterly contract and performance interface considered demand for placements and explored failures to attend by people on probation.

Once people on probation completed their hours, they were guaranteed an interview with the placement provider, if there were vacancies. Rod Williams, Crest managing director, reported that *"25-30 per cent of people on probation continue to volunteer once their UPW hours are complete, and 20 per cent of Crest staff have had UPW requirements."*

² Retrieved from: [Second Hand Furniture Colwyn Bay, Llandudno, Conwy | Crest Cooperative](#)



Listen here to a person on probation who completed his hours at Crest and made a video for its website: [Diogo reflects on his time at Crest - Crest \(crestcooperative.co.uk\)](https://crestcooperative.co.uk)



More information about Crest is available on its website: [Second Hand Furniture Colwyn Bay, Llandudno, Conwy | Crest Cooperative](https://crestcooperative.co.uk)

Example of effectiveness: Contribution to the community at the Pavilion Project, Cardiff

The Pavilion Project, based in a park in Cardiff, was a group placement where, over a four-month period, the UPW teams renovated areas which had become disused and overgrown, and had attracted vandalism and antisocial behaviour.



The work covered manual, ground maintenance, gardening, and planting, using equipment such as strimmers and basic carpentry to enhance skills for employment. Tasks were also extended to the portacabins on site, where painting and decorating skills have been utilised and developed.

Feedback from beneficiaries about the work of community payback was extremely positive and they fully supported further renovation work as part of the Pavilion Project. The site will also include a café, as the park hosts football pitches and Trelai Park parkrun, for example, which they anticipate will self-fund the project. People on probation were now involved in additional pieces of work, such as building planters for the park, ornamental festive items during the Christmas period, and ongoing maintenance work.

There was a strong sense of value and mutual respect between the people on probation, the beneficiaries, and the UPW staff, which promoted enthusiasm and motivation for the work on this project. This was an effective example where people on probation had made a valuable contribution to the local community through reparation activities, while acquiring basic skills, and building a positive social connection. As noted in the [User Voice research](#):

"Making something or helping someone makes us proud and other people notice it too. We're doing it [UPW] for a good cause."



You can access an article on Prison and Probation Wales Instagram page from October 2024 highlighting the work of the community payback team in Cardiff: [HMPPS Wales: The Pavilion at Trelai Park, Ely had fallen into disrepair but following restoration work from the Community Payback team in Cardiff, the site has been restored | Instagram](#)



A Cardiff City councillor for Ely and the beneficiary have praised the work done: [UPW Effective practice follow up interview - Pavilion project](#)

Example of effectiveness:

Increasing employability for women on probation at The Hub, Greater Manchester

The Hub at Westhoughton opened in March 2023 and has hosted various activities that supported both the community and local small businesses. All its programmes have been designed to meet the needs of the local area and enhance community engagement.



*"Our vision places The Hub at Westhoughton, at the heart of the community, providing a sustainable, secure, culturally diverse, and accessible space that is valued and supported by the people of the local district and community."*³



The Hub offered community payback women-only placements for up to eight women on a Thursday at the centre, supervised by a woman. The women were welcomed to a warm, well-maintained site run by a charitable organisation. The UPW supervisor was attentive to their needs, fostering strong relationships which supported the success of the placements.

Women reported feeling like volunteers and appreciated the strong ethos of rehabilitation. Flexible hours accommodated childcare needs, and participants were given a hot meal and appropriate facilities. Activities included assisting with food preparation, service, and participating in community group setups and deliveries. Women reported increased wellbeing and the acquisition of new skills.

"As well as technical skills, I have developed confidence, social inclusion, and motivation to seek paid employment."

For women who showed commitment and motivation in completing their UPW hours, the centre offered a funded Level 2 City and Guilds qualification in food hygiene, recognised by potential employers. The centre also welcomed women to continue volunteering after completing their hours and provided references when appropriate. One woman we spoke with successfully secured weekend employment in hospitality due to the experience gained at this placement.

This was an example of a successful women-only provision which met the needs of women on probation and provided a safe space to gain employment-related qualifications and skills.

"I find the centre responsive, supportive and I'm grateful to the UPW officer for signposting me to additional support that I would not have accessed. I feel safe at the centre. I was previously allocated [to] a male group and felt frightened and intimidated when there were incidents of violence and aggression on site."



You can find out more about The Hub at:

[Home | The Hub at Westhoughton \(thehubwesthoughton.co.uk\)](https://thehubwesthoughton.co.uk)

³ Vision statement of The Hub at Westhoughton, retrieved from: [Home | The Hub at Westhoughton](https://thehubwesthoughton.co.uk)

Example of effectiveness:

Therapeutic inclusion at Rhubarb Farm, Nottingham



Located in Langwith on the Derbyshire/Nottingham border, Rhubarb Farm has used a therapeutic organic horticulture model to develop skills, confidence, and employability while improving health and wellbeing.



Rhubarb Farm had collaborated with probation services since its inception 12 years ago. Initially supported by Derbyshire Probation Trust, which sent community payback teams to clear the overgrown site, it now hosted individuals and groups from Worksop, Mansfield, and Chesterfield to complete their UPW hours.

The enterprise supported various groups, including the unemployed, recovering addicts, people on probation, young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET), excluded students, people with disabilities,

mental, and physical health issues, ex-service personnel, and isolated older adults, including those with dementia. Notably, three staff members began as volunteers completing their UPW hours.

Since 2012, Rhubarb Farm had received funding from the Derbyshire Police and Crime Commissioner for its services to ex-offenders.

Rhubarb Farm offered individual and group placements for both men and women on probation. Staff conducted their own inductions and coordinated with UPW placement coordinators to ensure suitability. To promote inclusivity, all attendees were referred to as 'volunteers'.



The multi-terrain site had adaptations for accessibility, offering alternative tasks based on mobility needs. Activities included growing organic fruit and vegetables, keeping poultry for eggs, and participating in therapeutic workshops, art therapy, and cookery courses. The farm valued the skills of volunteers, such as electricians, welders, and photographers, encouraging them to use and develop their talents, while also developing new skills.

In the 12 months from October 2023 to October 2024, people on probation completed 403 hours of unpaid work at Rhubarb Farm, reporting positive impacts on their wellbeing and skills development.

Two men on site provided the following feedback to HM Inspectorate of Probation:

"It [the placement] has changed my life."

"They [the staff] always have time for me."

"I suffer from social anxiety, and everyone is so friendly it feels like a safe space to be."

"It [the placement] has helped me refine my time management skills, sort out where I need to be and when."

"A very welcoming and happy environment."



You can read more about Rhubarb Farm and its community work and successes at: [Home | Rhubarbfarm](#)

Example of effectiveness:

Individual placement, Recycling Lives, Central Lancashire



Recycling Lives, a social enterprise, has funded itself through the work of people on probation, who dismantle and recycle scrap metal products like gas meters and boilers for national firms such as British Gas. Additionally, they can work in the community soup kitchen and café and help run the foodbank.

The organisation also had a charitable arm that provided residential support for those released from custody or without stable housing. This support helped individuals develop employment skills while offering stable housing.

"We empower people, equipping them with skills and resources to change their lives for the better."⁴

In Central Lancashire, Recycling Lives offered 25-30 per cent of UPW hours as individual placements, which were highly favoured due to the quality of the placements available Monday to Friday. It could accommodate up to six people on probation at a time, and aimed to engage them in meaningful work to develop skills, confidence, and resilience.

People on probation received a full induction during their first session, and the individualised approach was impressive. Flexible start and finish times accommodated those with childcare commitments. The focus was on what each person could do and what would be meaningful for them.

The community café was bright and welcoming, offering a place for people on probation to take breaks and have free meals. The café was open to the community, with no differentiation between the public and those on probation or temporary release from prison.

Recycling Lives also offered education, training, and employment (ETE) opportunities, where people on probation could undertake certified courses in health and safety, and banksman and fire marshal training, for example.

During our inspection, we heard examples of individuals with lived experience progressing to direct employment with Recycling Lives or gaining opportunities through its network of 300 partner businesses. Employees at Recycling Lives valued the work of people on probation and were enthusiastic about supporting positive change.

This was a holistic and bespoke approach to maximising a participant's strengths, skills, and abilities. The offer included early work to stabilise individuals so they could reach the stage where they could cope with the structure of work. There were multiple varied opportunities to enhance employability. There was onward support for a wide range of common pathways to maximise the chance of maintaining success. Compliance rates for individual placements

⁴ Recycling Lives impact report 2023/2024, retrieved from: [Recycling-Lives-Charity-Impact-Report-202324_dgtl.pdf](#)

were better than for group placements, and both the UPW manager and Recycling Lives staff reported high compliance rates at the placement.

People on probation did not view the work as purely punitive, and recognised the additional offer:

"I would come every day, if I could."

"I feel valued, respected and part of the team."

"I don't feel labelled or stigmatised."



You can read more about recycling lives at: [Our Programmes](#) | [Recycling Lives Charity](#)

Example of effectiveness:

Weekend placement at Montem Primary School, Slough

The UPW placement at Montem primary school in Slough has operated at weekends. Established for over 10 years, it was a group placement for up to 10 people on probation undertaking UPW requirements. The school site manager actively supported the placement activities and, as well as providing tools for the work, his trade background enabled him to provide some training and guidance to the individuals working on the placement.



The work undertaken was wide-ranging and included landscape gardening, carpentry, painting and decorating, and property maintenance. As a result of this work, the school had benefited from significant improvements to its facilities and play areas, including installation of display boards, a hand-dug bark pit, and various decking projects (including a sensory garden). People on probation had also built and installed an outdoor teaching area, tree planters for the Queen's Jubilee, and a small bridge over a stream. Other tasks completed under the guidance of the site manager and UPW supervisor had been the installation of a kitchen and basic plumbing, such as an outdoor tap.

The site manager's trade background had clearly helped the development of the project. He reported that since UPW became involved with the school, it had not once had to use a professional painter and decorator, and estimated that the school had received over £1 million of added value in the work completed by community payback over the period of the placement.

Facilities for people on probation at the school supported a seven-hour working day, and they had access to toilets and a small canteen. Access to the wider school buildings was not permitted unless they were undertaking supervised tasks. The placement supported mixed-gender working groups where appropriate, but avoided allocating lone women to men-only groups.

The UPW project at Montem primary school made a positive contribution to maintenance of the school, ensuring that the people on probation made a tangible reparation to the community. Inspectors observed an impressive level of skilled work, and the people on probation on site were positive about the guidance they received and the work they were undertaking.

Key take-aways

Identifying and delivering effective and meaningful UPW placements require:



a **diverse range of placements** tailored to individual need and protected characteristics



placements which offer the opportunity to **acquire vocational training and employment-related skills**



placements which **develop soft skills**, such as teamwork, confidence, and self-esteem



placements which **deliver benefits to their beneficiaries and the local community**



placement supervisors able to exercise **professionalism and appropriate authority**.

Engagement strategies

Research by the Centre for Justice for Innovation (Bennett and Bowen, 2022) identified that *'the most complex and challenging element of UPW delivery is matching people to work opportunities'*.

A personalised approach was crucial, recognising that individuals had unique strengths and challenges, shaped by their characteristics and experiences. Using a social-ecological framework, which considered individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels, enhanced our understanding of individuals within their contexts. A holistic, person-centred approach ensured everyone received high-quality, tailored support, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Ideally, a personalised approach, guided by assessments of individual needs, goals, and aspirations, should inform placement choices for people on probation. However, this was operationally challenging due to high workloads and sometimes insufficient information, often necessitating mid-sentence placement changes when initial matches proved inappropriate. Despite these challenges, our inspection found examples where efforts were made to meet diversity needs and ensure UPW and ETE activities were meaningful to engage people on probation.

Example of effectiveness: A proactive and personalised approach to making a proposal of an unpaid work requirement

In the case below, although the offence had met the custody threshold, the pre-sentence report (PSR) considered and balanced the seriousness of the offence with Jenny's personal circumstances as a primary caregiver to her infant son and her younger brother. The PSR author made efforts to consult the UPW team to establish if this could be a realistic, workable proposal.

Case illustration

Jenny appeared at court for drug-related offences. She was involved in an organised crime group and police had made several arrests, including Jenny's partner, the father of her son. Jenny had allowed her home to be used as a base for the supply of drugs. She had no prior convictions.

When considering the court proposal, there was evidence that the PSR author had contacted the UPW team to discuss Jenny's situation and personal circumstances, and to explore the suitability of proposing UPW. Enquiries were made about whether the probation delivery unit could ensure she would be allocated to women-only projects due to her experience of trauma, and explored the reasonable adjustments that would be needed, such as placement on a set day around childcare commitment. This was a personalised approach to ensuring the UPW team would be able to accommodate the flexibility that Jenny would need, before making a proposal to the court.

Jenny was sentenced to a suspended sentence order (SSO) with rehabilitative activity requirement days and UPW hours.

Outcome: Following sentence there was effective, regular liaison between the probation practitioner and the UPW team throughout the delivery of UPW requirement. UPW was

regularly instructed by the probation practitioner, and attendance was consistent, with appropriate flexibility applied when required to support Jenny's caring responsibilities.

Jenny completed all her UPW hours and also completed all available online ETE courses, which contributed to 18 per cent of her total hours.

Example of effectiveness: An individual placement tailored to the bespoke circumstances of the person on probation

In the case below, the personal circumstances and diversity needs of Emma were fully considered when making decisions on an appropriate UPW placement for her and how any barriers would be overcome.

Case illustration

Emma was sentenced to an SSO with a curfew requirement, rehabilitative activity requirement days, and UPW hours for the offence of theft. At the point of sentencing, Emma was suffering from long Covid, as well as other health concerns - depression, anxiety, and stomach problems linked potentially to cancer.

As part of assessment and planning of this case, the probation practitioner recognised the need for an individual UPW placement for Emma given the index offence, her childcare responsibilities, and her physical and mental health needs. It was considered that all these factors presented potential barriers and challenges to delivery of UPW.

The practitioner and the UPW team worked together to locate a placement in a charity shop, with the practitioner advising the store appropriately that she should not handle any money or work on the till as part of risk management given her index offence.

The UPW team also responded positively to the practitioner's assessment and requests, factoring reasonable adjustments into the delivery. The placement worked around Emma's health needs, pausing the requirement at one stage while she underwent tests, and then later reducing her hours due to fatigue, and also allowing for flexibility around her son's childcare and school holidays.

The placement provided Emma with the opportunity to gain experience in a retail setting, and ETE was also provided in between placement hours with Emma completing four online courses.

Outcome: Given the appropriate assessment and individual response to Emma's needs and personal circumstances, there had been no issues with enforcement in this case. At the six-month review, which took place around the time of inspection, Emma was expected to complete her remaining hours within the 12-month timeframe.

Example of effectiveness: Purposeful completion of ETE courses



As part of a UPW requirement, people on probation could undertake education, training, and employment (ETE) to increase their likelihood of achieving employment and reduce their likelihood of reoffending. An individual was eligible to have up to 30 per cent of their hours credited by undertaking ETE if they were not in work or training, were at risk of losing their

employment or were seeking to develop their employment options. Upon completion, people on probation could receive accredited and non-accredited certificates (depending on the provider), which could enhance employability, either through personal development, sustained employment or by building a portfolio of evidence for future job applications.



The example below evidenced effective practice in identifying an appropriate individual placement for a woman on probation, also utilising appropriate ETE courses to complete her hours and benefit her own personal development.

The woman on probation used Alison, an online learning and empowerment platform that provided a range of educational and training opportunities, including certificate and diploma courses, and valuable career development tools to users.



You can access the Alison website to find out more by following this link: [Alison - Providers | The CPD Certification Service](#)

Case illustration

Amy was sentenced to an SSO with UPW hours for drug offences. At the point of sentence, she was unemployed, the primary carer for her four children (receiving care allowance) and had been recently diagnosed with depression.

Assessment and planning for UPW was positive in this case, with key areas of consideration noted, such as Amy's recent diagnosis. She was allocated an individual placement at a local charity shop, with hours that were flexible in relation to her caring responsibilities and the school drop-off and pick-up times. UPW started promptly and Amy was also afforded condensed hours over two sessions per week to manage her childcare. She had previous retail experience and viewed the charity shop placement as a positive step towards getting back into employment following the birth of her fourth child.

Amy also utilised the 30 per cent ETE allowance to full effect through the Alison platform. She was supported by her probation practitioner to think carefully about the course she would access, and which would be most relevant and useful for her. She engaged with online courses relevant to her needs and personal experiences, such as mental health awareness, depression, substance abuse, violent behaviour (as a domestic abuse victim), and treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with which her son had been diagnosed. This gave Amy a wider understanding of some of her own experiences, and also how to support her child as his parent.

Outcome: Amy completed her UPW hours within five months, with no need for enforcement action. The ETE activity was meaningful and purposeful, and supportive of her current experiences and circumstances.

Example of effectiveness:

The use of a compliance meeting to encourage re-engagement

In Greater Manchester, compliance meetings were used to maintain oversight and encourage re-engagement with UPW expectations. These meetings involved a senior probation officer (SPO), placement coordinator, probation practitioner, and the person on probation. During the meeting, the individual was held accountable for their non-compliance, while the group collectively explored barriers to attendance, reasonable

adjustments, and next steps. This collaborative approach helped form a plan to move forward, ensuring support and accountability for completing UPW hours.

Case illustration

Jason was sentenced to a suspended sentence order for the offence of theft, with UPW hours.

He was assessed as a medium risk of serious harm and allocated a group placement. However, soon after the start of the order he experienced a decline in mental health and there were concerns regarding self-harm. The probation practitioner was flexible when making decisions on acceptable absences. They also contacted Jason's general practitioner to discuss whether the UPW hours were workable.

Due to concerns about Jason's UPW attendance, a compliance meeting was held. These meetings were routinely held in Greater Manchester when concerns arose about an individual's compliance, which might be because of repeated not fit to work notes or multiple absences. The SPO, the probation practitioner, and the placement coordinator met with Jason. His presence at the meeting provided an opportunity to discuss his barriers to attendance, and explore reasonable adjustments and potential alternative placements. Following this meeting, the placement coordinator was able to consider other more suitable options for Jason to complete his UPW hours, and it was decided to move him to an online project.

The UPW requirement was reviewed regularly by the practitioner and in collaboration with the placement coordinator.

Outcome: The UPW online project supported Jason, who wanted to be employment ready, and he felt that it was preparing him for work. The change to an online project also enabled him to complete his hours.

Compliance meetings were a positive approach within the probation delivery unit. They aimed to provide management oversight, unblock cases, and remotivate people on probation to complete their UPW hours.

Training for practitioners delivering unpaid work



Staff should have the full range of skills, knowledge, and experience to deliver a high-quality service, with learning and development opportunities to enable them to achieve their full potential, considering their different tasks and responsibilities, and their career development stage. The organisation should give attention to equality of access to training, with appropriate flexibility to meet all needs.

During our inspection we heard about locally developed training initiatives to enhance the learning and development offer for UPW staff and the wider organisation to progress understanding of community payback.

Example of effectiveness:

Risk workshops for unpaid work teams, North East

The accredited programmes team in the North East had developed a risk workshop to address gaps in confidence and knowledge among UPW colleagues, particularly regarding individuals who had committed sexual offences. Initially designed for the programmes team, the workshop was later extended to UPW staff to enhance their understanding of risk assessment and management.

The content was tailored to be relevant and meaningful for UPW colleagues, providing a broader perspective on risk and practical application. Police colleagues contributed insights on sex offender registration requirements and specific risk areas, addressing issues encountered at unpaid work placements.

A full-day face-to-face session was delivered to two separate UPW groups and the workshops were well received, effectively addressing concerns and outdated perceptions about the role of UPW supervisors.

“Although I found the whole session to be beneficial, the afternoon when we were able to speak more in depth about registered sex offenders (RSOs) with the relevant people was especially useful as it is a recurring issue throughout our role.”

“Really enjoyed the open discussions about the subjectivity of risk. Enjoyed working with more experienced colleagues.”

This initiative effectively demonstrated how the head of interventions leveraged staff from distinct parts of the organisation to upskill one another. It also encouraged participants to consider their future training needs and how to address them.



[The North East region workshop activity pack can be accessed here:](#)

Example of effectiveness:

Sentence management teams shadowing UPW staff, Cardiff



In Cardiff, all probation practitioners were required to spend a morning with the UPW team every six months. It had been identified that communication could be poor between the sentence management teams and UPW supervisors, and shadowing expectations were introduced to bridge the gap between the teams in line with the [shared mental model](#). Staff also requested shadowing to improve their understanding of UPW and increase knowledge of their cases.

Weekly shadowing was organised via One Note, with staff selecting a date to meet the UPW manager. They spent a morning with the UPW manager and were also introduced to the administrative staff, with the aim of improving working relationships.

Feedback was positive from both sentence management teams and UPW colleagues, and shadowing had improved communication between both parts of the organisation. Staff also reported that they felt more able and more confident to discuss UPW with their cases.

Example of effectiveness:

Unpaid work induction visits by magistrates, Nottinghamshire



Probation liaison meetings with courts in Nottinghamshire had identified that magistrates were not aware of the local UPW provisions, and so a structured visit was arranged to the UPW office, the workshops, and placements within the area. All magistrates in the county had now visited the Meadow Grove UPW office as a result.

Prior to these visits, magistrates had previously approached UPW considerations with a degree of scepticism and thought that UPW was *"a bit of a myth"* and maybe a *"soft option"*. However, the visits developed magistrates' understanding of what was involved and available to people on probation. The magistrates reported that they were now more confident, both about what UPW entailed and in questioning probation practitioners about their proposals in court. For example, they were now able to consider bespoke options for UPW, such as light duties in a workshop.

A repeat of the visit was planned, and they were now part of the general induction for new magistrates.

Example of effectiveness:

Beneficiary training at Snibston Colliery, East Midlands



The beneficiaries at Snibston Colliery in the East Midlands probation region identified a need to improve the quality of the work carried out by people on probation at the site, and so they invited UPW supervisors to an open day where they were taken around the site and provided specific training in ground maintenance and gardening. This knowledge and skills were then passed on to the people on probation, improving the standards and demonstrating a real enhanced offer of service.

We spoke with people on probation at Snibston Colliery and they told us about the training they received from unpaid work supervisors. They valued being shown how to do tasks such as pruning and planting to ensure they could carry out the work to a quality standard and take pride in their achievements.

Annex one

The human factors approach

The human factors approach encompasses three domains that influence our behaviour at work:

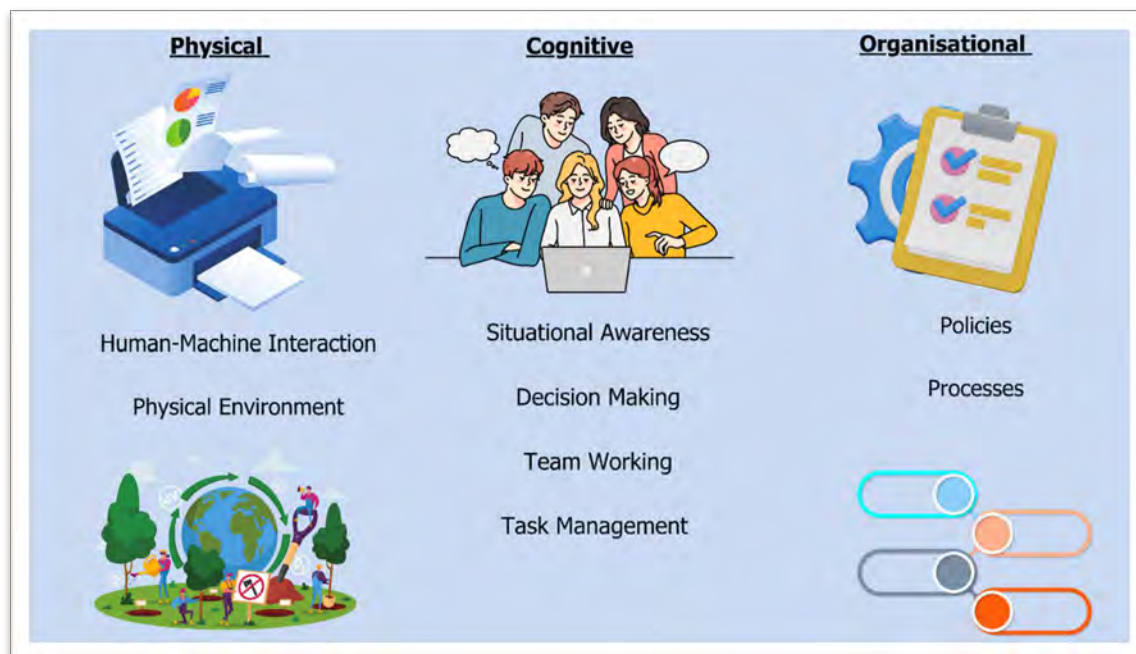


Figure 2. Human factors domains

1. **Physical** (ergonomics) – the physical interactions we have at work, and anything we touch and use, such as equipment.
2. **Cognitive** – how we gather, use, and communicate information. This includes non-technical skills that develop as a result of multiple interactions with people, systems, and protocols rather than specific training.
3. **Organisational** – the organisational psychology or how we interact with policies and procedures in the workplace, and the influence of the 'hidden curriculum'.

The theory of the 'hidden curriculum' is that these are the rules and procedures we learn about our workplace through observing people and social cues as team members. This influences the way we work in a team, and therefore our behaviour, which is as important as written procedures and policies. In groups, humans tend towards conformity, so in a pro-safety workplace, the hidden curriculum can exert a positive effect, but in an unhealthy culture it can lead to unsafe behaviours.



Dr Paul Grieg and J. L. Darbyshire explore the hidden curriculum in more detail in the journal article [Medical educational theory in practice](#).

Further reading



HM Inspectorate of Probation publications

Thematic review:



[A Thematic Inspection of the Delivery of Unpaid Work. \(2016\). \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\).](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk)



Effective practice guide. Case supervision – adult. (2020). [[Adult effective case supervision](#)] – a comprehensive effective practice guide providing an overview of case supervision in context, what effective supervision looks like, and the research which underpins this.

Academic Insights:



[A tripartite strategy for unpaid work in the community. \(2023\).](#) – a report by Dr Eoin Guilfoyle and Dr Louise Kennefick which sets out the benefits to be gained from a clear underpinning philosophy and strategic direction for unpaid work which meets the needs of victims, those who have offended, and the community.



[Social capital building supporting the desistance process. \(2021\)](#) – a report by Dr Katherine Albertson which summarises the concept of social capital and how increases in the strength, range, and quality of bonding, bridging, and linking opportunities can be beneficial in supporting the desistance process.

Research & Analysis Bulletins:



Three complementary bulletins which utilise our HM Inspectorate of Probation datasets and examine the relationships between inspectors' judgements on the quality of different aspects of probation supervision and later output/outcome measures: [The links between the quality of supervision and positive outcomes for people on probation](#)



The [unpaid work \(justiceinspectorates.gov.uk\)](#) evidence base – Probation Service page at HM Inspectorate of Probation summarises the key research findings in this area of work.

Reflections from research:



Chris Fox in his reflections from research available on the HM Inspectorate of Probation website provides advice for the delivery of high-quality services for probation. [Video \(YouTube, 06:01\): Reflections from research Chris Fox \(HM Inspectorate of Probation\)](#)

Additional research



This report, [Unpaid Work Process Evaluation \(2024\)](#), published by the Ministry of Justice, evaluates the delivery of unpaid work within the unified probation service in England and Wales. It explores the operational challenges and changes following the unification of probation services, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The evaluation highlights the experiences of people on probation, the role of unpaid work supervisors, and the mechanisms through which unpaid work serves punitive, reparative, and rehabilitative purposes.

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